General World Cultures

Chapter 8- Central America

**adobe**- a sun-dried brick made of mud and straw

**sacred**- deeply respected and usually having religious meaning

**guerrilla**- a soldier who fights outside a regular army, often against a government

**rain forest**- any dense forest that grows in a warm, moist area; a tropical rain forest is near the equator

**cash crop**- a crop grown to be sold; a cash crop usually provides a farmer’s or landowner’s main source of income

**dictator**- a leader who rules with complete power

**contra**- a rebel fighting the Sandinista government in Nicaragua

**United Nations**- an international organization whose purpose is to keep peace between the nations

**The Countries of Central America**

\* Central America is a strip of land connecting Mexico to South America. Seven countries are on this strip: Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Panama.

\* The land in Central America, like Mexico, was a colony of Spain for about 300 years. The Spanish and Native American people mixed, and today, most of the people in Central America are mestizos. Guatemala, however, is an exception. There, Spaniards and Native Americans stayed apart more. Nearly half the people of Guatemala are pure-blooded American Indians. The rest are ladinos, as mestizos are called there.

\* Belize is another exception. It was settled by English sailors. Even now, most people in Belize speak a form of English. Many enslaved Africans were brought to this area, too. About 40% of the people in Belize have African history.

\* Nicaragua is the largest of the Central American countries, about the size of New York state. El Salvador is the smallest- but the most crowded. It has 685 people per square mile. The United States only has 74 people per square mile.

\* Costa Rica stands out as a country with a stable government, which is democratic. Costa Rica’s economy is in good shape, and the country is generally peaceful. Costa Rica is one of the few countries on Earth that does not have an army. Honduras is more typical of the region. It is a poor country and has a history of military rule.

* Do you think the U.S. needs a military? Defend your answer. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
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\* Panama occupies the thinnest part of Central America. It is best known for something that the people built- the Panama Canal. This waterway connects the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean. We will now watch a National Geographic video about this awesome structure.

<http://www.amazon.com/Building-The-Panama-Canal/dp/B005ITVC0U/ref=sr_1_3?s=movies-tv&ie=UTF8&qid=1373224226&sr=1-3&keywords=panama+canal>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avvIGaNho9o>

*Complete the Countries of Central America Map Study on page 103*

**Volcanoes in Central America**

\* Central America, like western Mexico, is dotted with volcanoes. Some are **dormant**- that is, they are in no danger of erupting. Many, however, are still active and could erupt at any time.

\* Although volcanoes can be destructive, they can also be of use to the people. Soil is often very fertile near volcanoes. The rocks near volcanoes contain valuable ores and other minerals such as gold, silver, copper, and sulfur. All of these minerals are mined in Central America.

\* There are six active volcanoes in Central America that are over 10,000 feet high. Fuego, in Guatemala, erupted in 1999.

\* Another useful volcanic product is energy. In volcanoes, hot, melted rock is near the surface. This rock can turn underground water to steam, which then pushes upward with great force. Engineers drill holes to tap the steam, which can be used to make electricity. Using volcanic heat to produce electricity this way is called **geothermal power**. Costa Rica uses geothermal power to produce electricity instead of fossil fuels.

\* Earthquakes occur often in the area. Some of the earthquakes cause a lot of damage. A single earthquake in 1976 killed 20,000 people in Guatemala City. Earthquakes have shaped some aspects of life in Central America. For example, many people build small, one-story houses from light wood. Such houses do not break or fall down easily in an earthquake. In some areas, however, people build houses of **adobe**. Poor people use adobe because it is inexpensive. Unfortunately, in a large earthquake, an adobe house may crumble and fall.

**Maya: Ancient and Modern**

\* The culture of Central America has strong roots in the great civilization of the Maya. These Native Americans lived in parts of Mexico and Central America. They built temple-cities in Belize, Honduras, and Guatemala. The Maya invented a whole system of mathematics. It was based on 20 numbers instead of 10. They developed precise calendars. For example, they figured out that a year is exactly 365.2422 days long.

\* The Maya had no alphabet, but they did have a writing system. The *Popul Vuh* is a **sacred** book of the Maya that was written in pictures instead of words. It tells their history and myths and is a guide to their customs and beliefs.

*Complete the Geographer’s Tool Kit Understanding Climate Maps on page 106*

**Making a Living in Central America**

\* Rainfall is steady and plentiful in Central America., and the temperature is warm nearly all year. Plants grow quickly in these conditions, and much of the region is covered with thick forests full of trees, vines, and brush. These lush areas are called **rain forests**.

\* However, people are cutting down the rain forests. They do this to make money by selling the wood for building materials and paper. The warm, wet climate is also good for farming once the trees have been cut down. Unfortunately, the destruction of rain forests affects the whole world. It decreases the Earth’s oxygen supply and kills wildlife.

\* In some coastal areas where fish and shrimp are plentiful, fishing is a growing industry. Mining is important in Honduras, where silver, gold, and many other minerals are plentiful. Unfortunately, non-Honduran companies own most of the mines. The people who work in the mines receive low wages and remain poor.

\* Generally, the economy of Central America is based on agriculture. Some people are subsistence farmers. Many however, work on plantations, or commercial farms, for big landowners, growing **cash crops**. The main cash crops grown in Central America are coffee, bananas, sugar, and cotton. Many of the industries in this region make products out of these crops. These crops and other products are sold as **exports**, or products shipped out of the country. The people who own the land and the factories receive most of the money from the sale of the exports.

\* Because Panama has the Panama Canal, it does not depend primarily on agriculture. Shipping companies pay to use the canal to avoid a 12,000 mile trip around South America. Only about 2% of the people of Panama work on the canal. Many of them work in service jobs that have been created by it.

**The Struggle for Land Reform**

\* A few families and companies own most of the land and wealth in Central America. Almost everyone else works for these families and companies for low wages. Such conditions lead to unrest.

\* Landless people in Central America have long called for land reform. However, the big landowners have refused to give up any land. Tension over land reform has led to violence. Some of the worst violence has occurred in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

\* Nicaragua was ruled by one family- a **dictator** named Anastasio Somoza and then his two sons- for almost 45 years. The Somozas mad themselves rich. In 1972, an earthquake hit the capital city of Managua and killed 6,000 people. People from around the world sent money for their victims. The Somoza family ended up with most of the money.

\* This made many people so angry that the united behind a rebel group that overthrew the Sonozas in 1979. They held power for 11 years. They did many good things during their reign.

-They began programs for the poor

\_They built schools and opened health clinics

- They took over many businesses

They almost took too much power because they limited the people of Nicaragua’s freedom.

\* The U.S. helped the landowners. They aligned with the **contras**, and helped the Sandinistas lose the 1990 election.

\* El Salvador seems to be a democracy on the surface. Elections are held, and presidents come and go. However, the army holds the real power- and its closely tied to big landowners.

\* In 1992, the Salvadoran government and the FMLN signed a peace treaty, under **United Nations** supervision. The government is still trying to avoid fulfilling their end of the bargain.

\* The first important export to Guatemala in the 19th century was dye made from insects. Then coffee became the most important export. Guatemalan coffee is still shipped around the world.

**The Arts in Central America**

\* Many people in Central America express artistic feelings through crafts. Crafts are useful but also beautiful. Some of the best hand-woven cloth is made in Guatemala. Designs are often placed in the cloth.

\* Designs are also **embroidered** into fabric. They reflect the ancient Mayan art styles. American Indians women wear a blouse called a huipil, which they sell to tourists. A huipil is made of three flaps of cloth woven or embroidered with designs. It is worn with a skirt of many colors. Mayan women dressed the same way in ancient time. We will now Google sear huipil.