SIDETRAKKED

Travel Planning for the 55+ Adventurer

TRIP COMPASS

Central America: Winter 2026/27

Prepared for	Tom & Susan
Destination	Central America (excluding Costa Rica)
Trip length	5–8 weeks (35–56 nights)
Travel window	Winter (December–February)
Party size	2 travellers
Budget approach	No fixed budget stated: options scored for value against researched costs
Options presented	3

WELCOME

Your Trip Compass: Central America

Tom & Susan, welcome to your Trip Compass. It sets out three researched options for your winter in Central America, so you can choose a direction before anything is booked. I built and costed each one for two people travelling at a settled pace, with the same comfort standards at every base, and each option states its trade-offs.

Every option is built on stays of five to twelve nights at each base, not a country a day. Every base was checked for places to stay with a private bathroom, air conditioning and a quiet location, every night of the trip. Wildlife, nature and moderate hiking come first in the planning, with guided walking tours and markets close behind, and no base is cold, although the highland evenings are cool. Where a base is busier with tourists than you'd like, the option says so.

The Maya built one of the ancient world's great civilizations across what's now Guatemala, Belize and the western edges of Honduras and El Salvador, long before any European arrived. They had a written language, precise astronomical calendars, and cities like Tikal and Copán that rivalled anything in Europe at the time, before a collapse around 900 CE, still debated, scattered their descendants into the highland villages you'll pass through. Millions of Maya people still live across Guatemala's highlands, speaking more than twenty distinct Maya languages and wearing traje, hand-woven clothing specific to each village, as everyday dress. Spanish colonization arrived in the 1520s, and for three centuries most of the isthmus was governed as a single unit, the Captaincy General of Guatemala, from Antigua itself. That's part of why Antigua's colonial architecture is some of the finest and best preserved in the Americas: for a time it was the region's capital.

On September 15, 1821, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica declared independence from Spain together, in a single act, and the date is still celebrated across the isthmus every year. A short-lived federation followed, the United Provinces of Central America, before it split into the separate nations you'll cross between on this trip. Panama was governed from Colombia until 1903, when it seceded with American backing so the Panama Canal could be built. The Canal opened in 1914 and passed to full Panamanian control in 1999, and in Panama City it's still the country's defining fact. Belize was the British colony of British Honduras until it was renamed in 1973, and it became independent in 1981, the last country in the region to do so. It's the only English-speaking country on any of these routes, which makes day-to-day life there easier to manage.

Coffee runs through nearly everything here. Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua all built large parts of their modern economies on it, and the highland towns in this Compass, Antigua, Lake Atitlán and Boquete in Panama, are coffee country. A finca tour with a cup at the end shows you how the region earns its living. Food changes country by country: Guatemala has tamales and pepián, and in Nicaragua gallo pinto, rice and beans cooked together until the flavours merge, is on nearly every breakfast table. Marimba is Guatemala's national instrument, and you'll hear it in plazas and restaurants. Along the Caribbean coast, which none of these routes follows, the Garifuna, an Afro-Indigenous people descended from shipwrecked and escaped enslaved Africans who married into Caribbean Indigenous communities in the 1600s and 1700s, keep a language, music and food tradition that UNESCO recognizes.

People who've spent time in this region tend to remember the pace and the people longer than any single ruin or view. A market vendor explains what a fruit is instead of just selling it to you, a shopkeeper remembers your order by the second morning, and conversations run longer than the purchase needs. Lunch is a proper meal, not a break from work, and nobody around you seems to be watching the clock. The whole region runs at that pace, and you'll feel it within the first few days.

Central America is a narrow land bridge between two continents, which is why it holds so much wildlife: species from North and South America mix here, in a landmass smaller than many single countries. A chain of volcanoes runs its length, part of the Pacific Ring of Fire, so many of the highland towns on these routes sit ringed by volcanoes, a few still active. The resplendent quetzal, sacred to the ancient Maya and one of the most striking birds in the Americas, still lives in the cloud forests of Guatemala's highlands and of Boquete in Panama. Guatemala's highlands and volcanic lakes are in all three options. After that, each option goes somewhere different: Nicaragua's warm volcanic lake country, Belize's English-speaking jungle and coast, or Panama's cloud-forest birding and Canal history.

Border rules shape these routes more than most travellers expect. Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua share one 90-day entry allowance, the CA-4 agreement, so time in any of them counts against the same clock. At five to eight weeks you won't come close to it. Belize sits outside the agreement, and Panama gives you its own separate allowance of 180 days. The tighter limit

is your travel insurance: your policy covers trips of up to 60 days, and every option here stays inside that.

One option goes through Nicaragua, which carries a political and authoritarian risk flag in both Canadian and US travel advisories. It's a different kind of risk from the crime-driven risk elsewhere in the region, and whether it matters to you is your call to make. It's stated wherever it applies below. There's no fixed budget on your file, so I've priced each option from real research and left the number for you to set. The three options run from about CAD $8,980 on the low estimate to about CAD $20,290 on the high estimate, and the spread comes far more from which countries you choose and how much you fly than from trip length. Use each option's figures to set your own number.

Each option's cost covers return flights from Vancouver, accommodation, food and drink, local transport, activities, travel between bases and a contingency buffer, for the two of you. Travel insurance and gratuities aren't included. Tipping is customary across the region, and the Blueprint prices both for the option you choose.

Highlands to the Great Lakes has the best climate of the three: Guatemala's highlands, then Nicaragua's volcanic lake country, warm and comparatively dry. *Maya Highlands & the Jungle Coast* pairs Guatemala with English-speaking Belize for the strongest mix of wildlife and Maya culture, and it has the easiest logistics of the three. *Highlands & the Cloud Forest Hub* is built around Boquete and its cloud-forest birding in Panama, and it needs the most flying.

I scored each option against nine SIDETRAKKED criteria: climate, budget, safety and stability, trip rhythm, activity alignment, accommodation fit, group dynamic, atmosphere and practical logistics. Each criterion is weighted, and the scores combine into one Match Percentage. Read all three before you decide. The option that catches your eye on the cover isn't always the one that holds up best over five weeks or more of day-to-day life.

> *When you've chosen, that option becomes your **Trip Blueprint**: a full planning document with confirmed bases, recommended places to stay, a day framework for each base and a tested budget.*

YOUR PLANNING PROFILE

At a glance

YOUR TRAVEL PROFILE

You've travelled enough to know what you want from a trip like this. Warmth without the kind of humidity that makes a walk feel like work. Wildlife and nature ahead of monuments and museums. Guided walking tours, markets and moderate hiking over sitting on a beach. And a steady pull toward living somewhere for a while instead of checking it off.

You were specific about comfort: a private bathroom, air conditioning and quiet, every night. I scored those as requirements. Every base in every option was checked for a real accommodation market that can supply all three.

Your two dealbreakers shaped this Compass more than anything else: cold weather, and anywhere that reads as too mainstream touristy. Both ruled out some strong candidates on my long list, and both are stated wherever they create a trade-off in the options ahead.

Pace
Settle-in stays of 6–10 nights per base, not a country-a-day itinerary.

Comfort
Private bathroom, A/C, and quiet: non-negotiable at every base.

Top interest
Wildlife, nature, and moderate hiking, ahead of monuments and museums.

Climate
Warm, 20–30°C, with as little punishing humidity as the region allows.

Dealbreakers
Cold weather, and anywhere that reads as too mainstream touristy.

Transport
Ground transport preferred; up to one flight connection accepted.

Group
A couple travelling together, with the same interests and pace.

Budget
No fixed budget: good value matters more than the lowest price.

CRITERIA & WEIGHTS

Every option was scored against the same nine criteria, each weighted by how much it matters for a trip like yours. Climate and budget carry the most weight, at 15% each. Practical logistics carries the least, at 6%, because it's the easiest thing to solve once you've chosen a direction.

The percentage beside each option is a Match Score. A high number means the option lines up with most of your profile. It doesn't make the other options wrong for you, and the top-scoring option still has trade-offs: each option's write-up lists its watchouts.

Central America has no single base that everyone goes to, the way a one-country trip often does. Each of the six countries I researched has its own character, so these three options differ in country, climate and pace, as well as in which towns they visit.

The scores are close: four points separate all three options, and the top two are three points apart. *Highlands to the Great Lakes* leads mainly on climate and activity fit. *Maya Highlands & the Jungle Coast* is a very strong option too, especially if political stability matters more to you than it did in this scoring. Read both closely before you decide. The scoring is my judgement, not a measurement.

What we looked at	What we measured
Climate match	Daytime warmth, evening temperatures, humidity, and how each base's climate holds up against your stated warm/dry preference.
Budget fit	A likely all-in daily cost per couple for each option, researched for this Compass: flights, accommodation, food, transport and activities.

What we looked at	What we measured
Safety & stability	Current government travel advisories and any named political, health, or crime risk specific to the bases in each option.
Trip rhythm match	How much flying versus ground travel each option requires, and whether the pace matches your stated preference for settling in, not rushing.
Activity alignment	How well each option’s bases deliver on your ranked interests: wildlife and nature first, then walking tours, hiking, and markets.
Accommodation fit	Whether a real, bookable accommodation market exists at each base that can deliver a private bathroom, A/C, and quiet.
Group dynamic fit	How evenly each option's pacing and activities suit two travellers with the same interests and energy levels.
Atmosphere match	How each base reads against your stated preference for quieter, more local places over mainstream tourist enclaves.
Practical logistics	Language, border crossings, connection complexity, and how easy each option is to book and carry out.

YOUR OPTIONS AT A GLANCE

Read through all options fully before forming a view: the differences matter most in the detail.

Option	Trip name & tagline	Match %	Est. total budget (all-in)	Key pros	Key trade-offs
Option 1: Best fit	Highlands to the Great Lakes: Guatemala & Nicaragua	**74%**	CAD $13,988 likely (couple, 49 nights, about CAD $285 a night)	Best climate match researched; Granada and Ometepe among the strongest single-base fits; well away from the main tourist routes	Nicaragua's political risk is a different kind of risk from crime; the least certain of the three cost estimates
Option 2	Maya Highlands & the Jungle Coast: Guatemala & Belize	71%	CAD $12,085 likely (couple, 44 nights, about CAD $275 a night)	Strongest combination of wildlife and culture; English-speaking Belize makes daily life easiest	Antigua is the most touristed base in this option; the most time on the road of the three options
Option 3	Highlands & the Cloud Forest Hub: Guatemala & Panama	70%	CAD $15,445 likely (couple, 48 nights, about CAD $322 a night)	Best single activity match researched (Boquete birding); Panama is the safest of the six countries researched	The most expensive option, in total and per night; the most flying, against a preference for ground transport

EVERY STOP AND ITS NIGHTS, AT A GLANCE

Option	# Stops	# Nights	Stops & Nights
1 · Highlands to the Great Lakes	**6**	**49**	Antigua (10N) → Lake Atitlán (12N) → Flores (5N) → Granada (10N) → Isla de Ometepe (7N) → San Juan del Sur (5N)
2 · Maya Highlands & the Jungle Coast	**5**	**44**	Antigua (10N) → Lake Atitlán (12N) → Flores (5N) → San Ignacio (10N) → Placencia (7N)
3 · Highlands & the Cloud Forest Hub	**6**	**48**	Antigua (10N) → Lake Atitlán (12N) → Flores (5N) → Panama City (6N) → Boquete (10N) → Bocas del Toro (5N)

OPTION 1 OF 3

Highlands to the Great Lakes

Volcanic lakes, warm dry air, and the best climate match of all the bases researched.

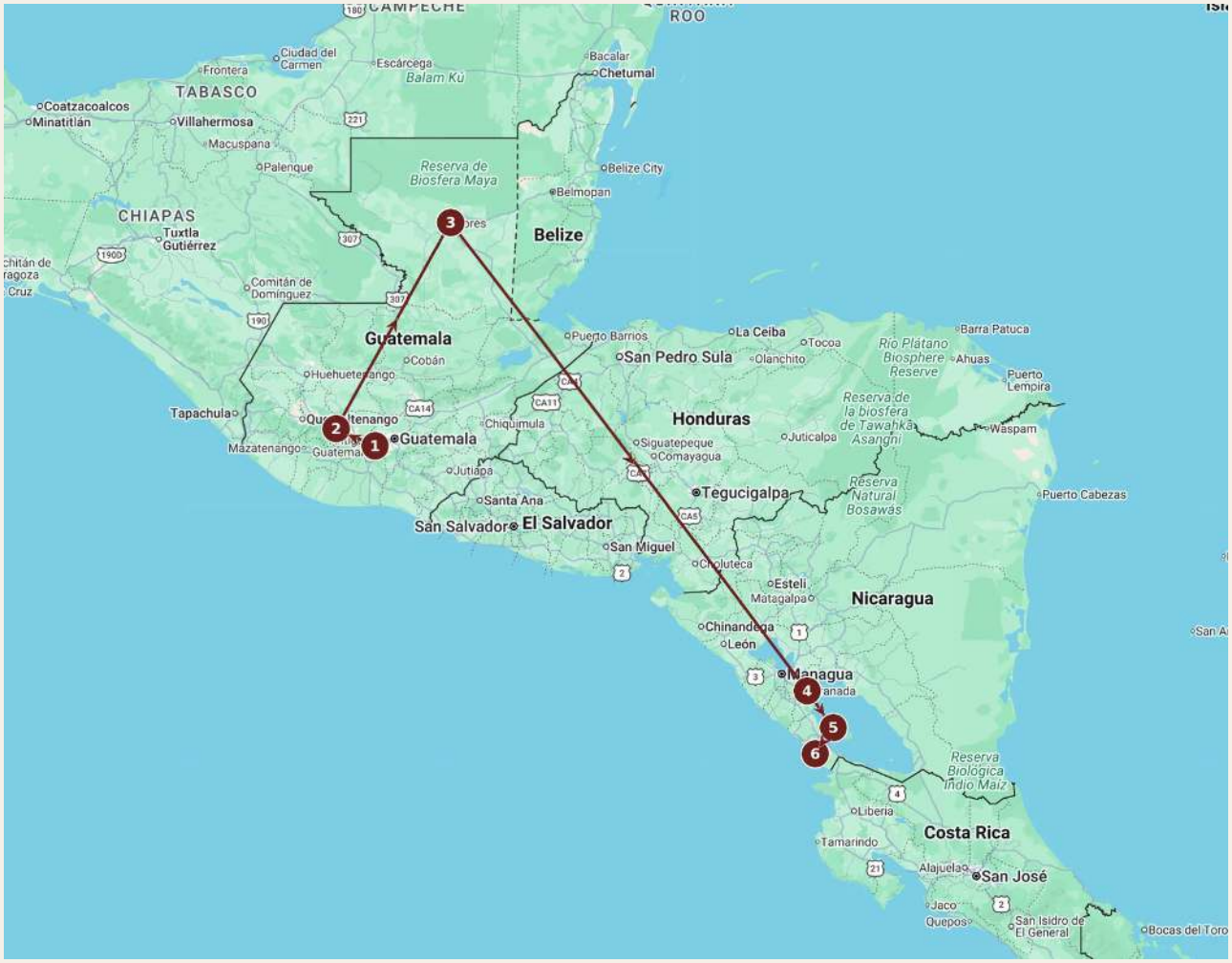
74% MATCH

★ OUR BEST FIT RECOMMENDATION ★

DURATION	BASES	PACE	LOGISTICS	SELF-DRIVE
49 nights	6	Relaxed–settled	5 moves	Not needed

Vancouver BC	Antigua Guatemala	Lake Atitlán Guatemala	Flores Tikal & Petén	Granada Nicaragua	Isla de Ometepe Nicaragua	San Juan del Sur Nicaragua	Vancouver BC
Fly out	10 nights	12 nights	5 nights	10 nights	7 nights	5 nights	Home

ROUTE MAP · THIS OPTION



1 Antigua 10N
2 Lake Atitlán 12N
3 Flores 5N
4 Granada 10N
5 Isla de Ometepe 7N
6 San Juan del Sur 5N

The numbers match the pins on the map. Base map data ©2026 Google.

ABOUT THIS TRIP · OPTION 1 OF 3 · Highlands to the Great Lakes

This option is built on the weather. Two countries, six bases and 49 nights, seven weeks in all, and the whole route stays warm and comparatively dry. You start in Guatemala's colonial highlands and cross into Nicaragua's volcanic lake country, and of the fourteen candidate bases I researched for this Compass, this route has the best climate match.

Antigua opens the trip with ten nights in a colonial town ringed by three volcanoes: cobblestone streets, a Saturday market that sells to locals more than to tour buses, courtyard cafés, and volcano viewpoints a short trip from the old colonial grid. Antigua has the largest long-stay accommodation market of any base I researched, so over ten nights there's room to settle in, take a cooking class built around market produce, and do a volcano viewpoint day trip when you feel like it. Evenings are cool here, so pack a light layer, but the days sit in your preferred range. For nearly three centuries Antigua was the capital of the whole Central American region under Spanish rule, which is why its colonial architecture is some of the best preserved in the Americas. The 1773 earthquake that moved the capital to Guatemala City toppled its grand churches, and their roofless ruins still stand throughout the old town, free to walk between.

Lake Atitlán follows with twelve nights, and it's the strongest wildlife and nature match in Guatemala. It's a lake ringed by volcanoes, with Maya villages around the shore linked by boat, quiet north-shore stretches away from busier Panajachel, and market days at Chichicastenango or Sololá worth planning a visit for. Expect slow mornings on the water, a short hike partway up one of the lakeside volcanoes if you want one, and enough time to settle into a routine. Coffee grows on these volcanic slopes, and a finca tour with a cup at the end shows how the region earns its living: Guatemala is one of the world's major coffee producers, and much of it comes from these highlands.

A short domestic flight north from the highlands takes you from colonial streets and volcanic lakes to jungle lowlands. Flores is a small colonial island town on Lake Petén Itzá, joined to the mainland by a short causeway, and you can walk around it in under an hour. The main reason to go is Tikal, Guatemala's largest excavated Maya site and the best combination of wildlife and ruins on this itinerary: howler monkeys and toucans are a normal sight in the forest between the temple complexes, and Temple IV at sunrise over the jungle canopy is one of the best-known views in Guatemala, whether you climb it or watch from below. Yaxhá, a quieter lakeside ruin site, and the canopy walkways at Ixpanpajul fill out five nights here: enough for Tikal, both other sites and one slower day with nothing planned.

Then you cross into Nicaragua, and the trip changes pace. Granada gets ten nights as this option's second anchor, and it's one of the strongest single-base fits I found: warm, comparatively low humidity, and walkable. Las Isletas is the main outing, a boat trip between some 365 small islands on Lake Nicaragua, one of them home to a colony of spider monkeys. Mombacho volcano's cloud-forest trails are a half day out and back, Laguna de Apoyo, a crater lake, is close by for a day on the water, and the colonial core has church towers, a walkable grid, and a market that's already busy when you head out in the morning. Granada was founded in 1524, one of the oldest European-founded cities in the Americas, and its colonial core was deliberately burned during a nineteenth-century filibuster war. The city you'll walk through was rebuilt, and on a longer stay you'll notice its age in the details: door hardware, tilework and church façades restored instead of replaced.

Isla de Ometepe is next, and it's the most remote base in this Compass: two volcanoes rising straight out of Lake Nicaragua, reached by ferry from the mainland. Seven nights here are quieter than Granada: kayaking near the shore with the volcanoes behind you, wildlife-watching at an island pace, and an optional walk on the lower slopes of one of the volcanoes. Nothing here demands hard effort.

The trip ends with five nights at San Juan del Sur, a beach town on the Pacific coast, with warm evenings on the water and nothing left to plan before the long flight home.

Nicaragua has more than fifty volcanoes along its Pacific side, several of them still active, and Lake Nicaragua is big enough that bull sharks swim up the Río San Juan from the Caribbean into its fresh water. Gallo pinto, rice and beans cooked together until the flavours merge, is on nearly every breakfast table, and daily life runs at a calmer pace than in Guatemala's busier highland towns. Most travellers notice the change within a day or two of crossing the border.

The weather and the travel days change as you go. Overnight lows at the highland bases run from about 11 to 18°C depending on the base, and daytime highs stay between 20 and 30°C. Antigua to Lake Atitlán is a shuttle of two and a half to three hours, and Flores is about an hour's flight from the highlands. Flores and Tikal are hot and humid, the most humid part of this route, and five nights covers the ruins without a long stay in the heat. Granada is the least humid of all the bases I researched, in the mid-50s per cent in January and February, and the Nicaraguan bases stay warm at night. Ometepe's volcano summits are strenuous climbs, so the walks there stay on the lower slopes.

This option scores highest mainly on climate and activity fit. Its trade-off is Nicaragua's political and authoritarian risk flag, which neither of the other two options carries. It's a different kind of risk from the crime-driven risk elsewhere in the region, and it's set out in the watchouts below. Whether it matters to you is your decision, not the scoring's.

For the two of you over 49 nights, all in, this option costs about CAD $9,978 on the low estimate, CAD $13,988 likely and CAD $16,900 on the high estimate, about CAD $285 a night at the likely figure. It's the second most expensive of the three, and its cost estimate is the least certain, because Nicaragua's daily spending is a reasoned estimate, not a sourced one. If the figure needs to come down, the easiest place to cut is San Juan del Sur: it's the shortest base and the weakest fit in this option, and a night or two less there loses nothing the research points to.

BASE LOCATIONS FOR OPTION 1

ANTIGUA
10N

Colonial centre, Guatemala highlands

Highland anchor · Settle-in base

• Cobblestone colonial streets ringed by three volcanoes

• Saturday market with a local, not tour-bus, feel

• Spanish-colonial architecture and courtyard cafés at settle-in pace

• Cool, comfortable highland evenings: pack a light layer

LAKE ATITLÁN
12N

Panajachel and the lakeshore, Guatemala

Highland anchor · Strongest wildlife and nature match in Guatemala

• Volcano-ringed volcanic lake with boat-linked Maya villages around the shore

• The strongest wildlife and nature match in Guatemala

• Slow mornings on the water, market villages reachable by a short boat hop

• Cool evenings, same as Antigua: the same light-layer note applies

FLORES
5N

Petén lowlands, northern Guatemala

Petén detour · fly north from the highlands

• Tikal's Maya temples rising above the jungle canopy, howler monkeys and toucans in the surrounding forest

• Yaxhá, a quieter lakeside ruin site with a fraction of Tikal's visitor traffic

• Ixpanpajul nature park's canopy walkways and wildlife-spotting trails

• Flores itself: a small colonial island town on Lake Petén Itzá, linked to the mainland by a short causeway

GRANADA
10N

Colonial old town, Nicaragua

Nicaragua anchor · Best climate match in the Compass

• Spanish colonial architecture along a walkable old-town grid

• Las Isletas: a boat trip through some 365 small islands on Lake Nicaragua

• Mombacho volcano's cloud-forest trails, a half-day out and back

• Laguna de Apoyo, a crater lake nearby for a change of pace

ISLA DE OMETEPE
7N

Lake Nicaragua island

Discovery base · Off-the-beaten-track nature

• Two volcanoes rising directly out of Lake Nicaragua

• A ferry crossing that feels like leaving the mainland behind

• The quietest, most remote base in this Compass

• Slower island rhythm after Granada's fuller days

SAN JUAN DEL SUR
5N

Pacific coast, Nicaragua

Coastal wind-down · Short interlude

• A short beach-town stay to close the trip before the flight home

• Easy, low-effort final days after six weeks of settling into new places

EXAMPLE EXPERIENCES

ANTIGUA

- Cobblestone colonial streets ringed by three volcanoes, a different view at nearly every corner
- Saturday market with a local, not tour-bus, feel
- A slow morning at a courtyard café, no itinerary pressure
- A day-trip volcano viewpoint outside town
- A cooking class built around Guatemalan market produce
- Wandering the old colonial grid without a fixed plan, with the largest long-stay accommodation market researched to choose from
- Evening light on the ruined convents and church façades, roofless since the 1773 earthquake
- A short walk to a mirador for a wide highland view
- Coffee at a family-run spot that isn't on anyone's top-ten list

LAKE ATITLÁN

- A boat crossing between Maya villages around the shore, volcanoes on every horizon
- A quiet morning at a north-shore village away from Panajachel's bustle
- The Chichicastenango or Sololá market on its market day
- Slow mornings on the water with nowhere particular to be
- A short hike partway up one of the lakeside volcanoes
- Watching the light change on the lake through the afternoon
- A village weaving cooperative: local craft, not a tour-bus stop
- A lakeside café built for lingering, not turning tables
- The strongest wildlife and nature match in Guatemala, at your own pace

FLORES

- Tikal's Temple IV at sunrise, the jungle canopy still holding the night's mist
- Howler monkeys calling through the forest canopy on the walk between Tikal's temple complexes
- An unhurried morning at Yaxhá, ruins reflecting in the lake with almost no one else around
- A canopy walkway at Ixpanpajul, looking for toucans and spider monkeys from above the tree line
- An evening stroll around Flores island, the whole town circled on foot in under an hour
- A market morning in Santa Elena or Flores before moving on, no fixed plan

GRANADA

- A boat trip through Las Isletas: some 365 small islands on Lake Nicaragua, one with a colony of spider monkeys
- Mombacho volcano's cloud-forest trails, a half-day out and back
- Laguna de Apoyo, a crater lake nearby, for a change of pace from streets to water
- Sunset from the Merced church bell tower over the colonial grid
- A quiet weekday morning in the old town before the day's heat sets in
- Masaya's volcano and market, a short trip from Granada
- A walkable colonial core: one of the oldest European-founded cities in the Americas
- Warm, comparatively dry days: the best climate match in this Compass
- An unhurried ten nights, long enough to have a regular breakfast spot

ISLA DE OMETEPE

- The ferry crossing from the mainland: Lake Nicaragua opening up, two volcanoes rising ahead
- A quiet morning on the island with very little traffic noise
- Kayaking near the shore with the volcanoes as a backdrop
- Wildlife-watching on a slower island rhythm than Granada's
- The most remote base in this Compass
- An optional, non-strenuous lower-slope walk on one of the volcanoes
- Evening quiet after Granada's fuller days
- Local island life, with no resort strip

SAN JUAN DEL SUR

- A beach-town close to the trip's end, low-effort and easy
- Warm Pacific coast air for the final days before the flight home
- An easy wind-down after six weeks of new places
- Sunset over the bay from a waterfront table

CRITERIA SCORES

CRITERIA	SCORE	WT	CRITERIA	SCORE	WT
Climate match	9/10	15%	Accommodation fit	8/10	10%
Budget fit	6/10	15%	Group dynamic fit	8/10	10%
Safety & stability	5/10	12%	Atmosphere match	8/10	8%
Trip rhythm match	7/10	12%	Practical logistics	7/10	6%
Activity alignment	9/10	12%			

OVERALL MATCH · 74%

HOW OPTION 1 PLAYS OUT

The feel. Antigua and Atitlán start the trip slowly: cobblestones, a lake ringed by volcanoes, and highland evenings cool enough for a light jacket. Then you cross the border. Granada mornings start with church bells and a market that's already busy when you head out, and by the middle of your stay you'll know the boat trip through Las Isletas and the way to Mombacho without checking the map. Ten nights is long enough to live there for a while. Ometepe is quieter again: two volcanoes standing out of the lake, a ferry crossing from the mainland, and mornings with very little noise. San Juan del Sur at the end is five nights on the coast to wind down before the flight home. The second half of this trip is warmer and drier than anywhere else in the Compass, and you'll hardly think about the weather.

Why it works. Climate is this option's main advantage: you're warm and comparatively dry for the whole second half of the trip, after the cooler evenings at the highland bases. Granada and Ometepe are two of the strongest single-base fits I found for wildlife, nature and places away from the main tourist routes. The pacing holds together too: six bases of five to twelve nights each, and no day where comfort is traded for sightseeing to make the itinerary work.

Watch for this. The main watchout is Nicaragua's political and authoritarian risk, which is different from the crime-driven risk elsewhere in the region: Canadian and US advisories specifically name arbitrary detention and searches of phones and laptops, and it deserves a deliberate decision. The daily spending estimate for the Nicaragua part of the trip is the least certain of the three options' figures: it's reasoned, not fully sourced. San Juan del Sur is a busy surf and bar town in season, closer to mainstream tourism than any other base in this option, which is one reason it's the shortest stay. And there are two flights in an otherwise ground-connected trip, the short hop to Tikal and the Guatemala to Nicaragua leg. Both are within your stated tolerance, but they do interrupt the pace.

TRIP BLUEPRINT FOR THIS OPTION

6 bases, 2 countries: CAD $2,200, or CAD $1,800 after your Compass credit.

OPTION 2 OF 3

Maya Highlands & the Jungle Coast

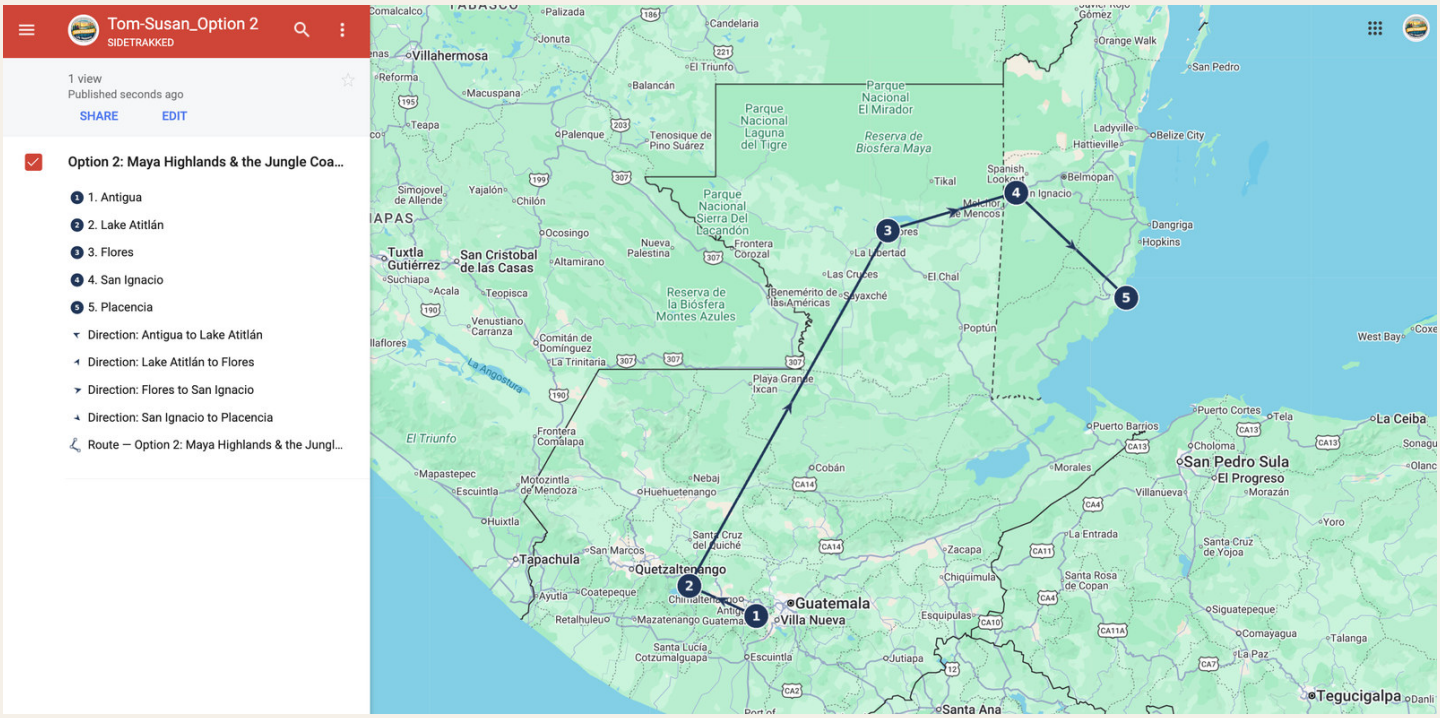
Colonial streets, volcanic water, and English-speaking jungle wildlife next door.

71% MATCH

DURATION	BASES	PACE	LOGISTICS	SELF-DRIVE
44 nights	5	Relaxed–settled	4 moves	Not needed

Vancouver BC	→	Antigua Guatemala	→	Lake Atitlán Guatemala	→	Flores Tikal & Petén	→	San Ignacio Belize	→	Placencia Belize	→	Vancouver BC
Fly out		10 nights		12 nights		5 nights		10 nights		7 nights		Home

ROUTE MAP · THIS OPTION



1 Antigua 10N **2** Lake Atitlán 12N **3** Flores 5N

4 San Ignacio 10N **5** Placencia 7N

The numbers match the pins on the map. Base map data ©2026 Google.

ABOUT THIS TRIP · OPTION 2 OF 3 · Maya Highlands & the Jungle Coast

This option has the strongest combination of wildlife and culture in this Compass, and it's also the easiest of the three to carry out: five bases, four moves and 44 nights, with English spoken in Belize. There are no flights within the region, which makes it the most settled itinerary of the three.

Antigua opens the trip with ten nights in Guatemala's colonial highlands: cobblestone streets ringed by three volcanoes, a Saturday market that sells to locals, courtyard cafés, and the largest long-stay accommodation market of any base I researched. Evenings are cool enough for a light layer, but the days are warm, and ten nights is long enough to stop checking the map and settle on a regular breakfast spot. For nearly three centuries Antigua was the capital of the whole Central American region under Spanish rule. Its colonial architecture, including the roofless churches toppled by the 1773 earthquake that moved the capital away, is some of the best preserved in the Americas.

Lake Atitlán follows with twelve nights, the longest stay in this option, and it's the strongest wildlife and nature match in Guatemala. It's a lake ringed by volcanoes, with Maya villages around the shore linked by boat, quiet north-shore stretches away from busier Panajachel, and market days at Chichicastenango or Sololá. The research supports all twelve days. Coffee grows on these volcanic slopes, and a finca tour with a cup at the end shows how the region earns its living.

The ground route from the highlands into Belize passes through Flores, so this option makes it a stay of five nights instead of an overnight stop. Flores is a small colonial island town on Lake Petén Itzá, joined to the mainland by a short causeway, and you can walk around it in under an hour. The main reason to go is Tikal, Guatemala's largest excavated Maya site and the best combination of wildlife and ruins on this itinerary: howler monkeys and toucans are a normal sight in the forest between the temple complexes, and Temple IV at sunrise over the jungle canopy is one of the best-known views in Guatemala, whether you climb it or watch from below. Yaxhá, a quieter lakeside ruin site, and the canopy walkways at Ixpanpajul fill out the five nights: enough for Tikal, both other sites and one slower day with nothing planned.

Then you cross into Belize by road through the Petén, with no flight needed, and San Ignacio gives you ten nights in English. It's Belize's best fit for wildlife and nature: a jaguar reserve and cave systems close enough to visit on an ordinary day, Maya ruins nearby, and a farmers market at the centre of town life. English everywhere makes day-to-day logistics easier here than at any other base in this Compass, and ten nights leaves room for a jungle excursion without it taking over the week. The reserve was one of the first jaguar sanctuaries in the world. Seeing a jaguar is rare, but the surrounding forest holds one of the healthiest populations left in Central America.

Belize stands apart in the region. It's the only English-speaking country in Central America, a former British colony that became independent in 1981, decades after its Spanish-speaking neighbours. You'll see it as soon as you cross the border: road signs in English, a Caribbean rhythm to conversation, and Creole, Maya, Garifuna, Mestizo and Mennonite communities living side by side, a mix you won't find elsewhere on this itinerary. The reef offshore is part of the second-largest barrier reef system in the world, after Australia's, and Placencia gives you reef access at the end of the trip. Belize's currency is pegged to the US dollar, and with English that makes it the easiest base in the Compass for everyday shopping and paying: menus, prices and conversations need no translation.

The trip ends with seven nights at Placencia on Belize's coast, long enough to settle in. Placencia has the flattest walking of any base I researched, Monkey River wildlife trips nearby (howler monkeys and manatees, all by boat), and the reef for days you'd rather be on the water. It's seven easy nights to finish five weeks or more of new places before the flight home.

Placencia sits at the tip of a narrow peninsula twenty-six kilometres long, so there's no elevation to climb anywhere in town. The peninsula lies between the Caribbean Sea and a coastal lagoon, so the Monkey River trips run through sheltered mangrove channels instead of open water, a calmer boat trip than a reef crossing.

The weather and the travel days change as you go. Overnight lows at the two highland bases run from about 11 to 18°C depending on the base, and daytime highs stay between 20 and 30°C. Antigua to Lake Atitlán is a shuttle of two and a half to three hours. North of the highlands the route drops into lowland heat, and Flores and the Belize coast at Placencia are both humid. Daily costs in Belize run at about twice Guatemala's, which is why the Belize half of the trip costs more per night than the Guatemala half. The Canadian travel advisory lists San Ignacio among the popular tourist areas where violent incidents have happened, so take normal care there at night.

Antigua is the most touristed base in this Compass, which works against your wish to avoid mainstream, heavily touristed places. It's in this option because no other base has as large a long-stay accommodation market, and because the route runs through it. The option is 44 nights, about six weeks, because five bases, each at the length its research supports, don't stretch as far as the six-base options.

For the two of you over 44 nights, all in, this option costs about CAD $8,982 on the low estimate, CAD $12,085 likely and CAD $14,784 on the high estimate, about CAD $275 a night at the likely figure. It's the cheapest of the three, even though Belize is the most expensive country on the route, because there are no flights within the region. It also has the easiest daily logistics once you're in English-speaking Belize. Guatemala and Belize share a land border, so the whole trip stays within a small area, which is why the logistics are simpler than in the other two options.

BASE LOCATIONS FOR OPTION 2

ANTIGUA	LAKE ATITLÁN	FLORES	SAN IGNACIO	PLACENCIA
10N	**12N**	**5N**	**10N**	**7N**
Colonial centre, Guatemala highlands	*Panajachel and the lakeshore, Guatemala*	*Petén lowlands, northern Guatemala*	*Cayo district, Belize*	*Coastal Belize*
Highland anchor · Largest long-stay market in this Compass	**Highland anchor · Strongest wildlife and nature match in Guatemala**	**Petén stop · the overland route to Belize passes through here**	**Belize anchor · Jaguar reserve and Maya ruins**	**Coastal wind-down · Short interlude**
• Cobblestone colonial streets ringed by three volcanoes	• Volcano-ringed volcanic lake with boat-linked Maya villages around the shore	• Tikal's Maya temples rising above the jungle canopy, howler monkeys and toucans in the surrounding forest	• A real farmers market at the centre of daily life, not a tourist stop	• Flat, easy beach-town walking to close the trip
• The largest long-stay accommodation market of any base researched	• The strongest wildlife and nature match in Guatemala	• Yaxhá, a quieter lakeside ruin site with a fraction of Tikal's visitor traffic	• Close to a jaguar reserve and cave systems	• Monkey River wildlife access nearby
• Saturday market and courtyard-café pace	• Twelve days: the longest stay in this option	• Ixpanpajul nature park's canopy walkways and wildlife-spotting trails	• Maya ruins within easy reach	• Low-effort final days before the flight home
• Cool highland evenings: pack a light layer	• Cool evenings, same light-layer note as Antigua	• Flores itself: a small colonial island town on Lake Petén Itzá, linked to the mainland by a short causeway	• English throughout: the easiest day-to-day logistics of any base in this Compass	

EXAMPLE EXPERIENCES

ANTIGUA

- Cobblestone colonial streets ringed by three volcanoes
- Saturday market with a local feel
- A slow morning at a courtyard café
- A cooking class built around Guatemalan market produce
- A day-trip volcano viewpoint outside town
- The largest long-stay accommodation market of any base researched
- Evening light on the old colonial grid's church façades
- A short walk to a mirador for a wide highland view
- Ten unhurried nights: enough to find a regular breakfast spot

LAKE ATITLÁN

- A boat crossing between Maya villages around the shore, volcanoes on every horizon
- The strongest wildlife and nature match in Guatemala
- A quiet north-shore village away from Panajachel's bustle
- The Chichicastenango or Sololá market on its market day
- A short hike partway up one of the lakeside volcanoes
- Slow mornings on the water with nowhere particular to be
- A village weaving cooperative for local craft
- Watching the light change on the lake through the afternoon
- Twelve nights: the longest stay in this option

FLORES

- Tikal's Temple IV at sunrise, the jungle canopy still holding the night's mist
- Howler monkeys calling through the forest canopy on the walk between Tikal's temple complexes
- An unhurried morning at Yaxhá, ruins reflecting in the lake with almost no one else around
- A canopy walkway at Ixpanpajul, looking for toucans and spider monkeys from above the tree line
- An evening stroll around Flores island, the whole town circled on foot in under an hour
- A market morning in Santa Elena or Flores before moving on, no fixed plan

SAN IGNACIO

- A real farmers market at the centre of daily life, not a tourist stop
- A day at a jaguar reserve, close enough to fold into an ordinary week
- Cave systems close to town
- Maya ruins within easy reach of town
- English throughout: the easiest day-to-day logistics of any base in this Compass
- A quiet weekday morning at a local café
- Belize's best match for wildlife and nature
- A short excursion into the surrounding jungle
- Ten nights: long enough to settle into English-speaking daily life

PLACENCIA

- Flat, easy beach-town walking to close the trip: no elevation to climb on this narrow peninsula
- Monkey River wildlife access nearby: howler monkeys and manatees through sheltered mangrove channels
- A gentle, low-effort final stretch after five-plus weeks of new places
- The flattest walking of any base researched
- Reef access for the days you want water over land
- Seven nights: long enough to unwind
- A quiet beach evening before the flight home
- An easygoing daily rhythm to close the trip

CRITERIA SCORES

CRITERIA	SCORE	WT	CRITERIA	SCORE	WT
Climate match	6/10	15%	Accommodation fit	8/10	10%
Budget fit	8/10	15%	Group dynamic fit	8/10	10%
Safety & stability	6/10	12%	Atmosphere match	5/10	8%
Trip rhythm match	7/10	12%	Practical logistics	8/10	6%
Activity alignment	8/10	12%			

OVERALL MATCH · 71%

HOW OPTION 2 PLAYS OUT

The feel. Ten nights in Antigua is long enough to find your own café and stop checking the map, even though the town is busier than anywhere else in this Compass. Lake Atitlán is calmer: twelve days with the lake at the centre of everything, boat rides to Maya villages around the shore, and mornings that ask little of you. Five nights at Flores and Tikal come next, jungle and ruins before the border, and then Belize, in English, where small daily things get easier over a long trip. San Ignacio's farmers market becomes part of your week, and the jaguar reserve and caves are close enough to visit on an ordinary day. Placencia at the end is seven easy, flat beach-town nights to wind down.

Why it works. This option has the strongest combination of wildlife and culture in the Compass: Lake Atitlán, the strongest nature base in Guatemala, plus Belize's jaguar reserve, caves and Maya ruins, on the easiest route to carry out. English in Belize makes daily life simpler for a large part of the trip, and with five bases, four moves and no flights within the region, it has the fewest travel days of the three.

Watch for this. Antigua is the most touristed base in this Compass, which works against a preference for quieter, less mainstream places. It's the cost of its large long-stay accommodation market and its central place on the route. Both Guatemala highland bases are cool overnight in December and January. The Guatemala to Belize crossing works by road and is split into two travel days by the Flores stop, and this option still has the most time on the road of the three.

TRIP BLUEPRINT FOR THIS OPTION

5 bases, 2 countries: CAD $1,950, or CAD $1,550 after your Compass credit.

OPTION 3 OF 3

Highlands & the Cloud Forest Hub

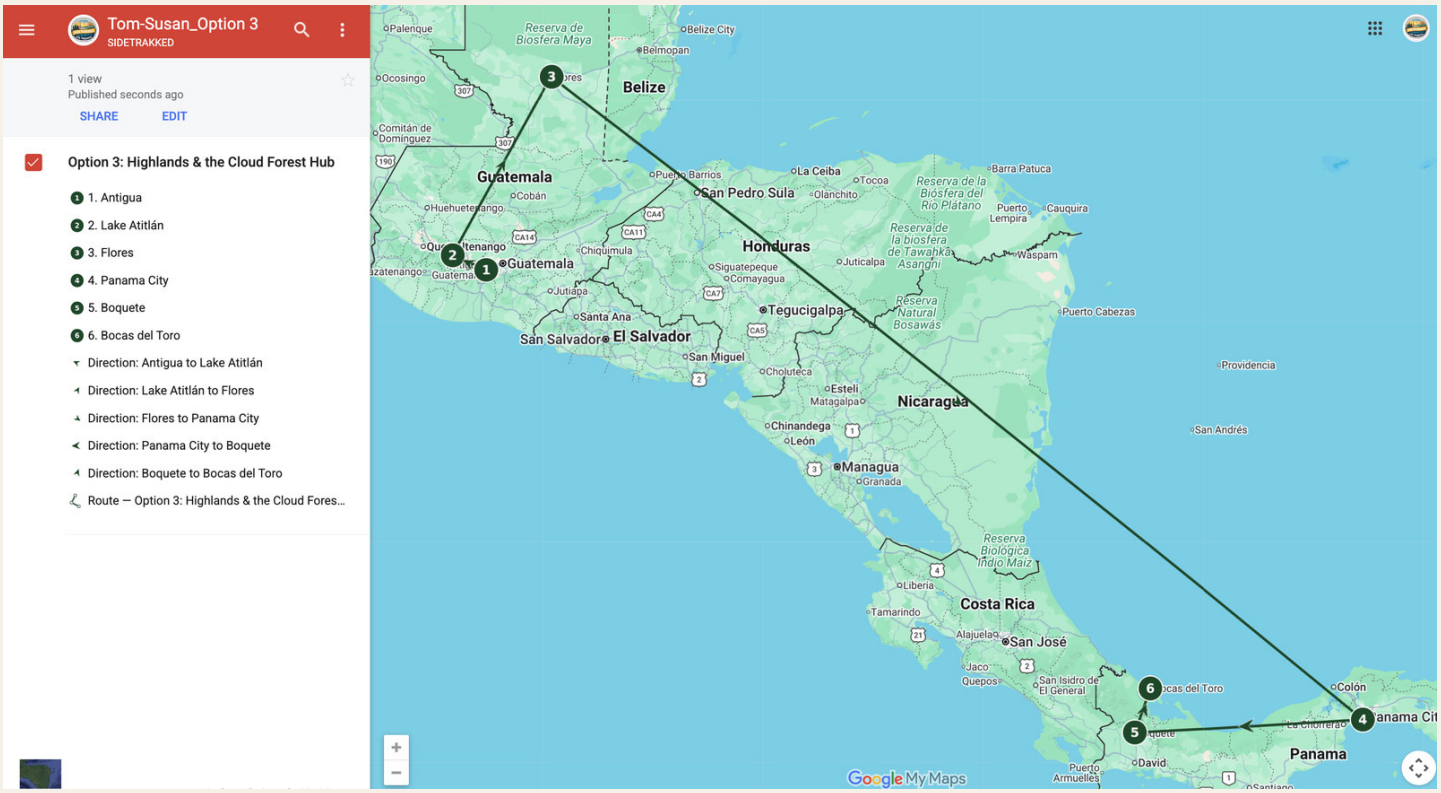
Quetzals, cloud forest, and the best wildlife match of all the bases researched.

70% MATCH

DURATION	BASES	PACE	LOGISTICS	SELF-DRIVE
48 nights	6	Relaxed–settled	5 moves	Not needed

Vancouver BC	→	Antigua Guatemala	→	Lake Atitlán Guatemala	→	Flores Tikal & Petén	→	Panama City Panama	→	Boquete Panama	→	Bocas del Toro Panama	→	Vancouver BC
Fly out		10 nights		12 nights		5 nights		6 nights		10 nights		5 nights		Home

ROUTE MAP · THIS OPTION



1 Antigua 10N **2** Lake Atitlán 12N **3** Flores 5N

4 Panama City 6N **5** Boquete 10N **6** Bocas del Toro 5N

The numbers match the pins on the map. Base map data ©2026 Google.

ABOUT THIS TRIP · OPTION 3 OF 3 · Highlands & the Cloud Forest Hub

This option is built around Boquete, a cloud-forest town in Panama's highlands and the strongest match for wildlife and nature of the fourteen bases I researched: quetzal sightings are close to certain in season, and the birding is easy and excellent. Two countries, six bases and 48 nights, arranged so Boquete gets a full stay.

Antigua and Lake Atitlán open the trip as they do in the other two options: ten nights in Antigua and twelve at Lake Atitlán, in Guatemala's highlands. Antigua has cobblestone streets ringed by three volcanoes, a Saturday market, courtyard cafés, and the largest long-stay accommodation market of any base I researched. Lake Atitlán is the strongest wildlife and nature match in Guatemala: a lake ringed by volcanoes, Maya villages around the shore linked by boat, and slow mornings on the water. That's twenty-two nights to settle into a highland routine before the trip changes completely. For nearly three centuries Antigua was the capital of the whole Central American region under Spanish rule, and the roofless ruins of churches toppled by the 1773 earthquake that moved the capital away still stand throughout the old town.

Before the flight south to Panama, a short domestic flight north from the highlands reaches Guatemala's jungle lowlands. Flores is a small colonial island town on Lake Petén Itzá, joined to the mainland by a short causeway, and you can walk around it in under an hour. The main reason to go is Tikal, Guatemala's largest excavated Maya site and the best combination of wildlife and ruins on this itinerary: howler monkeys and toucans are a normal sight in the forest between the temple complexes, and Temple IV at sunrise over the jungle canopy is one of the best-known views in Guatemala, whether you climb it or watch from below. Yaxhá, a quieter lakeside ruin site, and the canopy walkways at Ixpanpajul fill out five nights here: enough for Tikal, both other sites and one slower day with nothing planned.

From Flores you fly back to Guatemala City, about an hour, and take the daily nonstop south to Panama City for six nights. That nonstop is the only connection between countries in this Compass that I confirmed in full. Casco Viejo, the walkable old town and a UNESCO site, is the centre of the stay, the Panama Canal is a half-day trip away, and Metropolitan Park and Soberanía offer easy nature walks minutes from downtown, so it's a proper stop with plenty to do. Panama is outside the CA-4 zone, the shared entry allowance that covers Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua, so all three Panama bases use Panama's own separate entry allowance.

Then Boquete, the reason for this option: ten nights, as long as any stay outside Guatemala in this Compass. Quetzal sightings are close to certain in season, gentle cloud-forest birding trails fit into an ordinary morning, coffee fincas surround the town, and the town's daily rhythm is English-friendly, with a large community of retirees. Evenings are cool and most rentals have no heating, so look for warm bedding, but the mornings of birding are what this stop is for. Panama's history is different from the rest of this itinerary: it was governed from Colombia until 1903, when it seceded so the Panama Canal could be built. The Canal opened in 1914 and passed to full Panamanian control in 1999, and Panamanians still talk about it as the country's defining fact.

Casco Viejo, Panama City's old town, was founded in 1673 after the pirate Henry Morgan destroyed the original settlement in 1671. Its stone fortifications, colonial churches and French and Spanish colonial-era buildings became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997, and twenty years of restoration have turned a run-down neighbourhood into one of the most walkable old towns in Latin America.

The trip ends with five nights at Bocas del Toro, a Caribbean archipelago reached by a short flight, or by road and water taxi from Boquete. There are mangrove and dolphin-watching tours and snorkelling on the Caribbean side, and it's a quiet stretch on the water before the flight home. December is noticeably wetter here than the rest of the window, so if your dates land in December, this stop is worth reconsidering. The resplendent quetzal, sacred to the ancient Maya, is why birders travel to this stretch of highland cloud forest, and Boquete's coffee, grown at altitude in volcanic soil, is among the most highly rated in the world.

The Guatemala City to Panama City flight is a daily nonstop of about two and a half hours on Copa Airlines, into its Panama City hub, one of the busiest and best-connected airports in Latin America.

The weather and the travel days change as you go. Overnight lows at the Guatemala highland bases run from about 11 to 18°C depending on the base, and Boquete's evenings run 13 to 18°C. Panama City is hot and humid at sea level, and so is Bocas del Toro. Quetzal sightings in Boquete are most reliable from January to April. Panama City to Boquete is about an hour's flight plus a 45-minute drive, or six and a half to seven hours by road, and Boquete to Bocas del Toro is four to five hours by road and water taxi. Metropolitan Natural Park, minutes from downtown Panama City, has monkeys and sloths, and you can see sloths at Bocas del Toro too.

This is the most flight-dependent option in the Compass: three flights between bases, against your preference for ground transport. In return, it has the one connection I confirmed in full, Panama is the safest of the six countries I researched, and Boquete is the strongest wildlife match of all the bases. It's also the most expensive option at every figure, because Panama costs more and there's more flying. Panama has the strongest economy in Central America, built largely on Canal revenue and its role as a shipping and banking hub, and you'll see it in better roads and phone coverage than anywhere else on this itinerary, and in higher prices.

For the two of you over 48 nights, all in, this option costs about CAD $11,315 on the low estimate, CAD $15,445 likely and CAD $20,290 on the high estimate, about CAD $322 a night at the likely figure. It's the most expensive of the three at every figure. If cost decides between this option and the others, the extra money pays for Boquete and for Panama's easier logistics, and the other two options don't cost that premium.

BASE LOCATIONS FOR OPTION 3

ANTIGUA
10N

Colonial centre, Guatemala highlands

Highland anchor · Settle-in base

• Cobblestone colonial streets ringed by three volcanoes

• Saturday market and courtyard-café pace

• Cool highland evenings: pack a light layer

LAKE ATITLÁN
12N

Panajachel and the lakeshore, Guatemala

Highland anchor

• Volcano-ringed volcanic lake with boat-linked Maya villages around the shore

• Slow mornings on the water

• Cool evenings, same as Antigua

FLORES
5N

Petén lowlands, northern Guatemala

Petén detour · fly north from the highlands before continuing to Panama

• Tikal's Maya temples rising above the jungle canopy, howler monkeys and toucans in the surrounding forest

• Yaxhá, a quieter lakeside ruin site with a fraction of Tikal's visitor traffic

• Ixpanpajul nature park's canopy walkways and wildlife-spotting trails

• Flores itself: a small colonial island town on Lake Petén Itzá, linked to the mainland by a short causeway

PANAMA CITY
6N

Casco Viejo, Panama

City stop and structural hub · Confirmed nonstop from Guatemala

• Casco Viejo: a walkable UNESCO old town

• The Panama Canal, a half-day trip away

• Metropolitan Park and Soberanía for easy nature walks inside the city

• The only connection between countries in this Compass confirmed in full

BOQUETE
10N

Chiriquí highlands, Panama

Discovery anchor · Strongest wildlife match of all the bases researched

• Quetzal sightings close to certain in season

• World-class, gentle cloud-forest birding trails

• The strongest match in this Compass for wildlife and nature

• A full ten-night stay, as long as any base outside Guatemala

BOCAS DEL TORO
5N

Caribbean archipelago, Panama

Marine wind-down · Short interlude, date-sensitive

• A quiet, water-based closing stretch before the flight home

• Better outside December, which is noticeably wetter

EXAMPLE EXPERIENCES

ANTIGUA

- Cobblestone colonial streets ringed by three volcanoes
- Saturday market with a local feel
- A slow morning at a courtyard café
- A cooking class built around Guatemalan market produce
- A day-trip volcano viewpoint outside town
- The largest long-stay accommodation market of any base researched
- Evening light on the old colonial grid
- A short walk to a mirador for a wide highland view
- Ten unhurried nights to open the trip

LAKE ATITLÁN

- A boat crossing between Maya villages around the shore, volcanoes on every horizon
- The strongest wildlife and nature match in Guatemala
- A quiet north-shore village away from Panajachel's bustle
- The Chichicastenango or Sololá market on its market day
- A short hike partway up one of the lakeside volcanoes
- Slow mornings on the water
- A village weaving cooperative for local craft
- Watching the light change on the lake through the afternoon
- A full twelve nights before the flight south

FLORES

- Tikal's Temple IV at sunrise, the jungle canopy still holding the night's mist
- Howler monkeys calling through the forest canopy on the walk between Tikal's temple complexes
- An unhurried morning at Yaxhá, ruins reflecting in the lake with almost no one else around
- A canopy walkway at Ixpanpajul, looking for toucans and spider monkeys from above the tree line
- An evening stroll around Flores island, the whole town circled on foot in under an hour
- A market morning in Santa Elena or Flores before moving on, no fixed plan

PANAMA CITY

- Casco Viejo's walkable UNESCO old town, rebuilt after Henry Morgan's 1671 raid
- The Panama Canal, a half-day trip away
- Metropolitan Park and Soberanía: easy nature walks inside the city
- A daily nonstop from Guatemala, the one connection between countries confirmed in full
- A proper city stop with plenty to do
- French and Spanish colonial-era architecture along the old town's restored streets

BOQUETE

- Quetzal sightings close to certain in season
- Gentle cloud-forest birding trails, among the best in the region
- The strongest match in this Compass for wildlife and nature
- Coffee finca visits in the surrounding highlands: among the most prized coffee-growing elevations anywhere
- A gentle waterfall walk
- Cool mornings built around birding, no big planned excursion
- An English-friendly, retiree-town daily rhythm
- Ten nights, as long as any stay outside Guatemala in this Compass
- Slow highland mornings with coffee before the day's walk

BOCAS DEL TORO

- A quiet, water-based closing stretch before the flight home
- Mangrove and dolphin-watching tours
- Caribbean-side snorkelling
- Wetter in December than the rest of the window, so check this before you set dates

CRITERIA SCORES

CRITERIA	SCORE	WT	CRITERIA	SCORE	WT
Climate match	7/10	15%	Accommodation fit	7/10	10%
Budget fit	5/10	15%	Group dynamic fit	8/10	10%
Safety & stability	9/10	12%	Atmosphere match	6/10	8%
Trip rhythm match	5/10	12%	Practical logistics	7/10	6%
Activity alignment	9/10	12%			

OVERALL MATCH · 70%

HOW OPTION 3 PLAYS OUT

The feel. Guatemala is the same as in the other options: cobblestones, volcano views and a settled pace across Antigua and Lake Atitlán, with evenings cooler than you'd expect this close to the equator. Then two flights, through Guatemala City, to Panama City, which is a different kind of place: Casco Viejo is walkable end to end, the Canal is close enough for a half day, and six nights makes it a proper stop. Boquete is where this trip settles: ten days in cloud-forest country, mornings built around birding without an organized tour, and quetzals close to certain in season. Bocas del Toro at the end is five quiet nights on the water.

Why it works. Boquete is the reason for this option: the strongest wildlife match of the fourteen bases I researched, with quetzals close to certain in season and gentle cloud-forest birding as part of an ordinary week. The Guatemala City to Panama City flight is the one connection in this Compass I confirmed in full as a daily nonstop, and Panama is the safest of the six countries I researched. With the Tikal flight added, it's also the most flight-dependent option of the three, which works against a preference for ground transport.

Watch for this. This is the most flight-dependent option, with three flights between bases against a preference for ground transport, and it's the most expensive option at every figure. Bocas del Toro is wet in December; if your dates land then, reconsider this base or swap it for a longer stay in Panama City.

TRIP BLUEPRINT FOR THIS OPTION

6 bases, 2 countries: CAD $2,200, or CAD $1,800 after your Compass credit.

OUR RECOMMENDATION

Highlands to the Great Lakes leads this Compass, and the call is close: four points separate all three options, and the top two are three points apart. It leads mainly on climate and activity fit: Guatemala's highlands into Nicaragua's volcanic lake country, warm and comparatively dry the whole way. Below is why it fits, what each of the other two offers instead, and where the call could go either way.

WHY THIS FITS YOUR PROFILE

The best climate match of the fourteen candidate bases I researched: Nicaragua is warm and comparatively dry for the whole second half of the trip, with no weather trade-off.

Granada and Isla de Ometepe are two of the strongest single-base fits I found for wildlife, nature and places away from the main tourist routes, and Ometepe is the quietest base in the Compass.

Settled pacing across all six bases, five to twelve nights each, with no base stretched past what the research supports.

The scoring is my judgement, built on nine criteria, each weighted for a trip like yours. If political stability matters more to you than it did in this scoring, *Maya Highlands & the Jungle Coast* is just as strong a choice.

WHAT YOU GIVE UP

Maya Highlands & the Jungle Coast (71%): the most settled itinerary of the three. Five bases, four moves, no flights within the region, and English in Belize for the easiest day-to-day logistics in this Compass. If easy logistics, or staying out of Nicaragua, matters more to you than the warmer climate, this option fits you just as well.

Highlands & the Cloud Forest Hub (70%): Boquete is the strongest wildlife match of all the bases I researched. It costs more: this is the most flight-dependent option by a clear margin, with a flight north to Tikal and two flights south to Panama through Guatemala City, and it's the most expensive at every figure.

A NOTE ON THE SCORES

The scores are close and the judgement behind them is subjective, so read 74% as my assessment, not a verdict. If Nicaragua's political-risk flag gives you pause, or English-speaking Belize appeals more than the warmer climate, Maya Highlands & the Jungle Coast is an excellent choice for different reasons. Read all three closely. I'll build the Blueprint for whichever direction you choose.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE TRIP BLUEPRINT

Whichever option you choose, the Trip Blueprint turns it into a trip you can book. The scope is the same for every option. It covers:

- Confirming the final base sequence and exact night counts, including the routing detail for every cross-border leg
- Neighbourhood-level guidance for each base: which zones, which streets, what to look for and what to look out for
- Accommodation search strategy for every base: platform recommendations, timing, search filters, and what to prioritize in each market
- A day-trip framework from each base: what's a drive, what's a shuttle or ferry, and what needs a full day, paced for your profile
- A full CAD budget with low, likely and high estimates for every category: flights, accommodation, ground transport, food, activities, travel insurance, gratuities and a contingency buffer
- Ground transport and border-crossing logistics between every base: named operators, timing, and what to book in advance
- A walking, wildlife and excursion shortlist for each base, rated by terrain and effort, with backup options for bad-weather days
- Your stated preferences, priorities and limits, applied in every section of the Blueprint
- Visual aids: a route map showing the base sequence across the region, a Google Earth map of every place named in the plan, and a neighbourhood guide for each base setting out what each area is like to walk, what sits on its doorstep and what it costs
- A dedicated Trip Blueprint Prep Guide, a companion document covering everything to confirm and arrange before departure: entry requirements, insurance, packing strategy, phone and data setup, and a week-by-week pre-trip timeline

WHAT THE TRIP BLUEPRINT COSTS

The Trip Blueprint is CAD $1,300 for up to 3 bases in one country, plus CAD $250 for each extra base and CAD $150 for each extra country. A base is a stay of 2 nights or more, and a country counts only where there is a base in it. Your CAD $400 Compass credit comes off the Blueprint when you go ahead within 90 days of paying for the Compass.

Option	Trip	Bases	Countries	Trip Blueprint	After your Compass credit
Option 1	Highlands to the Great Lakes	6	2	CAD $2,200	CAD $1,800
Option 2	Maya Highlands & the Jungle Coast	5	2	CAD $1,950	CAD $1,550
Option 3	Highlands & the Cloud Forest Hub	6	2	CAD $2,200	CAD $1,800

If you change the bases or countries in the option you choose, the price is worked out again at the same rates.

NEXT STEPS

The Compass gives you what you need to make this decision on your own. Read all three options, including any you think you've already ruled out. The scores tell part of the story and the descriptions tell the rest.

When you have a direction, let me know. That's all I need to start the Blueprint.

If anything isn't clear, a number that doesn't add up or a trade-off you want more detail on, contact me and I'll answer directly.

DISCLAIMER: SIDETRAKKED makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information in this Trip Compass. Details such as accommodation availability, costs, safety advisories and local conditions change often. Check all time-sensitive information yourself before making bookings or decisions. The research and costs in this document date from July 2026, and it is provided for planning purposes only. The Trip Blueprint prices were updated in October 2026.

I enjoyed putting this Compass together. Your questionnaire was detailed, and it let me compare the options against what matters to you. Where the call between options is close, I've said so, and the reasoning is on the page so you can disagree with it. I look forward to hearing where you land.

Rob Jensen, SIDETRAKKED • sidetrakked.com