

## The Forgotten Land of El Salvador

A commonly overlooked tourist location is El Salvador. One reason is the prevalence of guns, crime, unemployment and the pollution of San Salvador. Tourist agencies are not developed here so much of the planning needs to be done by the individual tourist. Those looking for a low-stress, all-inclusive trip should travel elsewhere. However, part of the attraction is with so few tourists there is no competition for services. There are no lines for attractions, no sold-out concerts. A trip here will get a better indication of how a normal Central American person lives. With the lack of tourism there is a bit of curiosity towards foreigners, which makes for good conversation.

Santa Ana, in the west of the country is the second largest city, with a population of 250,000. In the city center is a series of buildings including a park, cathedral and theater. Chalchuapa, eight miles west of Santa Ana, has the Mayan ruins of Tazumal. Archeologists believe that the first settlements in this area were around 5000 BC. As interesting as the ruins are, the cemetery located on the backside of the ruins is also worth a look. The crosses by the graves are green, blue and pink pastel colors. The idea behind these "soft" colors is that they should be inviting to God; this is also done with some churches in Eastern Europe. There are also many flowers in the area to make for an even softer, more appealing environment.

Volcan Izalco is located near the city of Santa Ana. A slightly diverted route to the volcano along CA8 allows a view of Ruta de Las Flores. Even with limited Spanish, I knew this was the Flower Route and there are certainly are large number of hibiscus and other blooming plants. As this is the heart of coffee country, it is possible to see the white coffee blossoms in late spring.



Upon arriving at the national park located next to the volcano, tourists will be given a police escort, which is a requirement. It is also required that climbers are in good shape as it is a difficult trek. The first part of the climb up the volcano is actually descending from the main road through a forested area. After trekking through this area, there will be a clearing that marks the end of the descent and the beginning of the ascent. At this point there is little vegetation, mostly just volcanic rock. The police officer may use his or her binoculars to look for any bandits.

Satisfied that there are none, the climb up the volcano begins.



The climb up is difficult as two steps forward is often followed with one step back because of the loose volcanic rock. If climbers lose their footing, they can grab onto rocks for balance. However, some of the rocks are hot because of the underlying heat and can scorch. Reaching the top is most enjoyable as the cone is still smoldering and the view of the countryside is

spectacular.

With an unemployment rate reaching 50% and a high crime rate, San Salvador has several unsafe neighborhoods, largely in the area from Thirteenth Street to the east. It is necessary to stay in your hotel and take a taxi after dark. Any sleep may be broken by the sound of distant gunshots at two in the morning. The main business in this area appears to be selling tombstones and other death-related material. Although there is great pride in the burial ceremony and in the upkeep of the burial plot, it is still unnerving.

The advantage of staying in this area is that many of the sights are in this city center area. The grid pattern of the city makes getting around easy and in the daytime it is safe. The attractions in the area are also located very close to each other so a tour without much walking and hassle is possible. There are several pleasant plazas and parks in the area, which allows people to rest and enjoy the attractions. Across the street from Plaza Barrios is the Metropolitan Cathedral, which is one of the top attractions after its 1999 renovation. The National Palace, made of marble, is located on one side of the plaza while the National Library occupies another. A couple hundred yards from Plaza Barrios is the huge central market, which can be used for a quick meal or as entertainment.

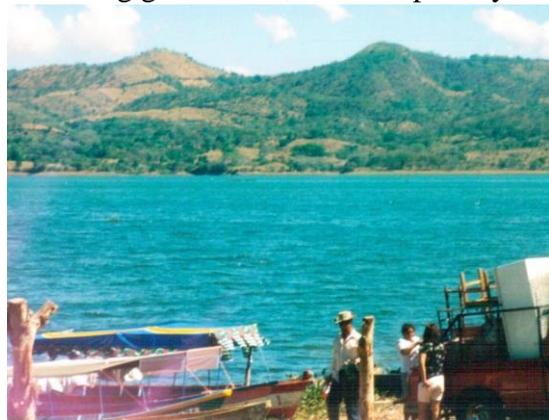
A relaxing day in San Salvador, which is nearly impossible, can be accomplished by touring the moderately upscale area known as Boulevard de Los Heroes. At the end of the boulevard is the University of El Salvador and anyone can take an individual walking tour here. There are a couple megamalls, Metro Center and Metrosur, as well as many nice restaurants in this generally safe area. However, security officers guard many shops with a finger on the trigger of their automatic weapon. Also, many buildings have barbed wire fences to provide additional security.

The city of Suchitoto to the north of San Salvador is now a quite, safe city. This has not always been true, as it was part of the civil war that ended in 1992. This area was home of the scorched land tactic that led to an exodus, which partially explains the number of people who lived in America at one time. Many of the emigrants have returned and Suchitoto is restoring the colonial houses and buildings that were destroyed in the war.

A required walk is down the hill to Lake Suchitlan, which is actually a reservoir for hydroelectric power. Proceeding down the winding gravel road, one will pass by many small shacks housing people and chickens that are working the land. A couple children or a dog may accompany you to the lake, as it is popular destination for the people of Suchitoto.

The lake area has a couple of activities for people. There are a couple of bars and restaurants that have an overlook of the lake. Many locals are fishing in rowboats. One person will splash a long piece of wood about 10 feet long in the water to scare the fish and then their

partner will pick them off. Also, motorized boats can be rented for a cruise around the lake while locals use these boats for transporting goods, some as big as refrigerators.



There seems to be guarded optimism in El Salvador as she recovers from the recent past. This is exemplified by the people of El Salvador, who, although generally polite, are somewhat guarded at first approach. There is not a lot of what would be termed tourist attractions in El Salvador, but it is a good place to get a sense of what it means to be a Central American.