

# Into the wilds of El Salvador

From zip lines to surfing — fun, Central American style

By **LESLIE LONG**

**H**EADLINES out of El Salvador focus on the violence that afflicts the Central American country, where earthquakes are a common occurrence. Despite these hardships, the region's tiniest nation offers endless unspoiled natural beauty without the tourist clichés.

Cozy and compact, with most sights just an hour or two from each other by bus, El Salvador is a place where you can inhale the aroma of coffee plantations and wander through archaeological ruins in the same day.

Be warned: Hardly anyone speaks English. Don't expect slick brochures, Western-style breakfasts or functional Web sites. A guided tour is one surefire way to steer clear of

bad neighborhoods and avoid hassles. El Salvador's Mayan name is *Cuscatlán*, meaning "land of beautiful things." Easy to see why. Many of the adventurers' most colorful attractions lie beyond San Salvador, the nation's volcano-rimmed capital. But the city's **Iglesia El Rosario** is worth a look. The drab concrete dome, built in 1971, seems almost abandoned. Inside, the church is a visual wonder, with soaring panels of stained glass that throw color



Holiday Inn San Salvador

everywhere. Base yourself at the **Holiday Inn San Salvador** (from \$108; [IHG.com](#)), a surprisingly sleek and stylish property from the ubiquitous mid-level chain.

Want to cool down? About an hour southeast of San Salvador is **Costa del Sol**, a retreat for well-heeled Salvadorans lined with pastel-colored weekend houses. At the **Jaltepeque Estuary**, a low-slung blue boat takes visitors through mangrove-rimmed canals that open onto wider waterways with restaurants suspended on stilts. A beach club called **Ola** ([ahokbetos.com](#)) serves up food and drink that fit the mood — grilled fish, plantains and local beer. Due north is the colonial town of **Suchitoto**, the country's cultural hotbed. An indigo dyeing workshop,



El Tunco

**Arte Añil** (Bo Sta Lucía 4 Cl Ote No. 7), lets you make your own bags, a twist on the trade that once sustained the area. A stone-clad hotel, **Los Almendros de San Lorenzo** (from \$93; [LosAlmendrosDeSanLorenzo.com](#)), offers dinner in a dreamy, antique-filled setting. Another lodging option, **La Posada de Suchitlan** (from \$88.50; [LaPosada.com.sv](#)), is as scenic as it is central: from its hilltop location, guests awake to mist over the

green valley that rises out of pale-blue **Lake Suchitán**. Look through that mist and you'll see, in this part of the world, they don't skimp on archaeology or food. For a dose of ancient history, visit **Joya de Cerén**, a village first inhabited 3,000 years ago and so well preserved from a volcanic explosion that folks call it Central America's Pompeii. Its newish museum describes the settlement, while the grounds recall

a verdant tropical garden.

Look for the beloved street food, *pupusas*, at the aptly named **Pupusería Julita** in a pretty town nearby called **Nahuizalco**. Stuffed with tangy cheese and refried beans, and topped with pickled cabbage, the grilled corn tortilla treat is a delicious bargain at just 90 cents.

It's a half-hour ride to the mountainous coffee-growing region of **Apaneca**, home to the **Hotel Santa Leticia** (from \$60; [HotelSantaLeticia.com](#)). Known as a *finca*, or rural resort, it has handsome rooms. For dinner, head to **Tayua**, (Avenida Norte y 5a Calle Oriente 2a, Concepcion de Ataco) a surprisingly hip restaurant that serves pizza with herbs grown in its backyard. Return to sleep amid cawing birds. But enough lounging — it's time for some action. The next stop in the countryside is **Metapán**, near the border with Guatemala. A four-wheel drive is a must for the journey to **Reserva Ecológica El Limo**, a 35-acre nature sanctuary. Up and down bumpy roads, past waterfalls and precipices lie cozy cabins and a zip line. Last stop: the ragtag surfing town of **El Tunco**, where a dirt road packed with shops leads to clear waters almost free of foreigners.

Some peg El Salvador as an untouched Costa Rica, but that transformation will take a while. Good.