



¿Habla Español?

Central America is a 10,000km drive through eight countries with turbulent pasts but plenty of colonial towns, colourful fiestas, Caribbean beaches, Mayan ruins and smoking volcanoes. You just need to speak Spanish to survive this adventure...

Words by Akis Temperidis Photos by Vula Netu and Akis Temperidis



Zapotitlan is the ultimate cactus reserve in Mexico.



Crossing a Chiapas Village south of San Cristobal.



The cobblestone road to Real de Catorce.



You are going to collect many stamps while travelling in Central America.



We were stopped more than thirty times by police and army in Mexico but only once we were asked - politely - for a bribe.



A trained Labrador checks our Discovery for drugs before we ship it from Panama to Colombia.



The border between the US and Mexico is an extremely vibrant place. On the northern side of Rio Grande lies the big 'American Dream'. On the southern side, a gang war between cocaine cartels still goes on, despite the efforts of the Mexican government. At least, this is the idea you have about Mexico coming from the US. Right after you cross the border you forget the negative hype. Apart from the border areas, Mexico is a lovable and pretty safe country. This is not only for the great colonial towns, the colourful fiestas or the exquisite cuisine but mostly because of the people. Mexicans are maybe the happiest folks in the world despite many of them being among the poorest.

After a long time in the US we were delighted by the vibes, the energy and the laid back approach of Mexicanos. We learned to walk again, after six months of a drive-through lifestyle in the States. Our trip started from Monterrey, the most Americanised city in the country, and took us all the way to Mexico City, through glorious towns that flourished thanks to silver and gold mines. Saltillo, Zacatecas and Guanajuato still keep a sense of their old glorious days, when the Spanish colonialists were sending tons of silver back home. Most famous of all abroad is San Miguel de Allende, a beautiful town where more than 12,000 expatriates from the US and Canada live permanently.

Driving in Northern Mexico is straightforward thanks to a decent motorway network. We skipped all motorways to avoid

Sometimes you need to be courageous with Mexican cuisine - like tasting 'chapulinas' - deep fried cockroaches.



the expensive tolls and followed smaller roads which gave us a better insight of the country. One day, we took a cobblestone road up to 2800m, entered a mining tunnel and found the ultimate Mexican village, the heroic Real de Catorce. This was an old mining town where indigenous people were exploited humanely by the 'conquistadores'. Real was a ghost town when the price of silver plummeted but locals rediscovered it as a pilgrimage destination thanks to a miraculous picture of San Francis of Assisi.

Arriving in Mexico City we took a deep breath. This is the most populated city in the world, an ever expanding theatre of hard working life for no less than 30 million people! We camped 50km to the north, next to the famous Teotihuacan

“ Mexico is the most populated city in the world, and an ever expanding theatre for no less than 30 million! ”





An old Kuna Yala woman posing for one dollar promised fee...



Palenque attracts more hippy travelers than any other Maya kingdom not only for trekking in the jungle but for the magic mushrooms flourishing around as well...

pyramids and we didn't drive our car downtown fearing we would get lost in the horrific traffic forever. Downtown 'de-affe' (the shortcut for 'Distrito Federal' as Mexico City is referred) is a lively place to stroll around but the shanty towns in the suburbs make this metropolis an unbearable place to live. One good thing is that you don't really need to stay there as there are more colonial beauties that are worth staying at for days. This is the case for Puebla and Oaxaca, possibly the most vibrant Mexican towns of all and the ones with the best culinary culture. Taste a chicken with 'mole poblano' (a thick chocolate sauce) and you will never want to leave this place.

Cactus is Mexico's trademark. If you need to cross the ultimate cactus desert, don't miss Zapotitlan biosphere, next to the main road that connects Puebla and Oaxaca. What most people don't know is that the vast country offers a greater variety of landscapes. Around Oaxaca itself and up on the Chiapas mountains the environment is similar to Central Europe or South Australia, where pine and cedar forests are abundant. We are now in Southern Mexico and the huge Yucatan Peninsula extends to the northeast. This looks like a totally different country. An infinite plain of rainforests all the way to the Caribbean coast. The country of the Maya is always hot and humid. There are no rivers at Yucatan but only 'cenote', the underground, interconnected water sinkholes that played a major role in the Mayan civilization. They were used as sacrifice places. Now, cenote are used as natural swimming pools by hordes of American tourists who prefer



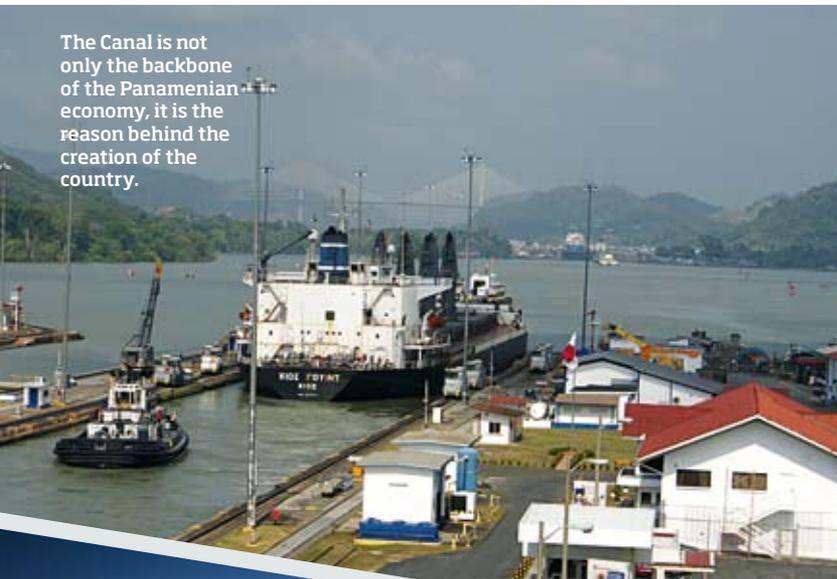
El Castillo, the best preserved pyramid of the Maya at Chitzen Itza; more than an architectural masterpiece it is a giant astronomical tool.



Mundo Maya

Roots of Maya civilization date back to 2000B.C. in the tropics extending from the Yucatan Peninsula to Guatemala and to Honduras territory. Maya had an astonishingly flourishing period from 200 to 900 AD, during which they became masters in architecture, astronomy and mathematics. Apart from their unique culture and great architectural work, archaeologists more excited about why the empire declined, six centuries before the Spanish arrived on the continent. There are different theories on this, connecting the Mayan decline to a long draught, to an epidemic or to internal conflicts between different kingdoms. The truth is that Mayan people did not disappear and today they remain strong populations within Central America. The kingdoms were just gone so somebody supports that maybe there was a people's revolution that terminated the rule of the glorious kingdoms...

The Canal is not only the backbone of the Panamenian economy, it is the reason behind the creation of the country.



Yukatan more than any other place in Mexico for their summer holidays. You can find more gringos at the massive Cancun resorts than in California during summer. Cancun is the Gold Coast of the Caribbean, the kind of places we hate, you know...

Former Banana Republics

Belize has a completely different feeling than any other country in Central America. It is the only former British colony in the mainland Caribbean. Belize is smaller than any Mexican state but worth a visit for the exotic islands – the Cayes (pronounced keys) that form a belt on the second longest barrier reef in the world – second only to Australia’s Great Barrier Reef. We took a break at Caye Caulker, the only island affordable to backpackers. We had a nice grilled lobster listening to classic reggae hits and met some funny Rastafari men there for a night. The next day we hit the road to Guatemala through the mystic Mayan ruins of Xunantunich.

Guatemala is a country with a turbulent past considering the civil war only ended in 1996. It’s still infamous for their high crime rate but it is actually a poor but visitor-friendly country of Mayan people. There are two main reasons to visit Guatemala. Number one is the lost city of Tikal, the most impressive one left from the Mayan golden years. After Palenque and Chitzen Itza in Mexico, we visited the place and – believe me – we were completely lost in this magic world, still hidden in dense jungle. If you go to Tikal, you can skip any other Maya ruins...

Guatemala city – the capital, is a place better to be avoided. It is ugly, busy and potentially dangerous. Only 50km from there, lies the nicest colonial town in the country, Antigua. This is another one great town of the Spanish baroque architecture. Hordes of backpackers stay here for months, possibly attending a Spanish language course. Antigua lies



Visiting the volcanic Isla del Tigre in Honduras is definitely an off the beaten track experience.



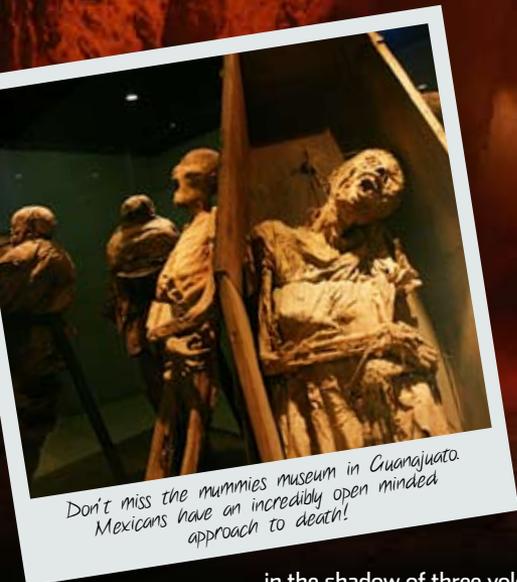
Mariachi at Cuernavaca, Mexico. They can play a song for you for less than 10AUD...



Driving on volcanic ash, on the slopes of Cerro Negro, one of the 17 volcanos of Nicaragua, close to Leon town.

The World Off Road Pt 6

In the 2.5km long tunnel to Real de Catorce.



in the shadow of three volcanoes, one of which erupted in 1972 for the last time.

From Antigua we had two choices en route to Panama. To enter Honduras or take the Pacific Road to El Salvador, the smallest and most densely populated country in the region. We chose the second option. The border crossing proved to be the trickiest part of our trip – worse than any in Africa! Long queues of trucks and an incredible amount of red tape would've required us to stay overnight there if we were not showing our press passes to the customs director. After that, everybody moved, so we could enter the country on the same night. The pacific coast of El Salvador is a place that gets in the tourist map as a surfing destination. If you don't surf, probably you will hate El Salvador for the heavy traffic and for the Iguana street sellers on the road to Honduras.

Upon entering Honduras you realise that this is the poorest neighbour in the region. The villages look dilapidated like in Central Africa, the traffic is low and the roadside is filled with rubbish. This seems to be a country you need to drive though fast. We did less than 200km in Honduras but we have some good memories thanks to the night we spent at the volcanic Isla El Tigre. It was like going back to the colonial years as the houses, the church and the main plaza were like they were in 19th century. We were the only foreigners on the that day and we enjoyed being among the local people.

The next day, a huge banner of former Sandinista leader and today president, Daniel Ortega, welcomed us in to Nicaragua. This was a country we always associated with civil wars, with the Sandinistas front and the US backed



Upon entering Honduras you realise this is the poorest neighbour in the region.



'Contras' who fought them unsuccessfully for years. Nicaragua is now the hidden gem of Central America. It gets touristy at Leon and Granada, two wonderful cities with a colonial feel, but there's definitely something more to explore here. Today's Nicaragua is finally peaceful but still a very poor country, which is good for the adventurous traveller. It is cheap and rewarding like a downhill ride from a volcano on a wooden sand board – an activity exclusive to Nicaragua. Believe it or not, people in Nicaragua don't hate Americans, despite the fact that they paid the price of US policies for decades...

Darien Gap Dead End...

Costa Rica is a totally different scenario if you come from Nicaragua. It is like an escape from the third world. This is the only country in the isthmus which is not included in the international travel warnings. It was peaceful and politically stabilised since the end of WW2, when all the other 'banana republics' of Central America were in trouble. Costa Rica has had no army for the last sixty years but is equipped with a powerful tourist machine which supports the local economy as much as the coffee production. The country is a tropical paradise and thanks to their environment-friendly policies, a great amount of its territory is protected. Costa Rica offers everything a tourist dreams of; five star resorts on the beach and in the forest, canopy walks, bird watching and other outdoor activities that will keep you busy for weeks. But for the



Iguanas aren't bothered by bikini-clad tourists at the seaside ruins of Tulum.



Caye Caulker of Belize is the ultimate laid back destination in the Caribbean.

real adventure seeker, the country is dull. Everything is oriented towards tourism, there is nothing left to discover and it lacks culture as the locals have turned to a more Western lifestyle. Sorry mates, but for all these reasons we crossed Costa Rica pretty quickly and entered Panama. Our choice was good.

Panama may seem like an American colony – which it was until ten years ago – but it is more like two different countries in one. Panama City is a trade and shopping heaven, a city of unfinished skyscrapers, shipping companies and rich people, situated in the most strategic geography on earth. On the other side of the canal indigenous Panama still exists. When we took the road to the infamous Darien gap we realised that this is a place that few – if any – white collar Panamenios visit. Darien Gap is real no mans land. It's a dense jungle gap between Panama and Colombia, synonymous to hidden drug cartels and bloody conflicts between guerrilla groups that still go on. Our trip in Central America ended at Yaviza, the easternmost village of Panama, where the Panamaricana Highway terminates. We thought we could find a path to get into Colombia but there is nothing actually beyond dense jungle and rivers. There was a TV crew in Land Rovers that attempted the trip in the 70's and they were the last to succeed. We would need four months of winching and bridge building to cross the 400km gap – like they did - so the only way to get to South America was to ship our car to Colombia. The last part of our adventure is yet to come! 📷

60km of gravel from the famous Tulum ruins, in Yukatan, take you to Punta Allen Peninsula.



Red tape

A visa is not required from Mexico to Panama. In June 2006 Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador signed the CA-4 agreement under which travellers may travel between signature countries without completing exit and entry formalities for periods up to 90 days. Entry procedure gets a bit more complicated when you drive your own car because the FIA Carnet de Passage is not recognised. A short manual for driving on your own in Central America is as follows...

Mexico

On the border you get issued a sticker permit valid for 6 months. It costs 920 pesos. Mexican car insurance is obligatory. We paid 82 USD for a basic one (third party coverage), valid for one month. Don't pay for a 'departure tax' on land borders, even if you are asked to. Ask persistently for a receipt!

Belize

You pay ten Belize Dollars for fumigation 10 to enter the country. Procedure on customs and immigration are transparent and straightforward. Car insurance is obligatory but not checked on the border (7AUD/day). When exiting the country, we paid 25USD to get our passport stamped plus 6USD environmental tax. This is official.

Guatemala

The immigration officer asked for a 2USD 'process fee' for each passport. Don't pay or ask for a receipt! Temporary car permits cost 7AUD for us. Don't forget to get it stamped when you exit, unless you can't enter El Salvador. We were not asked for car insurance.

El Salvador

We nearly spent the night at the border because of the long queues... Temporary car permits costs 5USD. There were signs at the customs office that the Salvadorian officers 'don't accept bribes'. They actually don't!

Honduras

For every passport you pay a 3USD process fee. Temporary car permit costs 35USD and should be paid at the bank. Ask the officer politely to arrange this if you enter after working hours. Car insurance is compulsory.

Nicaragua

You pay a process fee of 7USD for every passport. A temporary car permit, valid for one month is free. Car insurance is obligatory and costs 12USD for one month.

Costa Rica

Passport process fee costs 2USD. Your car gets a fumigation for 4USD before you enter the country. A car permit is free (for three months) but gets issued only after you buy insurance that costs 17AUD – for three months.

Panama

You pay 1USD 'tourist tax' fee to get your passport stamped, plus 1USD for car fumigation. Car permit is free but car insurance is obligatory and costs 15USD (18AUD).

