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Travel

● Belize ● Nicaragua ● Panama

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The Up-and-Coming Travel Spot for Down-and-Out Times

Yes, the financial forecast is grim, but that doesn't mean you have to deny yourself a sunny escape. Get to Central America, where the wave riding, cerveza sipping, and beach bumming come cheap and easy

Cheap Thrill

World-class snorkeling

The best \$50 you'll spend in Placencia? A snorkeling trip to one of the many **cayes** (pronounced keys) in Belize's barrier reef. (Ask your hotel to recommend a tour operator.) Just a half-hour ride from the coast, you'll see a vibrantly colored underwater world inhabited by dolphins, manatees, and nurse sharks, plus manta rays longer than the boat you came in on and sea turtles decades older than you. It's like a trip to the aquarium, only one where there's no glass and a friendly ship's captain stops at a comically tiny island to grill you up some lunch. —K.S.



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Belize

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Placencia

For deserted beaches and total relaxation



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1. Shades, a bathing suit, and a hammock are all anyone needs for a good time in Placencia.

2. Belly up to the seaside bar at Turtle Inn...

3. ...or laze around your thatch-roofed villa.

4. Rumfish y Vino's fresh, juicy sevicehe.



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You can see Placencia from miles away as you approach it in a single-engine plane: a half-moon-shaped sliver of sand speckled with palm trees and divided by an airstrip from the rest of the southern Belize peninsula. Where the road (there's only one) swerves around the landing strip, you'll see a sign telling drivers to yield to planes. And that's really the only stressful moment you'll have here.

At Turtle Inn (www.blancaneaux.com; from \$375 a night), one of Francis Ford Coppola's three Central American resorts, khaki beaches, lapping waves, and—more importantly—a seaside bar are a few sandy shuffles

from your Balinese-style villa. You can while away your hours here, sipping on Belikins (the local beer) and eating pizzas from the brick oven at **Mare**, but if you grow tired of lounging, you can take out a kayak for a better view of the peninsula. Nonactivity is also the activity at the **Chabil Mar Villas** (www.chabilmarvillas.com; from \$385 a night) down the road, a beachfront hotel-condo with lush gardens. And while no one would blame you for holing up at one of these spots, you'd be missing out on the village itself—a quaint town that seems to have forgotten about mass tourism.

On the main drag—which is actually a narrow concrete sidewalk—hand-painted signs lead you past candy-colored cottages to beachside bars like the **Tipsy Tuna** and **Cozy Corner**. So long as Bob Marley, Steely Dan, and \$2 rum punches are enough to keep you happy, you'll fit right in with the Creole speakers and sunburned expats; just make sure you're barefoot or flip-flopped.

The best food, like life itself in Placencia, is simple. Head to **Yoli's Bar and Grill** by the pier for a classic Belizean dinner (\$5 gets you a big plate of grilled ribs and rice), or for a slightly more upscale evening, go to **Rumfish y Vino**, where the special is usually what was caught that morning. Either way, the final Belikin of the night should be had at **Driftwood**, located across the bay. (The bar will send a skiff to pick you up.)

Since Placencia is surrounded by water, there are plenty of opportunities to venture farther than a few hundred feet in a seacraft for a tour of the cayes (see box). But if you never wander far from the hammock outside your villa, that's okay, too.

—KEVIN SINTUMUANG

Ask anyone who visited Nicaragua in the '80s and they'll tell you: The place ain't what it used to be. You could say the same about its neighbor Costa Rica, where the famed *pura vida* has been trampled by development, but the change in Nicaragua is the kind you can believe in. Thank the lingering (and now baseless) stigma of the Sandinista revolution for unspoiled gems like **San Juan del Sur**—a sleepy village on the Pacific coast, dotted with brightly painted surf shops and open-air bars. Here you can get chauffeured from your luxe cabana to the breaks, but you can also get an ice-cold lager for a buck—20 percent tip included.

The best view of San Juan del Sur's crescent-shaped bay is from the infinity pool at **Piedras y Olas** (www.piedrasyolas.com), where one of the airy *cabinas* will cost you just **\$180** a night. The excellent breakfast—including eggs Benedict and corned-beef hash—is free.

The beach in San Juan del Sur is alluringly lined with bars, but to see perfect peeling surf and dramatic rock formations, you need a boat. Ask at Piedras y Olas about their open-bar excursions aboard a forty-two-foot sloop for **\$80**. Or for as little as **\$25** per person,

you can charter a twenty-five-foot *panga* through **Action Tours** (www.actiontoursurfnica.com), captained by "Joey the Australian," who knows where the fish are running, where the waves are breaking, and where you can swim ashore and crack open a beer in Corona-ad-like solitude.

Back in town, freshen up and head to **El Pozo** (www.el-pozo.com), where the *seviche* is made from fish that were swimming that morning, the juicy local pork shoulder is simmered in cinnamon and bitter orange, and the Argentinian *Sémillon* costs about **\$10** a bottle. El Pozo shares a polished South Beach vibe with **Bambu Beach** (www.thebambubeachclub.com), where you'll find pizza worthy of Southern Italy and bracingly fresh cocktails. Afterward, hit the **Iguana Bar**, where "bottle service" means a liter of smooth Flor de Caña rum for about **\$12**.

If you find the one-two punch of inexpensive rum and early-morning surf sessions hard on the system, spend a night at **Morgan's Rock** (www.morgansrock.com), a luxurious eco-lodge. At around **\$250** (including three meals a day), it seems like a splurge until you cross a footbridge above a jungle canopy to your cabin and drift off to the sound of crashing waves. Yeah, this used to be a war zone. So *viva la revolución!* Or at least its leisure-friendly aftermath.

—STAN PARISH

Nicaragua

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San Juan del Sur

For awesome surf and a picturesque beach town

Cheap Thrill

Surfing lessons

So you're not quite ready for enormous outer-reef breaks? Then hit up **Playa Madera** (just a twenty-minute drive from town) for mellow but consistent waves that roll over a soft, sandy bottom. Get your board at **Gecko's** in San Juan del Sur, where the owner rents from his personal collection—one-hour lesson included—for **\$25** a day. Madera can get crowded, but when the blond who stole your wave introduces herself as a cardiologist from Cologne, you won't mind so much. Buy her a beer at the beach bar, but drop in on her and she'll eat you alive.—S.P.

1. The sun-drenched, postcard-ready bay at San Juan del Sur.
2. Caught-that-day mahimahi at Bambu Beach Club.
3. The sheltered cove and infinity pool at Morgan's Rock.

4. Playa Madera: a surfer's paradise.
5. Nicaragua's native golden lager.



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There are few things as thrilling and disorienting as discovering something wonderful that's been there all along: the F11 button on your computer, for example, or the way pickles go perfectly with bacon. Or, say, a sexy, cosmopolitan Central American city that's a mere **\$300** flight away.

If the name Panama City makes you think of spring break in Florida, don't feel bad; it sometimes seems even the Panamanians have only just realized the charm of their capital. "This country has been so consumed with business for so long, they didn't concentrate on tourism," says Matt Landau, an American who founded the expat site **The Panama Report** (www.thepanamareport.com).

Landau also co-owns **Los Cuatro Tulipanes** (www.loscuatrotulipanes.com), an agency that rents out apartments in **Casco Viejo**, Panama City's old quarter. The neighborhood, where the Spanish set up shop in the 1500s, sits on a peninsula attached to the noisy, skyscraper-filled part of town like a forgotten appendage. Indeed, its narrow streets and gracious plazas were once left to molder. (Imagine if New Orleans had ignored the French Quarter for a century.) Now the neighborhood vibrates with the rough energy of transition. Locals blast reggaeton beats into the street while nearby, chauffeured



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1. A view of Panama City over the glassy Pacific.
2. Strolling in the old city.

3. Take in the action at Indigo, a Moroccan-style bar and restaurant...
4. ...and fuel up for the evening with citrus-marinated lamb chops.
5. The scenery in the revitalized Casco Viejo: always colorful.



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SUVs drop off an international set at **Manolo Caracol**, which has an ever changing menu of whatever's fresh, and the Moroccan-themed **Indigo Lounge & Bazaar** (www.indigopanama.com).

In a couple of years, Casco Viejo will be filled with hotels. For now, your options are apartment rentals (nicely restored digs are as little as **\$1,000 per week**), a dorm-style youth hostel, and the three elegantly appointed rooms at **Canal House** (www.canalhousepanama.com), a boutique hotel—if that term even applies to a place with rates under **\$200**. If you don't snag quarters like those, you can stay downtown in the new city, a fifteen-



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minute cab ride away. There the **Hotel El Panama** (www.elpanama.com) exudes Third-World-hotel-as-fortress glamour, and the club-lined Calle Uruguay anchors the nightlife. A relatively sedate oasis is New Yorker David Henesy's restaurant, **La Posta** (Calle 49 at Calle Uruguay, www.lapostapanama.com), filled with business tycoons, ex-presidents, and third, fourth, and

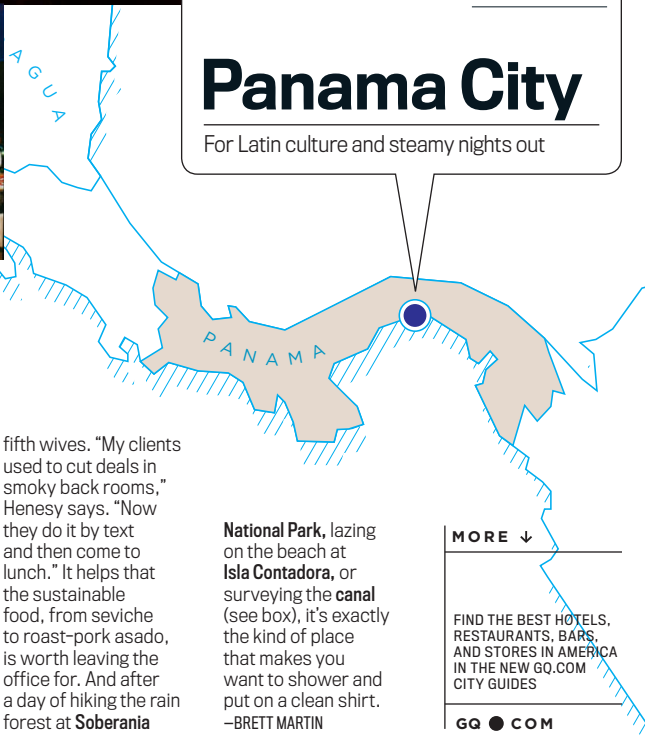
fifth wives. "My clients used to cut deals in smoky back rooms," Henesy says. "Now they do it by text and then come to lunch." It helps that the sustainable food, from seviche to roast-pork asado, is worth leaving the office for. And after a day of hiking the rain forest at **Soberania**

Panama

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Panama City

For Latin culture and steamy nights out



National Park, lazing on the beach at **Isla Contadora**, or surveying the **canal** (see box), it's exactly the kind of place that makes you want to shower and put on a clean shirt. —BRETT MARTIN

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Cheap Thrill

A day on the canal

If you know one thing about Panama, it's probably that there's a canal there. If you *do* one thing while in Panama, spend some time on that canal. The **Miraflores Locks**, where you can get a close-up view of ships entering the waterway, are a short cab ride from the city. A little farther north is the **Gamboa Rainforest Resort**, where you can have lunch 300 yards from massive container ships gliding silently through the jungle. —B.M.

