

AIM SKY HIGH, DON'T JUST FLY BY!

Honduras

From the moment we overflew San Pedro Sula Airport, we were overwhelmed by the intense green landscape. We'd left behind a wintered landscape—typical of mid-February in Canada! The purpose of our travel was business, as we are an international consultancy firm that works on development projects. In this case, it was a development project to assist Honduras with the development of a new niche travel product: birdwatching! And we were just part of the chain of actors that made this amazing project possible (see acknowledgements to learn more about it). Honduras is a spectacular destination, where tourists can enjoy nature and culture like the well-known vast Mesoamerican Barrier Reef and the archeological Mayan site of Copán. But our travel and attention focused on two lesser known areas: birdwatching within the region of Lake Yojoa and La Ceiba in Atlántida. The Honduran Small Businesses and Government Support program is working very hard in these areas to develop a sustainable ecotourism supply chain.



ALL PHOTOS BY WILLIAN ORELLANA & KATINKA DOMEN (BEAKS & PEAKS)



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In general, Honduras is a fantastic destination for birdwatching. It has rain and dry forests, beaches, coral reefs and a variety of protected areas, with a plethora of species. Some ornithologists have estimated that Honduras has approximately 770 species of birds.

And in the areas of Lake Yojoa and La Ceiba specifically, the emerging birdwatching industry has invested in good infrastructure—great hiking trails, boardwalks and observation towers. The accessibility to most birding hotspots is relatively easy, not too onerous to walk, climb or hike through, and there are sites for all levels of birdwatchers (casual and hardcore birding). Due to the amount of bird species, every site offers the opportunity for sightings of birds of interest.

There is also a good pool of knowledgeable birdwatching guides or *pajareros*, as they're called in Honduras. They are very flexible, and always willing to accommodate birdwatchers in terms of going to different regions in search of target species. In fact, there is genuine enthusiasm from the *pajareros*—most are very prepared to work with tourists and they are known as the leaders in the emerging green culture of Honduras, driven by respect for nature as well the demand for ecotourism.

Accommodations in Honduras range from mainstream lodging to high-end eco-resorts. We found all to be clean, our hosts friendly and their customer service very efficient. Internet connection is available, but in remote locations can at times be slow. Most issues encountered were easily overcome by driving just a little ahead to the next hotspot.

Global Affairs Canada advises against travel to some areas of Honduras, as they do in many other countries. While this could deter some visitors, the areas we travelled to are not under an advisory notice.

HIGHLIGHTS OF OUR TOUR

We arrived at San Pedro de Sula, the industrial hub of Honduras and the second-largest city after the capital, Tegucigalpa. We had arranged to be picked up at the airport by Gustavo Poublanc, owner of PAL TOURS. Gustavo and his staff accompanied us on our trip, and are not only excellent drivers but like most of the birding guides here are bilingual (English-Spanish). They were extremely friendly, and were always prepared to help maximize our eco-experience.

From San Pedro de Sula we headed to Lake Yojoa Region. The lake is a popular destination for Hondurans and becoming more popular with foreigners. It's the largest lake in Honduras, centrally located in the artery that connects San Pedro de Sula with Tegucigalpa, and is just a two-hour drive from it. It's surrounded by mountains and rich biodiversity, and thanks to our excellent tour guides William and Katinca from Beaks and Peaks, we soon discovered just how much the region had to offer!

We stayed a few days up in the mountains, at Panacam Lodge, a cozy eco-lodge located in Meambar Blue Mountain National Park. The stunning natural beauty of this protected area, combined with the lodge's spacious facilities, attracts birdwatchers from around the world. The food was excellent, and the opportunity just to sit and lounge on the wide porch and eat while watching the animal kingdom in action was one we still cherish!

Then we moved to the foothills of the lake and stayed at the LA NATURALEZA Hotel. It was centrally located and can easily support day excursions. We visited Parque Los Naranjos, an eco-archaeological park with great natural beauty, a perfect spot for beginner birdwatchers. We had a nice lunch at D&D Brewery, and then went out to La Ensenada to catch the birds returning to the cove for the evening. Once there we met AMUPROLAGO, a nonprofit association that manages and protects Lake Yojoa. The association is working hard to implement suitable fisheries and commercial practices around the lake in order to preserve its beauty.

In a quest for the quetzal, an elusive Central American bird, we visited Santa Bárbara Mountain National Park and had the opportunity to get to know Proyecto La Fuente de Vida, a community-based project that aims to build local capacity to manage ecotourism opportunities, as well as develop and implement conservation programs. We spent a day surrounded by birds, coffee and chocolate at Ecofinca Luna del Puente, a privately-owned and operated natural reserve with a strong commitment to conservation. Finally, we said goodbye to the Lake Yojoa region with a scenic boat ride aboard one of Honduyate Marina's fleet of vessels.

Next, we headed to La Ceiba in the Atlántida region. This area is located on the northern Caribbean shore of Honduras. It's a four-hour drive from Lake Yojoa, or a two-hour drive from San Pedro Sula Airport on a good route. We had two fantastic tour guides with us from this area: Angel Fong from Go Bird Honduras and Jafeth Zablah from Eco Ceiba.

We stayed at The Lodge at Pico Bonito, a world-renowned eco-lodge with superb infrastructure and services. The location is ideal for day excursions. We went to Cuero y Salado Wildlife Refuge and had the opportunity to navigate through mangroves and to see incredible wildlife. Afterward, at the Rio Santiago Nature Resort, we had a great encounter with hundreds of hummingbirds and enjoyed natural walking trails.

Part of the group had the opportunity to visit the area of Rio Cangregal, which offers some of the best whitewater rafting in Central America and accommodation options for all tastes and budgets. We visited the stunning B&B La Villa de Soledad and the Hotel Rio, which is ideal for large groups.

Another part of the group visited Guanaja Island, one of the Honduras Bay Islands. They stayed at Roland & Garden Guest House, a charming B&B surrounded by tropical vegetation and fruit trees, where you can enjoy amazing views over the forest and the full expanse of the Caribbean Sea.

With that, our expedition ended. We returned with 232 species of birds spotted, great memories and the satisfaction of knowing that while being a birdwatching and/or nature tourist in Honduras is rewarding in itself, we were also enablers of ecological conscience, part of an emerging industry and agents of positive change for people's livelihoods in Honduras.

On our way back, we were asked if the trip satisfied the business model we aimed for. We answered: "Yes indeed! Originally we came to do business only, but we soon discovered that Honduras is so much more than we ever thought possible."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our project in Honduras was part of a Canada Trade Related Technical Assistance development program, which is designed to meet the priority needs of Canada and Canadian Free Trade Agreement partner countries. Our project goal was to increase eco-tourism from Canada to Honduras, to assist Honduran micro- and small-size enterprises, and to enhance women in business participation in the tourism supply chain in Honduras.

Our project was made possible thanks to the Ambassador of Honduras to Canada, Ms. Sofia Cerrato. Her hard work and perseverance helped create an extraordinary Canada-Honduras team who executed this project. The team was formed by the Honduras Tourism Agency (*Instituto Hondureño de Turismo*), Zamorano University in Honduras, and Kisserup International Trade Roots Inc. in Canada.

The Canadian executing agency for this project was the Conference Board of Canada, a leading independent not-for-profit institution in Canada, with a remarkable track record in impact oriented development projects.

