

## CENTRAL AMERICA – PANAMA TO GUATEMALA

Speaker: Colin Sale

Thirty of us came along to enjoy Colin Sale's photos and talk based on his personal travels in Central America in 2003 and the Society's Study Tour of the region in 2004. Colin distributed a sheet of maps which showed the route he would follow in his address; it included the names and locations of the main cities, the many volcanoes for which the region is famous and the largest lakes; and he referred to some of these in his talk.

Central America comprises seven nations between Colombia in South America and Mexico in North America. Moving northwards, with the capital cities shown in brackets, these are:-

Panama (Panama City)

Costa Rica (San Jose)

Nicaragua (Managua)

Honduras (Tegucigalpa)

El Salvador (San Salvador)

Guatemala (Guatemala City)

Belize (Belmopan) – not visited

Not only is this a very rugged part of the world, but it is also physically a very unstable region, having experienced many serious earthquakes and volcanic eruptions; Nicaragua, for example, has 25 volcanoes with 6 still active. The south-to-north travel route shown on our maps involved some air travel (3 flights), with overland bus travel and tours in between, as the highlights of five of the nations were visited and shown to us.

Starting in the **Republic of Panama** (population 3.3 million), we obtained glimpses of old and new Panama City - from the ruins of the original settlement that was plundered and destroyed by pirate Henry Morgan in 1671, to the heritage colonial buildings of Old Panama, and to the modern high-rise city of today - and of course, the engineering marvel – the Panama Canal, the construction of which involved the loss of 27,000 lives; views included ships traversing the Miraflores Locks. Out of the city, we saw the group visiting the rainforests of *Chagres National Park* where the Embera indigenous people still live their traditional life-style, and, following an included village lunch of river fish and local fruits and vegetables, they were shown their arts and crafts, provided with a song and dance show, and given information about curative benefits of forest products.



From Panama, they flew to the **Republic of Costa Rica** (population 4.2 million), and in the capital of San Juan, they saw many fine buildings dating from colonial times but their pride is the *Teatera Nacional* (Opera House) of marble and gilt, built by and for the country's rich (the coffee and banana barons, in the 1890s. On tours out of the city, at Cartago, the original capital and site of serious earthquakes in 1841 and 1910, they visited the huge *Basilica de Nuestra Senora de Los Angeles* which houses the miraculous Madonna, found in the bush in 1636; thousands of pilgrims seeking cures come here every year. In *Ujarras* they explored the ruins of a town that was abandoned in 1833, including its beautiful old church, because it experienced too many floods. They visited coffee plantations, took a cable car ride through the rainforest canopy of Wilderness National Park, and visited the *Institute of National Biodiversity* with plants and animals of Costa Rica's four major ecosystems. In a 1963 eruption of nearby *Volcan Irazu*, the country's highest mountain, the whole of the Central Valley was left covered with fertilizing ash. Continuing further north by bus, they came to another famous volcano - Arenal, a perfect cone, 1633m high, and continuously very active since 1965; in this area they had a river safari seeing some of the country's wildlife, and in the evening enjoyed therapeutic hot spring baths (40 degrees C) of a garden resort. Continuing north and driving around high-altitude Lake Arenal and its hydro projects supplying 50% of the nation's electricity, and passing wind farms on the continental divide, they descended to the dry side of Costa Rica, stayed on a ranch, had a tram safari in Innocentes Volcanic National Park, fed iguanas on the highway, and crossed the border into their next country by road.

In the **Republic of Nicaragua** (population 6 million), they drove along the shores of Central America's largest lake (L. Nicaragua) with two active volcanic islands, and stayed on its shores in charming 570-year-old Granada, famous for its heritage colonial buildings; it was sacked by pirates on three occasions. We saw some of the city sights

they explored, their boat trip around small rocky islands, the tour of Volcan Masaya National Park's steaming active craters and a caldera lake, and saw village dancers and a horse-drawn hearse. They stayed next in country's present modern capital, Managua, rebuilt after being totally destroyed by an earthquake in 1931, and rebuilt to only to be completely destroyed again in 1972, and then rebuilt again in a safer location with the old city left as a *Monumental Ruin*. Next, we saw photos of Lake Managua with two more active volcanic islands, the heritage town of Leon (founded in 1610) boasting the largest cathedral in Central America, roadside thermal mud springs, and *Selva Negra* (Black Forest) coffee estate and village with ecologically friendly farming techniques, and which, unlike several neighbouring villages, was not wiped out by Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

From Nicaragua, the group flew, via El Salvador, into the **Republic of Honduras** (population 7.5 million), stayed in the small town of Tela on the Caribbean coast, toured the country's largest National Park seeing bird-life mainly, and explored the Mayan ruins of *Copan* with pyramidal temples, plazas, ball court, statues and hieroglyphic stairs, mostly dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.

From Honduras, they travelled by bus into the **Republic of Guatemala** (population 10.5 million), staying first in its capital Guatemala City (population 4 million). From here, they made a side trip by air to the town of Flores to visit the vast Mayan ruins of *Tikal* which was a major cultural and religious centre at its peak in 250 AD, and probably with a population of about 100,000 spread out over 30 sq km. We saw views of the Great Plaza, Central Acropolis with 33 palaces and 148 rooms, and huge pyramidal temples up to 44 m tall. Back in Guatemala City, the group travelled further north by bus to what was the country's original capital, beautiful Antigua which has suffered from several disastrous earthquakes and eruptions from its adjacent three active volcanoes, which caused the capital to be moved away in 1776. See photos of some of the town's heritage buildings, the spectacular volcanic cones, nearby huge caldera Lake Atitlan, lake-shore villages visited on a ferry cruise there, and the famous colourful Thursday markets in Chichicastenango (Chichi) with its unique church.

What an exotic blend of natural and human vistas! My impression was that the beauty/culture is so haunted by risk i.e. quakes, eruptions, hurricanes, violent theft, drug induced muggings - that as far as Central America is concerned, the comfort of the club-chair and Colin's superb photos is definitely preferable to the real thing for this woman of a certain age. Thank you Colin!