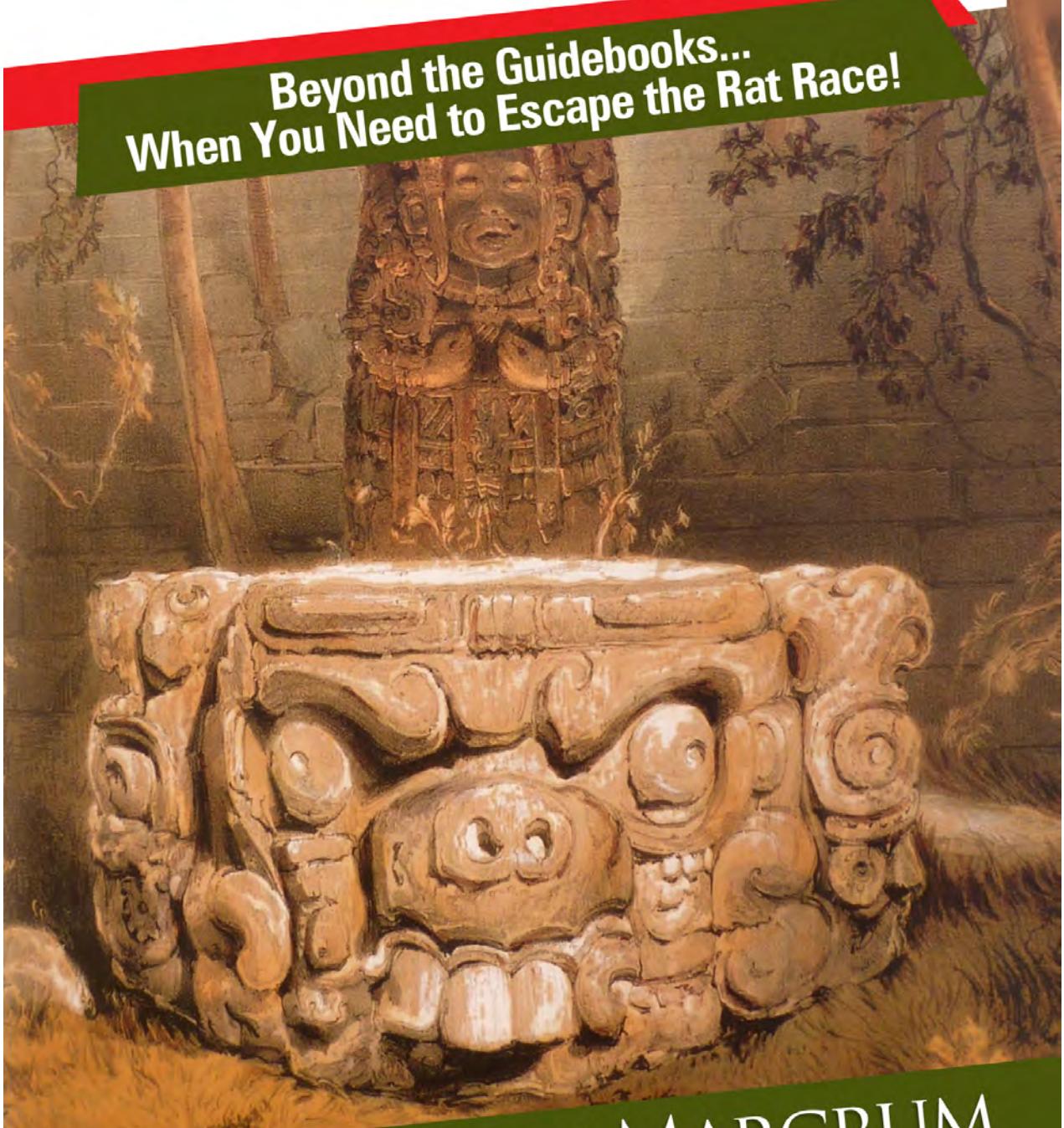


# GRINGO!

IN HONDURAS

Beyond the Guidebooks...  
When You Need to Escape the Rat Race!



LEW MARCRUM

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## PREFACE

This short work is written as a collection of personal reminiscences including some practical information and personal suggestions for anyone wishing to permanently escape the humdrum of a boring existence and explore new places and new experiences.

This is a very basic guide to what you might expect when attempting to make a move to a new land. Some things here are common sense, some are logical expectations and many are totally unique and rare surprises. This is written specifically for emigration to Honduras and Central America, but the principles will be mostly the same wherever the reader may decide to put down roots.

This is NOT a “guidebook” for retirees, a primer on how to live in a foreign land on \$25 per day nor a real estate investment advisor. I do not wish to portray my newly adopted land as a rosy paradise, free from all want or care, as I will also show its dark side. Hopefully it will be of value to the would be explorer, the person with a burning desire or wish to escape his surroundings, as well as the budding dreamer bitten by the infectious call of wanderlust.

There is a multitude of books and other works available on the subject of living abroad. Some are very good, but some are written by armchair travelers willing to compile a lot of internet “research” ideas into a salable work. This is written from the point of view of someone who has actually “been there, done that”, and is currently living the dream, walking the walk. I hope to make it a little different from the usual travel or expat guide because these are my personal experiences and observations. The observations of others may be different, but this is from on-the-ground experience.

I have attempted to prevent this from evolving into a photo-show, but as an amateur travel photographer it has been a difficult task. There are so many wonders to reveal in this land urging my artistic side to burst forth, but I have tried to use restraint. Please bear with me on this point.

Whatever your reason for wanting to leave your native land, whether it be curiosity, adventure or a serious need to escape, you will find this an invaluable guide to what you may expect should you choose Central America as your destination.

## WANDERLUST

“It’s hard to go. It’s scary and lonely...and half the time you’ll be wondering why the hell you’re in Cincinnati or Austin or North Dakota or Mongolia...”

— Cheryl Strayed, *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar*

From early childhood I have had the wanderlust, at least in my own mind. I devoured everything I could find on exotic places and cultures, but mostly I had daydreams.

Living in the hills of southern Missouri in the 1950s did not afford much real opportunity for travel or adventure. The rocky hillsides were our world, but my imagination and my dreams were always in far away places with strange sounding names. My heart longed for the thrill of pounding surf, palm trees, pirate beaches and mangoes plucked from the trees by beautiful brown-eyed girls. For a young lad of those times, these thoughts were as impossible as the idea of artificial earth satellites and trips to the moon.

Then my mind always came reluctantly back to the reality of the hills. This is where I was born, and this is where I would die. This was the real world, my lot in life, and that's just the way it is.

A couple uncles, veterans of World War II, came back with glowing tales of their experiences in the Pacific which only made things worse for my budding wanderlust. A few of these stories I'm sure my mother would rather I hadn't heard, but I soaked them up like a sponge. In 1967 Connie Francis came out with her version of "The Wayward Wind", a song with which I immediately identified. I knew that I, too, was its next of kin, and I knew that I had to go. Much to my mother's chagrin, I joined the navy, and very soon I was far from home for the first time in my life. I was ecstatic to be shipped to the Pacific, not even considering that there was a war on.

My head was swimming with new sights, sounds, smells and experiences. I discovered Plumerias and Sampaguitas, beaches with soft sand as far as the eye could see.. I saw the ocean for the first time and could not imagine there was so much water in the universe. I had to run down and taste it to see if it was really salty like I had read. It was. There were coasts where pirates had roamed, where some still do, and palm trees with real coconuts. And a whole new world full of brown-eyed girls plucking mangoes.

I was hooked.

## LANGUAGE

Language is the most basic thread that holds a culture together. Spanish is a relatively easy language to learn, or so they say, but I found that it was/is difficult for me. I fear I will always speak and sound like an *extranjero*, or foreigner.

A basic-to-moderate command of Spanish is essential to get by in Central America. Almost no one speaks English, and neither the airport personnel, the customs officials, nor anyone else will drop what they are doing and go find an interpreter for you. Also, no signs or written materials are in English, so it's Spanish or nothing. I found that the people here are almost universally patient in trying to help foreigners understand, but they won't speak to you in anything other than Spanish.

There is a website called [www.duolingo.com](http://www.duolingo.com). It is free and, with it you can obtain a basic command of Spanish. The lessons are short, easy to understand and quite effective. It might be worth a try. Also, another site named [www.learninglikecrazy.com](http://www.learninglikecrazy.com) offers a great down-loadable program called Verbarrator for a reasonable cost, which I found fantastic to help learn Spanish verb conjugations. These and the usual Spanish dictionaries and phrasebooks are enough to get you started and on your way to learning the language.

All the above suggestions are great but, in reality, everything you really need can be found for free on the internet if you choose to search for them. Spanish vocabulary, verb conjugations, phrases and conversation practice are all available. The programs and sites I quote merely make it faster and easier to find.

A rarely-spoken fact about Spanish is that the language is very region-specific. Hondurans do not speak like Mexicans, Mexicans do not speak like Argentinians, Venezuelans are almost incomprehensible to me, and none of them talk like the people of their mother country Spain. Though they are all able to understand each other, it is instantly apparent when a stranger speaks that he is not of the local area. No matter where you learn Spanish, your use of words and accents will always label you as a foreigner. There is no way around that unless you actually live in your chosen area for a long time and learn to speak like the locals. Even then, if you visit another Spanish speaking country, you will again be an *extranjero*.

I tried a website called [www.yabla.com](http://www.yabla.com) which teaches conversational Spanish through a series of videos of real native Spanish speakers. It is a great site and a great concept, but in my opinion it tries to be all things to all people. I found there were almost no videos from Honduras specifically, and those from Spain, Mexico, Argentina or Venezuela did not help me to learn Honduran accents. I loved the site, but I had to give it up because it was not region-specific enough for me.

A good way to learn local accents, idioms and phraseology is to watch local TV and try to pick out words that you know. Little by little you will find you are understanding the gist of the narrative and coming to hear not only words but phrases, sentences and conversations. A good Honduran website, again free, is [www.HCH.com](http://www.HCH.com). HCH is actually a TV station in Tegucigalpa, but it streams their broadcasts live over the web. Here you will find entertainment programs, local happenings, movies, and the best news source in Honduras.

You may be at first shocked by the news broadcasts, as they are very uncensored and show things you would never see in US news stories. Be prepared to see news from around the world that you won't find on CNN, and lots of videos and photos showing the blood and gore as it actually happens, not as an editor wants you to see.

Don't be put off from any desires to travel to Honduras by what you may see in the news, for news stations, even in Honduras, thrive on sensationalism, sensationalism brings viewers, and viewers bring advertising and sponsors. It is not nearly as bad as it looks sometimes, but you will learn a lot and hear the language as the common people speak it.

Though there are definite uses for the tourist Spanish handbooks found in all bookstores in the US, there is only so much you can learn by asking where is the bus station, or is there a hotel in town. This is not real conversation, but these guides do have a certain value. The trick is to read, watch any Spanish TV you can find, practice your own made-up sentences, and pay special attention to your pronunciation and diction.



## THE ADUANA

On the plane from Houston or Miami you will be given a small form to fill out, so bring a pen. It will ask the usual information, name, residence, citizenship, etc. The most important part of the form, however, is a little section which asks your reason for visiting Honduras. It gives the choices of business, tourist/pleasure, government, etc., but there is also a choice of "other". By all means check that choice, regardless of what you might think what are your real reasons. There is good logic behind this choice.

Any US citizen who steps off a plane in Tegucigalpa and presents his/her passport will be given an automatic and free thirty-day visa. However, if you check "other" on the form you will be given a ninety-day visa, and no one will ask what the "other" is. This will give you a couple extra months to decide what you really want to do, and save you a some real hassles that I will explain in a moment.

The airport in Tegucigalpa, Toncontín, is being phased out, so it may not be in use when you read this, but the procedures are the same in San Pedro Sula or Palmerola, near Comayagua. This phaseout is a shame for a couple reasons. Travelers to Tegucigalpa will have to disembark in Palmerola and take a bus or other transportation into the capital city. This is at least an extra hour's travel time.

Landing at Toncontín is like a free carnival ride, and in the past it was even better (worse?). This airport has been honored in the past as the forth most dangerous landing in the world, and probably it was true, but not quite so much anymore. There is only one runway, with a mountain on one end and a freeway on the other. It was built after World War II for prop planes, and now there is no room for expansion or lengthening. On my first flight to Tegucigalpa in the 1980s the plane had to fly low, coming in toward the mountain and parallel to the runway, dumping any excess fuel so there was only a one-shot chance to land. When what seemed dangerously close to the mountain the plane banked steeply to the left, the wing so low I could count the daisies on the ground, pulled up over the runway, cut the engines and dropped onto the pavement. I think that's the day I got my first gray hair. Since then they've cut down some of the mountain so the planes can come in straight, so it's much less nerve-wracking than it was then.



**The airport at Toncontín, Tegucigalpa.  
You can see the cut-down mountain on  
this end. The highway is hidden on the  
other end by a deep drop-off.**

After checking in with the immigration agents in the airport at Toncontín, the yellow copy of your form will be stapled into your passport over the visa stamp and you are ready to go to the Aduana, or Customs. Honduras has a major problem with drug smuggling and money laundering, so the Aduana is very thorough. Other than the usual procedures like in the US, they will look through EVERYTHING in your luggage, even unrolling your socks and underwear. They empty out everything and look for false bottoms and sides in your suitcases and bags. I don't mind this because it is for a good cause, and they do catch a lot of would-be smugglers.

After the Aduana you are free to leave for whatever destination you wish in Honduras, however as a tourist you must carry your passport, or a copy, with you at all times. As a side note, I complied with all the regulations regarding visas and carrying my passport, but in all the time I've lived in Honduras I have never been asked to show papers, though I stick out like a neon sign among the local populace.

Assuming you checked "other" on the immigration form, you now have a ninety-day visa to travel around Honduras. By law all tourists must either leave or renew their visa before it expires. To renew a tourist visa isn't as easy as going down to the immigration office in Tegucigalpa and paying a fee. The renewals are only done at certain ports of entry, and Tegucigalpa isn't one of them, so when the expiration date gets close you will have to take a trip to El Florido (border of Guatemala), Las Manos (border of Nicaragua), fly to Belize or Costa Rica, or perhaps another port of entry designated by the immigration office. The law states that you must leave the country for at least seventy-two hours and return, though Las Manos and El Florido will automatically waive the seventy-two hour requirement. When you re-enter at the port of entry and pay a fee, you will be given another thirty-day visa. The fee seems to vary depending on where you cross, but shouldn't be more than twenty dollars. So you can see how important that initial ninety-day visa is, and the importance of checking "other".

Another thing about the Aduana: don't try to pass through customs with guns, dope or ancient Mayan artifacts. None of these things are worth twenty or thirty years in the national penitentiary at Tamara. Honduran tourist centers are full of fake Mayan artifacts, some of which are so well made as to be nearly indistinguishable from the originals, so your fate may be in the hands of someone who is not an archaeological expert. Usually they will assume the item is modern, but if there is any doubt, you could be detained until a real expert makes a decision. Out in the rural areas of western Honduras there are people who make a living looting actual Mayan sites and selling real artifacts. Honduras has very strict laws prohibiting the buying, selling or possession of genuine ancient Mayan items, so don't fall for this. You will be caught, and you will go to jail for a very long time.



## RESIDENCY

The one, and maybe only, way to avoid the monthly exodus and return for visa renewal is to become a permanent resident of Honduras. But be forewarned, it isn't easy, it isn't cheap, and it isn't quick.

To obtain Honduran residency you will need a load of paperwork. When someone says you will need a copy of something, you would be wise to plan on two, and three just to be on the safe side. In order to apply for residency you will need the following, and whatever else some bureaucrat says:

1. A copy of your birth certificate, official with stamp and apostile
2. A copy of your police record from your city and state of origin, with apostile
3. Background check from Honduran National Police
4. Background check from INTERPOL.
5. Certified medical checkup from a Honduran doctor
6. Two passport type photographs
7. Official application to be filed by a Honduran lawyer
8. Whatever other forms and papers you are told to supply.
9. Wait at least six months to a year for finalization.

An apostile is a certification issued by the Secretary of State in the state of your birth or your present residency, depending on the document required. It is merely an international assurance that the person certifying the signatures, documents, etc., is qualified to do so. Each apostile is issued for a specific country, so if you have one on a birth certificate to be used in Honduras, it will not be accepted in Guatemala, for example. The apostile itself is a sheet of paper stating for which country it is issued, signed by the Secretary of State with all appropriate governmental seals, and physically sealed to the document in question. The cost is nominal and the waiting time is short. As I said above, if you need one, it's best to get two or three. Government bureaucracies have a habit of "losing" lots of paperwork.

All these things require payment of some fee or other, some not at all inexpensive. My residency when final was at a cost of nearly four thousand US dollars, most of it for lawyer fees. It is good for one year, then has to be renewed, but renewal is easy. I just have to go into the immigration office on the day of expiration, sign a book, pay twenty dollars US, and wait a week to pick up my new card.

One good thing about applying for residency is you no longer have to leave the country and return every month. With a copy of your application you can just go down to the immigration office, pay twenty dollars and you're good for another month. And the application temporarily satisfies the legal requirement for residency, so you don't have to carry your passport, and you won't be hassled by the police should they ever want to see your papers.

If you plan to stay in Honduras for more than 30 or 90 days, and especially if you apply for residency, you will become intimately acquainted with the Oficina de Migración in Tegucigalpa. Before I got my final residency card I was practically on a first name basis with the girls in that office. The office is not easy to find unless you ask someone. It is best just to take a taxi. All the drivers know where the office is located.

Honduras will not take it lightly if you overstay your visa without a renewal. You may be assessed stiff fines which must be paid before you will be allowed to leave the country. About a week before your visa expires, it's best to go to the Oficina de Migración and ask what are the regulations concerning visa renewal because they may change without notice. They will tell you the official government story, that you will have to leave the country for three days. They will probably say you need to fly to Costa Rica or Belize and return, but they WILL NOT tell you that you can cross at Las Manos or El Florido and come back the same day. In fact, if you ask about this, they will say it isn't true, but it is...usually. That's why you need to work on this at least a week in advance, because things may not be the same today as they were last week.

There's another trap which is best avoided concerning residency. There's sometimes someone in the immigration office who will approach you, ask to meet with you outside somewhere, and offer to get your residency at a cut rate, bypassing the lawyer. This will be an official residency document, but most of the normal paper trail will not exist. If there is ever any need to check up on your residency documentation you will be found out and prosecuted. Since Juan Orlando Hernández has been president, many of the corrupt government officials have been removed and jailed, including the one who approached me.

If you choose to go to El Florido or Las Manos to renew your tourist visa you will be asked at the border office to fill out another yellow paper somewhat like that original one on the plane. This is called a *tramita*, or official paper requesting permission to cross the border. There will be about a dozen "tramtadores" at every crossing place. These are people, usually young men, asking to fill out the paper for you for a small fee. They do not work officially for any government, but are safe and will save you some time and hassle. They also have a remarkable ability to get you to the front of the line, so it is usually to your advantage to use their services.



## MONEY

Money is necessary and important to all of us, even in Honduras. When you arrive here it is best to change most of your money into Lempiras because it is difficult to do everyday transactions with dollars. Most people will not know the official exchange rate, and you will almost certainly get ripped off, intentionally or otherwise. There are always money changers around who will give you a little better exchange rate than the banks, but I don't recommend them. Most are honest and will exchange your money without a problem, but there is a small percentage who might set you up for a robbery or give you a handful of counterfeit bills. It's best to go the official route.

The exception to this rule of using Lempiras instead of dollars is if you should take a trip to Guatemala or Nicaragua. These countries are very reluctant to take Lempiras for any monetary transaction. They want only their own national currency, either Córdobas or Quetzales, but actually prefer US dollars. Their banks won't exchange Lempiras, nor will stores accept them, but will all accept dollars.

A One Quetzal note from  
Guatemala.



As a tourist you won't be able to open a bank account in Honduras, but any reputable bank will exchange your dollars at the going rate honestly and with a smile. There are several reliable banks in Honduras, but I would recommend three: Banco Ficohsa (the largest), Banco Atlántida (the oldest), and Banco Davivienda (the friendliest). There are other banks including BAC Bank America, Banco Occidental, Banco Azteca, and a few others. All the large banks are safe and reliable, and you should have no fear of being cheated.

Honduran money is well made, rugged and beautiful. It comes in denominations of 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100 and 500 Lempiras. At this writing, a US dollar is worth 23.58 Lempiras, so a dollar can go a long way here. I like the Honduran banknotes, and the only problem I have is with the twenty Lempira note. It's an experimental bill made in Europe, I believe, and is of some kind of plastic. It looks good and lasts forever, but if one ever gets bent or folded it defies all attempts to get it flat again. It will be bent for all time.

My personal favorite Honduran banknote is the five Lempira bill. It has a portrait of Francisco Morazán of the front, and a depiction of the Battle of La Trinidad on the reverse.



Francisco Morazán was the George Washington of Honduras, and the Battle of La Trinidad was his Yorktown. It was the pivotal point of independence from Mexico and its vassal, Guatemala, though much hard fighting remained before true sovereignty was attained.

I have searched for the site of La Trinidad several times with metal detector in hand, but so far I've had no success. It seems the locals and even the museum curators in Tegucigalpa have no idea exactly where the battle was fought. A grand memorial was raised in commemoration, but the actual site remains elusive.





A One Lempira note.

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Honduran coins come in denominations of 5, 10, 20 and 50 Centavos. They are attractive, but nearly worthless. In the past there were 1 and 2 Centavo coins, but those have been discontinued, as well as all coins made of silver. Most stores, except the large supermarkets, will not make change in coins, and just round the price up to the next Lempira. It is not unusual to find 5 and 10 Centavo coins lying in the street, abandoned or thrown away as worthless.



If you're going to do any business, or even spend any money, in Honduras it's best to keep abreast of the current exchange rate against the dollar. It has been falling steadily for the past two or three years, and that's very good if you find yourself here with a pocket full of dollars, or if you have a steady source of US money. The best place to get the actual daily rate is at the source, the Banco Central de Honduras in Tegucigalpa. Their website is: <http://www.bch.hn/>. The banks will exchange your dollars at the official rate without ripping you off for a percentage.

## MAKING MONEY

Depending on your personal situation you may find a need to augment your income in your chosen get-away land. If you have a little seed money and can speak reasonably good Spanish, you are in good shape. Or if you have a needed skill, because Honduras needs some decent electricians, welders and well drillers, as well as qualified English teachers. Keep in mind that you can't expect to come here and find a job; you will have to make your own.

For those with no technical skills, there are numerous buying and selling opportunities that have been quite lucrative for the ambitious. Buying old gold jewelry and silver coins has been good to me, and I find I can pay considerably more than the local buyers/thieves and still make a decent profit.



Old Honduran silver coins that you are likely to find for sale all look pretty much the same. They have a portrait of Chief Lempira with feathered headdress on the front, and the numbers "0.900" below. This indicates 90% silver content. Non-silver coins will have no number.

Other ways some have found to augment their income is buying gold from miners in Olancho, or opals in Intibucá, but you will need a native Honduran partner who knows the ropes in order to keep your head on your shoulders, literally. Modern Lenca are famous for their pottery and hand-woven textiles, and some have found that profitable if sold in the US.

Believe it or not, the easiest way I've seen to make a few bucks is to buy uncirculated banknotes from any bank and sell them for several times their actual value on eBay. An added perk to this idea is that if you find you can't sell them, you can always spend them.

## HONDURAN FOOD

One of the best things about Honduras is the food. Volumes could be, and are, written about Honduran food, and rightly so. It is distinctly different from Mexican cuisine, but using many of the same ingredients. It seems to be a melding of influences from the Mayas, the Garifunas of the Caribbean, and the Spanish.

The original foodstuffs of Central America came from discoveries of the Mayas. Their food consisted primarily of maiz, squash, beans, native tropical fruits and meat from deer, capybara, tapir and whatever other animals they could catch. Fish was always important also, fresh or dried. Maiz was so important to the ancient Maya that a special god was dedicated to its growth and prosperity.

When the Spanish arrived a revolution in food occurred. They brought cattle, hogs and chickens, but most importantly, rice and wheat. The Spanish diet was heavy in beef and pork, with wheat bread as a staple. These were quickly incorporated into the local cuisine, while the wheat was used more as tortillas than bread.

The local people quickly adopted the new Spanish footstuffs, and their beehive-shaped clay ovens and open fogones were ideal for cooking the European influenced cuisine. Milk and cheese became popular, and new recipes were quickly invented to take advantage of the new tastes.

The Spanish animal-based agriculture gave rise to the wonderful variety of pork and beef chorizos, in my opinion the best in the world.

The coming of the Spanish completely revolutionized the agricultural and eating habits of the New World. Though the ancient Maya had a reasonably varied and healthy diet, it would never again be the same.

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### **Garífunas**

The Garífunas of the north coast are descendants of freed or escaped slaves from the British territories of Roatan and the Caribbean. They formed their own settlements in the north coasts of Honduras, Nicaragua and Belize, and are of much more pure African blood than the blacks of the United States. They even have their own unique language, and have had a major influence on Honduran cuisine in the form of soups based on seafood, and much use of coconut and yuca.

Garífunas are known for their various seafood dishes, particularly Sopa de Caracol, conch soup. Also, they make a unique bread from yuca called *ereba*. Their cuisine is based heavily on fish, plantains, yuca, coconut and breadfruit. In Tegucigalpa Garífunas can be seen in the street selling Pan de Coco and Pan de Minimo, breads made from coconut or bananas.

In the past the Garífunas were traditionally farmers, tilling the rich land of the north coast area. In the early twentieth century the US fruit companies confiscated most of the land and forced the farmers off their croplands. They rely now mostly on jobs outside their home areas, or have become fishermen.

Though nominally Roman Catholic, the Garífunas people are highly influenced by traditional African and Caribbean religions, including voodoo and Rastafari. Much of their rituals revolve around shamans and mysticism.

Even after a history of slavery and persecution, the Garífunas are a happy people with rich traditions and colorful festivals. Music and dance are very important and tourism has become a major source of income for the community.

These people are unique in the area and are well worth a visit.



Garífunas in traditional costume.



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Some of the culinary treats you will quickly find in Honduras and throughout Central America, include:

### Red & Black Beans



The two most popular types of beans in Honduras, though the red variety is king. I prefer the flavor of the black beans, but most Hondurans like the red better.

The black beans here look like a black and white photo, but they are in living color. They really are that black.

In Honduras you will find red beans everywhere, and at every meal. Beans are eaten in a huge variety of forms, but chiefly as a paste, somewhat like Mexican refried pintos. In the markets you can find beans of many varieties, small white, blackeyed peas, green and yellow dried peas, and a few others, but the red bean is everywhere. Rarely, if ever, will you find pintos which are ubiquitous in Mexico. That's too bad because I find the flavor of pintos superior to the red beans.

I blame the lack of pinto beans on political bias. After the revolution and freedom from Spanish rule in 1821 Mexico made a power grab and tried to annex all of Central America as its own. Central Americans resented that, and after another revolution against Mexico, became free and independent nations. Hondurans resented Mexico to the point of disavowing everything Mexican, though many Mexican influences remain or have crept back in. Pinto beans are one of the things that have yet to make a successful return.

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### Pupusas

Pupusas are actually of El Salvadoran origin but are probably more common in Honduras than El Salvador. You will find them everywhere, with many small restaurants specializing in pupusas of various varieties. Pupusas are like a very thick soft corn tortilla stuffed with some combination of beans, quesillo, chicharón or a local flower called Loroco which gives a rare and delightful flavor. They are normally served with "curtido", a semi-pickled cabbage



and carrot salad, with a little salsa picante. Pupusa places are as common here as hamburger joints in the United States.

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### Rosquillas

Rosquillas are nearly as common as beans. Rarely will a Honduran serve you a cup of coffee without offering a rosquilla or two. Rosquillas are a hard doughnut shaped item, somewhat like a pretzel, made of corn and Honduran cheese. The first time I saw a rosquilla I thought it was a pretty poor excuse for a doughnut, but they grow on you to the point where you can't imagine coffee without a few. At first you probably won't be crazy about rosquillas, but, trust me, you soon will.

Honduran hard cheese, "queso duro", is very flavorful with a unique flavor. Though somewhat like Mexican hard cheese, I think it is better. Again, an acquired taste.

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