

November 30, 2004

Costa Rica's Neighbors See Rise in Tourism

By AMY CHOZICK
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
November 30, 2004; Page D7

As Costa Rica, the tropical vacation mecca of the 1990s, has become flooded with tourists, many Americans are turning to alternative destinations such as Honduras, Belize and Guatemala. Now, hoteliers, airlines and cruise lines are expanding into these off-the-beaten-path locales.

Director-turned-hotel owner Francis Ford Coppola ventured into Guatemala last year with La Lancha, a tiny jungle property minutes away from the ancient Mayan city of Tikal. U.S. airlines have added direct flights to the newly renovated airport in Belize's capital. And new ports along the Central American coast are being built to accommodate an increase in cruise-ship visits.



Kanantik Reef & Jungle Resort is an eco-sensitive resort in southern Belize.

Costa Rica draws more than a million tourists a year, but far fewer visitors come to the neighboring countries, which share many of the same attractions, such as rain forests, beach resorts and surfing but also have a more culturally rich, largely indigenous population.

Guatemala, the largest country in Central America, had 884,190 visitors in 2002, and Honduras had 610,535 visitors in 2003. Belize, on the coast of the Caribbean Sea, had 220,574

overnight visitors last year.

Still, the numbers are rising: Tourists to Belize have increased 50% over the past five years, and Guatemala, which launched its first international tourism promotion this summer, says income from tourism will hit \$700 million this year, up from \$600 million in 2003.

Attractive Prices

Even as high-end properties open in these countries, prices remain a big draw -- the price per night's stay at deluxe lodging in Costa Rica, for example, can start at \$70, to upward of \$300 for a room at the Four Seasons Resort. In Honduras, the starting rate for a deluxe room is \$30.50, in Guatemala it's \$50, and in

DOW JONES REPRINTS

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: www.djreprints.com.

- See a sample reprint in PDF format.
- Order a reprint of this article now.

Start a FREE trial of the Online Journal



Subscribe to The Print Journal



Free US Quotes:

- Symbol
- Name

Get FREE E-Mail by topic

Check Out our Mobile & Wireless Services

DIGEST OF EARNINGS

Details of the latest corporate earnings reported for FREE.

Belize, \$35. Even at Coppola Resorts' exclusive La Lancha -- with its thatched-roof huts and jungle views -- rooms start at \$85 a night in the popular winter season.

Darrin Dingman, a 36-year-old small-business owner, describes his week at Belize's Kanantik Reef & Jungle Resort, an all-inclusive eco-sensitive resort built on a 1,300-foot private beach in southern Belize, as "Gilligan's Island meets the Ritz."

"This place was literally carved from the surrounding jungle. Absolutely amazing, beautiful stuff," Mr. Dingman says, "I don't think the resort is for everyone, but I would go back tomorrow."



Lonely Planet Images
Lake Atitlan is a popular attraction for visitors to Guatemala.

Belize City, Belize's capital, has a newly renovated airport that now has direct American Air flights from Dallas-Fort Worth and Miami, and a Continental direct two-hour flight from Houston. It has also become one of the leading cruise destinations in the Caribbean.

Guatemala has built a new airport on its Pacific coast, for connections from its capital city airport, which is served by Delta, United, American Airlines and Continental. The country -- still overcoming the aftermath of a 30-year civil war -- is also building ports, to accommodate a projected doubling of the 39 cruise ships that embarked there last year. Like nearby Honduras, it is home to ruins of an ancient Mayan city several

centuries old.

Rich in Culture

Beverly Hayon, a 58-year-old public-relations executive from Oakland, Calif., chose Guatemala's sprawling Lake Atitlan, for her vacation last summer. "Costa Rica isn't culturally interesting," Ms. Hayon says. "Guatemala is on the other side of the spectrum."

She adds, "Lake Atitlan is gorgeous, but sometimes you wish these places were a little more developed touristically. You can tell that not a lot of care went into what was built on the shoreline. There's a fine line between accommodations and **looking like** Miami Beach."

Of course, these alternative destinations have their own drawbacks. Many of the high-end resorts are in isolated locations, requiring additional travel arrangements. And crime in major cities such as Guatemala City; Tegucigalpa, Honduras; and Belize City is on the increase, according to the U.S. State Department.

"Crime is something you have to deal with in all Latin American cities," says Alejandro Sinibaldi, Guatemala's minister of tourism.

Always looking for the next big thing, some adventure-seeking travelers already have their eye on other locations in Central America.

Manda Hunt went to San Juan del Sur, on the coast of Nicaragua last summer. The 29-year-old marketing executive from Atlanta calls Nicaragua the "Costa Rica of the past" because of its similar landscape but lack of tourists.

"It's undeveloped and you pay the price for that in some ways," says Ms. Hunt who cites frequent power outages and not many restaurants, "But the beaches are untouched, there are no TVs, and a beer costs 30 cents."

Write to Amy Chozick at amy.chozick@wsj.com¹

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB110177706918286301,00.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

(1) <mailto:amy.chozick@wsj.com>

Copyright 2004 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our **Subscriber Agreement** and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.