

# CENTRAL AMERICA

SMART CARD



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## MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS

**Mestizo:** Mestizos are the dominant ethnic group in Central America. Mestizo is the racial category used to describe the mixture of indigenous and European blood.

**Mayan:** The Mayans were the predominant indigenous society at the time of the Spanish conquests. Their civilization occupied much of the Central American isthmus, from Chiapas through Guatemala, to El Salvador and into Nicaragua.



Maya Children

**Garífuna:** The Garífuna live on the Caribbean coast of Central America; their lands stretch from Belize to Nicaragua. Their cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage has both Caribbean and West African influences.

**Miskitu:** Miskitu are the dominant ethnic group in La Mosquitia (Honduras) and number somewhere from 50,000 to 70,000. Prior to European arrival in the region of La Mosquitia, the Miskitu were believed to be among the Pech and Sumu indigenous tribes.

## BELIZE



**HISTORY:** The story of Belize and its people is complex and unique. Like many neighbors, its population has roots in the Mayan civilization and was then ruled by the Spanish. Unlike its neighbors, the nation came under British control in 1798. Belize first wrote a constitution in 1964, but did not achieve independence until 1981. As a result the national culture has a mixture of Caribbean, European and African influences.

**BELIEFS:** Many aspects of Mayan beliefs persist in this area despite nearly half a millennium of European domination. Belizeans strongly believe in the importance of Mayan natural and spiritual medicinal treatments.



**MILITARY:** The Belizean military, or Belizean Defense Force (BDF), is all volunteer. Belizean males and females can enlist at the age of 18, however, must serve 12 years to fulfill the initial military service commitment.

**CHALLENGES:** The major threats for Belize take the form of drug trafficking through the region, off-shore money laundering related to drug trafficking, and the land dispute with Guatemala. Drug trafficking includes cocaine and marijuana shipments heading for the US.



**BUILDING RAPPOR:** Belizeans tend to be reserved around people who are unfamiliar to them. When greeting, a handshake is common and followed by conversation. Friends (particularly men) might shake hands by clasping the palms and locking thumbs or all fingers.

## COSTA RICA



**HISTORY:** As a highly developed and non-violent nation in Latin America, Costa Rica leads the regional indicators for standard of living and human development. For more than 60 years, Costa Rica has been a peaceful democracy without a military. Despite bordering extremely volatile nations that were mired in civil wars and illicit trade, Costa Rica has maintained its status as an oasis of eco-tourism and peace.

**BELIEFS:** The people of Costa Rica are predominately Roman Catholic. Costa Rica prides itself on putting people and social services ahead of military spending. Costa Rica has many elements of the macho/machismo culture, however, less than its neighboring countries.

**MILITARY:** While it has no army, Costa Rica does have extensive security forces. However, they lack the resources typically associated with an army, such as army vehicles, heavy weaponry, naval vessels, warplanes, and tanks.



**CHALLENGES:** Border and immigration disputes continue with Nicaragua. Since the 1840s, the Nicaragua-Costa Rica border has been a hotspot for tensions between the two countries. The Pacific and Atlantic coasts of Costa Rica are havens for drug smugglers and other organized crime operatives that wish to use these waters as a transit corridor.

**BUILDING RAPPOR:** Costa Rica is traditionally an indirect culture, so initially a handshake is an appropriate greeting, but other extended physical contact is not welcome. Small talk is an essential part of any business conversation. Try not to bring up any business-related topics before your counterpart does in order to not seem rude or brash.

## EL SALVADOR



**HISTORY:** During the 1970s, El Salvador's economy continued to worsen and the people suffered from landlessness, poverty, unemployment and overpopulation. This sparked a 12-year civil war, which left the Salvadoran economy in shambles, and infrastructure heavily damaged. From 1981 to 1993, US military advisors were deployed to El Salvador and were considered very successful in assisting in the expansion and professionalization of the Salvadoran Armed Forces during a time of Civil War. During the civil war many youths immigrated to the US and formed their own gangs to protect themselves against other gangs. These MS-13 and Barrio 18 gang members were then deported back to El Salvador making the gangs a normal part of Salvadoran society and San Salvador one of the most violent cities in the world.



**BELIEFS:** Salvadorans take great pride in their Roman Catholic heritage. Storytelling is an important part of Salvadoran culture that serves as educational and cultural preservation, and to instill moral values in younger generations.

**MILITARY:** El Salvador has a one-year compulsory military service obligation for all males upon reaching the age of 18. The Armed Forces of El Salvador is called the **Fuerza Armada de El Salvador**.

**CHALLENGES:** El Salvador has aligned itself as an important partner with the US. Together, they have created a robust bilateral military cooperation to resolve humanitarian and counter-narcotics issues.

**BUILDING RAPPOR:** Direct communication is considered somewhat blunt by Salvadoran standards and may carry an unintentional tone of rudeness. Meeting a Salvadoran for the first time is relatively uncomplicated. First, introduce yourself with your own last name and where you are from while extending a firm handshake with eye contact and a smile.

# GUATEMALA



**HISTORY:** Guatemala has a complex history with a diverse, multiethnic population. During pre-Columbian times, the two principal centers for Mayan culture and civilization were in northern Yucatán and in the Mayan highlands, particularly the area that is known as Quiché (in northern present-day Guatemala). It has experienced Spanish Colonization, Independence, and a 36-year civil war, which over the years have become important in the formation of the nation's shared values, beliefs, behaviors, and norms.

**BELIEFS:** Guatemala does not have an official religion, although the constitution identifies with the Catholic Church as a legitimate organization. In the traditional Maya belief system, their worldview seeks a balance within social, cultural, and ecological environments.

**MILITARY:** They currently use a "selective draft" system for 18-year-olds, but male citizens up to the age of 50 could be called to service. The armed forces are comprised of the National Army of Guatemala, Air Force, and Navy which includes the Marines.



**CHALLENGES:** A number of gangs in Guatemala originated in the US. Following their incarcerations, many were deported back to Guatemala, bringing with them their criminal expertise from the US.

**BUILDING RAPPORT:** Guatemalans greet with a handshake and direct eye contact. Start conversations by exchanging pleasantries. Guatemalans enjoy speaking with others and are considered a collectivist culture, where loyalty to a group is significant.

# HONDURAS



**HISTORY:** During the 1980s, Joint Task Force-Bravo located in Honduras was used for US training exercises, intelligence and counterinsurgency efforts to support anti-Communist Contra guerillas in their conflict with the leftist Nicaraguan Sandinista government and a proxy war in Central America against communism. With gang and organized crime organizations outnumbering security forces in Honduras, the security situation deteriorated dramatically and Honduras became the murder capital of the world. Currently, JTF-Bravo organizes multilateral exercises, supports counter narco-terrorism, conducts humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, and builds partner capacities promoting regional cooperation and security in Latin America.



**BELIEFS:** While most Hondurans are Catholic, there has been a notable rise in evangelicalism. In Honduras, many people have a divine sense of destiny and the phrase "Si Dios Quiere" ("If God wills it/God willing") is common. Accidental deaths are commonly attributed to the will of God.

**MILITARY:** Honduras has a voluntary two to three year military service beginning as early as 18 years of age. There is no conscription. The Honduran Armed Forces consists of the Army, Navy (includes Naval Infantry), and the Honduran Air Force with most people serving in the Army.

**CHALLENGES:** During the 1990s, many criminals of Central American descent living in the US were sent back to their countries of origin. They brought their gang culture and dynamics with them back to Central America. Gangs and organized crime are a major concern in Honduras. The Mara Salvatrucha – Thirteenth Street (MS-13) and Barrio (M-18) are traditional rivals and both have origins in the US.

**BUILDING RAPPORT:** Start conversations by exchanging pleasantries. In small groups, greet each individual. Hondurans may tell you what you want to hear, instead of saying "no" if they are unable to follow through with a request. Always use a Honduran's professional or personal title unless otherwise instructed.

# NICARAGUA



**HISTORY:** During the Somoza Dynasty, President Somoza García and his circle of selected relatives maintained corrupt power of the Nicaraguan government. In early 1979, the formation of assorted insurgent groups aligned into a unified National Patriotic Front (FPN) to coordinate the fight. The overthrow of Somoza Debayle ended the Somoza Dynasty in 1979. The new government was called the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), and are now a democratic socialist political party in Nicaragua. Immediately, the FSLN implemented procedures to raise literacy levels, and upgrade health care services.



**BELIEFS:** The Roman Catholic religion is a significant part of the culture of Nicaragua and forms part of the constitution. Nicaraguan values, beliefs, behaviors, and norms have evolved due to the many natural and man-made disasters.

**MILITARY:** Nicaraguans can volunteer for service between the ages of 18 and 30, and there is currently no mandatory service obligation. US Soldiers should remember that their National Army counterparts are only required to have a sixth-grade education level, so literacy levels may be low.

**CHALLENGES:** The relationship between the US and Nicaragua took a slight downturn when the 2012 presidential elections were deemed by official observers to have been handled poorly and marred by corruption.

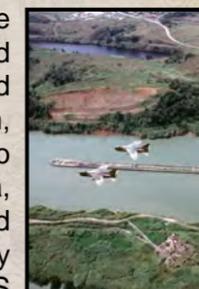


**BUILDING RAPPORT:** Nicaraguans are typically outgoing people, however, may be a little reserved and proper when first meeting. They regularly use and respect both military and civilian titles with last names, make direct eye contact and shake hands when they meet.

# PANAMA



**HISTORY:** Since the beginning of the Spanish colonial period, Panama has been utilized as the crossroads of many cultures and foreign interests. Panama has many heroes, from Vasco Núñez de Balboa who established the first stable settlement on the coast of Panama to Victoriano Lorenzo considered one of the great heroes of the Thousand Days War. In 1903, Panama gained its independence first from Spain, and then Colombia. In order to gain independence from Colombia, the US government supported a rebellion against Colombia by Panamanian nationalists. Today, US and Panamanian relations are strong with the US supporting the Panamanian government in political, security, and economic development.



**MILITARY:** Panama is the only other Latin American country to permanently abolish its Army. After the United States invasion in 1989, the government abolished Panama's Defense Forces and reformed the security by creating the Panamanian Public Forces.



**CHALLENGES:** The transit of narcotics, human smuggling and illicit cash are the biggest problems facing border security forces. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) presents a persistent terrorist threat by using remote areas in the Darién region as a safe haven.

**BUILDING RAPPORT:** Greetings depend on the setting and the status of the relationship and it can be either formal or informal. A handshake with eye contact is the norm. When addressing a superior officer, it is important to use the word "mi" followed by the officer's rank.