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UP-AND-COMING

El Salvador

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I thought things were off to a rocky start when I got my boarding pass for my Avianca airways flight from Toronto to San Salvador, capital of El Salvador. I was stuck in a middle seat, on a sold-out flight. But even at 6'3", I found there was enough leg room, and although it was a smaller aircraft, it still had an entertainment system with free headphones for the four-hour and 20-minute voyage (note that on the return flight they did not have an entertainment system, but I had plenty of viewing packed onto my iPad).

Unlike another airline (which shall remain nameless), the air hosts were happy to fill up my water bottle, rather than making me buy one, and we were provided with both a meal and a snack sandwich later on. These little things added up to a pleasant experience, especially when many other airlines have made me feel like cargo.

Another option is Air Transat, which started direct flights from Montreal on Dec. 22, departing weekly on Wednesdays at 8 a.m. and taking roughly five and a half hours. Clearly, Canadians are catching on to this under-discovered country. →



To attract more tourists, El Salvador tourism has been investing in their infrastructure, including major upgrades to their international airport (which is a hub for Avianca, for those wanting to country hop) and their port (to receive more cruises), including plans to build more departure lounges and airplane slots, aiming to receive more than six million passengers per year.

Upon arrival, I waited in a short line at passport control, where I paid a US\$10 visa fee (El Salvador uses the U.S. dollar as its currency), and was then driven along smooth highways (the roads range from “good” to “excellent”) to the Crowne Plaza Hotel. It was clean and comfortable, and the staff was friendly, earning a four and a half star rating on TripAdvisor, with elegant décor in the rooms and bathrooms, in hues of grey, beige, and dark brown.

The hotel's free WiFi worked well, and they delivered on their website's promise of “fast and fresh” food, including *papas* at the breakfast buffet (essentially a corn pancake filled with cheese and/or pork and beans), grilled fresh, along with an extremely efficient omelette station.

The Crown Plaza made for an ideal jumping off point for excursions, and many tourists use San Salvador as a home base, with numerous sightseeing experiences within 45 minutes of the city.

In fact, tourism people call El Salvador “the 45-minute country” and the Minister of Tourism dubbed it the country of “short distances,” because everything is so close. Although El Salvador does have all-inclusives (mostly near the beach – also 45 minutes away from San Salvador), the trip I was on – a FAM organized by the tourism board – was designed with the cultural and eco-minded traveller in mind.

A prime example was our morning visit to the imposing San Salvador volcano. As an “older” volcano, it was covered in trees and other vegetation, shading the hiking paths as hummingbirds chirped all around. We visited three observation platforms, which gave us wonderful views of the city and more volcanoes in the distance. For those with mobility concerns, one platform was right at the parking lot and had a ramp, while the other two were a short hike of low difficulty away, easily managed by anyone free of movement impairments.

At the top of two of the observation stations, we looked down into the crater known as El Boquerón, with its mini “volcanito” inside. One can actually hike all the way around the top of the volcano. It takes about four hours, though our guide said one group did it in two and a half. “They must have been Navy Seals,” he joked. “It was like a boot camp.” Hikes into the crater are another option.

PEOPLE CALL EL SALVADOR “THE 45-MINUTE COUNTRY” BECAUSE EVERYTHING IS SO CLOSE.



FIVE THINGS AGENTS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT EL SALVADOR

He also pointed out a volcano in the distance, Ilopango, which last erupted in the 6th Century. Some now theorize that the cloud it created blocked out the sun and caused a major global cooling event that toppled civilizations (because of crop failures), and may have contributed to the Dark Ages.

Our authentic El Salvador experience continued during a coffee tour at El Carmen Estate, which featured numerous activities, including horseback riding, ATV tours, and a ropes course. People can do overnight stays on the picturesque grounds of the original plantation house, which is more than 100 years old and has now been converted into a sprawling bed and breakfast.

We were there for the coffee tour, and none of us will ever look at a cup of coffee the same way again. The estate grew its own crop, but also processed coffee from other plantations. We watched as a pick-up truck pulled in with several bags of ripe, red coffee fruit, ready to be weighed. We learned he was one of the many small →

1. THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY: While places like Costa Rica are well known to Canadians, for many, El Salvador remains off the beaten path. Guided by Alfredo Avalos of Explore El Salvador, we did a 30-minute hike up to viewing platforms atop of Cerro Verde, an extinct volcano now covered in a cloud forest sprinkled with yellow and purple flowers. We got amazing views of Santa Ana volcano and the stunning volcanic Lake Coatepeque. Our guide told us that during weekends and holidays the hikes and viewing platforms do get crowded with locals, but we were there on a weekday and had the place largely to ourselves.

2. EASY TO GET TO GET TO: While direct flights from Canada to San Salvador are limited, they are available. Avianca flies direct from Toronto (just over four hours), and Air Transat started direct flights from Montreal on Dec. 22 (a five to 5.5 hour flight). San Salvador is also a hub for Avianca for those wanting to country hop.

3. EASY TO GET AROUND: Over the course of the FAM, El Salvador was referred to as "the 45-minute country" and the Minister of Tourism called it the country of "short distances." "Everything is 45 minutes away from San Salvador, from Mayan ruins to volcanoes to surfing and beaches. Most people will use San Salvador as a home base, and do day trips from there," said PR representative Robert Einhorn. They do have their rush hour, "but it's not like Mexico City or L.A."

4. EAT (AND DRINK) AUTHENTICALLY: At the open air restaurant, Jardin de Celeste, with a beautiful flower garden to match its name, we drank local beers (Suprema was our guide's favourite) and fruit juices (I had the jocote fruit smoothie), while feasting on steak with "salsa de tenquiques," a special mushroom sauce that's a local delicacy. For dessert I ordered the "quesadilla," which is nothing like what you get in Mexico. It's actually a cheesecake, but unlike anything we know here in Canada. Instead of a creamy dessert, it's a sponge cake with cheese in it. Our group's favourite local food was the papusa, a thick tortilla (essentially a corn pancake) stuffed with cheese (possibly pork and beans as well).

5. NEVER SEE COFFEE THE SAME WAY AGAIN: According to our guide, coffee is the second biggest export from El Salvador, and any Canadian who drinks coffee has probably had some brewed from beans grown in this country. It was an eye-opening experience as we saw the coffee-making process from beginning to end. We visited El Carmen State, which grows its own coffee, and processes the fruit from other growers – yes, coffee starts as a fruit, often referred to as cherries. Seeing the laborious process, from hand-picking to raking drying "beans" (they are actually seeds) in the sun, to men carrying around hundred pound bags and women sitting at a conveyer belt to pick out impurities, we all gained a new respect for our morning java.



growers in the country, relying on operations like this to get their crops to market.

Machines took care of some of the work, like separating the skin from the seed and the surrounding sugar-rich “mucous,” but overall, this is a very labour-intensive process. The fruit has to be hand-picked, the bags are dumped by hand, and after fermentation the seeds (conventionally called “beans” because they looked like lentils) are spread out over laid bricks to dry in the sun, then manually raked repeatedly. Women sit at a conveyor belt to pick out broken or misshapened beans (and other impurities) and men carry off the bags of beans, each of which can weigh around 100 pounds. We, on the other hand, got to sit back and savour a cup of slow-drip coffee at the end.

Other cultural offerings included a visit to MARTE (El Salvador’s Museum of Art), where we saw a dark and playful exhibition of plastic guns, comic strip murals, and skeleton commuters – a commentary on the country’s history, as well as the historic centre of San Salvador, with its beautiful Metropolitan Cathedral, National Palace, and the hidden gem, the El Rosario Church. The latter felt like a hangar converted into a holy place by metal smiths, concrete layers, and glass

makers. We closed with a beachside seafood dinner along the promenade at the Malécon del Puerto de la Libertad, which has seen a big investment from the government (the Minister of Tourism described it as his passion project).

The seafood dinner and the live band were great, but for me, the surfers were uniquely El Salvadoran. The pitch black ocean was lit up with spotlights as more than a dozen young surfers skimmed along the small waves. El Salvador hosts numerous international competitions each year, and according to PR representative Robert Einhorn, 39 per cent of visitors come for the beach, including surfing.

“The most popular surf spots in the west are La Libertad, Playa El Tunco, Playa El Sunzal, and Playa El Zonte,” said Einhorn. “The ultimate waves in El Salvador are Punta Roca in the west, and Las Flores and Punta Mango in the east. Playa El Sunzal is known for its consistency and quality, and is probably the best place to learn how to surf, but also has a fast right beach break that experienced surfers love.”

If I didn’t already want to come back, the surf demonstration would’ve sold me. I definitely need a surf-cation. ■