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# You're Missing Out on El Salvador

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*PHOTO: Volcanoes, archaeology and culture await adventurous visitors in El Salvador. (photo by Chelsea Davis)*

People used to associate El Salvador with danger. This, unfortunately, was a fair judgment as crime involving gang violence, drugs, murder and the mistreatment of women could be all too common.

However, most people don't realize El Salvador is also home to much more than homicide statistics.

Those willing to give this Central American nation a chance will be surprised at how [worthwhile a destination](#) it is.

"Tourism is one of the industries that will help our country grow and become stronger," said Benjamin Rivera, a tour guide at [Salvadorean Tours](#). "In the last 15 years, there has been progress in the political arena, in infrastructure and in education. There are more opportunities for El Salvadorians than ever before, and sometimes the change is slow, but things are changing for the better."

Known as "[El Pulgarcito of America](#)," or the little thumb of America, it's a country full of rich culture, jaw-dropping natural beauty, delicious (cheap!) food and archaeology. Because of its small size, you can start your morning with a cup of coffee in the mountains and enjoy lunch overlooking the crashing waves on the coast.

No matter where you travel, you should always be on high alert and cautious of your surroundings. That said, the best and safest way to see all this country has to offer is hiring a reputable tour guide.

During my stay, I was able to spend each night in a new city throughout the country. Here are the highlights:

## San Salvador

El Salvador's bustling capital city is home to historic monuments, churches and museums. Definitely check out the historical center, which includes the Metropolitan Cathedral, National Palace and National Theatre, with the Gerardo Barrios square as its center point.

One of the most popular sites to see is El Rosario Church, designed by famed El Salvadorian sculptor Ruben Martinez. From the sidewalk, all you see is a dismal concrete exterior. However, when you enter the church, get ready to be blown away by the stunning, arched stained glass ceiling, which filters natural light in a rainbow of color that illuminates the entire altar.

Where to stay? Mirador Plaza.

## Suchitoto

Meaning "place of birds and flowers", Suchitoto is a charming, quiet, colonial town with cobblestone streets. It's known as the arts and culture capital of the country and, more importantly, a town that takes women's rights seriously.

The town's strong presence of women's groups helps to educate the community on issues of equality. Throughout the town, you'll spot stenciled signs declaring, "In this house, we want a life free from violence against women."

While in Suchitoto, stop by Arte Añil where you can learn about the importance of indigo in El Salvador, once referred to as "blue gold" during colonial times. Shop for unique clothing and decorative items created by owner, Irma Guadron, or take a dying class yourself.

Nearby is Lake Suchitlan, where visitors can hop a boat tour departing from Puerto San Juan and admire the seemingly infinite types of birds seen in the area.

Where to stay? Los Almendros de San Lorenzo.

## Concepción de Ataco

If you appreciate art, explore the peaceful town of Concepción de Ataco.

Located alongside [The Flowers Route](#), a road named for the abundance of vibrant flowers blossoming on either side of it, Ataco is known for the colorful murals that decorate its town's walls. These depict both everyday life and folklore, as well as inspiring concepts, like gender equality and reaching your dreams.

Coffee-fiends will enjoy touring the nearby El Carmen Estate, where they can learn about the Ataco coffee process from guides who have grown up in the coffee industry, and of course, enjoy a cup of joe at the pristine estate.

Ataco also has a lively central plaza that comes to life on the weekends. Stroll through the plaza where you can part take in the gastronomic festival that features El Salvadorian cuisine, arts and crafts and music.

Where to stay? Misión de ángeles.

## La Libertad

While heading to the Pacific coastline, make a stop to admire Lake Coatepeque, an expansive crater lake in Santa Ana. Though you can admire it from the road, you can also visit its shore to swim, kayak, jet ski and more.

Visitors who love bohemian, beachy vibes will adore the town of [La Libertad](#). With two streets lined by shops and just a few restaurants and bars, it's a chill, relaxing getaway and a great place to learn [how to surf](#) or watch surfers crush the waves. After watching the epic sunset on El Tunco Beach, head to Beto's Restaurante, where the view of the coast is as spectacular as the enormous selection of seafood on its menu.

Where to stay? Boca Olas Hotel.

## Hot History

Other highlights of El Salvador include the epic volcanoes that can be found throughout the country. In fact, there are currently 23 active examples. Head to El Boqueron Park, located on top of the San Salvador Volcano at 5,905 feet where you can view a crater that's over three miles long.

Another must-see? [Cerro Verde National Park](#) where you can hike through three volcanoes: Cerro Verde volcano, Izalco volcano and Santa Ana volcano. Admission is \$2 and \$3, respectively.

Lastly, a trip to El Salvador wouldn't be complete without an exploration of archaeological sites. The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Joya de Ceren—also called the Pompeii of America—is a look at a pre-hispanic farming village preserved by a volcanic eruption in the seventh century AD.

Located a few kilometers away is San Andrés, preserved by an eruption of the Playon volcano during 1658 AD. Main attractions include the Acropolis, along with its nearby pyramids, that served as important political and ceremonial structures for the use of governors in during the Maya civilization.

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