



# 6 OF THE Best COLONIAL-ERA TOWNS & CITIES

Old-world charm abounds  
in Central America,  
finds Laura French



PICTURES: SHUTTERSTOCK; CORSATUR; MEHDI/ADOBE STOCK

**Bottle-green rainforests, burning-orange volcanoes, black-sand beaches, bright-blue lagoons – Central America is a riot of colour, and it's not just the landscapes that look like they've been splattered with a paintbrush.**

Its colonial-era towns and cities have the same effect, with rainbow-hued mansions, churches and palaces telling of the region's wealthy history, when the Spanish crown spared no expense in building these lavish hubs of power.

Today these structures remain to varying degrees, from barely-there remnants to fully preserved buildings, but even the crumbling, blackened ruins hold their own, eerie charm. Here are some of the most enchanting spots across the region.

**1 ANTIGUA, GUATEMALA**  
Nowhere is the colourful architecture more striking than in Antigua, once the Spanish capital of Central America. Grand monasteries, wealthy palaces and lavish baroque churches characterised its streets in the colonial era, until several were destroyed by an earthquake in 1773.

Many of these buildings have since been renovated, and today their palatial facades sit beside the crumbling ruins, set between the cloud-capped, active volcanoes that surround the city (and can be climbed by hardy adventurers).

"The ruined churches are really beautiful to admire," says

Rolf Stanley, Latin America destination manager for Tucan Travel. "And you can pick up beautiful handmade crafts at the markets."

Key spots on the sightseeing front include the Arch of Santa Catalina – a bright-yellow stone structure built in the 17th century that squats above the streets – and La Merced Church, one of the best-preserved churches in the city, carved with ornate, baroque patterns in postcard-pretty lemon and white.  
**Book it:** Sunvil's 10-night Highlights of Guatemala tour, featuring Antigua, starts at £2,779, including flights from Heathrow, B&B accommodation, private transfers, tours and internal flights.  
[sunvil.co.uk](http://sunvil.co.uk)

**2 LEON, NICARAGUA**  
Antigua isn't the only colonial city whose once-magnificent foundations have been struck by a natural disaster. Leon, founded in 1524 and once the colonial capital of Nicaragua, saw much of its grandeur tainted in a volcanic eruption in 1610. But not all of it was destroyed.

Today it's a laid-back, pastel-splashed university town filled with restored colonial churches that feels pleasingly far from the tourist trail – and significantly less visited than the larger Granada – with excellent food, buzzing nightlife and a fascinating history.

The town was at the centre of the country's revolution in 1979,

when then-dictator Anastasio Somoza was overthrown, meaning monuments dedicated to the country's revolutionaries scatter the streets, alongside striking street-art murals that tell of its artsy, intellectual heritage.

For those keen to learn more about its liberal leanings, suggest visiting the Museo Histórico de la Revolución, where former revolutionaries guide you round, recounting their experiences, in a historic colonial building.

Beyond that, key attractions in the town include the Mercado Central – where exotic-looking fruits and vegetables spill out from bustling stalls – and the Unesco-listed Leon Cathedral, the biggest in Central America, complete with a roof that can be climbed for sweeping panoramas.  
**Book it:** Explore spends two nights in Leon on its 16-day Central American Highlights tour, priced from £1,775 including some meals, transport and accommodation.  
[explore.co.uk](http://explore.co.uk)

**3 NAHUIZALCO, EL SALVADOR**  
El Salvador is a hub for outdoor adventurers with surf-friendly beaches, smoking volcanoes and lush-green coffee plantations, but it's just as rich on the cultural front, with a string of flower-filled colonial towns populating its landscapes.

Among its most charming is Nahuizalco, the first stop on the Ruta de las Flores, which connects the country's most picturesque towns and villages.

The town boasts one of the biggest indigenous populations in the country, making it a hotspot for those wanting to learn more about local culture, with various handicraft markets showcasing its rich woodcraft and wicker heritage.

"It's especially famous for its night market," says Carolina Briones, general manager of the Central America Tourism Agency. "The streets are lit only by candlelight, with artisanal craft products fashioned from wicker, wood and cotton available to purchase."

Beyond the market, there's a smattering of remaining colonial sites, including the white-washed, stone-built Iglesia de San Juan de Bautista, a restored church originally constructed in 1660. Outside the city, you'll find several scenic waterfalls that add appeal for outdoorsy types.  
**Book it:** Journey Latin America offers a private 11-day Signature El Salvador Revolutionary Road Trip visiting Nahuizalco from £1,830, including local guides, transport, accommodation, some meals and excursions.  
[journeylatinamerica.co.uk](http://journeylatinamerica.co.uk)

**4 OAXACA CITY, MEXICO**  
Over in Mexico, there's a plethora of pretty colonial towns and cities, but for one of the most enchanting, look to Oaxaca, says Rafe Stone, product manager for Journey Latin America.

"Latin America is abundant in sleepy colonial cities, but



none quite manages to surpass the infectious charm of this small city," he says. "It stands proud as the synthesis of European and pre-Hispanic cultures."

Green, volcanic-stone buildings characterise much of the architecture here, while ancient ruins dot the surrounding region. Suggest a visit to Monte Albán, a pre-Columbian archaeological site just outside the city, for history buffs wanting to learn more.

In the city itself, there are colourful, cobbled streets full of stalls selling silverware and handwoven crafts by the local Zapotec people, alongside impressive churches and good, reasonably priced restaurants serving regional specialities with a side of wince-inducing mezcal, which comes from Oaxaca.

"One of the main draws is that it's a great place to experience the Day of the Dead festival in November," says Andrew Sullivan, assistant product and commercial manager for Touring America at Travel 2. "The whole town becomes a huge celebration of ancestors past."

**Book it:** National Geographic Journeys (in partnership with G Adventures) offers a seven-day trip in Oaxaca themed around Mexico's Day of the Dead. Travel 2 can package it up with flights, with prices from £1,599, departing October 28 from Heathrow. [travel2.com](http://travel2.com)

**5 PANAMA CITY, PANAMA** Panama's capital might be best known for its cosmopolitan, Miami-esque vibe, but it's not only about the shiny skyscrapers and glittering casinos.



**LEFT:**  
Oaxaca,  
Mexico

**BELOW:**  
Trinidad,  
Cuba



### Salsa dancers spin and sway along to sensual Afro-Cuban beats, as tourists watch, mojitos in hand

At its heart is colonial quarter Casco Viejo, a Unesco-protected, trendy neighbourhood where fashionable boutiques and hipster bars rub shoulders with crumbling, pastel-hued remnants that recall its Spanish heritage.

Once something of a no-go zone, it's now a hotspot for coffee shops on cobbled streets, with colourful markets, attention-grabbing graffiti and live-music spots leading down to the crashing Pacific.

Those wanting to learn about the Panama Canal can check out the Interoceanic Canal Museum, housed in a restored colonial

building, while party-goers will find a plethora of late-night spots including Teatro Amador, a former cinema that's now one of the neighbourhood's trendiest nightclubs.

**Book it:** G Adventures has a 16-day Costa Rica & Panama Quest from San Jose to Panama City, from £1,215 including guide, accommodation, transport and activities.

[gadventures.com](http://gadventures.com)

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### TRINIDAD, CUBA

It might be across the water in the Caribbean, but no list of Latin America's finest colonial-era architecture would be complete without Cuba and its treasures, including the town of Trinidad.

Candy-coloured houses, cobblestone streets and rustic horse-drawn carts make up the old quarter of this Unesco-listed town, formerly one of the wealthiest spots in the country thanks to its abundance of sugar cane plantations.

Today its Spanish colonial mansions remain, lined up against perfectly preserved churches, one-off art studios and laid-back rooftop cafes where live bands play throughout the day.

By night, salsa dancers take to the central steps, spinning and swaying along to sensual Afro-Cuban beats beneath a warm, starry sky, as tourists sit watching, mojitos in hand, from a cluster of outdoor tables.

The beating heart of the town is Plaza Mayor, framed with lemon-hued mansions and colonial churches that tell of its prosperous past – and watched over by the domineering bell tower, which you can climb for panoramic views over the roofs below and distant mountains beyond.

**Book it:** Intrepid Travel visits Trinidad on its eight-day Beautiful Cuba trip from Havana. Prices start at £1,107 including guesthouse accommodation, transport, some meals and activities.

[intrepidtravel.com/uk](http://intrepidtravel.com/uk)

