



Visitors to Honduras take a trip back in time

By Richard Carroll

Encircled by a maze of ancient stones and craggy plateaus while standing amid the noble shadows of enormous towering temples where throbbing Maya hearts were once sent off to the gods, it feels as if a 3,500-year-old cocoon is squeezing one's senses back to the ancient world, to the intriguing and timeless secrets of the Copan ruins. A stone's throw from the Guatemalan border in Western Honduras, but still untrammelled and far from the tourist trail, Copan is filled with Maya spirits and an edgy emotion of energy and creativity.

Esteemed 18 Rabbit, Smoke Shell and New Dawn, three of the 17 known Copan Maya rulers, must be lurking nearby, for it is easy to feel their presence in the miles of tunnels that crisscross Copan, in the 4,500 rocky and moss-covered mounds yet to be explored, and the sacred burial tombs where jade glistens and royalty rests, amid the tangle of Honduran tropics and this vast blanket of green.



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Copan makes an immediate impression in the entrance to the site where, in a maze of color, 16 wild, noisy and jealous scarlet macaws have found a home. Remarkably snooty, they gossip incessantly, can understand a bit of Maya, Spanish and English, and seem to be working on French.

STILL STANDING - Copan, in western Honduras, a 3,500-year-old Maya site, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a Honduran National Monument. CNS Photo by Richard Carroll.

Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980, and a Honduras National Monument in 1982, the ruins are surrounded by a weighty sense of impending discovery. Grand sculptures, petroglyphs, altars and stelas are overwhelming. Many of them were created centuries ago during 18 Rabbit's reign. For the Maya, the expression "It's carved in stone" is the real deal.



CARVED IN STONE - The Copan ruins are surrounded by grand sculptures, petroglyphs, altars and stone statues. CNS Photo by Richard Carroll.

Tunnels lead to the Rosalila Temple, which was found, incredibly enough, buried beneath another large temple. Archaeologists were amazed to find it in nearly perfect condition, including large, painted stucco masks. Another great rocky tunnel representing a stroll into the Maya Underworld leads to the splendid Copan Sculpture Museum, ranked among the best anywhere, and an overview of 18 Rabbit's life and a spectacular, life-size replica of the Rosalila Temple. Copan Ruinas, a mile from the site, looks as if it was lifted out of [Universal Studios](#)

' back lot and plunked down in the Copan River Valley. Cobbled streets encircle a small central plaza, church

and classic colonial village architecture, while the town itself is surrounded by mountains and filled with hard-working farmers with flashing machetes.

In this hilly town - serene, friendly and safe - as in hundreds of other small villages dotting the Honduran countryside, half the residents are related to one another, and the other half know what their neighbors are having for dinner. The hotel of note, Marina Copan, just steps from the central plaza in Ruinas Copan, comes complete with a pool, beautifully landscaped grounds and live music. Nearby is the family owned and operated Enchanted Wings Butterfly House and Nature Center, and Macaw Mountain, a 10-acre, heavily forested nature preserve and coffee farm, host to a collection of rescued and donated Honduran parrots, macaws and toucans, who know they've found a slice of paradise.

A 2 1/2-hour drive on the best roads in Central America, from Copan to [San Pedro Sula](#), the Honduran gateway to the Bay Islands, is reminiscent of the [Puerto Vallarta](#) and Zihuatanejo of 30 years ago, when tourism south of the border was in its infancy. It brought back memories of an old barber in PV with trembling hands who sipped tequila, sold chickens on the side and sang off-key mariachi songs to any senorita in sight.

Horse-drawn carriages clomp along the road loaded with corn; a woman deftly balances a bundle of firewood on her head; patches of corn and pineapple cling to the side of steep-sided mountains where only mountain goats should tread; cattle, urged on by a cowboy riding a frisky mule, pass an overgrown, mossy cemetery holding forgotten memories.



But there's a contrasting side to Honduras as well. Just take a one-hour propeller flight on [Taca Airlines](#), trusting your gum-chewing pilot to get you safely from San Pedro Sula to the Bay Islands and Anthony's Key Resort on Roatan. The largest of 15 islands, Roatan is 30 miles off the coast of Honduras in a bay crisscrossed by 70 miles of vivid, multicolored coral reefs. Once upon a time Columbus landed in the Bay Islands; he was soon followed by boatloads of crusty French, English, Dutch and Spanish pirates and ragtag buccaneers who dropped anchor there to repair their boats.

AWAY FROM IT ALL -

Anthony's Key is a rustic resort ranked among the best in the Caribbean. Cozy over-water bungalows with private sundecks are tucked away in a small inlet. CNS Photo by Richard Carroll.

Tucked away in the dazzling Caribbean, Anthony's Key, a 30-year-old, family owned dive-snorkel-dolphin-research resort, ranked among the best in the Caribbean, gives guests reason to wish that each day would linger without end. The main [lodge](#) and dining room sit on a bluff with gorgeous views of a shimmering bay, state-of-the-art dive and snorkel boats and palm-laden Anthony's Key, a small islet where 56 cozy over-water bungalows with private sun decks are ensconced.



Reached by a one-minute skiff ride, the water-bound resort has 35 marked dive and snorkel sites, including dives to shipwrecks, caverns and canyons where eels dance in the sand and guests are accompanied by free-swimming dolphins reacting to their natural environment in the open sea.

Sixteen Atlantic bottlenose dolphins have found a home at the Roatan Institute for Marine Sciences. Assistant Director Bruce Plunkett, a free-spirited Canadian with webfeet who could swim before he could walk, said, "We've been studying their natural behavior since 1990 and are a recognized host facility for colleges and universities such as Yale and Creighton."

TAKE SOMETHING HOME - West End, a small village minutes from Anthony's Key Resort, is filled with serious divers and expatriates. Maya Indians sell their colorful weaving and wares along the sandy main street. CNS Photo by Richard Carroll.

West End, a funky village seven minutes from the resort via a \$3 taxi ride, is filled with serious divers and expats purposely wearing mismatched, ill-fitting, well-worn garb feeling very bohemian, and with deeply suntanned, barefoot Europeans who, for a week or two, are playing the part of bohemians. Yet they all stand in great contrast to the true bohemians, the elegant Maya women who sit quietly in their stalls along the sandy main road with their splendid weavings. Guests can horseback ride along the beach and book a canopy swing through the jungle with inquisitive monkeys, or kayak across a

glassy, shimmering bay at the resort to Bailey's Key, a large enclosure where the dolphins are splashing about. A skiff slips by followed by a spirited dolphin. The moment, quiet and serene, surrounded by a blaze of greenery, a radiant blue sky, dabbled shades of Caribbean turquoise and a Maya presence, is Honduras at its best.

IF YOU GO

Anthony's Key Resort, Bahia Tours, based in Miami, ranked among Honduras' top tour companies, can book all details including airport pickup to Copan with English-speaking guides and arrangements to the resort; (800) 227-3483; (504) 445-1003; www.anthonyskey.com. Taca [Airlines](#), a top Central America carrier flying roomy Airbus aircrafts, offers packages and [direct flights](#) to Roatan from the United States, and throughout Central America.