

Central perks



Pair Belize and Guatemala to get the very best of Central America, says **Kelly Ranson**

belize and Guatemala have largely stayed off the tourist radar for Brits, as bigger Latin American countries scoop up first-time visitors to the region, leaving the sacred sites and steamy jungles of these neighbouring states only to those in the know. Yet for the more intrepid UK traveller, that simply adds to the allure.

These small countries boast some of the world's best diving sites, Mayan ruins, mist-filled jungles and colonial cities – perfect for a twin-centre trip. Plus they offer just the kind of vibrant visual content you can use in social media or marketing to inspire customers planning ahead for 2021.

While there are no direct flights from the UK to Belize or Guatemala as yet, they are still easily accessible either with a stopover in the US (usually via Miami or Houston) or by tagging on a few days in Costa Rica, thanks to BA's direct airlift.

These countries pair up neatly on a joint itinerary, letting visitors compare and contrast their ancient ruins, unspoilt rainforests and brochure-worthy waterfronts, with highlights on offer in each destination.

RUINS

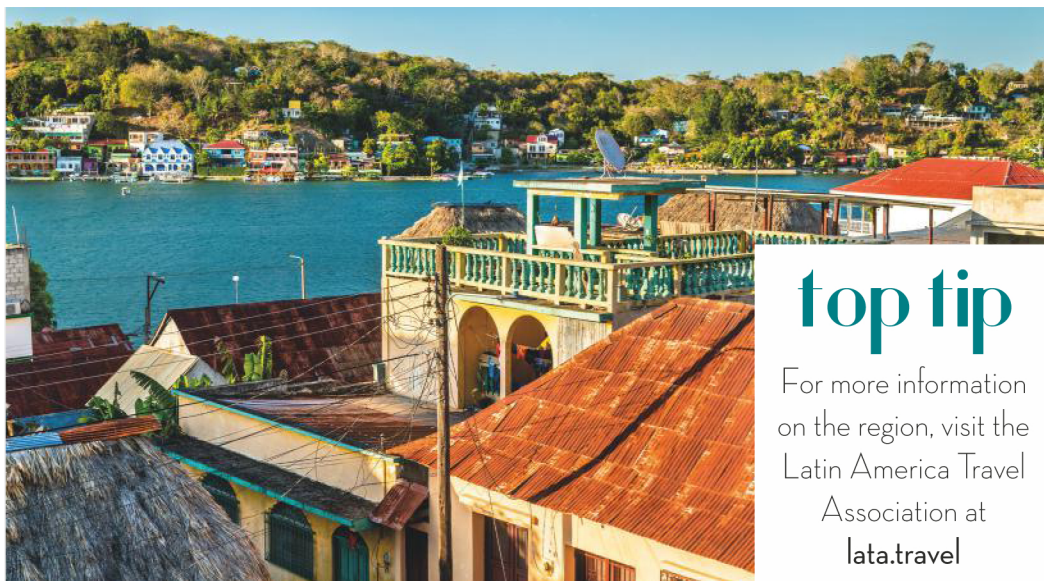
Guatemala: Whether it's the sounds of the howler monkeys or the magnificent view from atop one of the pyramids, Tikal will leave a lasting memory. Mayan sites are scattered across Guatemala, but the scale of Tikal is really something – and you can see why it's one of the country's top attractions for visitors.

Driving into the Unesco World Heritage Site, the true scale of this place becomes apparent. It takes more than 20 minutes to get from the gate to the visitor area alone, and the whole national park covers around 225 square miles.

Setting off to explore, you will scale small hills (which are, in fact, ruins of temples that have not yet been excavated) in the lush rainforest to reach a large opening where the expansive area of the central plaza can be found. Visitors have to use their imagination to envisage how these preserved pyramids were once the hub of an ancient civilisation dating back as far as 600BC. Travellers tend to stay in Flores, the small island town with colonial charm, often described as the 'gateway to Tikal'. ➤

DESTINATIONS

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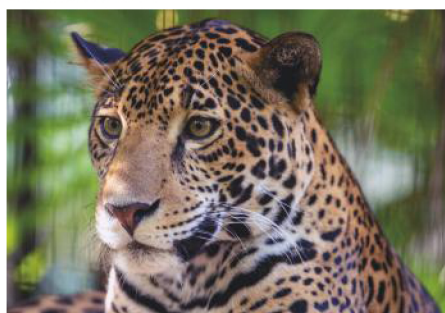
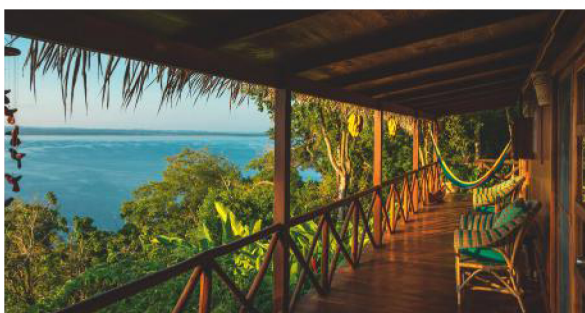
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

Flores, Guatemala; Gaia Riverlodge, Belize; a jaguar in Belize; La Lancha, Guatemala

PICTURES: Shutterstock; Gundolf Pfothenhaeur

top tip

For more information on the region, visit the Latin America Travel Association at lata.travel



Belize: Flores is also a good jumping-off point to cross the Belizean border to visit the smaller site of Xunantunich, the 'Maiden of the Rock', around two hours away. It's a tough ascent, particularly on a hot summer's day, but those who climb the steps to the top of the 130-foot-high pyramid of El Castillo are rewarded with breathtaking vistas across the site and beyond.

Yet the real draw lies in the foothills of the Maya Mountains, where you'll find Caracol, one of Belize's most impressive sites. At 75 square miles, it was once the largest Mayan centre in the country and is full of lush jungle leading to towering temples and open plazas that once housed as many as 150,000 people.



Laura Rendell-Dunn
PR and business development manager,
Journey Latin America

"We find most Brits dedicate two weeks to travelling in Central America. However, many of the countries, such as Belize and Costa Rica, are relatively small in size, so travel is easy and distances short, meaning you could easily spend just one week in Belize and still have a really varied holiday combining ruins, beaches and wildlife. I would add that Central America is best visited from November to April when the weather is not too hot and there is little rainfall."

JUNGLE

Guatemala: What you realise when you travel through this Central American country is just how thriving and unspoilt the jungle is – from the dense rainforests that cover undiscovered Mayan ruins, to the vast reserves that are home to an abundance of animal species, making it a dream destination for wildlife lovers.

The Petén region, which encompasses the site of Tikal, is the place for hiking through the jungle canopy, searching for the elusive jaguar and all creatures great and small that make it their home.

For clients looking for a hideaway with a difference, recommend a stay at La Lancha, one of film director Francis Ford Coppola's luxury properties. With lakeside

views over Lake Petén Itzá, the dwellings are spread through the rainforest and the lake's shores.

Alternatively, the river around the eastern Rio Dulce region is flanked by tropical jungle. From here, you can take a boat trip to the Caribbean coastal town of Livingston, where the population is largely made up of people from the Garifuna culture, or try bird spotting along the river.

Belize: Hopping across the border to Belize, the Mountain Pine Ridge Forest Reserve offers a striking landscape. As the name suggests, it is home to huge pine trees, as well as rivers, waterfalls and caves. The area may feel remote, but you are spoilt for choice when it comes to accommodation as there are plenty of lodges where you can immerse yourself in nature, including another Coppola luxury property, Blancaneaux Lodge, and the eco-friendly Gaia Riverlodge.

Explore's product manager for the Americas, Carmel Hendry, suggests that when in Belize, the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary is a must, doing wonders for conservation among the jaguar population. She says: "It's a vast jaguar reserve in the heart of a tropical forest, home to more than 300 species of birds, wild pigs, deer, tapir and five species of big cat – making it one of the best places to spot wildlife in Belize." ➤

DESTINATIONS

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ABOVE: Scuba divers explore Belize's barrier reef PICTURE: Shutterstock

WATER

Guatemala: While this part of Central America may be a hit for active travellers, there are plenty of waterfront spots in which to sit back and take in the beauty of the region – or dive under the surface to see its marine life.

The water-based draw in Guatemala has to be Lake Atitlan, where you can sit and take in the spectacular lake views, or go kayaking and mountain biking around it. As Explore's Hendry adds: "It is totally amazing: an enormous lake, circled by volcanoes and small villages that have indigenous heritage. It's like nowhere else in the world – a real highlight of the region."

Belize: Clients looking for diving experiences should make a beeline for Belize, best known for its outstanding barrier reef, which spans 185 miles of coast and is the largest in the northern hemisphere. Not only is it home to giant marine sinkhole the Blue Hole – an absolute bucket-list spot for divers – but there are also many hundreds of islands and cays for scuba divers and snorkellers of every ability.

It is noticeable how different the coastal areas of Belize are to the rest of Central America. Gone are the legacies of the colonial past and Spanish language – Belize is the only English-speaking country in Central America – and in place is a Caribbean feel, with barefoot beach bars and waterfront hotels and resorts.

Ambergris Caye is often billed as the hottest beach

“Lake Atitlan is amazing: an enormous lake, circled by volcanoes and villages with indigenous heritage

destination in the country, and while it retains its natural beauty, it's also the place for those clients looking for newer hotels with all the amenities they might expect. The Alaia Belize is due to open later this year, making it Marriott's first outpost in Belize.

With fewer crowds, the fishing village of Placencia is located on a narrow peninsula in the south, where you will find laid-back locals and colourful restaurants. Ensure clients take to the water. Day trips are on offer along the river for manatee spotting, or book a trip to one of the tiny islands such as the sand-fringed, palm-tree-laden Laughing Bird Caye, perfect for spying whale sharks (from March to May) and a host of other reef life. **TW**

BOOK IT

Journey Latin America offers a 15-day Signature Guatemala and Belize: Culture and Caribbean private journey, which starts in Guatemala City and visits Antigua Guatemala, Lake Atitlan, Tikal and ends in Ambergris Caye. Prices start from £3,237 per person with mid-range B&B accommodation, transport (road transfers and domestic flights), a local guide and some excursions; international flights not included. journeylatinamerica.co.uk

Explore has a 13-day Discover Belize itinerary that includes stops in Guatemala and visits Belize City, Placencia, Cockscomb Basin Jaguar Preserve, Xunantunich and Tikal archaeological sites, plus free time in Caye Caulker. Prices start at £2,175 for departures in 2021, including mid-range hotel and lodge accommodation, breakfasts, tour leader, local guide and domestic transport. explore.co.uk