

War & Peace

by Karen Angel | Published [September 2008](#) | [See more Condé Nast Traveler articles](#) ›

Countries and regions recently torn apart by violent conflict are turning to tourism to help them rebuild and restore stability. Karen Angel reports from El Salvador on the power of travel to heal the wounds of war

The photo exhibit at La Caona Bar and hostel in Suchitoto, El Salvador's new tourism boomtown, tells the story of the country's 12-year, U.S.-funded civil war. My guide's wife cries as she looks at the black-and-white photos of the brutal conflict, which claimed some 75,000 lives between 1980 and 1992. His friendly face turning tense, my guide explains that his wife has seen the images before but that they still shake those who lost relatives in the war—including him, her, and many others in this lovely Spanish colonial-style village that was once surrounded by guerrilla strongholds.



Kashmiri school children row to class in a shikara across the world famous Dal Lake in Srinagar, India.

Little by little, however, that pain is being replaced by a new optimism, as foreign money again flows into El Salvador—this time from tourism and from outside investment that is helping to finance a recovery.

"We have everything that Costa Rica has in a smaller territory with very good highway infrastructure," says Rubén Rochi, El Salvador's tourism minister. Small hotels and mountain lodges are sprouting up around the country, including several large resorts financed by foreigners. The U.S.-based development company VisionMaker, for instance, is planning to build two hotels, a marina, and 1,500 condos on 200 acres at Lake Ilopango, a crater lake outside San Salvador, at a cost of \$500 million, and La Casona's co-owner, Rene Luarca Maití, is one of several former guerrillas who are offering tours based on their experiences during the war.

In conversation after conversation, Salvadoran locals tell me how tourism has improved their lives. At the gracious restaurant La Posada de Suchitlan, in Suchitoto, waiter Marvin Escobar says that his job is paying for medical school. Juan Antonio Flamenco, a La Casona bartender who is the first person in his family to go to college, is studying to be a teacher. At the night market in Nahuizalco, a town on Ruta de las Flores, the western tourist roadway, Norma

Elizabeth Salguero and her husband, Miguel, have a café where they say tourism has doubled their business on weekends, enabling them to pay off the mortgage on their house and buy a car.

Like El Salvador, a growing number of formerly war-torn countries and territories are turning to tourism to help maintain stability and stimulate their economy. Among the success stories, Northern Ireland now draws almost two million visitors a year, Bosnia and Herzegovina about 500,000. In Southeast Asia, Vietnam serves as a model, with tourism now making up about 40 percent of its gross domestic product. Cambodia and Laos are also seeing the benefits of becoming popular destinations.

"Tourism can fuel economies in post-conflict countries," says Edward Bergman, executive director of the Africa Travel Association, an industry trade group that promotes the continent as a destination. "It's the only industry in the world that, when planned and managed properly, takes nothing from a country, leaves behind hard currency, fosters education and job creation, and promotes peace and stability."

After its 1994 genocide, Rwanda is enjoying something of a tourist boom these days: The country welcomed 39,000 visitors in 2007, up from fewer than 2,000 seven years ago. I visited Rwanda in June 2007 and saw firsthand how tourism dollars are trickling down to the locals, boosting the standard of living and helping to alleviate poverty. My Rwandan guide, Fred Budaramani, told me that business has been so good that he was able to save enough money to leave the big safari company he had been working for, buy a jeep, and start his own operation (gorillaselect.com)—which should allow him to earn about 60 percent more a year. Josh Ruxin, a Columbia University assistant professor of public health who runs health-care and economic-stimulus programs in Rwanda, says that the benefits of tourism extend even to those who are not directly involved. "Where there are tourists, governments are more careful and responsive on many fronts, from maintenance of security, both for tourists and for citizens, to improved infrastructure, including roads, electricity, and water supply," Ruxin says. Of the \$42.3 million spent by tourists in Rwanda last year, five percent is earmarked for local communities to fund primary schools, hospitals, and water tanks, as well as income-generating programs such as mushroom farms and souvenir shops.

Meanwhile, foreign investment in tourism is rising, bringing in almost half of the \$496 million recorded by the Rwanda Investment and Export Promotion Agency in 2007, and more than 252,000 Rwandans are directly employed in tourism as park rangers, guides, waiters, and hotel employees, while countless others benefit indirectly.

In El Salvador, the number of annual visitors has tripled to nearly 1.6 million over the past ten years. But critics say that the country is too focused on attracting business travelers and developing big projects—including the 552-room Pacific Coast hotel, opened by the Colombian company Decameron in 2006—and not focused enough on bringing in leisure travelers and promoting regions and towns. Even so, Decameron has created 700 jobs directly and 1,200 indirectly, according to the tourism ministry, and tourism countrywide is sparking a new breed of entrepreneur.

On a mule-back tour of the Guazapa volcano, led by two personable ex-guerrillas—the gentle Orlando Barrera and La Casona's gnomelike Maiti—I see foxholes, trenches, bomb craters, bullet-scarred trees, and graves marked with crosses. My guides show me large pits where government soldiers, trained and equipped by the United States, ordered civilians to line up so that their bodies would fall neatly when they were executed. Barrera tells me that the money from their fledgling tour business—\$15 per person for the mule rides, for example—is shared by about 350 nearby residents who received the land through the 1992 peace treaty.

In the village of El Mozote, in the mountainous northeast Morazán region, ex-guerrilla Benito Chicas and his ten-year-old daughter, Karina, lead me through moving memorials to the 1,000-odd men, women, and children exterminated in a 1981 massacre here. One of the testimonials is a wall bearing the names of the 146 children murdered at a local church. Myron Fehr, a traveler from Portland, Oregon, who is staying at the Perkin Lenca Mountain Hotel in Morazán, tells me that the U.S. government's role in funding the civil war here makes him "very angry." But in three trips to El Salvador over two years, he has never encountered anti-American sentiment—and he has seen many improvements.

"I've rented a car and traveled all over the country," says Fehr. "There are far fewer armed guards now, and I'm seeing a lot of development on the Ruta de las Flores, but it's being done at a higher standard."

Julio Vega, a Salvadoran, is one of those putting his mark on the Ruta de las Flores, which winds through charming towns in the mountainous coffee country in the west. Four years ago, Vega built the colorful, folk-artsy El Portezuelo ecolodge, which offers what he calls "extreme nature": horseback riding, hiking, bird-watching, mountain biking, and paragliding.

Vega was in business school in Baltimore when he and his wife decided to take their savings, return to El Salvador, and open Portezuelo. An avid surfer, he opened Las Olas Beach House two years later in the surfing mecca of La Libertad. "I started traveling, and I realized that El Salvador could compete internationally," Vega says. "We have great natural resources, a great culture, great traditions. When I left the States, people thought I was crazy, but I love my country. I want to live here and die here."

On the Ground: The best way to see El Salvador is with a knowledgeable guide such as Rene Barbón of **Vista Conga Tours**, in Suchitoto, who offers, among other activities, waterfall jumping, nature photography, and mango-forest camping (503-7118-1999; vistacongasuchi@yahoo.com). For surfing, mountain sports, and donkey rides, go with Julio Vega, who owns **Akwaterra** as well as two small resorts: **El Portezuelo Park**, near Juayua, and the laid-back **Las Olas Beach House**, in La Libertad. He can hook you up with El Salvador's No. 1 surfer for \$15-an-hour lessons (503-7888-4552; akwaterra.com; doubles, \$60–\$70). In Suchitoto, stay at the gorgeous **Los Almendros de San Lorenzo**, a former sugar-cane hacienda (503-2335-1200; hotelsalvador.com; doubles, \$85–\$110). For dinner, **La Posada de Suchitlan** serves the national specialty—rooster soaked in fermented corn sauce (503-2335-1064; entrées, \$9–\$15). In lovely Morazán, the comfortably rustic Perkin Lenca Mountain Hotel supports a local school (503-2680-4046; perkinlenca.com; cabins, \$50).