

Shaking hands with El Salvador



The Mayan ruins of Tazumal, one of the many archaeological sites in the ancient city of Chalchuapa.

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The year was 2005, a time in my life when I was searching for home rather than running away from it. With a backpack, surfboard and ticket around-the-world, I set out to find contentment through culture. Instead, I found a travel addiction that took me to 28 countries in 12 months. Central America snagged me by the collar, and before I knew it, I had fallen in love with all things Latino.

That is, until I met El Salvador. At that stage, it served only as a corridor between my two heavily researched destinations of Honduras and Guatemala. And so I pushed on, hitchhiking (children, close your ears) and busing across the smallest, and most densely populated country in Central America. It's nearly double that of Los Angeles, with residents sprawled across the country's 14 provinces.

Far from alone, I sat shoulder-to-shoulder with strangers on chicken buses, where, oddly enough, I was asked to hold a chicken. While the woman beside me cradled much more precious cargo, I was pecked by her featherless bird. That same route left me conversing with a clown who demanded spare change after telling a

joke I didn't understand. In the end, El Salvador left me with a sunburn, a broken surfboard and hostel (vs. hostile) bedbugs. Despite our differences, I bid adios with the promise of someday salvaging what was left of our brief encounter.

Now more than a decade later, I decided to shake hands with the country that spanked me on the way out. This time my trip would be different, much different. I had money and a mission. My goal was to experience the best of El Salvador in one single weekend, which was surprisingly doable.

Just 8,000 square miles, you can cover the length of El Salvador in about seven hours, and the width in just two. There are direct flights from eight major U.S. cities. Sadly, San Diego is not one of them, but the flight into the capital of San Salvador is painless, taking roughly seven hours. My in-flight magazine called El Salvador "Land of Jewels," which apparently is the literal translation of the country's indigenous name, Cuscatlán. I was hellbent on finding those precious gems, even if I only had 72 hours to dig 'em up.

Once on the ground, modern highways connected the city to surrounding metropolitan areas and beyond. Rental cars are available, but most travelers explore by taxi or private charter. My fear of clowns and chickens left me opting for the latter, which set me back about \$100 a day. From that point forward, the world was my ostra.

Webbing out from the central region are dozens of volcanoes and lakes, meaning you can add a splash of nature to your urban mix. For lodging, I hotel-hopped daily, picking the best of the familiar, the cultural and the downright luxurious. Good luck choosing — there are more than 10,000 hotel rooms in the country, ranging from bed-and-breakfasts to boutique hotels (no comment on the hostels).

My first night was spent at Hotel Real Intercontinental, a four-plus-star property in the city's business center. It also happens to neighbor Metrocentro, the largest shopping mall in Central America. But I wasn't there to shop, even if I could bypass conversion headaches for the U.S. dollar, adopted in 2001 as El Salvador's main currency.

Nope. I was there to find the jewels, which I quickly discovered were sparkling along El Salvador's seven tourist routes. Name your craving and there's a route to satisfy every traveler: flowers, history, beaches, archaeological sites, mountains, art, coffee and ecotourism (or "peace route" as they call it). In reviewing the seven options, my plan was to dedicate one day to nature, one day to history and one day to adventure.

Time out for transparency. I'm not a history buff, nor do I invest limited vacation days in museums. But El Salvador was different. Architecture, customs, history and nature all blended together in one remarkable story, which started on Day 1.

Up bright and early, my journey took me 15 miles into the misty hills of El Boqueron National Park. Home of the magnificent San Salvador volcano, its crater is 3 miles around and more than 1,800 feet deep. Don't fall in.

Trails are muddy during rainy season, which lasts from May until October. Despite the drizzle, I hiked the wet trails of Cerro Verde, El Salvador's largest national park. On display are three impressive volcanoes: Cerro

Verde, Izalco and Santa Ana. Connected by a network of hiking trails, Izalco is the baby of the group, Santa Ana is the steepest, and Cerro Verde is the only one cradled within a cloud forest.

From various viewpoints, expect to be dazzled. Volcanic cones sprout from emerald hillsides, battling for attention against Lake Coatepeque. This crater pool on the eastern edge of the Coatepeque Caldera boasts hot springs and island estates owned by El Salvador's elite.

At the base of the volcanoes are corn, sugarcane and coffee farms — perfectly wrapped like Christmas tree skirts. Neighboring parks are home to 500 species of birds and 20 species of orchids. Entrance fees to these natural wonders cost \$6, less than your to-go order from Starbucks.

From here, you can stop for lunch at El Jardín de Celeste, where the smell of grilled meat is enough to make you abandon vegetarianism. Charming is an understatement in this historic farmhouse now serving as a garden restaurant in the Ahuachapán region.

A coffee tour at nearby El Carmen Estate is the perfect cure for a food coma. The factory roasts 10 million pounds of coffee beans per season, and there are plenty of blends that will perk you up. The best time to visit is during harvest season, between December and January.

For dinner, reserve a night with the cool crowd at Lobby restaurant in San Benito district. Inspired by 1930s American hotels, this trendy gastro bar looks more like a San Diego hotspot, with its modern mixology, California cuisine and organic ingredients. Normally I would avoid anything reminiscent of home, but the \$5 cocktails and \$12 entrees are too beautiful to ignore.

On Day 2, head 30 minutes outside the capital, past the hardened lava fields of El Playon. Continue to the indigenous city of Chalchuapa, inhabited since 1200 B.C. This colonial center is home to the Church of Santiago and the El Tazumal pyramids — the highest in the country.

Joya de Ceren is a must for anyone remotely interested in history (present company now included). Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, these archaeological ruins display the daily life of the pre-Columbian population. In 660 B.C., the volcanic eruption of Loma Caldera buried the city under 10 layers of ash. As one of the world's best-preserved archaeological sites, it's considered to be the Pompeii of America. For those craving more history in their day, head to San Andrés Archaeological Site, one of five in El Salvador. The entrance fee is just \$3.

For a meal to remember, dine at La Pampa Coatepeque on the shores of Lake Coatepeque. As this exclusive restaurant, grilled fish is the specialty, but it's the architecture that will blow your mind. Tour the grounds and consider overnighting at the six-room hotel (with private infinity pools) for \$180 a night.

From here, transfer to Suchitoto, where you can stay at the quaint Los Almendros de San Lorenzo. The 200-year-old home was purchased 13 years ago and underwent a full restoration to retain its colonial style. Today, it acts as a 12-bedroom bed-and-breakfast with lake views and a full breakfast for less than \$100 a night.

A major bonus is its location in Suchitoto, 30 miles northeast of San Salvador, where indigo ruled as king of the economy. A non-debatable must is a visit to Arte Anil, a corner shop where you can dye a scarf using organic techniques of the past (and you get to keep the scarf; \$20).

“Suchi” as they call it, transformed from an abandoned ghost town to the iconic tourism center that it is today. Here, cobbled streets come alive with art, music and food festivals throughout the year. This is where you’ll want to shop for traditional crafts, like beaded jewelry, indigo-dyed clothing, loom-woven table runners and colorful nesting boxes.

If you can swing it, visit in late January and early February when local artists take to the streets to showcase their latest works. Set aside a few hours to soak in the colonial center, where food vendors serve hot pupusas — thick handmade tortillas stuffed with cheese, pork and beans. If you’re having nature withdrawals after Day 1, there are plenty of hikes to nearby waterfalls, caves and Lago Suchitlán, all within miles of town.

On Day 3, hit El Tunco Beach in La Libertad, home to some of the best waves in El Salvador. Start out with lunch at Café Sunzal to watch two or maybe three surfers in the water. The lineup is pretty much nonexistent, meaning you can have the ridiculously consistent waves all to yourself. If you’re on a tighter budget, opt for Hotel Casa del Mar, where you can talk incoming swells and painful wipeouts with fellow travelers. There’s a decent quiver on-site with board rentals going for \$20 a day, and lessons for \$10 an hour. Non-surfers can scuba dive, hike, zip line, kayak or do absolutely nothing at all.

If there’s ever been a place to go out with a bang, it’s here at B Boutique Hotel. Carved into the cliffs of Puerto Barillas, the exterior walls of the four rooms at this modern hotel are entirely made of glass. As you gaze over the Pacific, there is literally nothing separating you from the sea (except the window, of course). These stark-white suites are perfect for the pampered surfer, or someone who is so over clowns, chickens and hostels. Rates (\$350 per night) include a bottle of wine, two massages, stocked minibar and a massive breakfast. From here, you’re just a short 45-minute drive from the airport.

In the end, it wasn’t about finding the “treasured jewels” or even comparing my previous trip from 12 years earlier to the journey today. It was about looking El Salvador in the eye, shaking hands and saying thanks for grabbing me by the collar this time around.

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If you go

Eat

El Jardín de Celeste: www.eljardindeceleste.com

The Lobby: www.lobbygastrobar.com

La Pampa Coatepeque: www.cardeuelsalvador.com/lapampa/

Stay

InterContinental Hotel San Salvador: www.ihg.com

Los Almendros de San Lorenzo: www.losalmendrosdesanlorenzo.com

B Boutique Hotel: www.bboutiquehotel.com

More info: www.elsalvador.travel

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