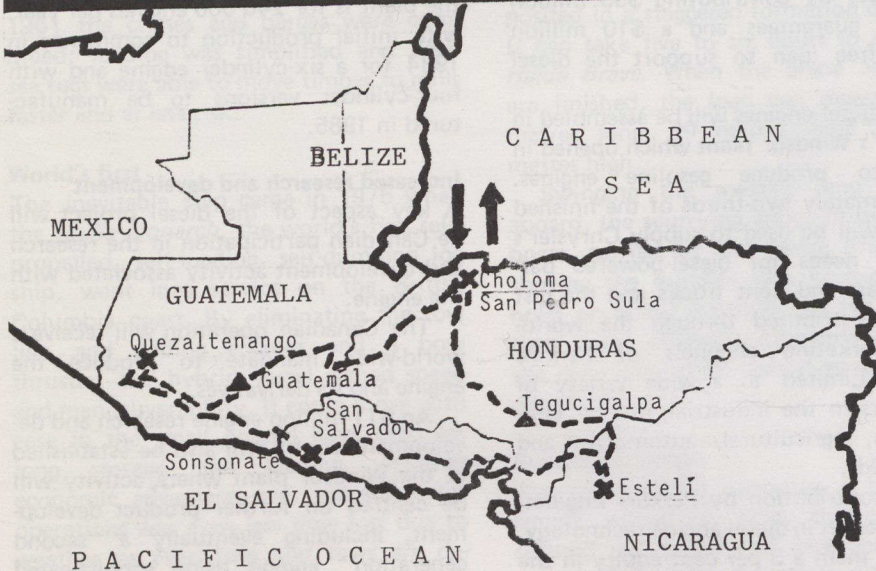


Canadian tours Central America by bicycle

**CENTRAL AMERICA** 200 mi



Map shows Paul Loofs' route of his cycle tour of Central America.

Greater Canadian interest in Latin America is evidenced not only by government activity, but also on a personal level, for instance by the rising number of Canadian foster parents for needy youngsters in that region. One such parent — Paul Loofs, 53, a civil servant in Ottawa — recently visited his foster children in Central America by bicycle, by all accounts the first time that has been done.

Paul, who has three solo round-the-world journeys by VW Beetle to his credit, had also travelled the length of South America some years ago and visited his first foster child in Nicaragua as a Year-of-the-Child project. Meanwhile he had acquired two more children, in Guatemala and El Salvador, but gave up his car. Thus came the idea of a combined plane and bicycle trip to visit all three children and to see some projects along the way not easily accessible otherwise.

Timing his trip for after the elections there and before the rainy season, he used his holidays this year to fly to San Pedro Sula in Northern Honduras, taking his three-speed touring bike with him, equipped with saddlebags, a bedroll and two water bottles. His mission involved SOS Children's Villages (supported by Horizons of Cobourg, Ontario) in Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, including visits to offices of Horizons of Friendship (formerly the Help Honduras Foundation), which had been arranged by letter beforehand. He

had to cover 2 400 kilometres overland in these four Central American countries in 22 days to catch his return flight — a demanding itinerary in a mountainous and tropical region beset by troubles.

He was almost defeated more than once by heat (up to 40 degrees Celsius) and steep grades, forcing him to walk his bike a total of some 150 kilometres. But thanks to some lifts he was able to recoup the lost time and make it back to San Pedro on schedule — sunburnt, weary, 10



The Canadian flag, almost faded by the sun, is still visible. Paul takes a breather in the hot, parched remote border region between Guatemala and Honduras. He used a self-timer for this photo.

per cent lighter, but happy with "mission accomplished".

Paul, no stranger to tropical hazards and Third World poverty, is anxious to express his admiration for the people in Central America who, despite chronic hardships and natural disasters, manage to carry on and even make progress, while retaining their dignity and hospitality. He says that, while guerrilla wars and political strife dominate the (sometimes exaggerated) news, the fact that life goes on and people cope, goes unreported, as do the efforts of local governments: illiteracy is reduced, construction goes on and necessities of life are available. He camped out most nights and lived on local produce, meeting a number of small farmers and shopkeepers — and dozens of children. Wherever he went people were impressed, particularly at the borders and checkpoints, not to mention in the Children's Villages, including his foster children: Marisol, 10; Silvia, 14; and Verónica, 15. So were his own daughters — Karen, 19 and Brigit, 21 — when they met their dad back in Ottawa.

In Paul's own words: "With the help of the Lord above and some good people on earth, my mission was accomplished: I had covered some 2 400 kilometres in Central America overland, visited eight SOS Villages and projects in four countries on my bicycle, and all on next to nothing camping outside and living on local produce. But the important point was that I did meet my foster children and spent some time with them, seeing