

LYNNE HELM

hen talk turns toward your next getaway ... when debate heats up on whether to laze on a beach, do something sporty and invigorating, or go the cultural route, why not do it all?

It's high time to head for Honduras,

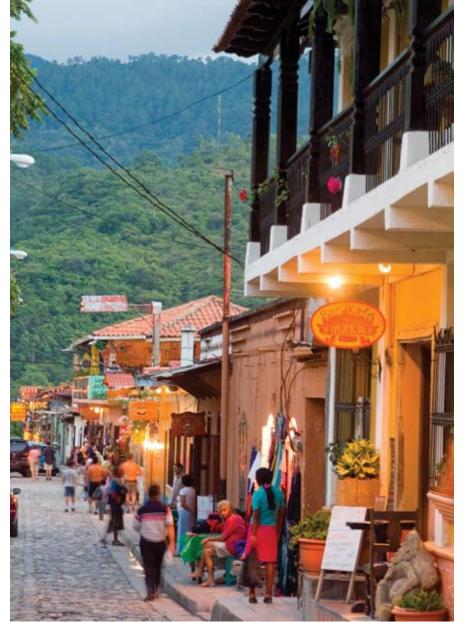
Central America's easily accessible, untrammeled destination that offers a welcome smile while going an extra mile to provide comforts, courtesies and culinary experiences that soft adventureseekers adore.

From zip-lining above rain forest canopies, white-water rafting, and

extraordinary diving to communing with the ancients at Copan, easy escapes to Honduras can seem like around-theworld whirls.

Want rough-hewn luxury with a personal hammock on your private cabin porch? Look to the **Lodge at Pico Bonito** near La Ceiba, where excitement

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The streets of Copan Ruinas

between naps can range from morning horseback riding on the beach to night hikes in the rainforest. Add to that a good afternoon soak in hot springs just off a mountain trail.

Prefer beachy-keen island environs where it's only a hop-skip to snorkel, dive, or kayak? Henry Morgan Resort on Roatan's West End attracts families from the mainland as well as Yankees from up north, providing a friendly, all-inclusive atmosphere with open-air lobby facilities and air-conditioned buffet dining.

Little wonder that real estate has gotten hot in Honduras, especially on Roatan. Native Honduran Ana Svoboda has lived in New York, Missouri, and on Florida's Marco Island, but can't resist being back on Roatan to show off Parrot Tree Plantation, a 168-acre gated waterfront community with one-bedroom condos and a 200-slip marina blending gracefully with the island's still common thatched huts and dugout canoes.

Mainland Magnetism

A century of banana trade and in—creasing tourism has brought Honduras in touch with North American culture, from golf courses to fast food. But beyond ubiquitous signs for pizza and Bojangles fried chicken lies the allure of spectacular Mayan Indian ruins ... of coffee plantations ... of untold flora, fauna and geologic wonders, all tied to a way of life far less frenzied.

The Mayan metropolis of Copan collapsed around 900 A.D., yet its culture

and traditions live on. Descendants of the Maya are plentiful around the colonial town of Copán Ruinas, and Copan Valley is filled with ancient footprints. Copan's main archaeological park is within hiking distance from town (or a short ride in a three-wheeled tuk-tuk). The site, with hieroglyphic staircase and ball court, is the second largest in the Mayan world. Exposed by river erosion is a cross-section of ancient construction, since the Mayans frequently built on top of their old monuments, going higher, wider, and more elaborate. Nearby, the Museum of Mayan Sculpture shelters many salvaged carvings in an open-air hall.

Nestled in hills above the ruins, Hacienda San Lucas is a 100-year-old family-owned retreat. Eight distinctive rooms feature private baths with hot water, plus beds handcrafted from local cedar. Authentic country cuisine prep, from rolling tortillas to wrapping tamales, is showcased in an open kitchen, and five-course candlelit dinners are served nightly. The San Lucas property also is home to the ruin of Los Sapos ("The Toads"), a key ceremonial site. According to folklore, Los Sapos holds special power related to birthing and fertility (the toad is a fertility symbol, and this region is home to 12 species).

Among newer attractions near Copan, Macaw Mountain stars as a bird park and nature sanctuary amid old-growth forests of mahogany, gumbo limbo, figs, and Spanish cedar. Many birds here were rescued by American conservationist Mandy Wagner who years ago began taking in cast-off parrots and toucans. Biologist Lloyd Davidson inherited the birds in 1994. By 2000, the collection had grown to more than 100 winged wonders representing more than 20 species. Davidson moved the birds from Roatan to the present-day tract by charter plane in July 2003. It's only fitting that rare birds donated or rescued include the scarlet macaw - the official bird of Honduras.



The view beneath the waves on a glass-bottom boat tour in Roatan

Bay Island Bliss

Once in Honduras, who can resist sunn-sea time to the Bay Islands? Roatan, 30 miles long and three miles wide, is the largest of 60 isles and is rimmed by the world's second largest reef. Underwater environs make for spectacular scuba diving, snorkeling and clear-bottom kayaking. Happily for non-swimmers, it's possible to take it all in via Miss Ziggy, a glass-bottom semi-submersible

boat that showcases fish-filled coral gardens and divers themselves. Marine life is extensive, from eagle rays to huge parrotfish and adult angelfish, schools of blue tangs and yellow-tailed damselfish with neon blue spots. Besides the allure of white-sand shorelines at West Bay, Palmetto Bay and Camp Bay, other fun includes tree canopy zip-lining, botanical gardens, extensive dining, and plenty of happy-hour options.

Quilting for Hope

In gift shops at attractions like Macaw Mountain, colorful quilts handcrafted from fabric squares depict wildlife from turtles to parrots. These are produced by ladies of the Juan Pablo Segundo Cooperative, high above the Cangrejal River in Pico Bonito National Park. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch did a number on many Honduran villages. Families like the Lobos of El Pital lost homes, crops, their life savings, and sometimes loved ones. But Rosario Lobo -- determined to rebuild her village and regenerate hope -- formed a women's circle to spearhead reconstruction. Producing their first quilt in 1999, the co-op has steadily grown. In 2003, Rosario was invited by the United States Agency for

International Development (USAID) to the First Mesoamerican Congress of Protected Areas.

Rosario's presentation brought global attention to how micro-businesses like hers can revive prospects for

struggling families. Demand for Juan Pablo Segundo Cooperative crafts provides better healthcare, nutrition and education for children of El Pital and surrounding villages. For the quilters themselves comes self-empowerment, educational opportunity,

economic freedom and hope. www.juanpablosegundo.org,

or e-mail info@juanpablosegundo.org.

- Lynne Helm

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Henry Morgan Resort, 116 air-conditioned rooms, \$\$, West Bay Beach, Roatan, 888-479-3640, www.henrymorganroatan.com. Air-conditioned dining, pool, volleyball, dive shop along a delightful shoreline.

Lodge at Pico Bonito, 22 cabins, \$\$\$, AP710 La Ceiba, 504-440-0388, www.picobonito.com. Luxurious tranquility with packages available.

Hotel Casa del Arbol, 13 rooms, \$\$, downtown San Pedro Sula, 504-1616, www. hotelcasadelarbol.com. A home away from home with historic appeal in San Pedro Sula, a stepping stone to either Roatan or Copan.

Hotel Posada Real de Copan, 80 spacious airconditioned rooms, \$\$\$, Copan, 504-651-4480, www.posadarealdecopan.com. Business hotel amenities include a courtyard pool and Jacuzzi.

Hacienda San Lucas, \$\$\$, Copan, 504-651-4480, www.haciendasanlucas.com. Country inn atmosphere with nouvelle Latin cuisine.

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Dragonfly Restaurant, Asian, \$\$\$, Roatan. Outdoor dining amid twinkling lights with excellent service.

Lighthouse Restaurant, seafood, \$\$\$, Roatan's west end. Cooked to order delights from fish burritos for lunch to luscious lobster dinners.

El Manzano, \$\$\$, downtown San Pedro Sula. Private dining areas with Honduran dishes served family style worthy of special occasions.

Ahhhh...

Los Sapos Canopy Tour. \$35, starting at the Hacienda San Lucas Hotel, Copan, www. hcanopytours.com. Zip through forests surrounding Mayan mysteries.

Macaw Mountain. \$10 adults, near Copan Ruinas, 504-651-4245, www.macawmountain. com. Commune with feathered friends near a streamside restaurant. Wheelchair accessible.

Miss Ziggy, (Coral Reef Explorer), \$25 adults/\$15 kids, West End behind Foster's Resort, Roatan, 504-336-5597, www.roatan coralreefexplorer.com., e-mail Lorimar@globalnet. hn. Soak up underwater coral reef action without getting wet. Night tours debuting in 2008.

Shhhh ...

Local currency is the lempira (about 19 to US\$1) and credit cards are often acceptable. For low-key bargaining at roadside stands, have a ready supply of both lempira and dollar bills, just in case.

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Honduras Institute of Tourism, 2828 Coral Way, Suite 305, Miami, Fla., 800-410-9608, 305-461-0601, www.letsgohonduras.com. E-mail: hondurastourism@aol.com.

Spirit Airlines flies from San Pedro Sula to major cities around the U.S., including New York.