

ADVENTURE

CENTRAL AMERICA

Head for Honduras

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Say you're going to Honduras and the reaction is likely to be: "Isn't there a war going on down there?" While the conflicts in neighboring El Salvador and Nicaragua did spill over its borders, Honduras itself was never at war. For More on HONDURAS on Page 9

Mountain ruins provide a fine high



The Ruins of Copan

Travel

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that matter, today all of Central America is at peace — and nowhere in the region are the people as friendly and easygoing as in Honduras.

Honduras conjures up images of jungles, but to dispel another misconception, it's mostly mountainous. And the high terrain is where the adventurous head to explore some of the most impressive ruins of the Americas, hike in tropical forests filled with wildlife and visit once-important Spanish colonial outposts that have been forgotten for centuries.

Only a trickle of travelers comes through here, motivated by the experiences, not luxuries. The roads are bad but lushly scenic, the restaurants and accommodations basic yet clean, friendly places. Days are spent riding horseback to the remote remains of a Mayan frog temple or hiking to steaming hot springs.

The highlight of the mountains for many is Copan, called the Athens of the Mayan world because the Mayas' artistic expression reached its zenith here. The extensive ruins include an acropolis of great plazas, ceremonial courts, pyramids, temples and a large residential complex.

was referring to Copan Ruinas' small but excellent archaeological museum, filled with artifacts from the ruins.

The next morning we went into the mountains on horseback. We rode past brilliant-green tobacco fields, climbed up to panoramas of meandering rivers, and marveled at the huge, partially eroded stone frogs of the Frog Temple, where Mayan women once prayed for fertility. Along the way, butterflies of many colors fluttered about, barefoot peasants passed carrying huge bundles on their backs, and an array of birds to delight any ornithologist swooped by — split-tailed turquoise motmots, little blue herons, orange-hooded orioles, kingfishers and smooth-billed anis.

From Copan, Gracias is reached via a six-hour bus ride up into the mountains. Founded in 1536, Gracias was once the base of the governing council for all of Central America but quickly lost all importance and has been forgotten ever since. An eerie aura of being removed from the world fills the old, dilapidated cobbled streets. I felt I'd reached an architectural ghost of the Spanish conquests, with heavy wooden doors adorned with elaborate carved lintels, ornate wrought-iron bars on windows, massive

churches and an imposing fort perched over the town.

Gracias is eerily spectacular and in itself worth a visit, but it's also the gateway to Celaque National Park — 67,000 acres of lush, virgin habitat with the country's highest peak, 9,347-foot Mount Celaque, enshrouded by a mysterious cloud forest.

A system of trails is planned, but only one has been cut so far — to the top of the mountain, leading into a mysterious world of shadow and mist exploding with moss, bromeliads, orchids, vines and giant ferns.

Beginning as a soft pine-needle path, it quickly turns to steep slopes scaled by countless switchbacks, zagging around streams that tumble down rocky gullies creating waterfalls and swimming holes. Higher up, it climbs through dark caverns of dense vegetation, growing progressively steeper, wetter and more difficult.

The untrammelled terrain is populated by white-faced monkeys, pumas, tapirs, toucans and brilliant quetzal birds. Apart from an uneventful snake encounter, I saw only large toads and a variety of birds, including red-gullied wild turkeys that took off from their perches with high-pitched screeches.

Reaching the top, in five exhausting hours from the park visitor center, was anticlimactic: Dense clouds and pouring rain obscured any panorama.

It takes at least seven hours to go

up and down from the visitor center, so it's best to spend the night there. Cots and pure water are provided, but you'll need a sleeping bag and food.

After the exhausting trek up Celaque, relax in soothing hot springs. They're several hours from Gracias on foot, but you can usually hitch a ride.

Gracias may be a lost village, but visitors are treated like newfound friends: People are ready with greetings, and kids are eager to be in photos. This attitude intensifies as you travel deeper into the mountains on a slow, arduous road to La Esperanza; even fewer visitors come here, and the people tend to be overly friendly, or just overly curious, gathering around you to talk or just stare.

La Esperanza is another centuries-old colonial town, long forgotten by mainstream Honduras. And there's excellent hiking here, too, in forested hills with beautiful lakes and waterfalls. Trek out to nearby Yaramanguila and other Lenca Indian villages, or on Sundays, head to town for the big market offering blankets, basketry and other handicrafts.

The day I climbed Mount Celaque, I descended from the mist to a warming, glorious sun extending long fingers of pastel light. "You will not forget the beauty of the park, and you will want to come back to Honduras," Enrique Lopez of the forestry office had told me. His words were true.

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Particularly setting Copan apart are the exquisite carving-work altars adorned with mythological figures, stone monuments depicting nobles, elaborate glyphs detailing history, and spectacular temples with statues of Chac, the long-nosed god of rain, and doorways formed by monstrous jaws.

About a 10-minute walk from the ruins is ancient Copan Ruinas. It was the main settlement in an area inhabited by the Maya for millennia, and an aura of timeless peacefulness and tradition pervades. Walking the quiet, cobbled streets of adobe houses with red-tile roofs, passersby pause to say *buenos dias*.

Children frolic and friends gather to chat in the tree-shaded main square fronted by an imposing, stark-white church.

Copan Ruinas is remarkably uncommercial for being next to one of Latin America's major ruins, but it's not without its night life. Enter Llama del Bosque (Flame of the Forest) restaurant and hear a jukebox blasting Honduran-style salsa as parrots squawk in the screened-in garden dining area. Diners are engrossed in animated conversations. The food happens to be tasty, too.

My hotel in Copan Ruinas was the charming Los Gemelos, with simple rooms set around a beautiful garden. The warm and gregarious proprietress, Dona Mafalda, invited me to lunch one day and served a hearty, garlicky soup of vegetables and noodles, an affordable staple in this poor country, she explained. For dessert, we had sweet and succulent *jocotes* (Spanish plums) from her garden.

At Los Gemelos I also met Bill Stevens, a retired American who worked as a volunteer on excavations at Copan during the '80s and now lives here part-time. He took me touring the ruins, pointing out details I would have missed. Reaching for a white shell, he explained, "These were the fast food of the Mayas. They would find them on the path, scoop them up, break off the end and suck out the snail."

He kicked at the dirt and loosened a shiny object, explaining, "This is obsidian, which was used to make knives and other implements. You can see them in the museum." He

How to Honduras

Getting there: U.S. carriers connect with Tegucigalpa, the capital, and San Pedro Sula.

When to go: In the mountains, the climate is springlike year-round, but the drier months are November to April.

Getting around: Explore Honduras' mountain areas on a loop starting in San Pedro Sula and ending in Tegucigalpa, or vice versa, flying into one city and out from the other. In-country transport is by bus only; they run regularly and are amazingly cheap, but roads are poor and travel is slow.

Where to stay: With one exception — the comfortable, hacienda-like Hotel Marina in Copan Ruinas at \$40 double — only basic accommodations are available in the mountains, yet they're clean, friendly and only cost \$3-\$5. Recommendations: in Gracias, the spotless, well-run Hotel Erick; in La Esperanza, the Hotel La Esperanza; in Copan Ruinas, the family-run Los Gemelos.

Where to eat: The cuisine is similar to that found elsewhere in the region — tacos, enchiladas, re-fried beans, fried bananas, fried and grilled meats, poultry and fish — but without the chile. Try a *plato tipico*, which includes a sampling of all the typical foods. Every town has at least one better restaurant where, in simple but clean surroundings, you eat very well for \$2-\$4. Avoid drinking the water. **Recommendations:** In Copan Ruinas, garden dining at Llama del Bosque; in Gracias, the pleasant patio at La Fonda; in La Esperanza, the Hotel La Esperanza restaurant.

For details: Honduras does not have a tourism office in the United States, and only limited information is available from the Honduran Consulate in Houston. However, two good guidebooks are available: *Honduras and the Bay Islands*, by Passport Press, and *Central America*, from the Lonely Planet series.