

# Venezuela

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Mérida** – choose from paragliding, canyoning, rafting, hiking and more in the country's adventure-sports capital (p1011)
- **Salto Ángel (Angel Falls)** – marvel at the world's highest waterfall as it drops over 300 stories in Canaima National Park (p1040)
- **Los Roques** – snorkel, scuba dive or just soak up the sun in these picture-perfect Caribbean islands (p999)
- **Los Llanos** – view anacondas, caimans, capybaras and other Venezuelan wildlife in these grassy flatlands (p1016)
- **Off the beaten track** – explore remote waterfalls, sandy beaches and lush rainforests along the winding Río Caura (p1034)
- **Best journeys** – hike to the lost world on the flat top of Roraima mountain with moonscape scenery and unique plant life (p1042)

## FAST FACTS

- **Area:** 916,445 sq km
- **Best bargain:** a red T-shirt with the face of Chávez and the title '*Patria o Muerte*' (Country or Death) for US\$10
- **Best street snack:** *arepas* (corn dough fried and stuffed with anything you can imagine, US50¢-\$3)
- **Budget:** US\$20-50 a day
- **Capital:** Caracas
- **Costs:** double room in a budget hotel US\$7-15, set meal in a budget restaurant US\$2-4, 100km intercity bus fare US\$2
- **Country code:** ☎ 58
- **Famous for:** oil, *tepuis*, beauty queens and Simón Bolívar
- **Language:** Spanish
- **Money:** US\$1 = 2145 bolivars
- **Phrases:** *chévere* (cool), *rumba* (party), *vaina* (thing)
- **Population:** 25.7 million (2006 estimate)
- **Time:** GMT minus 4hr
- **Tipping:** voluntary tips up to 10% in upmarket restaurants
- **Visas:** not required from nationals of major Western countries



## TRAVEL HINTS

Bring warm clothes for bus travel as they use powerful air conditioning. Keep your passport handy as there are military checkpoints along the highways.

## OVERLAND ROUTES

There are nine border crossings to Colombia, one to Brazil and a boat crossing to Trinidad. There are no land routes to Guyana.

Venezuela receives considerably fewer visitors than other major South American countries. This is not the result of a lack of attractions. In fact, Venezuela is a land of stunning variety. The country has Andean peaks, endless Caribbean coastline, idyllic offshore islands, grasslands teeming with wildlife, the steamy Amazon and rolling savanna punctuated by flat-topped mountains called *tepui*. The world's highest waterfall, Salto Ángel (Angel Falls), plummets 979m from the top of a *tepui* in Canaima National Park. Those seeking adventure will find hiking, snorkeling, scuba diving, kite-surfing, windsurfing, paragliding and more. Even better, most of these attractions lie within a one-day bus trip of each other.

Those interested in culture can revel in the pulsating salsa clubs of Caracas, explore various regional festivals, look for arts and crafts in the bucolic towns of the interior or even catch a world-famous Venezuelan beauty pageant. President Hugo Chávez and his socialist 'Bolivarian Revolution' have also started to draw spectators, aspiring documentarians and volunteers to the country.

There are various hypotheses for the relatively low number of visitors, though the most common is that a petrol state of Venezuela's magnitude has never really bothered to promote its tourism industry. Times are changing, so now is the time to go.

## CURRENT EVENTS

President Hugo Chávez always manages to keep himself in the news and people's love or hate for the president is also a frequent topic of conversation. Major issues of interest include the collapse of the bridge between the airport at Maquetía and Caracas, aid for leftist candidates and regimes in other countries (while poverty and crime worsen at home), the national crime and corruption rates and the acrid relationship with the United States. Less controversial but popular issues include the international success of Venezuelan baseball stars (local hero Ozzie Guillen is the manager of the 2005 World Series Champion Chicago White Sox) and Venezuelan beauty queens (the country has more Miss Universes than any other).

## HISTORY

### Pre-Columbian Times

There is evidence of human habitation in northwest Venezuela going back more than 10,000 years. Steady agriculture was established around the first millennium, leading to the first year-round settlements. Formerly nomadic groups began to develop into larger cultures belonging to three main linguistic families: Carib, Arawak and Chibcha. By the time of the Spanish conquest at the end of the 15th century, some 300,000 to 400,000 indigenous people inhabited the region that is now Venezuela.

The Timote-Cuica tribes, of the Chibcha linguistic family, were the most technologically developed of Venezuela's pre-Hispanic societies. They lived in the Andes and devel-

oped complex agricultural techniques including irrigation and terracing. They were also skilled craftspeople, as we can judge by the artifacts they left behind – examples of their fine pottery are shown in museums across the country. Though almost no architectural works have survived, some smaller sites in the Andean region have recently been unearthed and may be opening for tourism in the next few years.

### Spanish Conquest

Christopher Columbus was the first European to set foot on Venezuelan soil. As a matter of fact Venezuela was the only place that he landed on the South American mainland. On his third trip to the New World in 1498, he anchored at the eastern tip of the Península de Paria, just opposite Trinidad. He originally believed that he was on another island, but the voluminous mouth of the Río Orinoco hinted that he had stumbled into something slightly larger.

A year later Alonso de Ojeda, accompanied by the Italian Amerigo Vespucci, sailed up to the Península de la Guajira, on the western end of present-day Venezuela. On entering Lago de Maracaibo, the Spaniards saw indigenous people living in *palafitos* (thatched homes on stilts above the water). Perhaps as a bit of sarcasm, they called the waterside community 'Venezuela,' meaning 'Little Venice.' The first Spanish settlement on Venezuelan soil, Nueva Cádiz, was established around 1500 on the small island of Cubagua, just south of Isla de Margarita. The earliest Venezuelan town still in existence, Cumaná (on

the mainland directly south of Isla Cubagua) dates from 1521.

### Independence Wars

With few exploited gold mines, Venezuela lurked in the shadows of the Spanish empire through most of the colonial period. The country took a more primary role at the beginning of the 19th century, when Venezuela gave Latin America one of its greatest heroes, Simón Bolívar. A native of Caracas, Bolívar led the forces that put the nail in the coffin of Spanish rule over South America. He is viewed as being largely responsible for ending colonial rule all the way to the borders of Argentina.

Bolívar assumed leadership of the revolution, which had been kicked off in 1806. After unsuccessful initial attempts to defeat the Spaniards at home, he withdrew to Colombia and then to Jamaica to plot his final campaign. In 1817 Bolívar marched over the Andes with 5000 British mercenaries and an army of horsemen from Los Llanos and defeated the Spanish at the Battle of Boyacá. This brought independence to Colombia. Four months later in Angostura (present-day Ciudad Bolívar), the Angostura Congress proclaimed Gran Colombia a new state, unifying Colombia (which included present-day Panamá), Venezuela and Ecuador – though the last two were still under Spanish rule.

The liberation of Venezuela was completed with Bolívar's victory over Spanish forces at Carabobo in June 1821, though the royalists put up a rather pointless fight from Puerto Cabello for another two years. Gran Colombia existed for only a decade before splitting into three separate countries. Bolívar's dream of a unified republic fell apart before he died in 1830.

### Growing Pains

On his deathbed, Bolívar proclaimed 'America is ungovernable. The man who serves a revolution plows the sea. This nation will fall inevitably into the hands of the unruly mob and then will pass into the hands of almost indistinguishable petty tyrants.' Unfortunately, he was not too far off the mark. Venezuela followed independence with nearly a century of rule by a series of strongmen known as *caudillos*. It wasn't until 1947 that the first democratic government was elected.

The first of the *caudillos*, General José Antonio Páez, controlled the country for 18

years (1830–48). Despite his tough rule, he established a certain political stability and put the weak economy on its feet. The period that followed was an almost uninterrupted chain of civil wars that was only stopped by another long-lived dictator General Antonio Guzmán Blanco (1870–88). He launched a broad program of reform including a new constitution and assured some temporary stability, yet his despotic rule triggered popular opposition and when he stepped down the country fell back into civil war.

### Ruling with an Iron Fist

The first half of the 20th century was dominated by five successive military rulers from the Andean state of Táchira. The longest-lasting and most ruthless was General Juan Vicente Gómez, who seized power in 1908 and didn't relinquish it until his death in 1935. Gómez phased out the parliament and crushed the opposition on his path to monopolization of power.

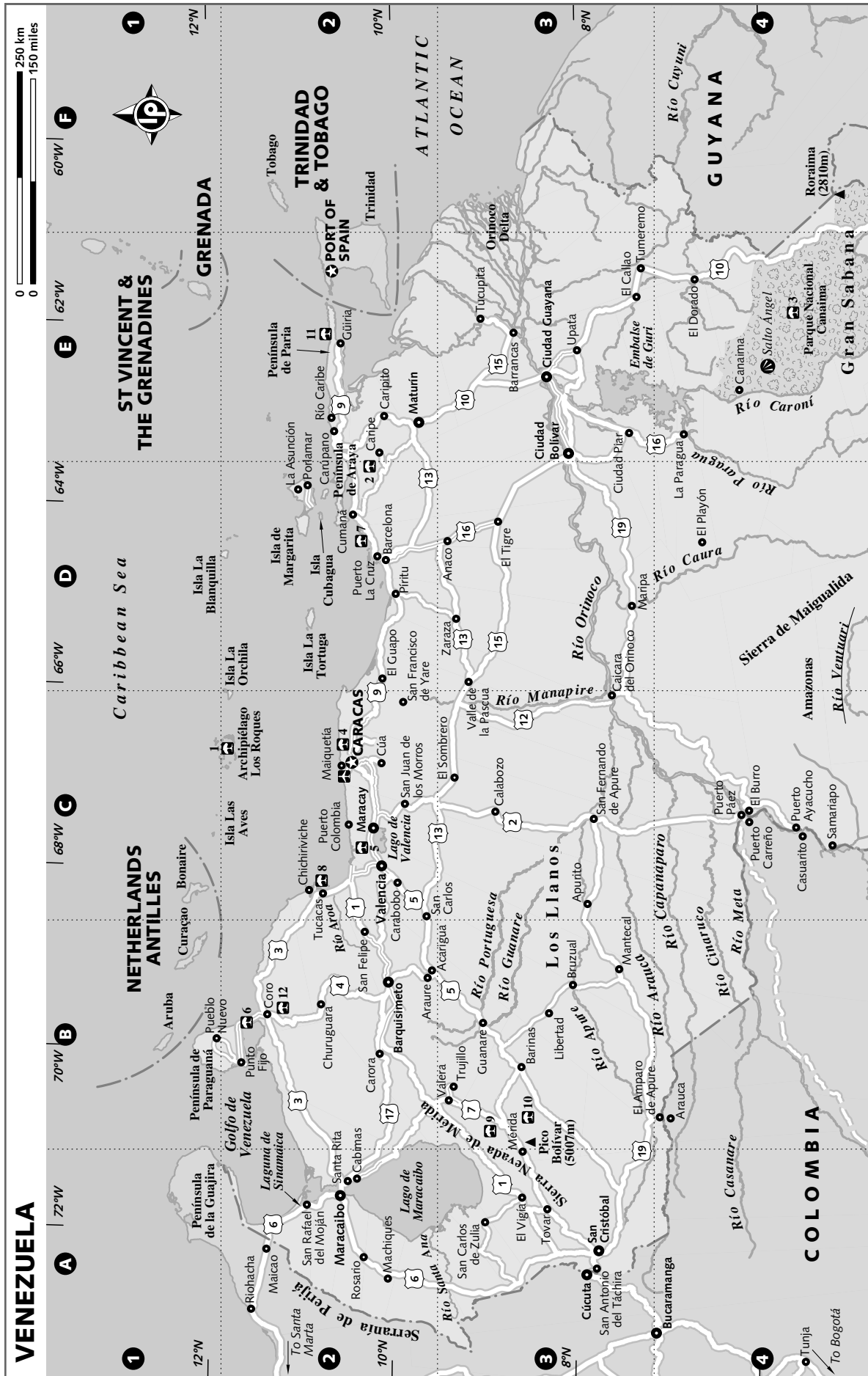
The discovery of oil in the 1910s helped the Gómez regime to put the national economy on its feet. By the late 1920s, Venezuela was the world's largest exporter of oil, which not only contributed to economic recovery but also enabled the government to pay off the country's entire foreign debt.

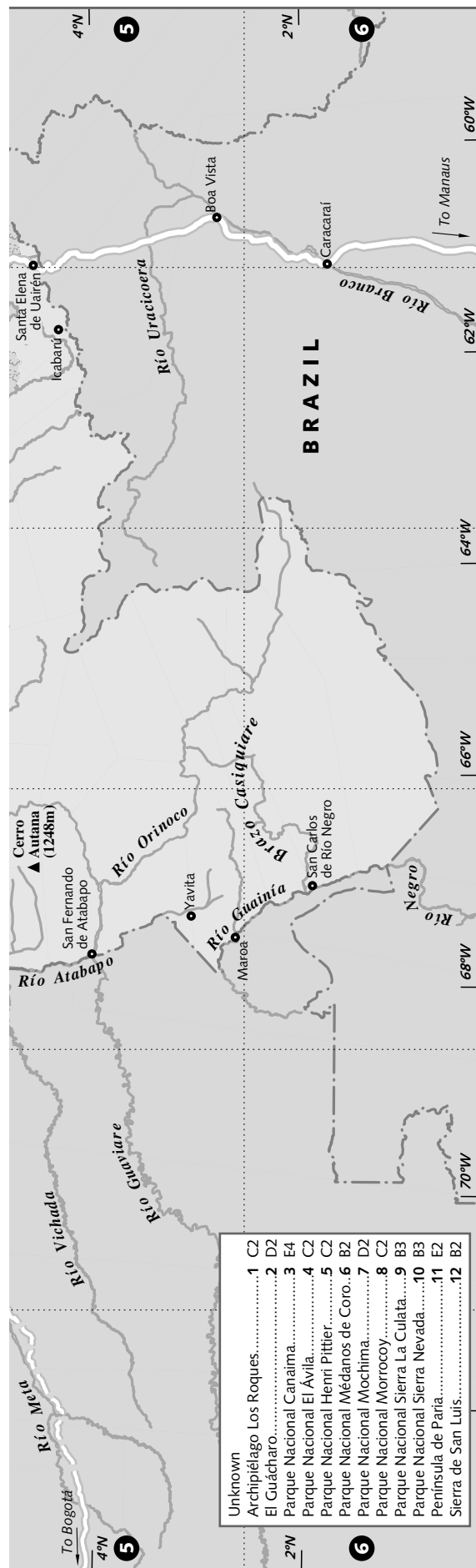
As in most petrol states, almost none of the oil wealth made its way to the common citizen. The vast majority continued to live in poverty with little or no educational or health facilities, let alone reasonable housing. Fast oil money also led to the neglect of agriculture and development of other types of production. It was easier to just import everything from abroad, which worked for a while but proved unsustainable.

After a short flirtation with democracy and a new constitution in 1947, the inevitable coup took place and ushered in the era of Colonel Marcos Pérez Jiménez. Once in control, he smashed the opposition and plowed oil money into public works and modernizing Caracas – not making many friends in the process.

### A Political Soap Opera

Pérez Jiménez was overthrown in 1958 by a coalition of civilians and military officers. The country returned to democratic rule, and Rómulo Betancourt was elected president. He enjoyed popular support and was the first





democratically elected president to complete his five-year term in office. There was a democratic transition of power though the country drifted to the right.

Oil money buoyed the following governments well into the 1970s. Not only did production of oil rise but, more importantly, the price quadrupled following the Arab-Israeli war in 1973. The nation went on a spending spree, building modern skyscrapers in Caracas and Maracaibo and importing all sorts of luxury goods. But what goes up must come down and by the late 1970s the bust cycle was already in full swing. And it continued to fall apart through the 1980s.

1992 started off the next decade with two attempted coups d'état. The first, in February, was led by a little-known paratrooper named Colonel Hugo Chávez Rivas. The second attempt, in November, was led by junior air-force officers. The air battle over Caracas, with warplanes flying between skyscrapers, gave the coup a cinematic dimension. Many died in both attempts.

Corruption, bank failures and loan defaults plagued the government through the mid-1990s. In 1995, Venezuela was forced to devalue the currency by more than 70%. By the end of 1998, two-thirds of Venezuela's 23 million inhabitants were living below the poverty line.

### A Left Turn

There is nothing better in political theater than a dramatic comeback. The 1998 election put Hugo Chávez, the leader of the 1992 failed coup, into the presidency. After being pardoned in 1994, Chávez embarked on an aggressive populist campaign: comparing himself to Bolívar, promising help (and handouts) to the poorest masses and positioning himself in opposition to the United States-influenced free-market economy. He vowed to produce a great, if vague, 'peaceful and democratic social revolution.'

Since then, however, Chávez's 'social revolution' has been anything but peaceful. Shortly after taking office, Chávez set about rewriting the constitution. The new document was approved in a referendum in December 1999, granting him new and sweeping powers. The introduction of a package of new decree laws in 2001 was met with angry protests, and was followed by a massive, and violent, strike in April 2002. It culminated in a coup d'état run

by military leaders sponsored by a business lobby, in which Chávez was forced to resign. He regained power two days later, but this only intensified the conflict.

While the popular tensions rose, in December 2002 the opposition called a general strike in an attempt to oust the president. The nationwide strike paralyzed the country, including its vital oil industry and a good part of the private sector. After 63 days, the opposition finally called off the strike, which had cost the country 7.6% of its GDP and further devastated the oil-based economy. Chávez again survived and claimed victory. No one really won.

### The Chávez Era – Venezuela & Beyond

National politics continued to be shaky until Chávez won a 2004 referendum and consolidated his power, eventually positioning himself to stay in the presidency through, perhaps, 2020.

Chávez's popularity rating is the issue of some debate, but the opposition remains divided and feckless. Chávez, with his pockets swollen by high oil prices, has expanded his influence beyond the borders of Venezuela and reached out to other leftist leaders in Bolivia, Argentina, Cuba, Uruguay, Chile and Brazil. He has openly allied himself with Cuba's Fidel Castro, and supported the leftist candidacy of Bolivia's Evo Morales and Peru's Ollanta Humala. Not afraid to make his opinion heard, Chávez also called Mexican President and free-trade supporter Vicente Fox a 'puppy dog of the (US) Empire.'

Chávez hopes to establish a Latin American political bloc to offer an alternative to US hegemony in the region. He made an international reputation for himself with his outspoken opposition to US President Bush and the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) at the 2005 Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata, Argentina. Caracas also hosted the 6th World Social Forum in January 2006.

While Chávez talks a good game, rising crime and poverty in the country – plus the collapse of the bridge between the airport and Caracas – have given question to the depth of his rhetoric and have left the president with a political black eye. Chávez remains South America's most controversial political figure both inside and outside of Venezuela.

## THE CULTURE

### The National Psyche

Venezuela is proud of its national history. The War of Independence and Simón Bolívar are championed throughout the country. However, unlike some neighboring South American nations there are few obvious defining factors of contemporary Venezuelan culture. Many attribute this to the fact that as a petrol state, Venezuela has spent much of its existence consuming from abroad (food, music, clothes, movies, furniture, cars, you name it) and not needing or bothering to produce much at home.

But just like the oil pumped out of the country, Venezuela does produce raw materials and raw talent. Two things that are produced in Venezuela, and produced quite well, are beauty queens and baseball players. Venezuelan women have won more international beauty competitions than any other country, including five Miss Worlds, four Miss Universes and countless other titles. Venezuelans have made their mark on baseball too. The North American major leagues have their fair share of Venezuelan athletes.

Baseball is played throughout the country too, and it is common to see pick-up games in construction sites or along the side of highways. The national sport goes hand-in-hand with the national drinks of rum and ice-cold beer. Men in Caracas tend to opt for Scotch instead, as they like to show their big-city sophistication.

Even in the face of deep-seated national ills and social tensions, Venezuelans are full of life and humor. They are open, willing to talk and not shy about striking up conversations with strangers. Wherever you are, you're unlikely to be alone or feel isolated, especially if you can speak a little Spanish. There's always a *rumba* brewing somewhere. So forget your schedules and organized plans and warm up to the Venezuelan lifestyle.

### Population

Venezuela's population density is a low 26 people per square kilometer. However, the population is unevenly distributed; 75% of Venezuelans live in towns and cities. Over one-fifth of the country's population lives in Caracas alone, while Los Llanos and Guayana are relatively empty.

About 70% of the population is a blend of European, indigenous and African ancestry,

or any two of the three. The rest are full European (about 20%), African (8%) or indigenous (2%). Of that 2%, there are about 24 highly diverse indigenous groups comprising some 600,000 people, scattered throughout the country.

## SPORT

Soccer? What soccer? In Venezuela, *béisbol* (baseball) rules supreme. The professional baseball league is composed of eight teams: Caracas, La Guaira, Maracaibo, Valencia, Barquisimeto, Maracay, Puerto La Cruz and Cabimas. Many Venezuelans have gone on to fame and fortune in US major-league baseball. In 2005, Ozzie Guillen (a native of Ocumare del Tuy in Miranda state) managed the Chicago White Sox to their first World Series championship in 88 years. The biggest rivalry in the Venezuelan league is between the two top teams: Leones del Caracas and Navegantes del Magallanes (Valencia).

The next most popular sports are *básquetbol* (basketball, also known as *básquet* or *baloncesto*), followed by *fútbol* (soccer), which has a professional league that plays from August till May. Soccer is the sport of choice among the country's indigenous population.

## RELIGION

Some 95% of Venezuelans are at least nominally Roman Catholic. Chávez has had words with the church in recent years and is no big proponent of the Vatican's influence in his one-man show. Many indigenous groups adopted Catholicism and only a few isolated tribes still practice their traditional beliefs. Evangelicals compete with Catholics for converts and are gaining ground across the country. There are small populations of Jews and Muslims, particularly in Caracas.

## ARTS

### Architecture

There are small, and impressive, pockets of colonial architecture in Venezuela – most notably in Coro (p1006) – but overall the country never reached the grandeur of other parts of the Spanish empire. Churches were mostly small and houses were usually undecorated one-story constructions. Only in the last half-century of the colonial era did a wealthier merchant class emerge that built grand residences that reflected their stature.

President Guzmán Blanco launched a dramatic overhaul of Caracas in the 1870s. He commissioned many monumental public buildings in a hodgepodge of styles, largely depending on the whim of the architect in charge. A forced march toward modernity came with oil money and culminated in the 1970s. This period was characterized by indiscriminate demolition of historic buildings and their replacement with utilitarian architecture. Just the same, Venezuela does have some truly remarkable modern architecture. Carlos Raúl Villanueva, who began work in the 1930s, is considered the most outstanding Venezuelan architect. The campus of Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas is regarded as one of his best and most coherent designs and has been included on Unesco's Cultural Heritage list.

## Cinema & Television

### CINEMA

Venezuela's film industry is small, but has started to gain momentum in recent years. The great majority of the films are either contemporary social critiques or historical dramatizations.

The biggest smash in new Venezuelan cinema was 2005's *Secuestro Express* (Express Kidnapping) by Jonathan Jakubowicz. The film, which was criticized by the government for its harsh portrayal of the city, takes a cold look at crime, poverty, violence, drugs and class relations in the capital. It broke all box-office records for a national production and was the first Venezuelan film to be distributed by a major Hollywood studio.

Those interested in learning more about Venezuelan film should track down: *Huelepega* (Glue Sniffer; Elia Schneider, 1999), a portrayal of Caracas street children using real street youth, not actors, in the film; *Amaneció de Golpe* (A Coup at Daybreak; Carlos Azpúrua, 1999), the story of how Chávez burst onto the political scene and *Manuela Saenz* (Manuela Saenz; Diego Rísquez, 2000), the War of Independence through the eyes of Bolívar's mistress.

Also worth seeing is *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, a documentary shot by Irish filmmakers who were inside the presidential palace during the coup d'état of 2002. It contains firsthand footage of the events and provides a deeply compelling – though unabashedly pro-Chávez – portrait of the man himself.

## TELEVISION

Venezuelan TV ranges from soap-opera fluff to equally kitsch government propaganda, with a few slapstick comedy shows and some baseball commentary in between. The Venezuela-based, pan-Latin American TV station TelSur was launched in 2005. Chavez has hoped it will balance out the influence of massively popular North American cable TV programs across the continent. The president's personal TV show *Aló Presidente* is a cross between a State of the Union address and the Oprah Winfrey show. Chávez prattles on about national progress while taking calls and addressing the questions of supporters.

Equally as engaging are the *telenovelas* (soap operas). It is said that the export market for Venezuelan *telenovelas* is more than the national export of automobiles, textiles or paper products. Some of the classics have been *Cristal* and *Kassandra*, which dominated TV screens from Spain to Indonesia.

## Literature

The classic work in Latin American colonial literature of the treatment of the indigenous populations by the Spanish – which happens to also document the early years of Venezuela – is *Brevísima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias Occidentales* (A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies), written by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas in 1542.

As for contemporary literature, a groundbreaking experimental novel from the middle of the century is *El Falso Cuaderno de Narciso Espejo* by Guillermo Meneses (1911–78). Another seminal work was Adriano González León's (1931–) powerful magical-realism novel *Pais Portatíl* (Portable Country), which contrasts rural Venezuela with the urban juggernaut of Caracas.

Ednodio Quintero is another contemporary writer to look for. His work *La Danza del Jaguar* (The Dance of the Jaguar; 1991) is one of several translated into other languages. Other contemporary writers worth tracking down include Carlos Noguera, Luis Brito García, Eduardo Liendo and Orlando Chirinos.

## Music

Music is omnipresent in Venezuela, though the country doesn't produce a lot of music of its own (and produces even less music for export). The most common types of popular

music are salsa, merengue and *reggaetón* from the Caribbean and *vallenato* from Colombia. The king of Venezuelan salsa is Oscar D'León (1943–). He has recorded a staggering 60 albums.

North American and European pop – everything from rock to hip-hop to house – is influential among urban youth (who account for the majority of the population). Chávez has tried to curb that influence, mandating that 50% of all radio airplay must be Venezuelan music and, of that music, 50% must be 'traditional.'

The country's most popular folk rhythm is the *zoropo*, also called *música llanera*, which developed in Los Llanos (see p1016). The *zoropo* is usually sung and accompanied by the harp, *cuatro* (a small, four-stringed guitar) and maracas.

Caracas is an exciting center of Latin pop and the *rock en español* movement, which harnesses the rhythm and energy of Latin beats and combines them with international rock and alternative-rock trends. The most famous product of this scene is the Grammy-winning Los Amigos Invisibles, who now reside in North America.

## Visual Arts

Venezuela has a strong contemporary art movement. The streets and public buildings of Caracas are filled with modern art and the city houses some truly remarkable galleries.

Large-scale public art developed with the internal investment of the Guzmán Blanco regime in the late 19th century. The standout painter of that period – and one of the best in all of Venezuelan history – was Martín Tovar y Tovar (1827–1902). Some of his greatest works depicting historical events can be seen in Caracas' Capitolio Nacional (p989).

There is a rich visual arts scene among the current generation. Keep an eye out for works of Carlos Zepa (painting), the quirky ideas of José Antonio Hernández Díez (photo, video, installations) and the emblematic paintings, collages and sculptures of Miguel von Dangel. And you'll see plenty more in the contemporary art museum of Caracas (see p991).

Jesús Soto (1923–2005) was Venezuela's number one internationally renowned contemporary artist. He was a leading representative of kinetic art (art, particularly sculpture, that contains moving parts). His large distinctive works adorn numerous public build-



ings and plazas in Venezuela and beyond (including Paris, Toronto and New York). The largest collection of his work is in the museum dedicated to him in Ciudad Bolívar (see p1034).

## ENVIRONMENT

### The Land

At about twice the size of California, Venezuela claims a multiplicity of landscapes. The traveler can encounter all four primary South American landscapes – the Amazon, the Andes, savannas and beaches – all in a single country.

The country has two mountain ranges: the Cordillera de la Costa, which separates the valley of Caracas from the Caribbean, and the northern extreme of the Andes range, with its highest peaks near Mérida.

The 2150km Río Orinoco is Venezuela's main river, its entire course lying within national boundaries. The land south of the Orinoco, known as Guayana, includes the Río Caura watershed, the largely impenetrable Amazon rainforest, vast areas of sun-baked savanna and hundreds of *tepuis*.

Last but not least, there is a 2813km-long stretch of Caribbean coast, featuring a 900,000 sq km Caribbean marine zone with numerous islands and cays. The largest and most popular of these is Isla de Margarita, followed by the less developed Archipiélago Los Roques.

### Wildlife

Along with the variety of Venezuelan landscape, you will encounter an amazing diversity of wildlife. Visitors often seek out anacondas, capybara, caimans and birds. There are 341 species of reptiles, 284 species of amphibians, 1791 species of fishes, 351 species of mammals and many butterflies and other invertebrates. More than 1360 species of birds – approximately 20% of the world's known species – reside in the country, and 46 of these species are endemic. The country's geographical setting on a main migratory route makes it a bird-watcher's heaven.

### National Parks

Venezuela's national parks offer a diverse landscape of evergreen mountains, beaches, tropical islands, coral reefs, high plateaus and rainforests. The national parks are the number-one destination for tourism within the country. Canaima, Los Roques, Mochima,

Henri Pittier, El Ávila and Morrocoy are the most popular parks. Some parks, especially those in coastal and marine zones, are easily accessible and tend to be overcrowded by locals during holiday periods and weekends; others remain unvisited. A few of the parks offer tourism facilities, but these generally are not very extensive.

### Environmental Issues

Far and away the most obvious environmental problem in Venezuela is waste management (or lack thereof). There is no recycling policy and dumping of garbage in cities, along roads and natural areas is common practice. Untreated sewage is sometimes dumped in the sea and other water bodies. There continues to be a general lack of clear environmental policy and little to no culture of environmental stewardship outside of the park areas. Much of the waste and pollution issues are a direct result of overpopulation in urban areas and a lack of civil planning and funds to cope with the rampant development.

Another major environmental issue is the hunting and illegal trade of fauna and flora that takes place in many parts of the country, including protected areas. Pet tropical birds, for example, fetch a handsome price in the US, Asia and Europe. A final major ecological concern is the inevitable pollution from oil refineries and drilling: Lago de Maracaibo, for example, has witnessed many oil spills, and much of the petroleum infrastructure is old and in need of repair.

## TRANSPORTATION

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

#### Air

Set at the northern edge of South America, Venezuela has the cheapest air links with both Europe and North America and is therefore the most convenient northern gateway to the continent. As of 2006, there were air-traffic disputes with the United States and the government had trimmed the number of outgoing flights as reciprocity for a similar move by the United States. The lack of flights raised transportation costs to and from North America.

Flying between Brazil and Venezuela is expensive. The flight from São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro to Caracas will cost around US\$615

**DEPARTURE TAX**

The airport tax is US\$35 or higher depending on the length of your stay. An additional *impuesto de salida* (departure tax) of US\$15 must be paid by all visitors. The taxes are payable in either US dollars or *bolivars*, but not by credit card. There are ATMs in the airport.

round trip. There are no direct flights between Manaus and Caracas, nor between Boa Vista and Santa Elena de Uairén.

Avianca and Aeropostal fly between Bogotá, Colombia and Caracas (US\$220 one way, US\$260 round trip).

There are no direct flights between Venezuela and Guyana. You need to fly via Port of Spain (Trinidad) with BWIA (US\$260 one way, US\$360 round trip).

Aeropostal and BWIA fly daily between Port of Spain and Caracas (US\$150 one way, US\$205 for a 21-day round trip). Aeropostal and Rutaca fly between Porlamar and Port of Spain (US\$110 one way, US\$155 for a 21-day round trip).

**Boat**

Weekly passenger boats operate between Venezuela and Trinidad, but there are no longer ferries between Venezuela and the Netherland Antilles. For more information, see the Güiria section (p1028).

**Bus**

Only one road connects Brazil and Venezuela; it leads from Manaus through Boa Vista to Santa Elena de Uairén and continues to Ciudad Guayana. For details see Santa Elena de Uairén (p1045).

You can enter Venezuela from Colombia at four border crossings. The two most common (and safest) are: the coastal route between Maicao and Maracaibo (p1011) and from Cúcuta and San Antonio del Táchira (see p1019).

No roads link Guyana and Venezuela; to go overland, you must go via Brazil.

**GETTING AROUND****Air**

Venezuela has a number of airlines and a reasonable network of air routes. Maiquetía, where Caracas' airport is located, is the coun-

try's major aviation hub and handles flights to most airports around the country. Cities most frequently serviced from Caracas include Porlamar, Maracaibo and Puerto Ordaz (Ciudad Guayana). The most popular destinations with travelers are Mérida, Ciudad Bolívar, Canaima and Porlamar. There is a tax of US\$16 to fly to internal destinations from Maiquetía.

Venezuela has half-a-dozen major commercial airlines servicing main domestic routes, and a dozen minor provincial carriers that cover regional and remote routes on a regular or charter basis.

Canaima and Los Roques have their own fleets of Cessnas and other smaller planes that fly for a number of small-time airlines. It is best to book these flights through an agent. Some of the airlines:

**Aeropostal** (☎ 0800-337-8466, 266-1059; www.aeropostal.com; Torre ING Bank, 1st fl, La Castellana)

The country's largest airline, with flights to most major domestic destinations including Barcelona, Barquisimeto, Maracaibo, Maturín, Porlamar, Puerto Ordaz (Ciudad Guayana), San Antonio del Táchira and Valencia.

**Aserca** (☎ 0800-648-8356, 905-5333; www.asercairlines.com; Edificio Taeca, Calle Guaicaipuro, ground fl, El Rosal) Caracas, Barcelona, Maracaibo, Porlamar and San Antonio del Táchira.

**Avensa** (☎ domestic 355-1609, international 355-1889; www.avena.com.ve; Maiquetía airport, Caracas)

**Avior** (☎ 281-274-9545; www.avior.com.ve) Caracas, Barcelona, Barinas, Barquisimeto, Canaima, Ciudad Bolívar, Coro, Cumaná, Maturín, Mérida, Porlamar and Valera.

**Conviasa** (☎ (☎ 0500-2668-4272; www.conviasa.aero; Porlamar) State-owned, Margarita-based carrier that services most of the country.

**Laser** (☎ 0800-527-3700, 355-2584; www.laser.com.ve; Maiquetía airport) Caracas, Maracaibo and Porlamar.

**Linea Turistica Aereotuy** (Map pp988-9; 761-6231, 761-6247; www.tuy.com/aereotuy.htm; Edificio Gran Sabana, Av Abraham Lincoln at Blvd Sabana Grande, 5th fl, Sabana Grande) Los Roques, Porlamar and Canaima.

**Rutaca** (☎ 576-0304; www.rutaca.com.ve) Caracas, Canaima, Ciudad Bolívar, Porlamar, San Antonio del Táchira and Santa Elena de Uairén.

**Santa Bárbara** (☎ 204-4000; www.santabarbaraairlines.com; Edificio Tokay, Calle 3B, Industrial La Urbina) Caracas, Cumaná, Las Piedras, Maracaibo, Mérida, Puerto Ayacucho and San Antonio del Táchira.

**Boat**

Venezuela has a number of islands, but only Isla de Margarita is serviced by regular scheduled boats and ferries; see Puerto La Cruz

(p1022), Cumaná (p1025) and Isla de Margarita (p1029).

The Río Orinoco is the country's major inland waterway. It's navigable from its mouth up to Puerto Ayacucho, but there's no regular passenger service on any part of it.

## Bus

As there is no passenger-train service in Venezuela, almost all traveling is done by bus. Buses are generally fast, and they run regularly day and night between major population centers. Bus transportation is affordable and usually efficient.

Venezuela's dozens of bus companies own buses ranging from sputtering pieces of junk to the most recent models. All major companies offer *servicio ejecutivo* in comfortable air-conditioned buses, which cover all the major long-distance routes and are the dominant means of intercity transportation.

Caracas is the most important transport hub, handling buses to just about every corner of the country. In general, there's no need to buy tickets more than a couple of hours in advance for major routes, except around holidays.

Many short-distance regional routes are served by *por puestos* (literally 'by the seat'), a cross between a bus and a taxi. *Por puestos* are usually large old US-made cars (less often minibuses) that ply fixed routes and depart when all seats are filled. They cost about 40% to 80% more than buses, but they're faster and can be more comfortable.

## Car & Motorcycle

Traveling by car is a comfortable and attractive way of getting around Venezuela. The country is reasonably safe, and the network of roads is extensive and usually in acceptable shape. Gas stations are numerous and fuel is just about the cheapest in the world – US3¢ to US6¢ per liter, depending on the octane level. You can fill up your tank for a dollar. This rosy picture is slightly obscured by Venezuelan traffic and local driving manners. Traffic in Venezuela, especially in Caracas, is chaotic and requires nerves of steel.

Bringing a car to Venezuela (or to South America in general) is time-consuming, expensive and involves plenty of paperwork, and few people do it. It's much more convenient and cheaper to rent a car locally. Also see above.

## Local Transport

### BUS & METRO

All cities and many major towns have their own urban transportation systems, which in most places are small buses or minibuses. Depending on the region, these are called *busetas*, *carros*, *carritos*, *micros* or *camionetas*, and fares are usually no more than US20¢. In many larger cities you can also find urban *por puestos*, swinging faster than buses through the chaotic traffic. Caracas is the only city in Venezuela with a subway system.

### TAXI

Taxis are fairly inexpensive and are worth considering, particularly for transport between the bus terminal and city center when you are carrying all your bags. Taxis don't have meters, so always fix the fare with the driver before boarding the cab. It's a good idea to find out the correct fare beforehand from an independent source, such as someone who works in the bus station or a hotel reception desk.

## CARACAS

☎ 0212 / pop 5 million

On first encounter Caracas is more likely to give you a slap in the face than a warm embrace. The political and cultural capital of Venezuela is densely overpopulated and hectic, with a solid dose of crime, traffic and pollution. There are few parts of the city that are pedestrian-friendly and there are almost no quality accommodations for budget travelers.

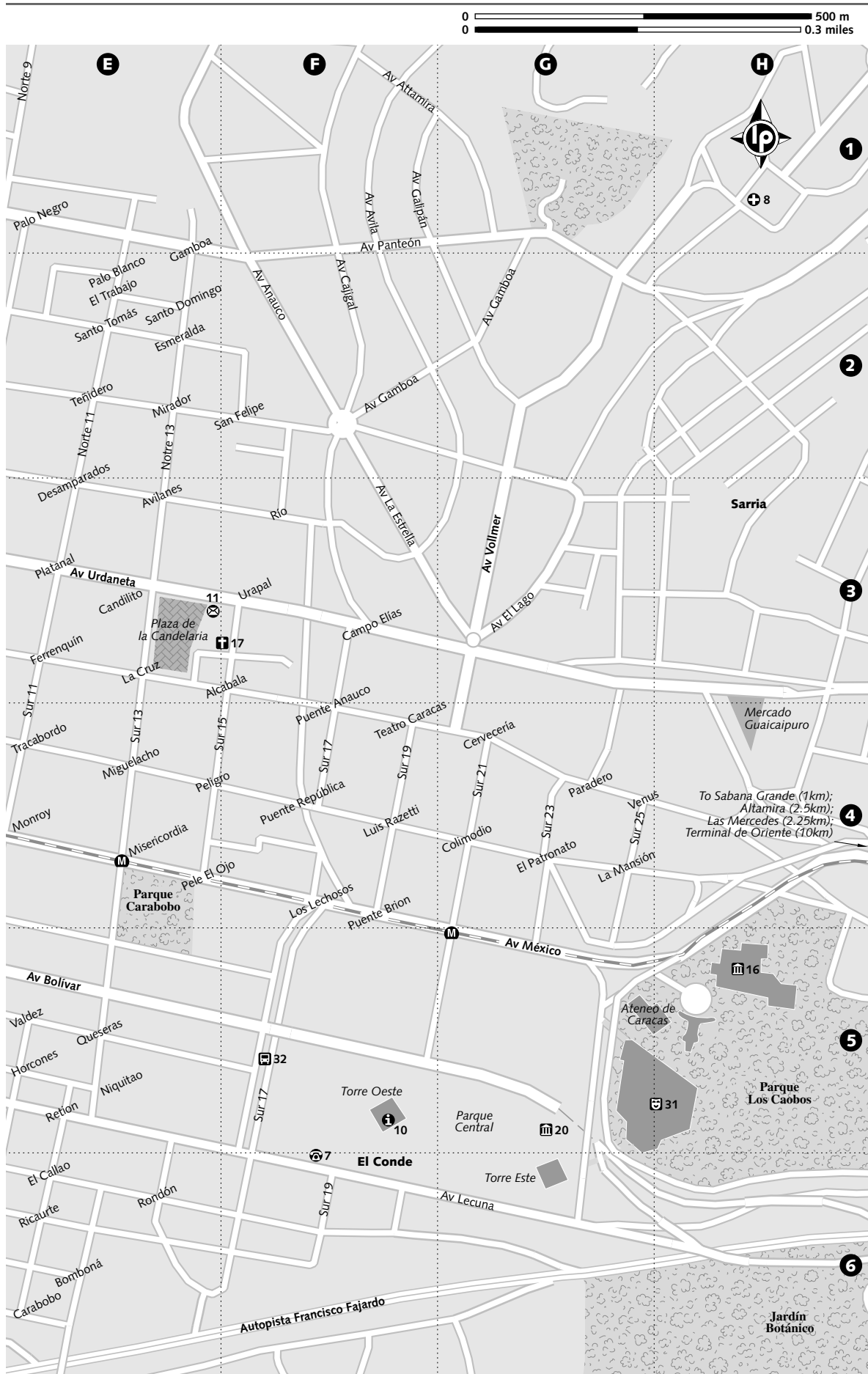
However, Caracas does have its attractions and will ingratiate itself to the persistent and intrepid traveler. Nestled between verdant peaks at an altitude of about 900m, the city enjoys both a spectacular setting and a comfortable climate. In counterbalance to the city's tougher side, Caracas claims an impressive variety of restaurants and a progressive fashion and art scene. From the chic lounges of San Ignacio to the patio bars and salsa clubs of Las Mercedes, the city is known for its pulsing nightlife. But Caracas' attractions are not just about the new and the sexy. The city is also home to much of the Venezuelan nation's history including many important sites relating to Simón Bolívar, the Liberator of South America.

**CENTRAL CARACAS**



<b>INFORMATION</b>		Galería de Arte Nacional.....16 H5	
Banco de Venezuela.....1 B4	Banco Mercantil.....2 B4	Iglesia de la Candelaria.....17 F3	Mirador de la Torre Oeste.....(see 10)
Banesco.....3 D2	Banesco.....4 C4	Museo Bolivariano.....18 B3	Museo Caracas.....19 B3
CANTV.....5 B3	CANTV.....6 C4	Museo de Arte Contemporáneo.....20 G5	Museo de Bellas Artes.....(see 16)
CANTV.....7 F6	Centro Médico de Caracas.....8 H1	Panteón Nacional.....21 C1	Plaza Bolívar.....22 B3
DIEX Office (immigration information).....9 A4	Inatur.....10 F5	<b>SLEEPING</b> 🛏	
Ipostel Main Office.....11 E3	Italcambio.....12 B3	Hotel El Conde.....23 B3	Hotel Hollywood.....24 D3
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>		Plaza Catedral Hotel.....25 B3	Plaza Catedral Hotel.....25 B3
Capitolio Nacional.....13 B3	Casa Natal del Libertador.....14 B4	<b>EATING</b> 🍴	
Cathedral.....15 B3		El Salón del Sabor.....26 D3	Hotel Center Park.....27 B5
		Kafta.....28 B3	

Restaurant Beirut.....29 C4	Restaurant Las Vegas.....30 B3
<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b> 🎭	
Cinamateca Nacional.....(see 16)	Complejo Cultural Teresa Carreño.....31 H5
<b>TRANSPORT</b>	
Buses to Maiquetía Airport.....32 F5	Carritos to El Junquito.....33 D5



Whether Caracas is your intended destination or not, it is likely that you will pass through the city, as it is the transportation hub for most of the country.

## ORIENTATION

Sprawling for 20km along a narrow coastal valley, Caracas is bordered to the north by the Parque Nacional El Ávila and to the south by a mix of modern suburbs and *barrios* (shantytowns) stacked along the steep hillsides. Downtown Caracas stretches for 8km or so west to east from the neighborhood of El Silencio to Chacao. Museums, theaters and cinemas are clustered around Parque Central on the eastern edge of the historic center. Most accommodations and inexpensive eateries can be found in the historic quarter or in the bustling neighborhood of Sabana Grande. Nicer restaurants, hotels and the majority of the city's nightlife can be found to the south and east of the center in Altamira, El Rosal and Las Mercedes.

## INFORMATION

### Bookstores

**American Book Shop** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 285-8779; Nivel Jardín, Centro Comercial Centro Plaza, Los Palos Grandes) Right past Altamira, this shop has a decent selection of English titles, used books and guidebooks.

**Read Books** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 991-9509; Av Orinoco, Las Mercedes) This welcoming bookstore has a variety of reading materials in English, Spanish, French and more.

**Tecni-Ciencia Libros** (☎ 959-5547) Centro Ciudad Comercial Tamanco (Map pp990-1); Centro Comercial Sambil (Map pp990-1) This chain bookstore is in a number of malls about the city as well as those listed. It has a reliable

## STREET ADDRESSES

A curiosity of Caracas is the center's street address system. It's not the streets that bear names here, but the *esquinas* (street corners); therefore, addresses are given 'corner to corner.' So if an address is 'Piñango a Conde,' the place is between these two street corners. If a place is situated on a corner, just the corner will be named (eg Esq Conde).

collection of texts in English and Spanish, including a few Lonely Planet guidebooks.

## Emergency

The following emergency numbers function 24 hours a day. The operators rarely speak English.

**Emergency Center** (Police, Fire & Ambulance ☎ 171)

**Fire** (☎ 166)

**Police** (☎ 169)

**Traffic Police** (☎ 167)

## Immigration

**DIEX** (Dirección de Identificación y Extranjería; Map pp984-5; ☎ 482-0977, 483-2070; www.onidex.gov.ve in Spanish; Av Baralt, Plaza Miranda, El Silencio; 🕒 7:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) Visas and tourist cards can be extended here for up to three months (\$40). Passport, two photos and a letter explaining the purpose of the extension are required. Processing takes three working days.

## Internet Access

In the areas of Caracas that are covered in this book, it is difficult to walk more than two blocks on a major street and not encounter

## GETTING INTO TOWN

Caracas' main airport is at Maiquetía, 26km northwest of the city center. It's linked to the city by a freeway that cuts through the coastal mountain range with a variety of tunnels and bridges. In early 2006, one of the principal bridges had to be demolished due to structural issues. At the time of writing, there was a side route that helps to keep traffic flowing but still slows the Caracas–Maiquetía trip by a half hour or more. Estimates of the time necessary to reconstruct the bridge run from one to three years.

Buses run every half hour from about 5:30am to 8pm (US\$3, one hour). At the airport, they depart from the front of the domestic and international terminals. In the city, buses depart from Calle Sur 17 (directly underneath Av Bolívar, next to Parque Central), and from Gato Negro metro station.

The airport taxi service is operated by black Ford Explorers (US\$20 to US\$40, depending on the destination), which park at the front of the terminal. Be careful about taking unregistered taxis and never wander outside of the main airport terminals at night.

a cybercafé. The prices are reasonable (usually less than US\$1 per hour). The modern shopping malls that dot the city tend to have cybercafés with the most modern equipment and the fastest connections. Most internet cafés open after 8am or 9am and are closed by 10pm. See also CANTV, right. Some good ones that are not in shopping malls:

**CompuMall** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 993-0111; Edificio CompuMall, Av Orinoco, 2nd fl, Las Mercedes; 🕒 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8pm Sun) One of the only internet spots in this part of town, it has slow connection speed but the chilly air-con and legitimate bakery-café make it worth a visit on a hot day.

**Cyber Office 2020** (Map pp988-9; ☎ 762-9407; Edificio San Germán, Calle Navarro at Av Solano, Sabana Grande; 🕒 9am-midnight Mon-Sat, 10am-midnight Sun) One of many choices in this area.

**Digital Planet** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 261-0509; Yamin Family Center, Av San Juan Bosco, 2nd fl, Altamira; 🕒 9am-midnight Mon-Sat, 10am-midnight Sun)

## Laundry

Most hotels or hostels will either do laundry in-house or send it out. There are few self-service places. Laundromats will wash and dry clothes for US\$2 to US\$5 per 5kg load and are open from about 7am until 6pm Monday to Friday with a break for lunch, and from 7am to 1pm Saturday. A few recommended *lavanderías*:

**Lavandería Chapultepec** (Map pp988-9; Calle Bolivia, Sabana Grande) Self-service.

**Lavandería El Rey** (Map pp988-9; ☎ 763-2643; Calle Pascual Navarro 6, Sabana Grande)

**New York City Lavandería** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 265-7737; Av Ávila, Altamira Sur)

## Medical Services

Most minor health problems can be solved in a *farmacia* (pharmacy). You can even get basic shots right at the counter. Under Venezuelan law there's always at least one open in every neighborhood. You can easily recognize them by the sign reading 'Turno.' Some dependable *farmacia* chains found throughout the city include Farmatodo and FarmAhorro. Following are reputable medical facilities that can help with more serious medical problems:

**Centro Médico de Caracas** (Map pp984-5; ☎ 552-2222, 555-9111; Plaza El Estanque, Av Eraso, San Bernardino)

**Clínica El Ávila** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 276-1003, emergency ☎ 276-1090; Av San Juan Bosco at 6a Transversal, Altamira)

## Money

Who says that Chavez is chasing out foreign interests? There are international banks and ATMs all over the city, including a prominent 24-hour Citibank at the entrance to El Recreo shopping center in Sabana Grande. Cash advances on Visa and MasterCard can be easily obtained at most Caracas banks. Be cautious when using outdoor ATMs at night. Some central branches:

**Banco de Venezuela** Center (Map pp984-5; Av Universidad); Sabana Grande (Map pp988-9; Blvd Sabana Grande)

**Banco Mercantil** Center (Map pp984-5; Av Universidad); Sabana Grande (Map pp988-9; Av Las Acacias)

**Banesco** Altamira (Map pp990-1; 6a Transversal); Altamira (Map pp990-1; Av Sur Altamira); Center (Map pp984-5; Av Fuerzas Armadas); Center (Map pp984-5; Av Universidad); Las Mercedes (Map pp990-1; Calle Monterrey); Sabana Grande (Map pp988-9; Blvd de Sabana Grande); Sabana Grande (Map pp988-9; Av Las Mercedes)

The usual places to change foreign cash are *casas de cambio* (money-exchange offices).

**Amex** (☎ 800-100-4730) Offers local refund assistance for traveler's checks.

**Italcambio** (☎ 562-9555; www.italviajes.com in Spanish; 🕒 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Altamira (Map pp990-1; Av Ávila); Las Mercedes (Map pp990-1; Calle California); Maiquetía airport (Map pp990-1; International terminal); Sabana Grande (Map pp988-9; Av Casanova).

**Grupo Zoom** (☎ 800-767-9666) If you need money sent to you quickly, Western Union is represented by Grupo Zoom, which has about 25 offices scattered around the city.

## Post

**FedEx** (☎ 205-3333)

**Ipostel main office** (Map pp984-5; ☎ 0800-476-7835; www.ipostel.gov.ve; Av Urdaneta, Esq Carmelitas, Center; 🕒 7am-7:45pm Mon-Fri, 8am-5pm Sat, to noon Sun) Near Plaza Bolívar, the main office offers a poste-restante service.

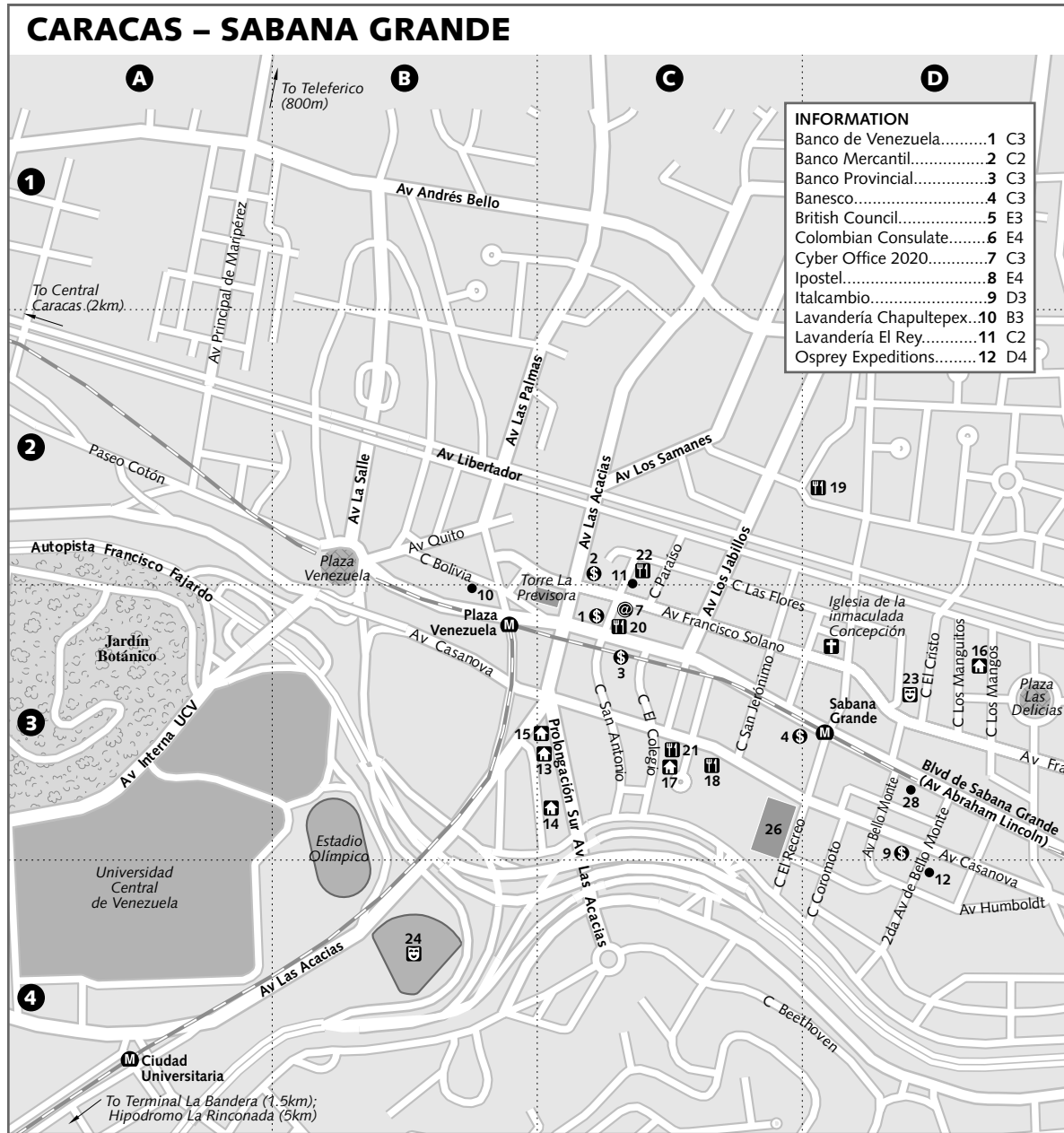
**Ipostel** (🕒 7am-7:45pm Mon-Fri) Altamira (Map pp990-1; Av Francisco de Miranda); Sabana Grande (Map pp988-9; Centro Comercial Arta, Plaza Chacaíto).

**UPS** (☎ 204-1353)

## Telephone

Domestic calls can be made from public phones or stands with mobile phones for rent (p1054). It is always best to make international calls from telephone centers, which are easy to find all over town.

**CANTV** Chacao (Map pp990-1; ☎ 263-0881; Centro Sambil, Av Libertador; 🕒 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm



Sun; internet per hr US\$1); Las Mercedes (Map pp990-1; ☎ 959-5099; CCCT, fl C-1, No 47-F; 🕒 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun; internet per hr US\$1) Has many telephone centers. Also in the center (Map pp984-5) at Esq El Conde, El Chorro at Dr Díaz and Parque Central.

**Tourist Information**

**Inatur** (www.inatur.gov.ve) domestic terminal (Map pp976-7; ☎ 355-1191; Maiquetía airport; 🕒 7am-8pm); international terminal (Map pp976-7; ☎ 355-1060; Maiquetía airport; 🕒 8am-midnight); Parque Central (Map pp984-5; ☎ 0800-462-8871, 576-5138; 35th fl, Mirador de la Torre Oeste; 🕒 8:30am-12:30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) When you enter the Mirador de la Torre Oeste, take the elevator from Nivel Lecuna to get to the information office – elevators from other levels don't go to this floor.

**Travel Agencies**

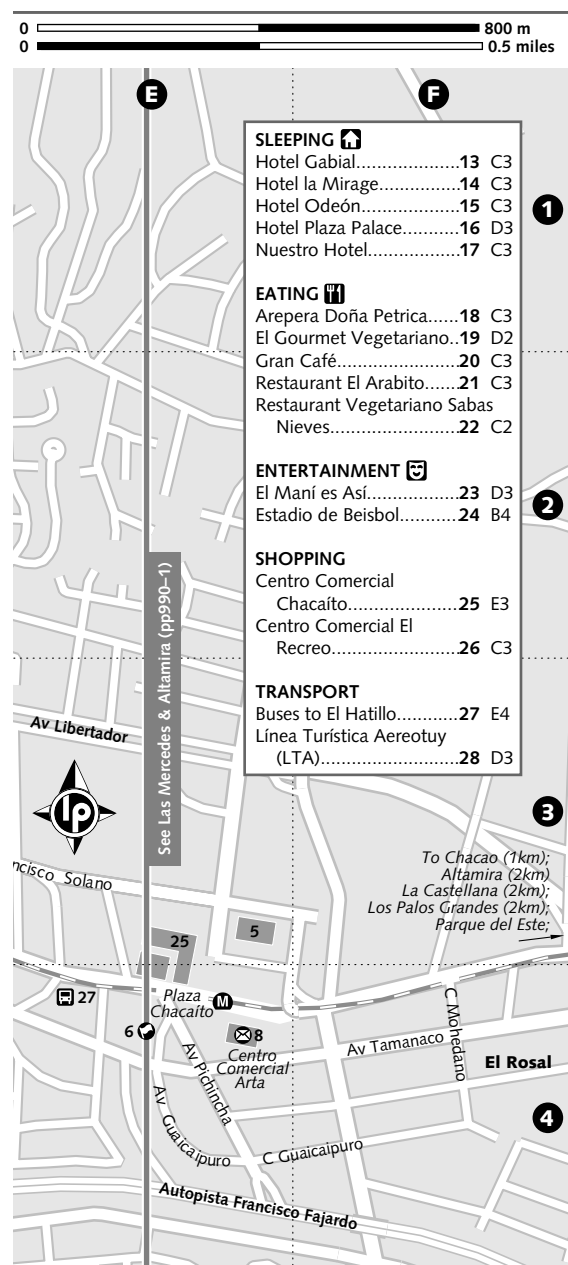
**Osprey Expeditions** (Map pp988-9; ☎ 0212-762-5975; www.ospreyvenezuela.com; cnr Av Casanova & 2da Av Bello Monte, Edificio La Paz, Office 51, Sabana Grande) Osprey is helpful with travel information and can arrange transportation and tours.

**IVI Idiomas Vivos** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 993-6082, 993-8738; www.ividiomas.com; Residencia La Hacienda, Av Principal de Las Mercedes, ground fl; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Fri) Offers reasonable airfares and useful information to foreign students, teachers and people under 26 years of age.

**DANGERS & ANNOYANCES**

Caracas has some well-known issues with petty crime, robbery and armed assaults. These problems are not just hype and should





be taken very seriously. Sabana Grande and the city center are the riskiest neighborhoods, although they are generally safe during the day (do look out for pickpockets in any dense crowd). Altamira and Las Mercedes are considerably safer. Travelers should always stick to well-lit main streets after dark.

## SIGHTS

### Central Caracas

#### THE CENTER & AROUND

The historic sector is the heart of the original Caracas. It still retains glimpses of its colonial past but is peppered with newer buildings and a lot of questionable architecture from the last century. It's a lively area and is worth visiting for its historical sites, particularly those

pertaining to Simón Bolívar. In the historic quarter it is the *esquinas* (street corners), not the streets that bear names.

Like most Venezuelan cities and towns, Caracas' central **Plaza Bolívar** (Map pp984–5) is dedicated to Bolívar. The equestrian statue in the plaza was cast in Europe and unveiled in 1874, after some delay as the ship carrying it foundered on Archipiélago de Los Roques. The plaza is a place to hang out and watch the hours pass, listen to soapbox politicians or search the street stalls for religious trinkets, Chávez propaganda or souvenirs. On the eastern side of the plaza, don't miss the **cathedral** (Map pp984–5; ☎ 862-4963; 🕒 7:30–11am Mon–Fri, 8:30–11am Sat, 9–11am & 5–6pm Sun) which is home to the Bolívar family chapel where his wife and family are buried.

The **Capitolio Nacional** (National Capitol; Map pp984–5; ☎ 564-7589; admission free; 🕒 9am–noon & 2–5pm Tue–Sun) occupies the entire block just southwest of Plaza Bolívar. In the central part of the northern building is the famous **Salón Elíptico**, an oval hall topped with an extraordinary domed ceiling. Covering this dome is a mural depicting the battle of Carabobo, which seems to move as you walk beneath it.

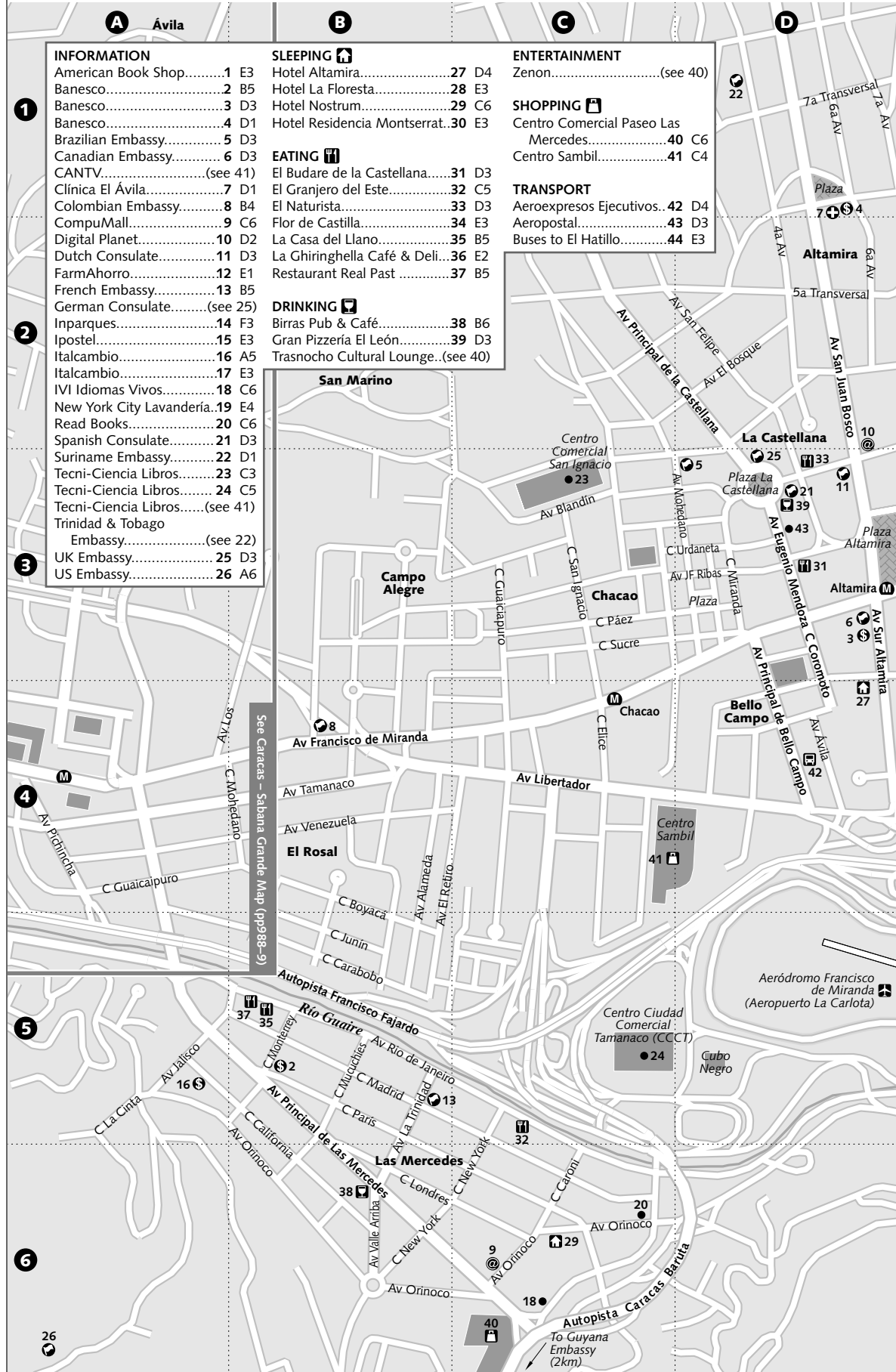
The reconstructed interior of **Casa Natal de Bolívar** (Bolívar's birthplace; Map pp984–5; ☎ 541-2563; San Jacinto a Traposos; admission free; 🕒 9am–4:30pm Tue–Sun) is attractive but lacks its original detailing. His funeral was also hosted here on July 24, 1783.

If you still crave more Bolívar memorabilia, walk just north of Casa Natal de Bolívar to the **Museo Bolivariano** (Map pp984–5; ☎ 545-9828; San Jacinto a Traposos; admission free; 🕒 9am–4:30pm Tue–Fri, 10am–4:30pm Sat & Sun). The colonial-style museum has everything Bolívar that you can imagine, from his letters to his swords to his original coffin.

If you have made it this far, you must continue to see the bronze sarcophagus of Bolívar in the **Panteón Nacional** (National Pantheon; Map pp984–5; ☎ 862-1518; Av Norte; admission free; 🕒 9am–noon & 2–5pm Tue–Fri, 10am–noon & 2–4:30pm Sat & Sun). No less than 140 white-stone tombs of other eminent Venezuelans grace the building, though there are only three women buried here.

**Iglesia de la Candelaria** (Map pp984–5; Plaza La Candelaria), seven blocks east of Plaza Bolívar, is the church famed as the resting place of José Gregorio Hernández (see the boxed text, p992). He lies in the first chapel off the right-hand aisle.

**LAS MERCEDES & ALTAMIRA**

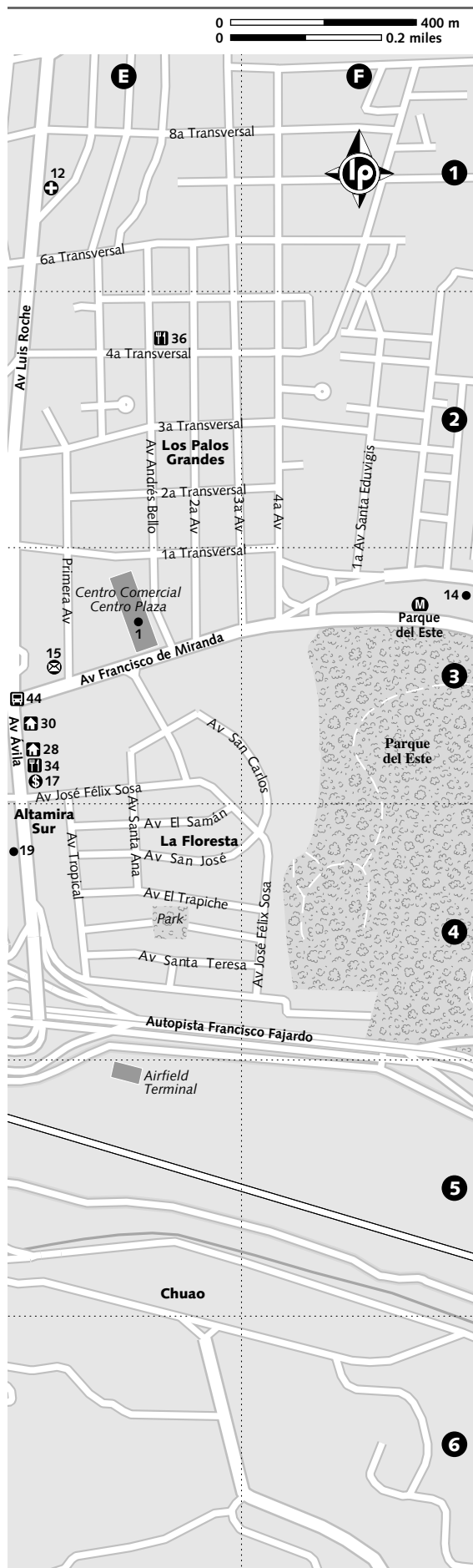


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American Book Shop.....	1 E3
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Banesco.....	3 D3
Banesco.....	4 D1
Brazilian Embassy.....	5 D3
Canadian Embassy.....	6 D3
CANTV.....	(see 41)
Clínica El Ávila.....	7 D1
Colombian Embassy.....	8 B4
CompuMall.....	9 C6
Digital Planet.....	10 D2
Dutch Consulate.....	11 D3
FarmAhorro.....	12 E1
French Embassy.....	13 B5
German Consulate.....	(see 25)
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Italcambio.....	17 E3
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See Caracas - Sabana Grande Map (pp98-9)



## PARQUE CENTRAL & AROUND

The Parque Central area is Caracas' art and culture hub, boasting half-a-dozen museums, the major performing arts center, two art cinemas and arguably the best theater in town. The park is 1.5km southeast of Plaza Bolívar, next to the Bellas Artes metro station.

On the eastern end of the Parque Central complex, the **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo** (Map pp984-5; ☎ 573-8289; maccsi@cantv.net; admission free; ☑ 10am-5:45pm Tue-Sun) is by far the best in the country. You'll find the major works of the top contemporary Venezuelan artists. There are some remarkable paintings by international giants such as Picasso, Matisse, Monet and others.

The open-air viewpoint **Mirador de la Torre Oeste** (Map pp984-5; admission free; ☑ 8-11am & 2-4pm Tue-Fri) sits high on the 52nd floor of the Torre Oeste (which also houses Inatur, p988) and provides some fabulous 360-degree views of the city. It's run courtesy of the tower's security department, which lets visitors ascend. You need to show your passport for admission to the viewpoint.

The **Galería de Arte Nacional** (National Art Gallery; Map pp984-5; ☎ 578-1818; Plaza de Los Museos, Parque Los Caobos; admission free; ☑ 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun) has a vast collection of artwork embracing five centuries of Venezuelan art – from pre-Hispanic to contemporary. The gallery also houses Caracas' leading art cinema.

Adjoining the gallery, the **Museo de Bellas Artes** (Museum of Fine Arts; Map pp984-5; ☎ 578-1816; museodebellasartes@cantv.net; Parque Los Caobos; admission free; ☑ 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun) features mostly temporary exhibitions, and has an excellent shop selling contemporary art and crafts. Don't miss the sculpture garden outside.

## Sabana Grande & Around

Sabana Grande, 2km east of Parque Central, is an energetic district packed with hotels, love motels, restaurants and shops. Locals come en masse to stroll along its teeming market street **Bulevar de Sabana Grande** (Map pp988-9), which stretches between Plaza Venezuela and Plaza Chacaíto.

## Las Mercedes & Altamira

East of Sabana Grande lie some of Caracas' more fashionable areas, especially in **Castellana**, **Altamira** and their immediate environs (Map pp990-1). As you travel further east, you descend the social ladder, eventually

### THE DAPPER DOCTOR

When traveling in Venezuela, you will inevitably see statues or trinkets of a man who bears a striking resemblance to Charlie Chaplin. This is not some national infatuation with classic cinema. The man is José Gregorio Hernández, Venezuela's favorite saint. Hernández is not recognized by the Vatican as a saint, though was elevated to venerable status in 1985. All technicalities aside, he is the country's principal homegrown religious icon.

Born into a humble Andean family in 1864, Hernández became a university professor and doctor to the president. He was a passionately religious person, and frequently treated the poor without charge. He tried to dedicate himself to a monastic life on various occasions, but always returned to medicine and care for his impoverished countrymen.

Hernández died in a car accident in 1919, and a cult soon emerged around him, spreading through the country and beyond. Countless miracles are attributed to him, including numerous healings.

reaching some of the city's most downtrodden *barrios*.

### Southern Suburbs

The rolling hills in the southern part of Caracas include the city's wealthiest suburbs and also numerous pockets of ramshackle *barrios*, sometimes neighboring each other.

**El Hatillo** was once its own village, but has now been absorbed into Caracas and is a popular getaway for folks who live in the more congested city center. Its narrow central streets and plaza are stacked with brightly painted colonial buildings that house restaurants, art galleries and craft shops. Located 15km southeast of the city center, this area overflows with people on the weekend. There's always a tranquil atmosphere in the afternoon and early evening, when diners and café-goers can sit back and relax to the sounds of crickets.

Frequent *carritos* (small buses; US\$30¢, 45 minutes) run to El Hatillo from Av Humboldt, just off Blvd de Sabana Grande near the Chacaíto metro station (Map pp988–9). Alternatively, metro bus 202 leaves from Altamira metro station (Map pp990–1) on weekdays only. Unfortunately, there are no hotels in El Hatillo.

### ACTIVITIES

Caracas is an urban city and its activities mainly revolve around nightlife (restaurants, bars and clubs) and shopping. The best place for **hiking** near Caracas is Parque Nacional El Ávila.

### TOURS

Caracas tour companies can send you almost anywhere in Venezuela, but it's usually cheaper to deal directly with the operator in

the region. Of course, that means that you'll have to figure your own transportation out of the city and the bus system is not for prima donnas. Caracas companies can also help by coordinating various excursions for you and making reservations during busy tourism seasons.

There are an uncountable number of travel agencies in Caracas. The following listed companies focus on responsible tourism and have English-speaking guides (some also have guides that speak German and/or French):

**Akanan Travel & Tours** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 264-2769, 266-8663; www.akanan.com; Av Bolívar, Edificio Grano de Oro, Planta Baja, Local C, Chacao) This major operator does not have the most budget prices, but is reliable for quality trips, including treks to the top of Auyantepui and Roraima, as well as bicycle trips from La Paragua to Canaima.

**Cacao Travel Group** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 977-1234; www.cacaotravel.com; Quinta Orquidea, Calle Andrómeda, Urbanización El Peñón, Vía Baruta) This agency, 2.5km south of Las Mercedes, was the first to develop tours to Río Caura (five days in total, US\$320 to US\$400 depending on accommodation type). It has its own lodges on the river.

**Osprey Expeditions** (Map pp988-9; ☎ 762-5975; www.ospreyvenezuela.com; Av Casanova & 2da Av Bello Monte, Edificio La Paz, Office 51, Sabana Grande) This young, friendly, English-speaking, Venezuelan-owned agency can organize tours to most parts of the country for a number of different budgets. It is strong on Canaima, Orinoco Delta, Caracas and the surrounding areas.

**Sociedad Conservacionista Audubón de Venezuela** (SCAV; ☎ 992-3268; www.audubonvenezuela.org; Calle Veracruz, Edif Matisco, 1er Piso Oficina 5, Las Mercedes; ☒ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri) For more information on responsible traveling, contact the local branch of this global environmental society. It can provide information on ecological issues and recommend tour companies; it also organizes bird-watching tours.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The biggest celebrations of the year in Caracas are Christmas, Carnaval and Easter. During these times all offices close, as do most shops, and intercity bus transportation is frantic. Flights can be fully booked.

Semana Santa (Holy Week, culminating in Easter) is also a major celebration with festivities focused in Chacao. Traditional outlying areas celebrate holy days with more vigor than central districts. El Hatillo boasts local feasts on several occasions during the year (including May 3, July 16 and September 4).

More characteristic of Caracas are cultural events, of which the Festival Internacional de Teatro (the International Theater Festival) is the city's highlight. Initiated in 1976, it has been held in March/April of every even-numbered year and attracts national and international groups to Caracas' theatres.

Also see the boxed text, p999 on the festival of Diablos Danzantes in Francisco de Yare, a day trip from Caracas.

## SLEEPING

Simply put, Caracas does not cater to budget travelers. Inexpensive rooms can only be found in love motels (some of which are actually brothels), which tend to be in more dangerous neighborhoods. It is worth considering staying in a midrange place in a safer neighborhood such as Altamira (the money that you save on that cheap room can get nicked pretty quickly in the wrong part of town).

### Central Caracas

As the cost of a less secure neighborhood, Central Caracas offers more affordable accommodations. The cheapest accommodations in the center are south of Av Lecuna, between Av Balart and Av Fuerzas Armadas, but the area is unattractive and can be downright dangerous. It's more convenient for sightseeing and possibly safer to stay north of Av Universidad.

**Hotel Center Park** (Map pp984-5; ☎ 542-4110; Av Lecuna; s US\$6, d with/without air-con US\$12/10; 🚽) This is one of the best – but still not particularly good – options in the Av Lecuna area. The price of the small rooms is better than elsewhere in town and the Center Park is cleaner than its Lecuna neighbors (a few cigarette marks on sheets is the worst of it).

**Hotel Hollywood** (Map pp984-5; ☎ 514-9946; Av Fuerzas Armadas, Esq Romualda; d US\$15-22; 🚽) The glitz

and bright lights of Hollywood did not find their way into the dark, plain rooms of this inexpensive option. The hotel sits opposite the Av Fuerzas Armadas book market and has an attractive polished-stone entrance (the attractiveness begins and ends at the entrance). The fairly priced rooms have cable TV and hot water.

**Plaza Catedral Hotel** (Map pp984-5; ☎ 564-2111; Esquina La Torre; d/tr with bathroom US\$22/26; 🚽) This is a great location for sightseers as it overlooks both the Plaza Bolívar and the cathedral. Choose one of the front corner rooms for best views. It's not a proposition for light sleepers, as the cathedral bells ring every quarter hour. The hotel's rooftop restaurant provides reasonably priced food and great views.

**Hotel El Conde** (Map pp984-5; ☎ 860-1171; hotelconde@cantv.net; Esquina El Conde; s/d/tr US\$27/32/35; 🚽) Hotel El Conde (The Count) rules over the historic center as the area's longest-running budget hotel, and possibly the best one. It is just a block from Plaza Bolívar and has affordable prices and a decent standard of comfort.

### Sabana Grande

Sabana Grande is the city's main budget lodging area and has plenty of places to stay, although most of them double as hourly-rate 'love motels.' The bustling neighborhood is safe during the daytime, but is increasingly dangerous at night. Stick to the main streets and walk in groups as muggings are common.

**Nuestro Hotel** (Map pp988-9; ☎ 762-1788; bhotelccs@yahoo.com; Calle El Colegio, Sabana Grande; s/d/tr/q US\$9/13/16/21) Also known as the backpacker's hostel (yes, it does have 'We're in Lonely Planet' painted on the front wall), this place is one of the few non-hourly-rates budget hotels in the city (actually, it's a sex motel on the 1st floor, but the 2nd floor is a budget hotel anyways). It's no frills and is in an area that is unsafe after dark, but the rooms are secure and it is a good place to meet other travelers. English not spoken.

**Hotel Odeón** (Map pp988-9; ☎ 793-1345; Av Las Acacias, Sabana Grande; d US\$14-18; 🚽) You could try to be positive and say that this place is minimalist, but it is really just numbingly plain with almost nothing in the rooms. This Colombian-run hotel has eight floors, so it is likely that it will have a vacancy. The 1st-floor café is convenient and decent.

**Hotel La Mirage** (Map pp988-9; ☎ 793-2733; Prolongación Sur Av Las Acacias, Sabana Grande; d US\$13-15, tr/ste US\$15.50/22; P 📶) There are over a dozen budget hotels further south on Prolongación Sur Av Las Acacias, including this undistinguished nine-floor stack of boxy rooms. It is popular with Venezuelan families, which cuts down on the hourly-rates factor.

**Hotel Gabial** (Map pp988-9; ☎ 793-1156; Prolongación Sur Av Las Acacias; d US\$27-30; 📶) Just down the street from the Odeón, Hotel Gabial is more comfortable with better beds and quiet air conditioners. It is also almost twice the price. It is debatable whether or not you get twice the comfort.

**Hotel Plaza Palace** (Map pp988-9; ☎ 762-4821; Calle Los Mangos; d/tr US\$35/40; 📶) If you want to stay in a midrange hotel we suggest that you go to Altamira (below). However, if you are set on Sabana Grande the Plaza Palace is a solid midrange choice. The rooms are airy and comfortable, but it's worth adding a mere US\$5 and staying in a suite.

## Las Mercedes & Altamira

### LAS MERCEDES

Do you want to stay closer to the restaurants and nightlife? Las Mercedes is an upmarket area and most of the hotels are very expensive. But there is one reasonable option.

**Hotel Nostrum** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 992-7646; Av Orinoco; d US\$23; P 📶) Nostrum is a love motel, but it is a relatively nice place and the price can't be beat in the neighborhood. It is a smart choice if you plan to stay in the city for only a night or two and want to spend most of your time partying in Las Mercedes – or if you have too much to drink at one of the bars and can't make it back to wherever you came from.

### ALTAMIRA

Altamira is a pleasant area of town that is easily accessible by the metro or taxi. It is a safe neighborhood where you can comfortably walk at night to a number of restaurants or the central plaza. The accommodations are all midrange places, but are worth the extra price for the increased security.

**Hotel Altamira** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 267-4284; hotelaltamira@telcel.net.ve; Av José Félix Sosa, Altamira Sur; d US\$37; P 📶) The best-priced midrange hotel in the neighborhood, the Altamira is on a quiet street just off the plaza. The rooms, with whitewashed walls and bamboo furniture, are on par with other nearby options and at

a mildly better price. Most rooms have cable TV. Some English is spoken.

**Hotel La Floresta** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 263-1955; hotellafloresta@cantv.net; Av Ávila, Altamira Sur; s/d US\$41/75; 📶 📺) La Floresta has small, comfortable and secure rooms that are a bit tattered around the edges. It also has lots of hot water, free internet in the lobby (and wireless in most rooms) and cable TV. Ask for a room with a balcony.

**Hotel Residencia Montserrat** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 263-3533; Av Ávila, Altamira Sur; s/d US\$45/80; P 📶) Montserrat has larger and slightly more expensive rooms than La Floresta. The furniture and finishings are equally worn in, but just chalk it up as character. Ask for a room in the back to minimize street noise and score a view of beautiful green gardens).

## EATING

### Central Caracas

The center is packed with mostly low- to mid-priced eateries.

**Restaurant Beirut** (Map pp984-5; Salvador de León a Socarrás; snacks & cakes US\$1.50-3, 2-course menú US\$3; 🕒 7am-6pm Mon-Sat) For a quick caffeine stop or tasty Lebanese food, this comfortable place does the trick.

**Restaurant Las Vegas** (Map pp984-5; La Torre a Ve-roes; cachapas US\$2-3; 🕒 5am-7pm Mon-Sat) If you want it cheap and fast, this barlike restaurant keeps the *cachapas* (large, flat corn pancakes, served with cheese and/or ham) flying off the grill, and is conveniently located just off Plaza Bolívar.

**Kafta** (Map pp984-5; Gradillas a San Jacinto; 3-course menú US\$4; 🕒 noon-3:30pm Mon-Sat) Located above a busy market, Kafta has excellent Middle Eastern and Mediterranean dishes, from falafel to kabobs. The good-value lunch menu at this no-frills café changes daily.

**El Salón del Sabor** (Map pp984-5; ground fl, Edificio Iberia, Av Urdaneta, Esq Animas, La Candelaria; 3-course menú US\$5; 🕒 7am-4pm Mon-Fri) This restaurant dishes up vegetarian and meat lunches with portions that are enough to keep you satisfied through a day of sightseeing.

### Sabana Grande

Sabana Grande is full of budget restaurants and a few decent midrange places too.

**Restaurant El Arabito** (Map pp988-9; Av Casanova; snacks US\$2, meals US\$4-6; 🕒 9am-9pm) Hard to miss in the middle of Av Casanova, El Arabito is a spacious Middle Eastern restaurant with fast-

food options such as falafel. It also offers more extravagant dishes for those who have a little extra time to stick around and enjoy.

**Arepera Doña Petrica** (Map pp988-9; Av Casanova; meals US\$3-4; ☎ 24hr) This *arepa* (grilled corn pancake), *cachapa* and sandwich restaurant serves healthy-sized, inexpensive portions to groups of beer drinking locals. It is a casual place to introduce yourself to the basics of Venezuelan cuisine.

**El Gourmet Vegetariano** (Map pp988-9; Av Los Jardines, La Campiña; buffet US\$4; ☎ 11:30am-2:30pm Mon-Fri; ☒) Over 50 years of successful business can't be wrong. El Gourmet is a venerated vegetarian spot, known for its quality buffet.

**Gran Café** (Map pp988-9; Blvd de Sabana Grande; 2-course menú US\$4.25; ☎ 6am-11pm Mon-Fri) This open-air café smack in the center of the busy street market is the perfect vantage point to watch people and all of the vibrant stalls, while enjoying a coffee, pastry or filling lunch.

**Restaurant Vegetariano Sabas Nieves** (Map pp988-9; Calle Pascual Navarro 12; buffet US\$4.50; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat) Sabas Nieves changes its specials and fixed-price lunches every day so it can keep vegetarians entertained for the length of their stay in Sabana Grande.

## Las Mercedes & Altamira

### LAS MERCEDES

With Las Mercedes' reputation as a fashionable dining district that becomes particularly lively in the evening, most restaurants here cater to an affluent clientele, but there are also some budget options.

**Restaurant Real Past** (Map pp990-1; Av Río de Janeiro; mains US\$2-6) It may not have much in terms of style, but it does have hearty portions of Italian dishes at reasonable prices. Try the lasagne.

**El Granjero del Este** (Map pp990-1; Av Río de Janeiro; mains US\$3-9; ☎ 24hr) El Granjero has a pleasant courtyard and fountain surrounded by tables giving it a nicer ambience than most other 24-hour places. It also has an *arepa* bar, and a diverse menu offering a good *parrilla* (mixed grill).

**La Casa del Llano** (Map pp990-1; Av Río de Janeiro, mains US\$4-8; ☎ 24hr) Here they keep it going all night, with Venezuelan standards and a *parrilla*. It is a top choice for a meal, light snack or a few rounds of icy Venezuelan beers.

### ALTAMIRA & CASTELLANA

**El Naturista** (Map pp990-1; cnr 1a Transversal & Av San Felipe; arepas US\$1-3) One of very few Venezuelan-

style restaurants in Castellana's glut of Hooters, McDonalds TGIFriday's and other American chain offerings. El Naturista serves up *arepas*, *cachapas* and other local standards in its cool, spacious dining area.

**La Ghiringhella Café & Deli** (Map pp990-1; Av Andrés Bello at 4a Transversal, Los Palos Grandes; breakfast & snacks US\$2-3; ☎ 8am-6pm) Separated from the street by a wall of plants, this open-air café has Venezuelan favorites and affordable breakfasts.

**El Budare de la Castellana** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 263-2696; cnr Mendoza & Riba; arepas and cachapas US\$2-4, dishes US\$3-12) This established two-story corner restaurant keeps the crowds coming through all day. Service is top notch and you can order everything from *arepas*, coffee and inexpensive snacks to steaks and other rather pricey meals.

**Flor de Castilla** (Map pp990-1; Av Avila; sandwiches US\$2-5; ☎ 7am-10pm) This down-to-earth place has sandwiches, ice cream, burgers and really good juices. Try the 'Manhattan' juice. It is open later than other places in the neighborhood.

**Restaurant El Presidente** (Map pp990-1; 3a Av, Los Palos Grandes; 3-course menú US\$6; ☎ 11:30am-3pm & 6-9pm Mon-Fri) This simple café is another of the hard-to-come-by cheap options in Altamira, and is good for its home-style set-lunch menus.

## DRINKING

Las Mercedes and La Castellana (particularly Centro Comercial San Ignacio) hold most of the city's nightlife, but bars and discos dot other suburbs as well, including Sabana Grande, El Rosal and Altamira. Many nightclubs have basic dress codes. If a club has a cover charge, it often entitles you to your first drink or two.

**Centro Comercial San Ignacio** (Map pp990-1; cnr Blandín & San Ignacio) Yes, it's a mall, but it comes alive at night with a number of bars, restaurants and lounges. Different venues fill up on different nights, so just head over and see what's happening. Some of the more consistent places include Whisky Bar and, on weekends, Loft – the club on the top floor.

**Gran Pizzería El León** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 263-6014; Plaza La Castellana) A famous Caracas spot to sit on a terrace in the shadow of a skyscraper and knock back beers. On weekends it attracts crowds of dedicated drinkers and it can fill up at peak hours.

**Birras Pub & Café** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 992-4813; Av Principal de Las Mercedes at Av Valle Arriba; ☎ open late)

Appropriately named with the Italian word for beer, this is one of many beer drinking places in Las Mercedes. Birras tends to be a bit cheaper and can attract a fun crowd.

**Transnocho Cultural Lounge** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 993-1325; Edificio Itaca, Centro Comercial Paseo de Las Mercedes, Las Mercedes; 🕒 Thu-Sun) This minimalist bar with low-key funk music and mirrored ceiling is frequented by theatergoers.

## ENTERTAINMENT

The Sunday edition of *El Universal* carries a 'what's on' section called the 'Guía de la Ciudad' and there is a free entertainment paper called CCS on offer outside of many restaurants and bars. Both give descriptions of selected upcoming events including music, theater, cinema and exhibitions.

**El Maní es Así** (Map pp988-9; ☎ 763-6671; Av Francisco Solano López at Calle El Cristo, Sabana Grande; 🕒 Tue-Sun) One of the city's longest-running salsa spots, where everything revolves around the dance floor and the live salsa bands. Take taxis after dark as the area is not safe.

**Ateneo de Caracas** (☎ 577-9878; Av México, Plaza Morelos, Los Caobos; tickets US\$8-20) Venezuela's best-known theater company performs here.

**Aula Magna** (Map pp988-9; ☎ 605-4516; Universidad Central de Venezuela) This place hosts concerts by the local symphony orchestra, usually on Sunday morning. Purchase tickets at door; price varies.

**Complejo Cultural Teresa Carreño** (Map pp984-5; ☎ 574-9122; opposite Parque Central; tours US\$50; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sat) The spot for big concerts.

**Cinematoteca Nacional** (Map pp984-5; ☎ 576-1491; www.cinematoteca.org.ve; Galería de Arte Nacional, Bellas Artes) For movies.

## GAY & LESBIAN VENUES

Caracas has by far the most open gay community in what is still a relatively conservative country. For an overview of more venues, check the websites [www.republicagay.com](http://www.republicagay.com) and [www.vengay.com](http://www.vengay.com) (all in Spanish). There are long established gay and lesbian bars and clubs in Las Mercedes, Sabana Grande and Castellana.

**Tasca Pullman** (Map pp988-9; ☎ 761-1112; Edificio Ovidio ground fl, Av Francisco Solano López, Sabana Grande; 🕒 till late) Pullman is the most popular of a group of small gay taverns in Sabana Grande. It is no frills and no pretense. Never walk alone on the surrounding pedestrian streets after dark.

**Zenon** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 993-8004; Nivel Cine, Centro Comercial Paseo Las Mercedes, Las Mercedes; admission \$8; 🕒 11pm-5am Thu-Sat) For a more progressive club environment, make your way to this extravagant spot hidden away behind a big black door in a shopping mall. It's on the cinema level in the parking garage, to the right and up a ramp – look for the purple neon lighting.

## Sports

**Estadio de Béisbol** (Baseball Stadium; Map pp988-9; metro Ciudad Universitaria) *Béisbol* (baseball) is the local sporting obsession. Professional-league games are played from October to February at this stadium on the grounds of the Universidad Central de Venezuela. Tickets should be bought here early in the morning, particularly for games with the Leones de Caracas (Caracas Lions; [www.leones.com](http://www.leones.com)).

## SHOPPING

Shopping is one of the city's greatest pastimes. La Candelaria, Sabana Grande, Chacaíto, Chacao and the historic center are all tightly packed with stores, malls, stalls and street vendors. The malls are an important part of *caraqueño* life – so shelve any preconceptions and check one out for a social experience if nothing else. There are a lot of good buys on the streets too (particularly in Sabana Grande and the historic center).

Some of the main malls:

**Centro Comercial Chacaíto** (Map pp988-9; Plaza Chacaíto, Chacaíto)

**Centro Comercial San Ignacio** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 263-0772; Av Blandín, La Castellana; 🕒 10am-8pm; 🅐) This mall is also one of the city's best centers for nightlife (p995).

**Centro Comercial El Recreo** (Map pp988-9; ☎ 761-2740; Av Casanova; 🕒 10am-8pm) This is the big one in Sabana Grande.

**Centro Comercial Paseo Las Mercedes** (Map pp990-1; Av Principal de Las Mercedes, Las Mercedes; 🅐)

**Centro Sambil** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 267-9302; Av Libertador, Chacao; 🕒 9am-9pm, restaurants & cinema later; 🅐) Claims to be the biggest in South America.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

The **Aeropuerto Internacional 'Simón Bolívar'** ([www.aeropuerto-maiquetia.com.ve](http://www.aeropuerto-maiquetia.com.ve) in Spanish) is in Maiquetía, near the port of La Guaira on the Caribbean coast, 26km from central Caracas. The airport is frequently referred to as 'Maiquetía.' The



airport has two terminals, the **international terminal** (☎ 303-1526) and the **domestic terminal** (☎ 303-1403). They are separated by an easy walk of 400m (though you are not allowed to take luggage carts from one terminal to the other). There's a free shuttle service between the terminals.

The terminals have most conveniences, including a tourist office, car rental, *casas de cambio*, a bank, ATMs, post and telephone offices, places to eat and a bunch of travel agencies. It even has a chapel, but at the time of writing lacked a left-luggage office (however one is planned).

The domestic terminal doesn't have official money-changing facilities (so it is overrun with black marketers), but does have a tourist office. **Inatur** (☎ 355-1191; ☎ 7am-8pm), cybercafé and a dozen desks for car-rental companies, domestic airlines and tour operators, plus fast-food outlets.

## Bus

Caracas has two modern intercity bus terminals and a central terminal for shorter journeys. The Terminal La Bandera, 3km south of the center, handles long-distance buses to anywhere in the country's west and southwest. The terminal is just 300m from La Bandera metro station and you can walk the distance during the day, but take precautions at night

when the area becomes unsafe. The terminal has good facilities, including computerized ticket booths, telephones, a **left-luggage office** (per 1st hr/hr thereafter US\$5/15¢; ☎ 6am-9pm Mon-Sat, 7am-7pm Sun), an **information desk** (☎ 693-6607) and a plentiful supply of food outlets.

The city's other bus terminal, the Terminal de Oriente, is on the eastern outskirts of Caracas (Map pp984-5), on the highway to Barcelona, 5km beyond Petare (about 18km from the center). It's accessible by numerous local buses from both the city center and Petare. A taxi from Altamira will cost US\$4. The terminal features computerized ticket booths and a helpful **information desk** (☎ 243-2606). It handles much of the traffic to the east and southeast of the country.

Buses to the airport depart from Parque Central.

## Car & Motorcycle

Driving into and out of Caracas is pretty straightforward. The major western access route is the Valencia-Caracas freeway, which enters the city from the south and joins Autopista Francisco Fajardo, the main east-west city artery, next to the Universidad Central de Venezuela. From anywhere in the east, access is by the Barcelona-Caracas freeway, which will take you directly to Av Francisco Fajardo.

### BUSES FROM CARACAS TO MAJOR DESTINATIONS

Destination	Distance (km)	Fare (US\$)	Duration (hr)
Barcelona	310	7-11	5
Barinas	512	10-14	8½
Barquisimeto	341	7-10	5½
Carúpano	521	11-16	8½
Ciudad Bolívar	591	12-18	9
Ciudad Guayana	706	13-18	10½
Coro	446	10-13	7
Cumaná	402	9-13	6½
Maracaibo	669	13-17	10½
Maracay	109	2-4	1½
Mérida	790	15-25	13
Puerto Ayacucho	637	16-20	15
Puerto La Cruz	320	7-11	5
San Antonio del Táchira	865	17-28	14
San Cristóbal	825	15-30	13
San Fernando de Apure	398	8-15	8
Tucupita	730	13-22	11
Valencia	158	3-5	2½

If you fly into Caracas without any previous arrangements, contact car-rental companies at the Maiquetía airport. Operators in the international terminal include **Avis** (☎ 355-1190) and **Hertz** (☎ 355-1197), but they can't always provide a car on demand. You'll find more desks of local companies in the domestic terminal. Major rental companies also have desks in the lobbies of top-end hotels.

## GETTING AROUND

### Bus

The extensive bus network covers all suburbs within the metropolitan area, as well as major neighboring localities. *Carritos* (small buses) are the main type of vehicle operating city routes. They run frequently but move only as fast as the traffic allows. However, they go to many destinations inaccessible by metro, are similarly priced and run later at night.

### Car & Motorcycle

Driving in Caracas is only for people with lots of confidence, lots of nerves and a lot more insurance. It is easy to get lost and the traffic can be maddening. It is recommended to pay to park your car in the monitored lots that are common around town.

### Metro

Caracas is in many ways synonymous with chaos. So it is somewhat out of step that the city's **metro** (www.metrodecaracas.com.ve in Spanish; per 1-3 stations US15¢, 4-7 stations US20¢, any longer route US25¢; ☎ 5:30am-11pm) is safe, fast, easy, well organized, clean and affordable – and it serves most major city attractions and tourist facilities. While the metro is generally safe, do be aware of the occasional pickpocket.

### Taxi

Identifiable by the 'Taxi' or 'Libre' sign, taxis are a fairly inexpensive means of getting around and sometimes the only option at night. None have meters, so always fix the fare before boarding – and don't be afraid to bargain. It is recommended that you use only white cars with yellow plates and preferably those from taxi ranks, of which there are plenty, especially outside shopping malls. Alternatively, many hotels or restaurants will call a reliable driver for you upon request.

## AROUND CARACAS

There are a number of exciting and decidedly different places to visit within close proximity to the bustle of Caracas. Also covered in this section are the Caribbean islands of Los Roques. The islands aren't usually a day trip, but Caracas is the main jumping-off point.

### PARQUE NACIONAL EL ÁVILA

One of the great attractions of the Caracas area, this national park encompasses some 90km of the coastal mountain range north of the city. The highest peak in the range is Pico Naiguatá (2765m), while the most visited is Pico El Ávila (2105m). The **teleférico** (cable car; ☎ 793-7418; adult/under 12/over 65 US\$9.50/5.50/5; ☎ 8am-7:45pm Tue-Sun, 10am-7:45pm Mon) runs 4km from Maripérez station (980m), next to Av Boyacá in Caracas, to Pico El Ávila.

The southern slope of the range, overlooking Caracas, is uninhabited but is crisscrossed with about 200km of walking trails. El Ávila provides better facilities for walkers than any other national park in Venezuela. Most of the trails are well signposted, and there are a number of campgrounds.

A dozen entrances lead into the park from Caracas; all originate from Av Boyacá, commonly known as Cota Mil (at an altitude of 1000m). All routes have a short ascent before reaching a guard post, where you pay a nominal entrance fee. Vans run between Maripérez station and just to the north of Bellas Artes metro station. On the weekend, regular jeeps (to the left as you exit the *teleférico*) run to the tiny village of Galipan (US\$1, 12 minutes), which has a cluster of cheaper restaurants.

### COLONIA TOVAR

☎ 0244 / pop 9500

Not your average Venezuelan town, Colonia Tovar was founded in the 19th century by German settlers. It wasn't until the 1940s that Spanish was introduced as the official language and the ban on marrying outside the community was abandoned. In 1963 a paved road from Caracas reached 60km west to this Teutonic enclave.

### Information

The village has a few banks.

**Cyber X** (internet per hr US\$1; ☎ 10am-6:30pm) Five minutes up the road to Caracas, next to a pharmacy.

## Sights & Activities

Today Colonia Tovar draws international and Venezuelan tourists (particularly on weekends). They come for the **Black Forest architecture**, German cuisine, locally grown strawberries and the agreeable climate. Bring some warm clothing as it can get a bit chilly at night.

## Sleeping & Eating

The accommodations here are of a high standard, but don't come cheap by Venezuelan standards.

**Cabañas Silkerbrunnen** (☎ 355-1490; www.colonia tovar.net; d/tr/q US\$20/26/32, with kitchen US\$26/30/36; (P)) Some of the best-priced cabins in town are on offer at this friendly, flower-filled complex set into the hillside, in the back street just below the church.

**Cabañas Breidenbach** (☎ 355-1211; www.colonia tovar.net; Sector El Calvario; d/tr US\$22/29, d with kitchen & fireplace US\$28; (P)) On the mountainside above the town center, these *cabañas* (cabins) are large and modern with majestic views. It's worth going for a double with kitchen, salon, and wood fireplace to ward off the chilly mountain air.

**Hotel Restaurant Kaiserstuhl** (☎ 355-1810; Calle Joaquín; d/tr US\$26/49; (P)) Located in the heart of town near the cemetery, Hotel Restaurant Kaiserstuhl has comfortable rooms plus the full pseudo-German tourist experience, including a restaurant with piped folk music and wait staff in traditional dress and braided hair.

**Rancho Alpino** (☎ 355-1470; www.hotelranchoalpino.com; Av Principal; d US\$30; (P)) The spacious and spotless Alpine Ranch also has a bar and restaurant serving German food and pizza. This, like most places in town, is a great place to relax.

## Getting There & Away

To get from Caracas to Colonia Tovar, you must change at El Junquito. All shared cars and minibuses to El Junquito depart from Lecuna at San Juan Puerto Escondido in the center of Caracas (US\$50¢, 45 minutes to 1½ hours on the weekend). There are also buses to El Junquito (US\$70¢). There's no terminal, but you can catch them on Av Lecuna or Av Universidad. From El Junquito, *por puesto* vans take you the remainder of the journey (US\$1, one hour).

## SAN FRANCISCO DE YARE

☎ 0239 / pop 20,000

Normally a tranquil town, San Francisco de Yare explodes into a frenzied mass of costumed revelers in devil masks for the annual Festival de Los Diablos Danzantes. This famous event has been celebrated here on Corpus Christi (the 60th day after Easter, a Thursday in May or June) since 1742. The day is not a national holiday, but it seems very much so in San Francisco de Yare as the town spends months gearing up for the festival.

San Francisco de Yare has no regular hotels, but it is a very easy day trip from Caracas. Take one of the frequent buses to Ocumare del Tuy (US\$90¢, 1½ hours) from the Nuevo Circo regional bus terminal and change for the bus to Santa Rerest del Tuy, which drops you off in San Francisco de Yare (US\$50¢, 20 minutes). Make sure you come early on festival days.

## ARCHIPIÉLAGO LOS ROQUES

☎ 0237 / pop 1500

Los Roques is a group of nearly 300 shimmering, sandy islands and islets that lie in aquamarine waters some 160km due north

### DANCING WITH DEVILS

Drums pound while hundreds of dancers clad in red devil costumes and diabolical masks writhe through the streets. This is the festival of the **Diablos Danzantes (Dancing Devils)**, a wild spectacle that takes place in Venezuela one day before Corpus Christi and on the holy day itself.

Why devils on such a holy day in such a Catholic country? It is said that the festival demonstrates the struggle between good and evil. In the end, the costumed devils always submit to the church and demonstrate the eventual triumph of good.

The festival is a blend of Spanish and African traditions. The origins lie in Spain, where devils' images and masks were part of Corpus Christi feasts in medieval Andalusia. When the event was carried over to colonial Venezuela, it resonated with African slaves who had their own tradition of masked festivals. They also added African music and dance to the celebration.

of Caracas. They may be part of Venezuela but have prices closer to other Caribbean island destinations. However, for those who appreciate beaches, snorkeling and diving the trip is worth every bolívar. Unlike other Caribbean islands, there are no high-rise hotels, no mass tourism and no cruise ships. The whole archipelago, complete with the surrounding waters (2211 sq km), was made a national park in 1972.

The great majority of the islands is uninhabited except by pelicans and can be visited by boats from Gran Roque. The surrounding waters are known for their sea life, particularly lobsters (which can be trapped from November through April and account for 90% of national production).

### Orientation & Information

The only village is on Gran Roque and is a grid of four or so sandy streets, a plaza and dozens of quaint *posadas*.

All visitors to Los Roques pay the US\$9.50 national-park entry fee upon arrival.

**Banescó** (☎ 221-1265; Plaza Bolívar; ☎ 9am-noon & 2:30-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat) The only bank; arranges cash advances on Visa and MasterCard with a maximum of US\$500. Has a 24-hour ATM.

**Enzosoft** (Calle la Laguna; per hr US\$10; ☎ variable) The better internet connection and bigger rip-off.

**Infocentro** (30min free; ☎ variable) For internet access, try the state-sponsored Infocentro near the school.

**Oscar Shop** (☎ 0414-291-9160; oscarshop@hotmail.com) A combination of shop, tour agency, boat operator and tourist office, near the airport.

### Activites

#### SNORKELING & SCUBA DIVING

You can get snorkeling gear at many shops and most *posadas*. Scuba diving is organized by several companies. Two dives generally cost US\$85 to US\$100.

The popular **Ecobuzos** (☎ 221-1235; www.ecobuzos.com; Calle la Laguna) offers classes and has boats going out multiple times per day. It has a big support staff and sizable boats.

Right on the plaza, **Aquatics Dive Center** (☎ 416-0009, 0414-777-4894; www.scubavenezuela.com; Plaza Bolívar) has smaller boats and requires that divers assemble their own BCDs and tanks, but is still of a high standard.

Two smaller but good dive shops are **SCDR Los Roques** (☎ 0414-924-1853) and **Eco Challenge** (☎ 0414-260-1167).

#### WINDSURFING & KITESURFING

Los Roques is also a top-notch spot for windsurfing of all levels. It's organized by **Vela Windsurf Center** (www.velawindsurf.com) on the island of Francisquí de Abajo, which rents equipment (US\$20/35/50 per hour/half-day/day) and can provide lessons for beginners (US\$40 for two hours including equipment). Or for something different, ask here for **kayaks** and lessons in **kite-surfing**. For more kitesurfing information, inquire with Libya or at Oscar Shop (below).

#### Tours

**Libya Parada** (☎ 0414-291-9240; libyapara@hotmail.com) A good-natured and knowledgeable guide based in Los Roques. She can help with everything from basic information to arranging complex tours.

**Oscar Shop** (☎ 414-5515; oscarshop@hotmail.com) This small shop provides boat transportation to the islands, organizes full-day boat tours and rents out snorkeling equipment and beach chairs.

#### Sleeping CAMPING

Free camping is allowed on all the islands within the recreation zone, including Gran Roque. After arrival, go to the **Inparques** (☎ 0414-373-1004; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-noon & 2:30-5:30pm Sat, 8:30am-noon Sun) office at the far end of the village for a free camping permit and information.

#### POSADAS

There are now over 60 *posadas* providing some 500 beds on Gran Roque. Prices are higher than the mainland. Many *posadas* also offer meals as there are few restaurants in Los Roques.

**Doña Carmen** (☎ 0414-291-9225; Plaza Bolívar; r per person incl breakfast & dinner US\$30-50) The longest-running *posada* on the island, Doña Carmen has been going for over 30 years and still has the best prices. The concrete rooms are nothing special, though a couple face onto the beach.

**Doña Magalys** (☎ 0414-373-1090; Plaza Bolívar; r per person incl breakfast & dinner US\$30-50) The other competitor for the fairest prices is this family home on the plaza. It has basic rooms that are serviceable, but lack decent light. Magalys cooks up filling meals served in a homey atmosphere with other guests.

**Posada El Botuto** (☎ 0414-291-9194; near the Inparques office; r per person incl breakfast US\$40-60) Known for its fantastic service and sociable dining

area, El Botuto has light, airy rooms, each with a small patio.

**Los Corales** (☎ 221-1025; [mideseo@cantv.net](mailto:mideseo@cantv.net); r per person incl breakfast & dinner US\$65-90) With the sounds of Bob Marley wafting out the front door, Los Corales is a tranquil, houseslike *posada*. While many of the *posadas* are dark and stuffy, this is cool and well ventilated. It has a great kitchen with vegetarian specialties.

## Eating

Since almost all *posadas* serve meals, there are few places that are strictly restaurants – and among those there are even fewer that are affordable.

**Panadería la Bella** (2 blocks back from the plaza, before Calle las Flores) The only place in town to get an inexpensive sandwich, empanada or snack is at this bakery that caters to locals.

**Aquarela CaféTours Shop** (Calle Principal; snacks US\$5-10) At the entrance to town from the airstrip is this trendy spot with beanbags on the beach. It is relatively expensive but worth it for the ambience. It has a full list of sandwiches, basic dishes and cocktails.

**La Chuchera** (Plaza Bolívar; mains US\$6.50-16; ☎ 11am-11pm) La Chuchera is the main budget restaurant in town (although prices are still not cheap). It serves pizza (including a vegetarian option), sandwiches and pasta dishes with friendly service. It is also a fun place to have beers with new friends in the evening.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Airfares to Los Roques differ, so shop around. The Maiquetía–Los Roques flight is usually in the range of US\$100 and takes some 40 minutes. It is easiest to book flights through an agency. Almost any established tour agency can book a Los Roques flight for you at no

extra cost. The small carriers include the following:

**AeroEjecutivos** (☎ 0212-993-1984; [www.aeroejecutivos.com.ve](http://www.aeroejecutivos.com.ve))

**Línea Turística Aereotuy** (LTA; ☎ in Caracas 212-355-1297; [www.tuy.com/aereotuy.htm](http://www.tuy.com/aereotuy.htm))

**Transaven** (☎ 355-2786; [www.transaven.com](http://www.transaven.com))

LTA and **Rutaca** (☎ 212-576-0304) also fly to Los Roques from Isla de Margarita (US\$100 to US\$200 one way).

Normally only 10kg of free luggage is permitted on flights to Los Roques, and you pay US\$50¢ for every additional kilogram.

### BOAT

There are no passenger boats to Los Roques, only cargo boats that depart two or three times a week (usually in the evening) from Muelle 7 in La Guaira port. They often take passengers for a small fee or sometimes even free of charge. However, the boats have no schedule and it's almost impossible to find out in advance the departure day and time. You have to go to the port and look for the captain. The trip takes about 12 hours and can be rough.

## Getting Around

Oscar Shop or other boat operators in Gran Roque will take you to the island of your choice and pick you up at a prearranged time and date. Round-trip fares per person are Madrizquí (US\$5), the Francisquises (US\$6), and Crasquí or Noronquises (US\$10).

# THE NORTHWEST

Easily accessible from Caracas, the country's northwest is stocked with beaches, rainforests, deserts, caves, waterfalls, 12 national parks and South America's largest lake. Parque Nacional Morrocoy attracts visitors with its colorful reefs, beaches and Sahara-like desert near the colonial town of Coro. Parque Nacional Henri Pittier is a favorite stop for backpackers and Venezuelans to hang out, soak up the sun and enjoy a few drinks or break out the binoculars and spot rare birds.

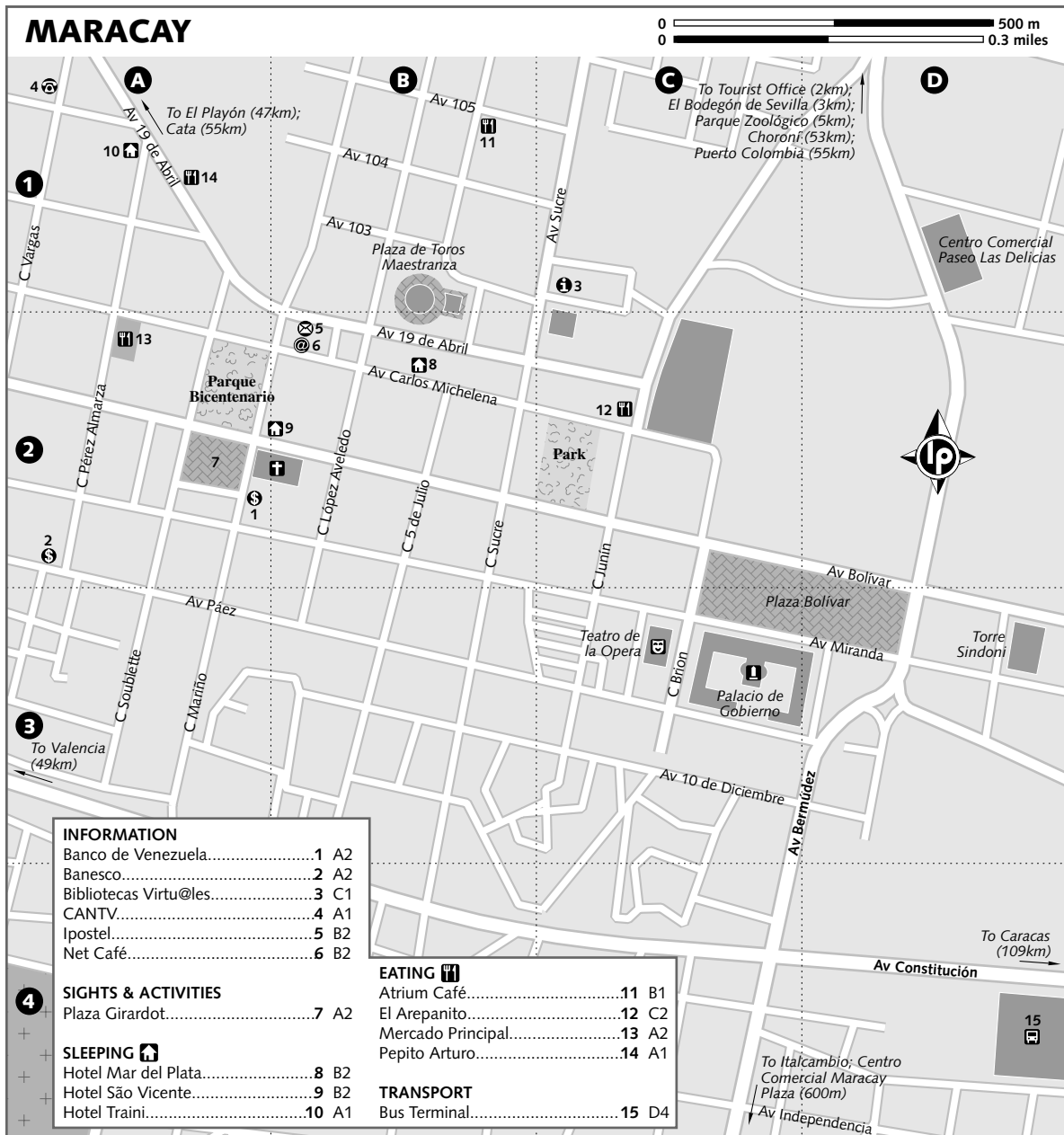
## MARACAY

☎ 0243 / pop 700,000

A couple of hours from Caracas, the Ciudad Jardín (Garden City) Maracay is a world apart. It is a chilled-out town of hot weather, green

### SPLURGE!

Technically, any trip to Los Roques is a splurge, but if you want to break the budget even a little more, make sure to dine on fresh seafood while watching the sunset from **Bora la Mar** (☎ 0414-325-7814, 0237-221-1289; next to the church; mains US\$20) and follow that up with cocktails on the beach at the surprisingly swanky La Gotera Art Café (at the point separating the two beaches).



parks, leafy plazas and friendly locals. It is a provincial capital and the center of an important agricultural and industrial area. The city is usually visited as a stopover on the way to Parque Nacional Henri Pittier and doesn't have many attractions to otherwise hold the traveler.

**Orientation & Information**

There are internet facilities in the Centro Comercial Paseo Las Delicias and Torre Sindoni.

There are no banks in Parque Nacional Henri Pittier (opposite). Those planning to stay in any of the towns in the park for a few days should stock up on cash here in Maracay.

- Banco de Venezuela** (Calle Mariño)
- Banescos** (Av Páez)

- Bibliotecas Virtu@les** (Av Sucre; per hr US40¢; ☎ 9am-6:30pm Mon-Sat) Slow, but cheap.
- CANTV** (cnr Calle Vargas & Calle López Avelado; internet per hr US70¢; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun)
- Ipostel** (Av 19 de Abril; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)
- Italcambio** (☎ 235-6945; No 110-K, Centro Comercial Maracay Plaza, cnr Avs Aragua & Bermúdez, 1st fl; ☎ 8:30am-12:30pm & 1:30-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Located 1.5km south of Plaza Bolívar.
- Net Café** (no 24, Centro Comercial La Capilla, Av Santos Michelana, 1st fl; per hr US90¢; ☎ 10am-6:30pm Mon-Sat) Twice the price of Bibliotecas Virtu@les, but twice as fast.

**Sights**

The historic heart of Maracay is actually not at Plaza Bolívar, it is **Plaza Girardot**. It features a large obelisk topped with a bronze eagle, which

commemorates the North American volunteers who joined the independence war forces led by Francisco Miranda. They were captured and hanged in 1806 by the Spaniards.

## Sleeping

Maracay has quite a choice of hotels and restaurants right in the city center. If you are taking an early morning bus it is better to stay in the city center and catch a taxi to the bus station than to stay near the bus station – where the options are limited and the neighborhood isn't safe after dark.

**Hotel São Vicente** (☎ 247-0321; Av Bolívar; d with fan/air-con US\$8/12; 🚽) This is one of the best-priced options in the city center. The rooms have been refurbished and offer matrimonial beds.

**Hotel Mar del Plata** (☎ 246-4313; Av Santos Michelena Este 23; s/d/tr US\$12/14/16; 🚽) A little more expensive, but noticeably better than other central budget options is this peaceful hotel. Mar del Plata has tidy, clean rooms with hot water.

**Hotel Traini** (☎ 245-5502; Av 19 de Abril; d/tr/q US\$16/19/25; 🚽) While not winning in personality, this street-level hotel is clean, secure and dependable.

## Eating

**Mercado Principal** (Av Santos Michelena) For a really inexpensive and filling meal, try one of the many food stalls.

**El Arepanito** (Av 19 de Abril at Junín; arepas US\$1.25-2; 🕒 6am-2am; 🚽) Open later than most places in town, this popular restaurant has a pleasant plant-filled patio where they serve tasty *arepas*, pizza and fruit juices.

**Pepito Arturo** (Av 19 de Abril; hamburgers US\$2-4; 🕒 10:30am-11:30pm) A casual and cheerful fast-food stop, Arturo's is the place to chow down on a cheap *parrilla* followed by a *batido* (fruit juice).

**El Bodegón de Sevilla** (Av Las Delicias; mains US\$5-8.50; 🕒 11:30am-late; 🚽) Housed in an attractive old mansion, this Spanish-style bar and restaurant has an extensive menu including tapas, and an equally abundant bar.

## Getting There & Away

The bus terminal is on the southeastern outskirts of the city center. It's within walking distance of Plaza Bolívar, but it's quicker to take any of the frequent city buses or a short cab ride.

The bus terminal has frequent transportation to most major cities. Buses to Caracas depart every 15 minutes or so (US\$2 to US\$4, 1½ hours), as do buses to Valencia (US\$65¢, one hour).

There are at least a dozen departures a day to Barquisimeto (US\$4 to US\$6, four hours), Maracaibo (US\$9 to US\$12, eight hours) and San Cristóbal (US\$11 to US\$14, 11 hours). Half-a-dozen buses run to San Antonio del Táchira (US\$14, 12½ hours), Coro (US\$8 to US\$10, 6½ hours) and Mérida (US\$11 to US\$14, 11 hours). There are direct buses to Puerto La Cruz (US\$9 to US\$12, seven hours) and Ciudad Bolívar (US\$19, nine hours); these buses bypass Caracas, saving time and money. Several ordinary buses per day go to San Fernando de Apure (US\$8, seven hours).

For transportation to El Playón and Puerto Colombia, see p1005.

## PARQUE NACIONAL HENRI PITTIER

☎ 0243

Venezuela's oldest and one of its most accessible national parks, Henri Pittier rolls over 1078 sq km of the rugged coastal mountain range and then plunges down to epic Caribbean beaches. There is something for everyone including a glistening coastline, 580 species of birds, twisting hiking trails through the green mountains, and quaint colonial towns with tasty food, comfortable *posadas* and even a bit of nightlife.

Two paved roads cross the park from north to south. The eastern road goes from Maracay north to Choroní (climbing to 1830m) and reaches the coast 2km further on at Puerto Colombia. The western road leads from Maracay to Ocumare de la Costa and El Playón, then continues to Cata; it ascends to 1128m at Paso Portachuelo. Both roads are about 55km long. There's no road connection between the coastal ends of these roads.

## Sights & Activities

### PUERTO COLOMBIA AREA BEACHES

Around Puerto Colombia the most popular beach is **Playa Grande**, a five- to 10-minute walk by road east of town. It's about half a kilometer long and is shaded by coconut palms, but is busy and can be littered on weekends. There are several restaurants at the entrance to the beach. You can camp on the beach or sling your hammock between the palms, but don't leave your stuff unattended.

If Playa Grande is too crowded or littered, go to the undeveloped **Playa El Diario**, on the opposite (western) side of the town.

Other beaches in the area that are normally visited by boat include **Playa Aroa** (US\$30 round trip per boat, 15 minutes one way), **Playa Valle Seco** (US\$22, 20 minutes), **Playa Chuao** (US\$25, 30 minutes) and **Playa Cepe** (US\$32, 45 minutes).

### EL PLAYÓN AREA BEACHES

Further west, **El Playón** skirts the northern edge of the town of the same name. There are actually several small beaches here, the best of which is **Playa Malibú**, close to the Malecón.

Five kilometers eastward is the area's most famous beach, **Playa Cata**. The beach is a postcard crescent of sand bordering Bahía de Cata, and marred only by two ugly apartment towers looming over the beach. There are plenty of shack restaurants and one basic *posada* (double US\$10) on the western side.

Boats from Playa Cata take tourists to the smaller and quieter **Playa Catita** (US\$2 one way) and usually deserted **Playa Cuyagua** (US\$10). Both can be reached overland for a cheaper price.

## Sleeping & Eating

### PUERTO COLOMBIA

Chorni may be the largest town on this side of the park, but Puerto Colombia is closer to the beach and therefore more popular. The strikingly attractive colonial village is packed with *posadas* and restaurants and is one of the major backpacker hangouts in Venezuela. Days are spent on the beach and evenings are whiled away in restaurants or sipping *guarapita* (the cane alcohol *aguardiente* with passion-fruit juice and lots of sugar) down on the waterfront. There are no banks in town, so remember to get cash in Maracay.

**Hostal Colonial** (www.choroni.net; Calle Morillo 37; d US\$12, d/tr with bathroom US\$15/17) The classic *hostal* in town, Colonial is a sociable place with a wide variety of rooms, a courtyard out back, lockers, a kitchen and tours of the area. The service can be a bit gruff.

**Posada Alfonso** (☎ 991-1037; Calle Principal 50; d US\$15-20) A basic spot toward the back of town, Posada Alfonso is quiet, relaxed and friendly.

**Posada La Parchita** (☎ 991-1233; Calle Trino Rangel; d/tr/q US\$18/25/28; (P)) This cozy and quiet family-run *posada* is tucked away down a backstreet next to the river. It has a handful

of simple, tidy rooms with fans set around a nice little patio.

**Hostal Vista Mar** (☎ 991-1250; vistamarchoroni@hotmail.com; Calle Colón; d/tr/q US\$20/25/27; (P)) This simple hostel is perched at the end of the seafront boulevard, and near a small park. Rooms are plain and a little dark, with cold-water bathrooms. A plus are the hammocks overlooking the sea on the breezy rooftop.

**Posada Tom Carel** (☎ 991-1220; www.posadatomcarel.com; Calle Trino Rangel; d US\$60; (S)) This colorful midrange family *posada* near Hostal Colonial has plenty of attention to detail with intricate mosaics on the walls. Rooms are small and well kept – many with hammocks strung up over the beds.

**Tasca Bahía** (Calle Los Cocos; mains US\$3.50-5; ☎ 8am-10pm) Great, down-to-earth spot for local seafood specialties.

**Bar Restaurant Araguaneys** (Calle Los Cocos 8; mains US\$5-15; ☎ 8am-11:30pm) Sit on the breezy upstairs terrace and enjoy international and *criollo* fare including a good selection of fresh fish.

**Restaurante Willy** (Via Playa Grande 1, right over the bridge on the right; ☎ dinner Wed-Sun; meals US\$7-15) Considered the best restaurant in town, Willy gets packed on weekends. Try the fish or pasta dishes, although everything is good.

### EL PLAYÓN

Puerto Colombia's sibling on the western road, El Playón has more than a dozen places to stay. The town is much larger than Puerto Colombia, but less attractive. Many places to stay are within a couple of blocks of the waterfront. There are a few ramshackle restaurants in town and hotels generally serve food on request. Expect prices to jump on weekends and holidays.

**Posada Loley** (☎ 993-1252; Calle Fuerzas Armadas; d/tr US\$15/18) This simple *posada*, one block back from the beach, is one of the cheapest and best budget options. It has a small garden and patio, laid-back host and meals available for guests.

**Hotel Costa de Oro** (☎ 951-1010; Calle California 2; s/d US\$21/27; (S)) Just at the edge of the sea, Costa de Oro offers spacious doubles with good hot-water bathrooms. Ask for a room with a seafront view.

**Posada de La Costa Eco-Lodge** (☎ 951-1006; www.ecovenezuela.com; Calle California 23; d with/without sea view US\$67/56; (S)) Set in harmony with the beach and surrounding gardens, the beautiful de La Costa Eco-Lodge provides neat rooms and a



relaxed atmosphere. It is worth the splurge for the rooms with the sea views and balconies.

### Getting There & Away

The departure point for the park is the Maracay bus terminal. Buses to El Playón (marked 'Ocumare de la Costa') depart every hour from 7am to 5pm (US\$1.50, two hours). They can let you off at Rancho Grande but will charge the full El Playón fare. The last bus back to Maracay departs at 5:30pm.

There are also hourly minibuses from Maracay to El Playón, but they depart from El Limón, not the bus terminal. The advantage is that they run longer, until about 7:30pm. From El Playón, you can catch a *carrito* to Playa Cata (US\$65¢, 10 minutes).

To Puerto Colombia, buses leave from the bus terminal every one or two hours (US\$2, 2¼ hours). The last bus back to Maracay theoretically departs from Puerto Colombia at 5pm (later on weekends), but this departure time is not reliable. There are taxis that leave from right behind the bus terminal (US\$20 during the day, US\$25 to US\$30 at night; 1½ hours). Look for other travelers in the bus station to share the cost.

## PARQUE NACIONAL MORROCOY

☎ 0259

If you had to select a single piece of Venezuelan coastline to visit, Parque Nacional Morrocoy would be a smart choice for both its beauty and variety. It comprises a strip of park on the mainland, and extends offshore to scores of islands, islets and cays. Some islands are fringed by white-sand beaches and surrounded by coral reefs. The most popular of the islands is Cayo Sombrero, which has fine (though increasingly damaged) coral reefs and some of the best beaches. Other snorkeling spots include Cayo Borracho, Playuela and Playuelita.

The park gets rather crowded on weekends, but is considerably less full during the week.

Chichiriviche (population 12,500) is the northern gateway to Parque Nacional Morrocoy, providing access to half-a-dozen neighboring cays. The waterfront has old, colorful fishing boats.

### Orientation & Information

The park lies between the towns of Tucacas and Chichiriviche, which are its main gateways. Chichiriviche is smaller than Tucacas,

but both are equally drab and unattractive. Both towns have accommodations, food and boats in good supply. Both towns have banks with 24-hour ATMs.

### Activities

Tucacas has two diving schools: the cheaper **Amigos del Mar Divers** (☎ 812-1754; amigos-del-mar@cantv.net; Calle Democracia) and the pricier **Submatur** (☎ 812-4640; Calle Ayacucho). Both offer diving courses and guided dives, and sell diving and snorkeling equipment, some of which can be rented. There are no diving operators in Chichiriviche.

Snorkeling gear can also be rented from some boat operators and hotel managers for about US\$4 per day. Some hotels have their own boats or have arrangements with the boat owners, and offer beach, snorkeling and bird-watching excursions.

### Sleeping & Eating

#### ISLANDS

With a tent, or hammock and mosquito net, you can stay on the islands; otherwise, you'll be limited to day trips out of Tucacas or Chichiriviche. Camping is officially permitted on four islands: Sal, Sombrero, Muerto and Paiclás. All four have beach restaurants or food kiosks, but some may be closed on weekdays in the low season, so come prepared. Before you go camping you have to contact the Inparques office in Tucacas and shell out a camping fee of US\$1 per person per night, payable at Banesco in Tucacas.

#### TUCACAS

Many of Tucacas' hotels and restaurants are on or nearby the 1km-long Av Libertador.

**Posada Amigos del Mar** (☎ 812-3962; Calle Nueva, past the hospital; d/tr US\$10/14) This pleasant *posada*, which is affiliated with the dive shop of the same name, has spacious rooms with bath and fan. Guests have use of the kitchen.

**Posada El Ancla** (☎ 812-0253; posadaelanca@cantv.net; Calle Páez, 2 blocks south of Av Libertador; d/q US\$18/22; ☎ ☎) Posada El Ancla is a small, affable, family-run place. The rooms don't have private bathrooms, but, interestingly enough, there are four shared bathrooms, exactly one per room.

**Posada d'Alexis** (☎ 812-3390; Calle Falcón; d US\$22-25, q US\$32; ☎ ☎ ☎) This is another small, quaint guesthouse, though this one has its own restaurant. The rooms are arranged

around a pool with a waterfall and dense weeping willows.

**Restaurant El Timón** (☎ 812-0783; Av Libertador; mains US\$5-8; 🍷) El Timón offers dependably tasty dishes – particularly seafood – at good prices, and you can eat it inside or at the tables outside.

### CHICHIRIVICHE

**Morena's Place** (☎ 815-0936; posadamorenas@hotmail.com; Sector Playa Norte; r per person US\$7) A classic budget option, this affordable *posada* is in a fine old house near the waterfront. It offers laundry service, budget meals, tours and rents out two kayaks. English spoken.

**Villa Gregoria** (☎ 818-6359; aagustinm@yahoo.es; Calle Mariño near the bus terminus; d with fan/air-con US\$13/20; 🍷) This Spanish-run and, therefore, Spanish-themed place has comfortable rooms with bathrooms. Ask for a room on the upper floor, where they are brighter and more attractive.

**Restaurant El Rincón de Arturo** (Av Zamora; breakfast/set lunch US\$2.50/3) A small, rustic place worth a try.

There are plenty of other budget eateries along Av Zamora. Among the best places in town are **Restaurant Casamare** (Av Zamora) and **Restaurant Txalupa** (Av Zamora), both on the waterfront.

### Getting There & Away

Tucacas sits on the Valencia–Coro road, so buses run frequently to both Valencia (US\$2, 1½ hours, 91km) and Coro (US\$5.50, 3½ hours, 197km). Buses from Valencia pass through regularly on their way to Chichiriviche (US\$75¢, 40 minutes, 35km).

Chichiriviche is about 22km off the main Morón–Coro highway and is serviced by half-hourly buses from Valencia (US\$2.80, 2½ hours, 126km).

There are no direct buses to Chichiriviche from Caracas or Coro. To get here from Caracas, take any of the frequent buses to Valencia (US\$2.50, 2½ hours, 158km) and change there for a Chichiriviche bus. From Coro, take any bus to Valencia, get off in Sanare (US\$5, 3¼ hours, 184km), at the turnoff for Chichiriviche, and then jump on a Valencia–Chichiriviche bus.

### Getting Around

Boats to the islands from both Tucacas and Chichiriviche take up to eight people and

charge the same for one as for eight. Popular destinations from Tucacas include Playa Paiclás (round trip US\$22), Playuela (US\$26) and Cayo Sombrero (US\$38). From Chichiriviche, popular trips include the close cays of Cayo Muerto (US\$10), Cayo Sal (US\$14) and Cayo Pelón (US\$14), and Cayo Sombrero (US\$38). Boats will pick you up from the island in the afternoon or on a later date. On weekdays during the low season, you can usually beat the price down.

### CORO

☎ 0268 / pop 165,000

Coro is a pleasant city best known as the entry point to Parque Nacional Médanos de Coro – Venezuela's little Saharan desert. However, Coro is also worth a visit for its gorgeous colonial architecture and welcoming university-town culture. Since Coro's historic center was declared a national monument in the 1950s, a number of the old houses have been restored. The cobblestone Calle Zamora, where most of the historic mansions are located, rivals any other colonial architecture in the country. In 1993, Coro was included on Unesco's World Heritage list.

### Information

There are a number of internet options in the center, though they tend to close by 8pm.

**Banco de Venezuela** (Paseo Talavera)

**Banco Mercantil** (Calle Falcón)

**Banesco** (Av Manare)

**Ciudad Bitácora** (cnr Calle Zamora & Calle Jansen;

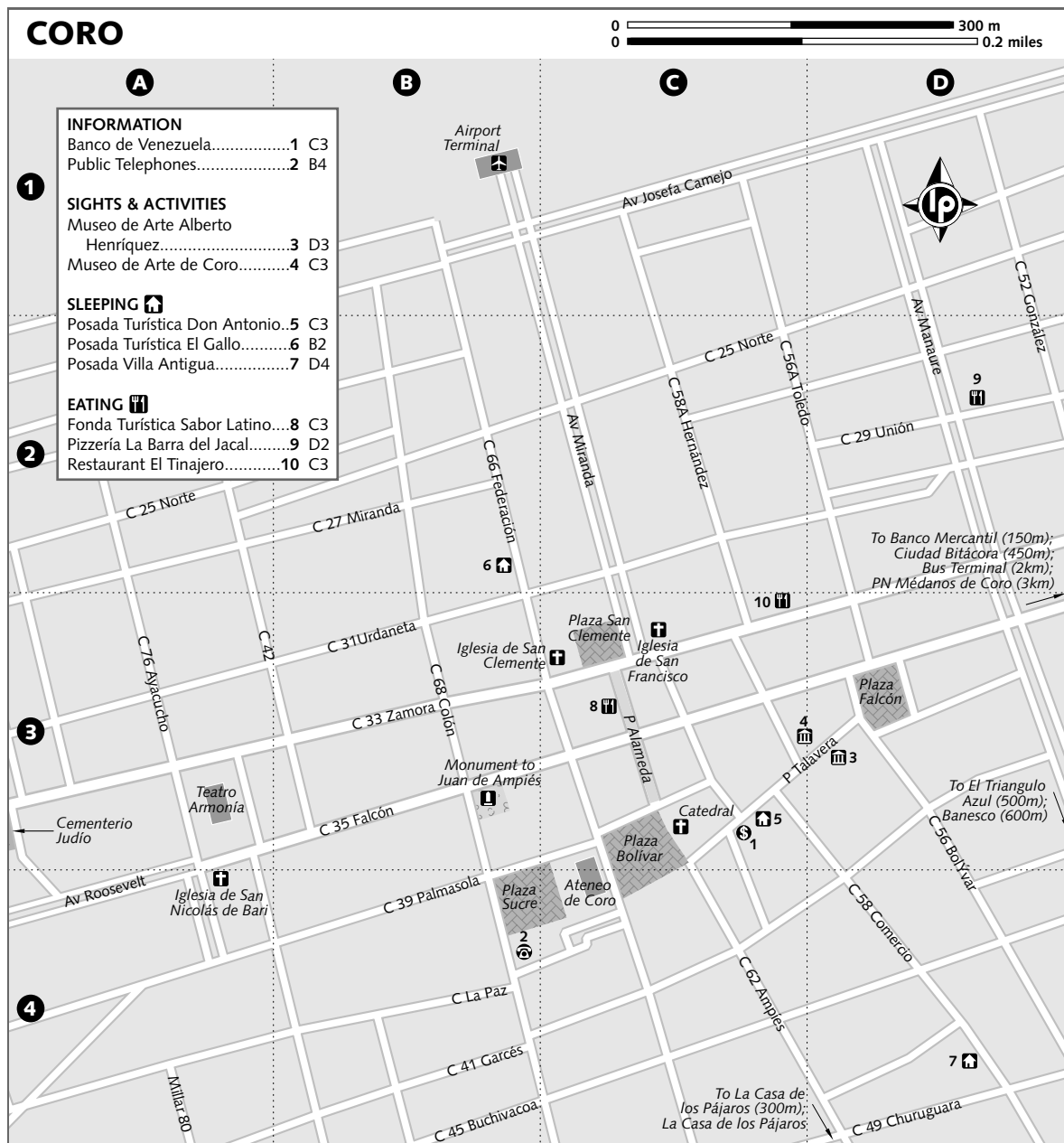
☎ 7am-2am) The largest and fastest cybercafé in town.

Take a sweater – it's cold!

### Sights

Hinting of the Sahara, the spectacular desert landscape of **Parque Nacional Médanos de Coro** (admission free; ☎ 7am-7:30pm) shelters sand dunes of 30m in height. To get there, take the Carabobo bus from Calle Falcón and get off 300m past the large Monumento a la Federación. From here it is a 10-minute walk north along a wide avenue to another public sculpture, the Monumento a la Madre.

All of the city's interesting museums are in restored colonial buildings. The **Museo de Arte de Coro** (☎ 251-5658; Paseo Talavera; admission free; ☎ 9am-12:30pm & 3-7:30pm Tue-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun), in a beautiful 18th-century mansion, is a branch of the Caracas Museo de Arte Contemporáneo and, like its parent, features thought-



provoking and well-presented temporary exhibitions.

Diagonally opposite in another great historic mansion, the **Museo de Arte Alberto Henríquez** (☎ 252-5299; Paseo Talavera; admission free; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-6pm Tue-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) also has modern art – shows change regularly but are always worth a visit.

### Sleeping

There are several budget places conveniently located in the historic center.

**La Casa de los Pájaros** (☎ 252-8215; [rstiuv@cantv.net](mailto:rstiuv@cantv.net); Calle Monzón No 74; dm US\$5, d with bathroom & fan US\$12, with air-con US\$16; ☎ ☎) This friendly private home welcomes travelers to its three small rooms and one four-bed dorm. Guests can

use the kitchen and internet (30 minutes free access per day).

**Posada Villa Antigua** (☎ 0414-682-2924; Calle Comercio No 46; d US\$12-16; ☎ ☎) The Villa Antigua (Old-fashioned Village) has some suitably old-fashioned rooms arranged around an attractive patio. The rooms have bathrooms and some not-so-old-fashioned quiet air-conditioners. Check out the inexpensive restaurant.

**Posada Turística El Gallo** (☎ 252-9481; [posadaelgallo2001@hotmail.com](mailto:posadaelgallo2001@hotmail.com); Calle Federación No 26; s/d/tr with fan US\$12/14/18) In a restored colonial building, this French-owned *posada* is one of the best deals in town. It's simple, tidy and functional with a relaxing courtyard. No private bathrooms.

**Posada Turística Don Antonio** (☎ 253-9578; Paseo Talavera No 11; d/tr US\$18/22; ☎ ☎) Rebuilt in colonial

style, Don Antonio is a newish *posada* right in the city's heart. All of the comfortable rooms here are equipped with bathrooms and air-conditioning.

### Eating

Coro is brimming with plenty of budget restaurants.

**Fonda Turística Sabor Latino** (Paseo La Alameda; breakfast US\$2, lunch US\$2-3; ☎ 8am-8pm; 🍴) Nestled in the central pedestrian mall, this is the place for Venezuelan standards and some of the cheapest meals in town (including 14 different set breakfasts).

**Restaurant El Tinajero** (Calle Zamora; mains US\$2-4) El Tinajero is a laid-back and inexpensive eatery serving popular Venezuelan fare on two tiny patios of a rustic historic house.

**Pizzería La Barra del Jacal** (Calle Unión; mains US\$3-6) A pizzeria by name but a full restaurant in function, this attractive open-air spot gets particularly busy in the evening when a gentle breeze eases out the heat of the day.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

**José Leonardo Chirinos** (☎ 251-5290; Av Josefa Camejo) airport is just a five-minute walk north of the city center. **Avior** (☎ 253-1689) has daily flights to Caracas (US\$60 to US\$70), where you can change flights for other destinations.

#### BUS

The **Terminal de Pasajeros** (☎ 252-8070; Av Los Médanos) is 2km east of the city center, and is accessible by frequent city transport. Ordinary buses to Punto Fijo (US\$2, 1¼ hours, 90km), Maracaibo (US\$5.50, four hours, 259km) and Valencia (US\$7, five hours, 288km) run every half hour until about 6pm. Most of the direct buses to Caracas (US\$10 to US\$13, seven hours, 446km) depart in the evening, but you can easily take one of the buses to Valencia and change. Several direct buses go nightly to Mérida (US\$12 to US\$18, 13 hours, 782km) and to San Cristóbal (US\$12 to US\$17, 12 hours, 698km); all these buses depart in the evening and go via Maracaibo. Within the region, there are buses to Adícora (US\$1.25).

### ADÍCORÁ

☎ 0269 / pop 1000

The small town of Adícora on the eastern coast of the Paraguaná Peninsula is one of the country's **windsurfing** and **kite-surfing** capitals.

Pros and beginners come from all over the world to ride the local winds. It is the most popular destination on the peninsula and offers up a reasonable choice of accommodations and restaurants.

There are a few local activities operators, all on the Playa Sur (South Beach), offering courses, equipment rental and simple accommodations. They include **Windsurf Adícora** (☎ 988-8224, 0416-769-6196; www.windsurfadicora.com), the biggest and most reliable facility, open year-round. It offers both windsurfing and kite-surfing, plus good rooms with air-con and bathroom. **Adícora Kitesurfing** (☎ 0414-697-5457; www.adicorakitesurf.com), run by Carlos, offers kite-surfing courses (no windsurfing), including three- and seven-day packages complete with accommodations and meals. It's only open on weekends in low season. **Archie's Kite & Windsurfing** (☎ 988-8285; www.kitesurfing-venezuela.de in German) is a German-run school open December to May only.

Adícora is linked to Coro (US\$1.50, one hour) by eight buses a day, the last departing at around 5pm.

### MARACAIBO

☎ 0261 / pop 1.5 million

Better known for business than for tourism, Maracaibo is Venezuela's second-largest city and the oil industry's nerve center. Other attractions include baking hot weather and characterless high-rise buildings. It is a prosperous city and does have some decent restaurants and other first-world conveniences, which can be welcome if you are arriving here overland from coastal Colombia.

Maracaibo was a backwater on the shores of Lago de Maracaibo (South America's largest lake) until drillers struck oil in 1914. Within six years Venezuela had become the world's largest exporter of oil. Traditionally some two-thirds of the national oil output comes from beneath the Lago de Maracaibo and passes through the city before being shipped to the far reaches of the planet.

### Orientation

Maracaibo is a big metropolis with vast suburbs, but (as is usually the case) the tourist focus of attention is on the central districts. Generally speaking, these encompass the historic center to the south and the new center to the north. Getting between the two is easy and



fast, so it doesn't really matter much where you stay. The new center, however, offers a far better choice of hotels, restaurants and other facilities, and it's safer at night. The old quarter boasts more sights, but they can all be visited on one or two leisurely daytime trips.

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

Most internet cafés cost between US70¢ and US\$1 per hour.

**CANTV** (Centro Comercial Paza Lago)

**Cyber Place** (Av 8 btwn Calles 72 & 73, New Center)

**Cyber Zone** (Local PNC 17A, Centro Comercial Lago Mall, Av El Milagro, New Center)

### MONEY

**Banco de Venezuela** Historic Center (cnr Av 5 & Calle 97); New Center (cnr Av Bella Vista & Calle 74)

**Banco Mercantil** (cnr Av Bella Vista & Calle 67, New Center)

**Banesco** (cnr Av Bella Vista & Calle 71, New Center)

**Italcambio** Airport (☎ 736-2513); Av 20 (☎ 783-2040; Centro Comercial Montielco, cnr Av 20 & Calle 72, New Center); Av El Milagro (☎ 793-2983; Centro Comercial Lago Mall, Av El Milagro, New Center)

### TOURIST INFORMATION

Maracaibo has two tourist offices; both are outside of the historic center.

**Corpozulia** (☎ 791-5555; Av Bella Vista btwn Calles 83 & 84; ☎ 8:30-11:30am & 1:30-3:30pm Mon-Fri) Two kilometers north of the city center, accessible by the *Bella Vista por puestos* from Plaza Bolívar.

**Corzotur** (☎ 783-4928; Edificio Lieja, cnr Av 18 & Calle 78; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Two kilometers northwest of the city center.

## Sleeping

It's most convenient to stay in the historic center, though the options are not stellar and the area is unsafe and deserted at night. The northern suburbs are a bit safer and provide better lodgings. If you're trapped for the night in the city, you can try any of half-a-dozen basic hotels on the west side of the bus terminal; none deserves to be named here.

**Hotel Astor** (☎ 791-4510; Plaza República; s US\$9, d US\$12-13; ☎) One of the cheapest hotels at one of the best locations, the Astor is basic, yet passable. It's attractively positioned in a hip and safe area, with a dozen trendy restaurants within a 200m radius.

**Hotel Nuevo Montevideo** (☎ 722-2762; Calle 86A No 4-96; d US\$10-12, tr US\$14; P ☎) Set in an old rambling mansion, this tranquil place has 13 large rooms with high ceilings, air-conditioning and en suite bathrooms.

**Nuevo Hotel Unión** (☎ 793-3278; Calle 84 No 4-60; d US\$10-11, tr US\$14; ☎) Just a few steps from the Corpozulia tourist office, this is another small budget spot with a touch of style and personalized attention.

**Hotel Caribe** (☎ 722-5986; Av 7 No 93-51; d US\$11-12, tr US\$15; ☎) Just two blocks from the Plaza Bolívar, the 60-room Caribe has a newer section at the back. These new rooms have noiseless, central air-con that can make the rooms almost too cold.

## LIGHTNING WITHOUT THUNDER

Centered on the mouth of the Río Catatumbo at Lago de Maracaibo, this shocking phenomenon consists of frequent flashes of lightning with no accompanying thunder. The eerie, silent electrical storm can be so strong and constant that you will be able to read this book at night.

Referred to as *Relámpago de Catatumbo* (Catatumbo Lightning) or *Faro de Maracaibo* (Maracaibo Beacon), it can be observed at night all over the region, weather permitting, from as far away as Maracaibo and San Cristóbal. You'll get a glimpse of it traveling by night on the Maracaibo–San Cristóbal or San Cristóbal–Valera roads, but the closer you get, the more impressive the spectacle becomes. Tours organized from Mérida (p1014) are the easiest way to see the Catatumbo lightning close-up.

Various hypotheses have been put forth to explain the lightning, but so far none have been proven. The theory that stands out is based on the topography of the region, characterized by the proximity of 5000m-high mountains (the Andes) and a vast sea-level lake (Lago de Maracaibo) – a dramatic configuration found nowhere else in the world. The clash of the cold winds descending from the freezing highlands with the hot, humid air evaporating from the lake is thought to produce the ionization of air particles responsible for the lightning.

## GETTING TO COLOMBIA

A number of companies run air-conditioned buses to Cartagena via Maicao, Santa Marta and Barranquilla (all in Colombia). **Bus Ven** (☎ 723-9084; bus terminal) has one early-morning departure daily from Maracaibo's bus terminal (and is cheaper than its competitors): Santa Marta (US\$34, seven hours, 374km), Cartagena (US\$38, 11 hours, 597km). The buses cross the border at **Paraguachón** (you actually change buses there) and continue through Maicao (p580), the first Colombian town.

It is cheaper to go by *por puesto* (shared taxi) to Maicao (US\$9, 2½ hours, 123km) and change there. *Por puestos* depart regularly from about 5am to 3pm and go as far as Maicao's bus terminal. From there, several Colombian bus companies operate buses to Santa Marta (US\$9, four hours, 251km) and further on; buses depart regularly until about 5pm.

All passport formalities are done in Paraguachón on the border. Venezuelan immigration charges a US\$16 *impuesto de salida* (departure tax), paid in cash bolivars by all tourists leaving Venezuela.

Wind your watch back one hour when crossing from Venezuela to Colombia. For information on traveling to Venezuela from Santa Marta, Colombia, see p580.

## Eating

A lot of ordinary cheap eateries in the city center serve set lunches for about US\$2, but they close early and the quality of the food often mirrors the price.

**Restaurant El Enlosao** (Calle 94; mains US\$2-4) Housed in a charming historic mansion, El Enlosao serves unpretentious but tasty Venezuelan food at low prices. The *parrilla* is so copious that you may struggle to finish it.

**Restaurant El Zaguán** (☎ 717-2398; cnr Calle 94 & Av 6; mains US\$4-6) A few paces away from El Enlosao, this inviting restaurant serves hearty local and international cuisine, and has a delightful open-air café shaded by two beautiful old trees.

**Restaurant Los Soles** (☎ 793-3966; Av 5 de Julio No 3G-09, New Center; mains US\$6-10) Run by a Mexican family, this bright, airy restaurant brings some authentic Mexican flavor to town. You can munch on your tacos and enchiladas either in the colorful interior or at the outdoor tables.

**Restaurant Mi Vaquita** (☎ 791-1990; Av 3H No 76-22, New Center; mains US\$7-12; ☎ noon-11pm) With some 40 years in business, Mi Vaquita is considered one of the best steakhouses in town. It has a warm wooden interior and a lively bar to the side.

## Getting There & Away

La Chinita airport is 12km southwest of the city center. It's not linked by public transport; a taxi will cost about US\$7. Flights are available to major cities, including Caracas (US\$50 to US\$75) and Mérida (US\$35 to US\$45).

The bus terminal is 1km southwest of the center. Regular buses run to Coro (US\$5, four hours) and Caracas (US\$12, 10½ hours). Several night buses run to Mérida (US\$11, nine hours) and San Cristóbal (US\$10, eight hours).

## THE ANDES

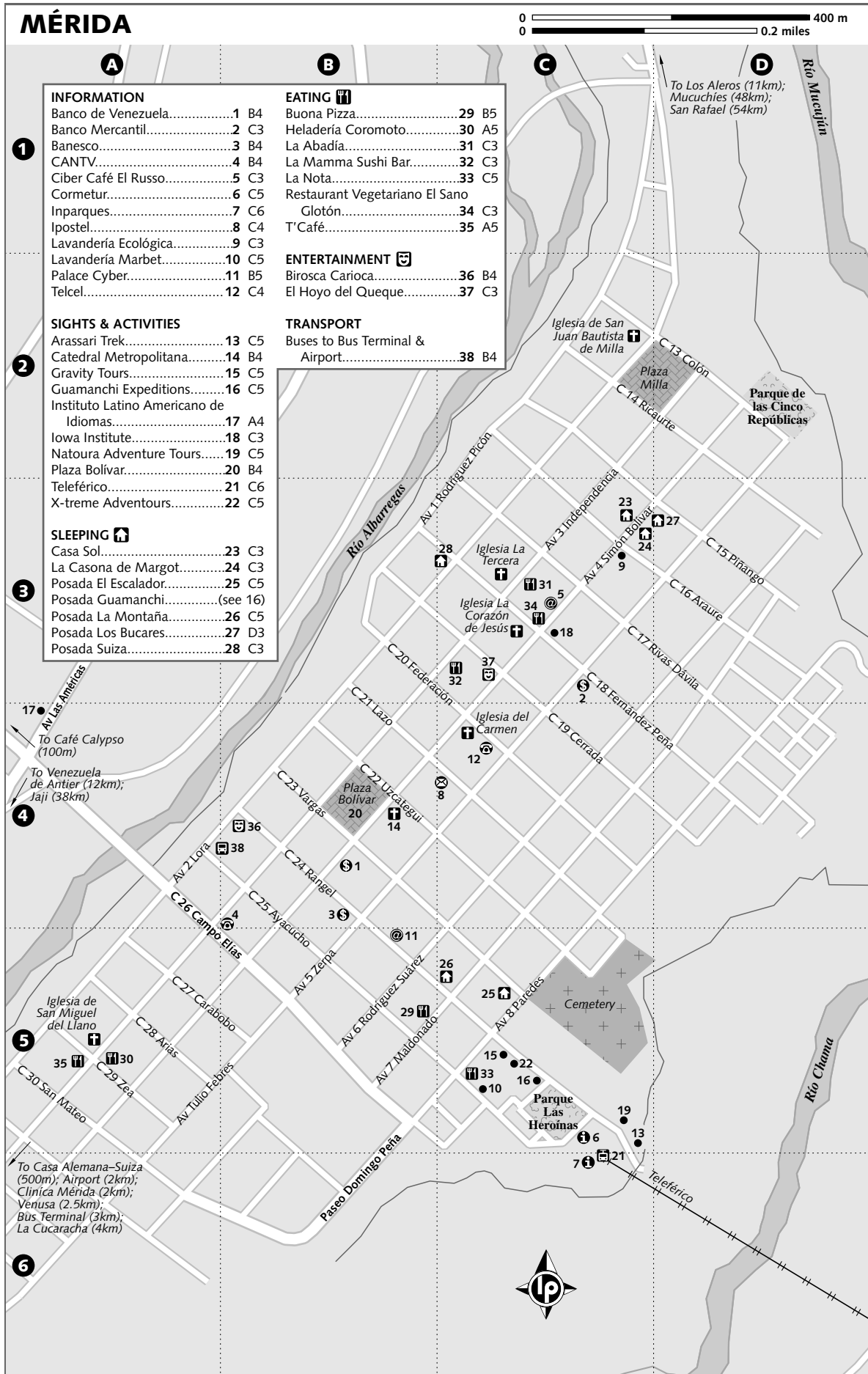
Hot-blooded Venezuela is not usually associated with snow-encrusted mountains and windswept peaks. However, Venezuela is, in fact, home to the 400km-long northern end of the Andes range, crowned by the country's tallest mountain, Pico Bolívar (5007m). For those who aren't hardcore mountaineers, the region offers lush valleys of cloud forest, cascading creeks and waterfalls, and charming mountain villages accessible by narrow winding roads.

Mérida state is in the heart of the Venezuelan Andes and has the highest mountains and the best-developed facilities for travelers. The city of Mérida is one of the continent's top adventure-sports destinations, offering everything from trekking and paragliding to rafting and canyoning. Mérida is also the gateway to Los Llanos grasslands (p1016). The two other Andean states, Trujillo and Táchira, are less visited, but have many trekking opportunities for intrepid travelers.

## MÉRIDA

☎ 0274 / pop 325,000

Nicknamed *La Ciudad de los Caballeros* (The City of Gentlemen), Mérida has an unhurried, friendly and cultured atmosphere derived from





the massive university and outdoor-sports presence in this mountain town. The country's highest point, Pico Bolívar (5007m), is just 12km away. The slightly lower, but still impressive, Pico Espejo can be accessed directly from Mérida by the *teleférico*, the world's highest and longest cable-car system. Visitors can also choose from hiking, canyoning, rafting, mountain biking, paragliding and other activities. But the town is not all about adventure, study and fitness. It has vibrant yet unpretentious nightlife, nearly seven days per week.

Mérida is also the jumping-off point for wildlife-viewing trips to Los Llanos (p1016) and hiking trips in the Andean region. The city is affordable and safe by Venezuelan standards, with a high standard of accommodations and numerous budget eateries. It is a major stop on backpacking circuits and frequently seduces visitors to stay longer than planned.

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are nearly as common as *arepas* in Mérida. They are inexpensive and the connections are generally good. The following are some central locations (see also CANTV and Telcel under Telephone):

**Palace Cyber** (Calle 24 btwn Av 5 & Av 6; per hr US\$1; ☎ 7:30am-10pm Mon-Sat, to 7:30pm Sun) Good screens and fast connection.

**Ciber Café El Russo** (Av 4 No 17-74)

### LAUNDRY

Most *posadas* offer laundry service; if not, there are many central facilities.

**Lavandería Ecológica** (cnr Av 4 & Calle 16)

**Lavandería Marbet** (Calle 25 No 8-35)

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Clínica Mérida** (☎ 263-0652, 263-6395; Av Urdaneta No 45-145)

### MONEY

**Banco de Venezuela** (Av 4 btwn Calles 23 & 24)

**Banco Mercantil** (cnr Av 5 & Calle 18)

**Banesco** (Calle 24 btwn Avs 4 & 5)

**Italcambio** (☎ 263-2977; Av Urdaneta, Airport)

### POST

**Ipostel** (Calle 21 btwn Avs 4 & 5)

### TELEPHONE

**CANTV** (cnr Calle 26 & Av 3) Also has internet.

**Telcel** (Calle 20 No 4-64) Also has internet.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Cormetur** (www.cormetur.com in Spanish) Airport (☎ 263-9330; Av Urdaneta; ☎ 8am-6pm); Bus terminal (☎ 263-3952; Av Las Américas; ☎ 9am-4pm); Main tourist office (☎ 263-5918, 263-4701, 800-637-4300; cnr Av Urdaneta & Calle 45; ☎ 8am-noon & 2:30-6pm Mon-Fri); Teleférico (Map p1012; Parque Las Heroínas; ☎ 8am-3pm Wed-Sun)

**Inparques** (Teleférico, Parque Las Heroínas) Permits for Parque Nacional Sierra Nevada.

## Sights

The **city center** is pleasant for leisurely strolls, though it has little in the way of colonial architecture or outstanding sights. The leafy **Plaza Bolívar** is the city's heart, but it's not a colonial square. Work on the monumental **Catedral Metropolitana** was begun in 1800, based on the plans of the 17th-century cathedral of Toledo in Spain, but it was not completed until 1958, and probably only then because things were sped up to meet the 400th anniversary of the city's founding.

A highlight of any visit to Mérida is the **teleférico** (☎ 252-1997, 252-5080; www.telefericodemerida.com in Spanish; Parque Las Heroínas; round trip US\$15; ☎ 7am-noon going up, by 2pm last return), the world's highest and longest cable-car system, now running again after various periods of being out of order. It runs 12.5km from the bottom station of Barinitas (1577m) in Mérida to the top of Pico Espejo (4765m), covering the ascent in four stages. The three intermediate stations are La Montaña (2436m), La Aguada (3452m) and Loma Redonda (4045m).

## Activities

The region provides excellent conditions for a range of activities as diverse as rock climbing, bird-watching, horse-riding and rafting, and local operators have been quick to make them easily accessible for visitors – see Tours later for tour companies, and p1016 for more details.

Paragliding is Mérida's most iconic adventure sport. There are even pictures of paragliders on the side of the city's garbage trucks. For those who want to learn to experience the joy of solo, motorless flight, Xtreme (p1014) offers classes with expert instructors. Prices and length of class must be negotiated.

## Courses

There are also plenty of students and tutors offering private language lessons – inquire at

popular traveler hotels and tour companies. Some major institutions offering Spanish courses:

**Instituto Latino Americano de Idiomas** (☎ 262-0990; latinoamericano@cantv.net; Edificio Don Atilio, cnr Av 4 & Calle 21)

**Iowa Institute** (☎ 252-6404; www.iowainstitute.com; cnr Av 4 & Calle 18)

**Venusa** (☎ 263-8855; Edificio Tibisay, Av Urdaneta No 49-49)

## Tours

There are plenty of tour operators in town, many of which nestle near Parque Las Heroínas and along Calle 24. Shop around, talk to other travelers and check things thoroughly before deciding. Prices are generally reasonable. Mountain trips are popular and include treks to Pico Bolívar and Pico Humboldt and more relaxed jaunts to the town of Los Nevados.

A recommended excursion out of Mérida is a wildlife safari to Los Llanos, and most companies offer this trip, usually as a four-day tour for US\$100 to US\$300 (depending on quality of transportation, guide and accommodations). Remember that you usually will get what you pay for.

Following are the best-established and most reliable local tour companies:

**Arassari Trek** (☎ 252-5879; www.arassari.com; Calle 24 No 8-301) The heavyweight of local operators, dependable Arassari has a wide range of tours including trekking, horse-riding and mountain biking. It is particularly strong on rafting and canyoning. Arassari also offers Los Llanos tours and trips to see the Catatumbo lightning (p1010). It has some of the most experienced guides and sell domestic/international airline tickets.

**Guamanchi Expeditions** (☎ 252-2080; www.guamanchi.com; Calle 24 No 8-86) Guamanchi is strong on all mountain-related activities and has a welcoming, down-to-earth feel. It also has Los Llanos trips, kayaking, bike tours, bike rental and information about do-it-yourself bike trips. Check out the *posada* at the same address.

**Natoura Adventure Tours** (☎ 252-4216; www.natoura.com; Calle 24 No 8-237) Well-established Natoura is known for mountain trekking and climbing, though it runs a range of other tours as well, including bird-watching in the Mérida region and beyond. It conducts its tours in small groups and uses quality camping and mountaineering equipment.

**X-treme Adventours** (☎ 252-7241; www.xatours.com; Calle 24 No 8-45) The main place in town for paragliding, this young, adventurous Venezuelan-owned agency has hiking, mountain biking, ATV, bridge-jumping and a full array of hotel, tour and flight booking services.

## Sleeping

Mérida has some of the best-value accommodations in the country.

**Posada Suiza** (☎ 252-4961; cnr Av 2 & Calle 18; s/d/tr without bathroom US\$7/10/13, with bathroom US\$10/13/17) Arranged around a colonial-style courtyard, Suiza has a quiet terrace with hammocks at the back, providing lovely views of the mountains. It has a communal kitchen, buffet breakfast (US\$4) and tour agency.

**Posada El Escalador** (☎ 252-2411; www.elescalador.com; Calle 23 btwn Av 7 & Av 8; d US\$12-20) This the place to stay for climbers and outdoor adventurers. It is affordable and right around the corner from most of the agencies. Here you can meet others interested in sports and activities and organize with them.

**Posada Guamanchi** (☎ 252-2080; www.guamanchi.com; Calle 24 No 8-86; s/d US\$12-16, with shared bathroom US\$10-16) A smart choice for adventurous travelers, this spartan and ever-growing *posada* is above the agency of the same name. It is a good place to organize expeditions, meet other like-minded travelers and get a good night's sleep.

**Posada Los Bucares** (☎ 252-2841; losbucarespos@hotmail.com; Av 4 No 15-05; s/d/tr US\$12/15/18; P) This fine historic mansion is an enjoyable place to stay. It has cozy rooms set around a tiny patio, plus a tiny restaurant.

**La Casona de Margot** (☎ 252-3312; Av 4 No 15-17; d US\$13-15, tr US\$20) Next door to Los Bucares and quite similar in style and atmosphere, Margot is another small *posada*, which provides stylish accommodations and doesn't cost a fortune.

**Posada La Montaña** (☎ 252-5977; posadalamontana@icnet.com.ve; Calle 24 No 6-47; s/d/q US\$14/18/27) A gorgeous colonial house with quaint, tidy and comfortable rooms; all have bathrooms with hot water, and safety boxes. The restaurant serves high-quality dishes including steaks with inventive sauces.

### SPLURGE!

**Casa Sol** (☎ 252-4164; www.posadacasasol.com; Av 4 btwn Calles 15 y 16; d/ste US\$30/40) Perhaps the most intricately decorated *posada* in the country, Casa Sol's refurbished colonial interior is adorned with beautiful art and metalwork. The rooms are airy and fresh with luxurious beds. They could charge twice the price for the rooms and it would still be a good deal.

**Casa Alemana–Suiza** (☎ 263-6503; www.casa-alemana.com; Av 2, Calle 38 No 130; s/d/tr/q US\$18/20/25/29) In the south end of town, this spacious building has a different feel from the more touristy center. The rooms are spacious and quiet. The roof deck has great views of the mountains and Alemana–Suiza can also organize tours all over the country.

## Eating

**Heladería Coromoto** (Av 3 No 28-75; ice cream US\$1-3; ☎ 2:15-9:45pm Tue-Sun) This ice-cream shop is in *The Guinness Book of Records* for the largest number of ice-cream flavors. The place offers more than 900 types, including Polar beer, trout and black beans.

**Restaurant Vegetariano El Sano Glotón** (Av 4 No 17-84; set lunch US\$2; ☎ noon-9pm) This small vegetarian restaurant has stayed popular through the years and always gets a crowd at lunch.

**La Nota** (☎ 252-9697; cnr Calle 25 & Av 8; snacks US\$2-3, mains US\$3-5) Nicknamed 'Mérida's McDonald's,' La Nota does indeed have burgers and chicken sandwiches, but has a number of standard, filling Venezuelan dishes too.

**Buona Pizza** (Av 7 No 24-46; pizza US\$3-4) Convenient, central and open late, this casual pizza restaurant is an affordable choice with many toppings on offer. It has a takeaway restaurant across the street.

**T'Café** (Av 3 & Calle 29; mains US\$3-6; ☎ late) Choose from coffees, sandwiches, pizza and delicious Venezuelan dishes at this hip open-air café-restaurant with a paraglider hanging from the ceiling. The café has wireless internet and is a place to have a coffee during the day or a beer at night.

**La Abadía** (☎ 251-0933; Av 3 No 17-45; mains US\$5-12; ☎ noon-11pm) This meticulously reconstructed colonial mansion has several different dining spaces, both indoor and alfresco. It serves quality salads, meats and pastas. It is a bit more expensive than other restaurants, but is worth the price and is a solid choice for a date.

**La Mamma & Sushi-Bar** (☎ 252-3628; Av 3 btwn 19 & 20; mains US\$5-15; ☎ noon-1am) The most expansive menu in town; La Mamma isn't afraid to mix pizza with sushi. And they do it all pretty well. It is a fun place to have a long dinner and start off an evening on the town.

## Entertainment

**El Hoyo del Queque** (☎ 252-4306; cnr Av 4 & Calle 19; admission on weekends US\$2; ☎ until 1am) Arguably

the best bar in the country, this renowned and endlessly fun venue manages to fill up every night. There is dancing and often live bands. A trip to Mérida isn't complete without a night here.

**Birosca Carioca** (☎ 252-3804; Calle 24 No 2-04) Birosca has a young, casual feel and is all about drinking and dancing and just having a good time. Compared to other city-center choices, Birosca is more of a strictly dance spot.

**La Cucaracha** (Centro Comercial Las Tapias, Av Andrés Bello) For those who want it loud, this is the place – Mérida's largest discotheque. Over 1000 revelers can turn up and rock out to salsa, house, techno and pop on a weekend night.

**Café Calypso** (Centro Comercial Viaducto; admission free; ☎ 9am-late Mon-Sat) Calypso is a normal café during the day, but turns it up at night with international DJs and quality caipirinhas, *mojitos* and other cocktails. It has a more urban and sophisticated feel than places in town and keeps the dancing going late.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The **Aeropuerto Alberto Carnevali** (☎ 263-1612, 263-7804; Av Urdaneta) is right inside the city, 2km southwest of Plaza Bolívar, accessible by buses from the corner of Calle 25 and Av 2. **Avior** (☎ 244-2454) and **Santa Bárbara** (☎ 263-4170) fly daily to and from Caracas (US\$75 to US\$100). There are also direct flights to Maracaibo (US\$50 to US\$70) and San Antonio del Táchira (US\$45 to US\$55).

### BUS

The **Terminal de Pasajeros** (Bus Terminal; ☎ 263-0051; Av Las Américas) is 3km southwest of the city center; it's linked by frequent public buses that depart from the corner of Calle 25 and Av 2.

A dozen buses run daily to Caracas (US\$13 to US\$20, 13 hours, 790km) and half-a-dozen to Maracaibo (US\$10 to US\$14, nine hours, 523km). Small buses to San Cristóbal depart every 1½ hours from 5:30am to 7pm (US\$7, five hours, 224km).

Regional destinations, including Apartaderos and Jají, are serviced regularly throughout the day.

## AROUND MÉRIDA

The best known of the mountain villages is **Jají** (*ha-hee*), 38km west of Mérida and accessible by *por puesto*. It was extensively reconstructed

in the late 1960s to become a manicured typical Andean town. A couple of budget *posadas* are in the village. For something less touristic, try **Mucuchíes**, a 400-year-old town 48km east of Mérida. Several kilometers up the road is the village of **San Rafael**, noted for an amazing small stone chapel.

## Activities

### HIKING & MOUNTAINEERING

The most popular high mountain-trekking area is the **Parque Nacional Sierra Nevada**, east of Mérida, which has all of Venezuela's highest peaks. **Pico Bolívar**, Venezuela's highest point (5007m), is one of the most popular peaks to climb. Without a guide you can hike along the trail leading up to Pico Bolívar. It roughly follows the cable-car line, but be careful walking from Loma Redonda to Pico Espejo – the trail is not clear and it's easy to get lost. Venezuela's second-highest summit, **Pico Humboldt** (4942m) is also popular with high-mountain trekkers.

An easier destination is **Los Nevados**, a charming mountain village nestled at about 2700m. Mérida's Posada Guamanchi (p1014) has a second *posada* in Los Nevados ((US\$14 per person, includes breakfast and dinner). The normal trip is done by cable car to Loma Redonda. From there you walk (five to six hours) or ride a mule (US\$5, four to five hours) to Los Nevados for the night. You can return by jeep to Mérida (US\$50 for up to five, four to five hours, 63km).

The **Parque Nacional Sierra La Culata**, to the north of Mérida, also offers some amazing hiking territory and is particularly noted for its desertlike highland landscapes. Take a *por puesto* to La Culata (departing from the corner of Calle 19 and Av 2), from where it's a three- to four-hour hike uphill to a primitive shelter known as El Refugio, at about 3700m. Continue the next day for about three hours to the top of **Pico Pan de Azúcar** (4660m). Return before 4pm, the time the last *por puesto* tends to depart back to Mérida. There are numerous other great hikes including **Pico El Águila** (4118m), **Paso del Cóndor** (4007m) and **Pico Mucuñuque** (4672m).

### MOUNTAIN BIKING

Several tour companies in Mérida organize bike trips and rent bikes. Shop around, as bicycle quality and rental prices may differ substantially between the companies. One of the

popular bike tours is the loop around the remote mountain villages south of Mérida known as Pueblos del Sur. For a more challenging ride, try a trip up and back to the Refugio in Parque Nacional Sierra la Culata. The downhill through the high grasslands really gets the adrenaline pumping. Bike rental is around US\$10 to US\$40 a day, depending on quality.

### PARAGLIDING

Most visitors fly on tandem gliders with a skilled pilot, so no previous experience is necessary. The usual starting point for flights is Las González, an hourlong jeep ride from Mérida, from where you glide for 20 to 30 minutes down 850 vertical meters. The cost of the flight (US\$40 to US\$50) includes jeep transportation.

You can also take a paragliding course that takes approximately a week, covering theory (available in English) and practice (including solo flights); the cost is US\$400 to US\$500. **X-treme Adventours** (p1014) is the main paragliding operator although the sport is offered by most all-round Mérida tour companies (p1014), which either have their own pilots or will contract one for you.

### RAFTING & CANYONING

**Rafting** is organized on some rivers at the southern slopes of the Andes. It can be included in a tour to Los Llanos or done as a two-day rafting tour (US\$80 to US\$100 per person). It's normally a wet-season activity, but some rivers allow for year-round rafting.

**Canyoning** (climbing, rappelling and hiking down a river canyon and its waterfalls) is another very popular activity. Full-day, all-inclusive canyoning tours go for around US\$50. Arassari Trek (p1014) is the gold standard of rafting and canyoning tours.

### Los Llanos

The best wildlife-watching destination is Los Llanos, an immense plain savanna south of the Andes. Los Llanos is Venezuela's great repository of wildlife, particularly birds, but it's also excellent ground to get a close experience with caimans, capybaras, piranhas and anacondas, to name just a few. Several ecotourist camps in Los Llanos offer wildlife-watching tours on their *hatos* (ranches) but they are expensive (US\$80 to US\$150 per person per day). Mérida's tour companies (p1014) provide similarly fascinating excursions for around US\$40 per

day. They are normally offered as four-day all-inclusive packages. The tours can also be arranged from Ciudad Bolívar. A guide of note, with a solid background in biology and birding, is **Tony Martin** (☎ 0414-820-2506; www.anacondas-losllanos.com.ve).

## SAN CRISTÓBAL

☎ 0276 / pop 350,000

San Cristóbal is a thriving commercial center fueled by its proximity to Colombia, just 40km away. You'll find yourself in San Cristóbal if you are traveling overland to or from anywhere in Colombia except the Caribbean Coast. Though the city is not a destination in itself it is a modern and comfortable place with friendly inhabitants. It is worth staying a bit longer in January, when the city goes wild for two weeks celebrating its FERIA de San Sebastián.

### Information

**Banco de Venezuela** (cnr Calle 8 & Carrera 9)

**Banesco** (cnr Av 7 & Calle 5)

**CANTV** (cnr Av 5 & Calle 5) Telephone service.

**Centro de Contacto Atelcom** (cnr Av 7 & Calle 12) Internet.

**Cybercafé Dinastía** (cnr Av 7 & Calle 14) Internet.

### Sleeping & Eating

If you're coming by bus and just need a budget shelter for the night, check out one of several basic hotels on Calle 4, a short block south of the bus terminal. Alternatively try one of the budget hotels in the city center (a 10-minute ride by local bus).

**Hotel Parador del Hidalgo** (☎ 343-2839; Calle 7 No 9-35; s/tr US\$7/12, d \$8-10) The most affordable rooms in town, the Parador del Hidalgo's acceptable rooms have fans and a convenient, central location.

**Posada Turística Don Manuel** (☎ 347-8082; Carrera 10 No 1-63; s/d/tr US\$10/13/16) This is the cheapest of San Cristóbal's half-a-dozen *posadas*, and the one closest to the center – it's just a 10-minute walk south of the center. It's a family home with four simple rooms rented out to tourists. Guests can use the kitchen and fridge.

**Hotel Grecón** (☎ 343-6017; Av 5 btwn Calles 15 & 16; d US\$12-18; 🍷) The best price that you will find with air-conditioning, Grecón, 100m north of the center, is a small hotel offering 20 spotless rooms.

**Restaurant La Bologna** (Calle 5 No 8-54; mains US\$3-5) La Bologna brings in a steady crowd of locals

to feast on its consistently good Venezuelan dishes.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

San Cristóbal's airport, **Aeropuerto Base Buena-ventura Vivas** (☎ 234-7013), is in Santo Domingo, about 38km southeast of the city, but not much air traffic goes through there. The airport in San Antonio del Táchira (p1018) is far busier and just about the same distance from San Cristóbal.

#### BUS

The busy **Terminal de Pasajeros** (☎ 346-5590; Av Manuel Felipe Rugeles, La Concordia) is 2km south of the city center and linked by frequent city bus services.

More than a dozen buses daily go to Caracas (US\$13 to US\$20, 13 hours, 825km). Most depart in the late afternoon or evening for an overnight trip via El Llano highway. Ordinary buses to Barinas (US\$7, five hours, 313km) run every hour or so between 5am and 6:30pm.

Buses to Mérida (US\$7, five hours, 224km) go every 1½ hours from 5:30am to 7pm. The 7pm bus is unreliable if fewer than 10 passengers show up. Five buses depart nightly for Maracaibo (US\$10 to US\$13, eight hours, 439km).

*Por puesto* minibuses to San Antonio del Táchira (US\$1.25, 1¼ hours, 40km), on the Colombian border, run every 10 or 15 minutes; it's a spectacular but busy road. If you are in a rush, consider taking a taxi.

## SAN ANTONIO DEL TÁCHIRA

☎ 0276 / pop 60,000

San Antonio is a Venezuelan border town, sitting on a busy San Cristóbal–Cúcuta crossing and living off trade with neighboring Colombia. When choosing where to stay, know that Cúcuta is a bigger town with more developed facilities. However, San Antonio is pleasant enough. Wind your watch back one hour when crossing from Venezuela to Colombia.

### Information

There are plenty of *casas de cambio* in the center, particularly on Av Venezuela and around the DIEX office. They all change cash, but none will touch your traveler's checks. You can change bolivars to Colombian pesos



(and vice versa) here or in Cúcuta – the rates are pretty much the same. There are a few banks around Plaza Bolívar.

**Banco de Venezuela** (cnr Calle 3 & Carrera 9)

**CompuNet Cyber Café** (Calle 6 No 8-28; per hr US80¢)

**Infoplanet Cybercafé** (Calle 4 No 3-45; per hr US85¢)

**Ipostel** (cnr Carrera 10 & Calle 2) Post office.

### Sleeping & Eating

San Antonio del Táchira has three decent places to stay, each with its own restaurant.

**Hotel Colonial** (☎ 771-2679; Carrera 11 No 2-51; d with fan US\$7-8, with air-con US\$10-11, tr with fan/air-con US\$9/12; 🚽) One of the cheapest hotels in San Antonio, the Colonial is a small, family-run affair with its own restaurant serving inexpensive set lunches. The rooms are basic, but decent and all have private facilities.

**Hotel Terepaima** (☎ 771-1763; Carrera 8 No 1-37; d/tr with fan US\$8/10, with air-con US\$12/15; 🍷 🚽) This is another small, family-managed hotel with 14 simple rooms upstairs and a restaurant providing basic breakfasts and lunches.

**Hotel Adriático** (☎ 771-5757; hoteladriatico@hotmail.com; Calle 6 No 5-51; s/d/tr US\$14/22/26; 🍷 🚽) The

best place to stay in the center, the Adriático offers fair-sized rooms with quiet air conditioners. Some rooms have balconies where you can watch the bustle on the street below. The hotel restaurant has inexpensive Venezuelan favorites.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

The **Aeropuerto Juan Vicente Gómez** (☎ 771-2692), 2km northeast of town, can be reached by buses. They depart from Plaza Miranda, but if you don't want to go that far, you can catch them on the corner of Calle 6 and Av Venezuela.

Aeropostal, Aserca and Rutaca have daily flights to Caracas (US\$90). Aeropostal and Santa Bárbara fly direct to Maracaibo (US\$85). Santa Bárbara also flies to Mérida (US\$50).

There are no direct flights to Colombia from San Antonio; go to Cúcuta across the border, from where you can fly to Bogotá, Medellín and other major Colombian cities (for a much better price than you'd get for a flight to those cities from Maracaibo or Caracas).

### GETTING TO COLOMBIA

The **DIEX** (Map1018; Carrera 9 btwn Calles 6 & 7; 🕒 6am-10pm) office puts exit or entry stamps in passports. All tourists leaving Venezuela are charged a US\$16 *impuesto de salida* (departure tax). You must pay in cash and must buy stamps for this amount in a shop (open till 5pm only) across the street from DIEX. Nationals of most Western countries don't need a visa for Colombia, but all travelers are supposed to get an entry stamp from DAS (Colombian immigration). The DAS office is just past the bridge over the Río Táchira (the actual border), on the right.

Buses (US\$40¢) and *por puestos* (US\$60¢) run frequently to Cúcuta in Colombia (12km). You can catch buses on Av Venezuela or you can save yourself a long wait in border traffic by walking up to the front of the line of cars and look for a shared taxi with extra space in it. You are supposed to get off at DAS (Colombian immigration) just behind the bridge for your Colombia entry stamp (or walk from San Antonio across the bridge to DAS) and then take another bus. Buses go as far as the Cúcuta bus terminal, passing through the center. You can pay in Venezuelan bolivars or Colombian pesos. Sometimes border security will just wave you through and is not concerned about an entry stamp.

From Cúcuta, there are frequent buses and flights to all major Colombian destinations. For information on travel from Colombia to Venezuela, see p577.

### BUS

The bus terminal is midway to the airport. Half-a-dozen bus companies operate buses to Caracas (US\$17 to US\$22, 14 hours, 865km), with a total of seven buses daily. All depart between 4pm and 7pm and use El Llano route. Most of these bus companies also have offices in the town center: **Expresos Los Llanos** (☎ 771-2690; Calle 5 No 4-26), **Expresos Mérida** (☎ 771-4053; Av Venezuela No 6-17), **Expresos Occidente** (☎ 771-4730; cnr Carrera 6 & Calle 6), and **Expresos San Cristóbal** (☎ 771-4301; Av Venezuela No 3-20). They all sell tickets, but then you have to go to the terminal anyway to board the bus.

No direct buses run to Mérida; go to San Cristóbal and change there. *Por puestos* to San Cristóbal leave frequently from the corner of Av Venezuela and Carrera 10 (US\$1.25, 1¼ hours, 40km).

## THE NORTHEAST

Much like the northwest, Venezuela's northeast is a mosaic of natural marvels. It has the Caribbean beaches, coral reefs and verdant mountains. However it also boasts Isla de Margarita, one of the most famous island destinations in the Caribbean, and the Cueva del Guácharo, Venezuela's biggest and most impressive cave system. Parque Nacional Mochima and the remote stretches of sand beyond Río Caribe offer the opportunity for unspoilt time on the beach. The city of Cumaná was also the first Spanish settlement founded on the South American mainland. Once you've

spent time in the northeast, you'll understand what prompted Columbus to whimsically declare the region 'paradise on earth.'

### BARCELONA

☎ 0281 / pop 320,000

Not quite as exciting as its namesake, Barcelona is a mix of a small colonial center and sprawling modernity along its highways. Most travelers visit Barcelona while passing from Caracas to Ciudad Bolívar or up to Puerto la Cruz (few actually get off the bus). Barcelona's airport serves as the regional terminal for Puerto la Cruz and destinations up the coast.

### Information

**Banco de Venezuela** (Plaza Boyacá)

**Banescó** (Carrera 9 Paéz)

**CANTV** (☎ 274-9719; Centro Comercial La Llovizna, Av 5 de Julio) Telephone access.

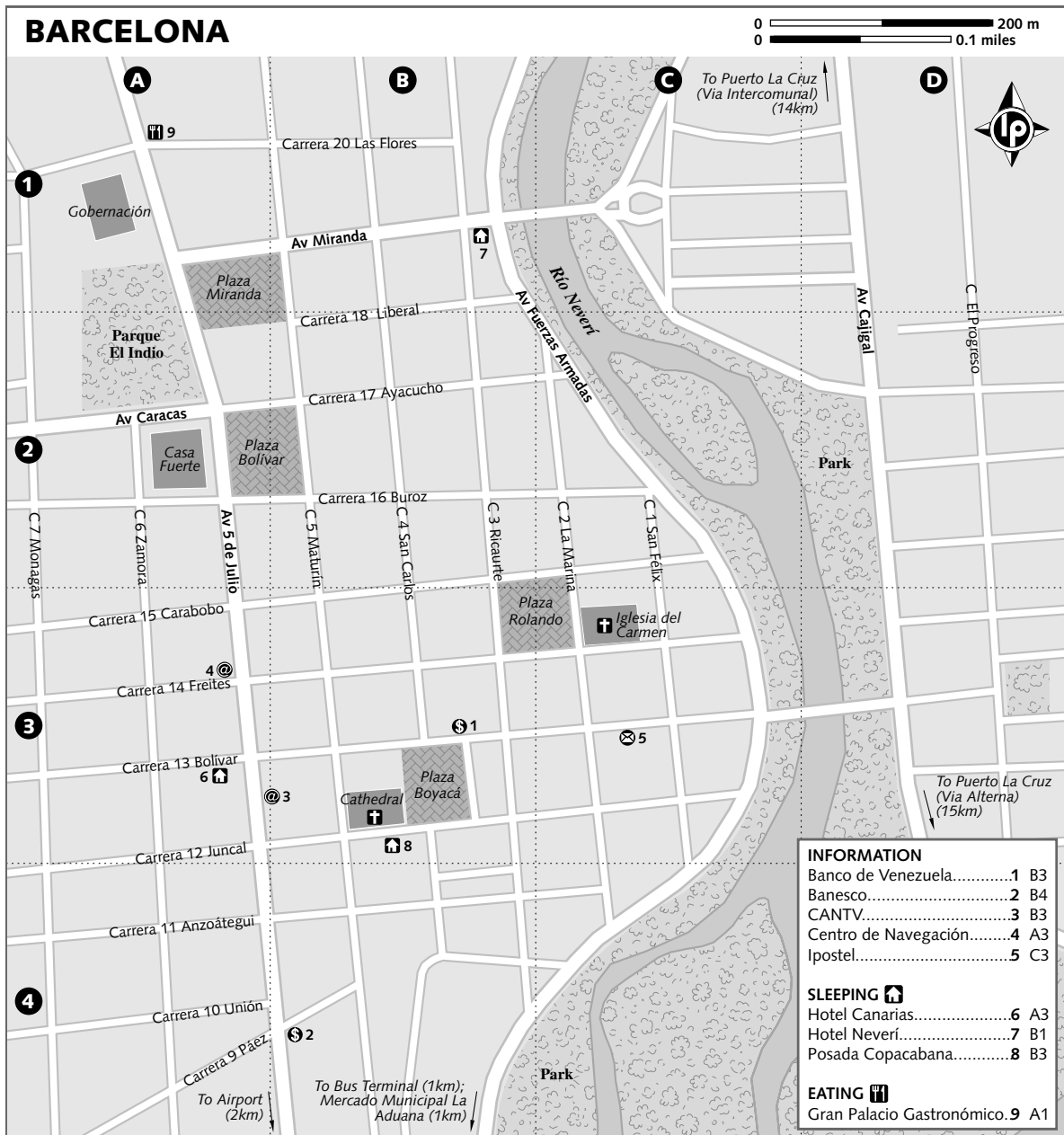
**Centro de Navegación** (Centro Comercial Marinelli, Av 5 de Julio; per hr US\$80¢) For internet.

**Ipostel** (☎ 275-7652; Carrera 13 Bolívar; 🕒 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Near the plaza.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Canarias** (☎ 277-1034; Carrera 13 Bolívar; d with fan/air-con US\$10/11; 🍷) This quirky little budget hotel has a mini wishing well, plastic birds, antique-style chairs and potted plants. It has plain rooms of different standards and prices, so have a look at a few before making a decision.

**Hotel Neverí** (☎ 277-2376; Av Fuerzas Armadas at Av Miranda; d/tr US\$13.50/15; 🍷) Recognizable by



the vivid mural of tropical flowers and birds adorning the outside, this place has a grand staircase, large utilitarian rooms and its own restaurant. Can be too noisy for light sleepers.

**Posada Copacabana** (☎ 277-3473; Carrera Juncal; d/tr with bathroom US\$17/26; 🚻) Right next to the cathedral, Copacabana has 11 inviting, newish rooms. They are clean and are great value.

**Mercado Municipal La Aduana** (🕒 6am-2pm) This is right next to the bus terminal, 1km south of town. It has more than a dozen popular restaurants serving a variety of typical food.

**Gran Palacio Gastronómico** (Av 5 de Julio; 🕒 7am-8pm) This straightforward self-service restau-

rant serves all the usual Venezuelan dishes, from *arepas* to roasted chicken.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The airport is 2km south of the city center. Buses going south along Av 5 de Julio pass within 300m of the airport (US\$25¢). Several carriers have daily flights to Caracas (US\$60 to US\$75). **Avior** (☎ 276-1465) flies to Puerto Ordaz (US\$78). **Aserca** (☎ 274-1240) services Maracaibo (US\$100) and San Antonio del Táchira (US\$120) via Caracas. **Santa Barbara** (☎ 274-0444) flies to Barquisimeto (US\$84) and Mérida (US\$95) via Caracas. Several airlines, including Avior and **Rutaca** (☎ 276-7090), fly direct to Porlamar on Isla de Mar-



garita (US\$25 to US\$45). Prices listed are one way.

**BUS**

The bus terminal is 1km southeast of the city center, next to the market. Take a *buseta* (US20¢, 10 minutes) going south along Av 5 de Julio, or walk for 15 minutes.

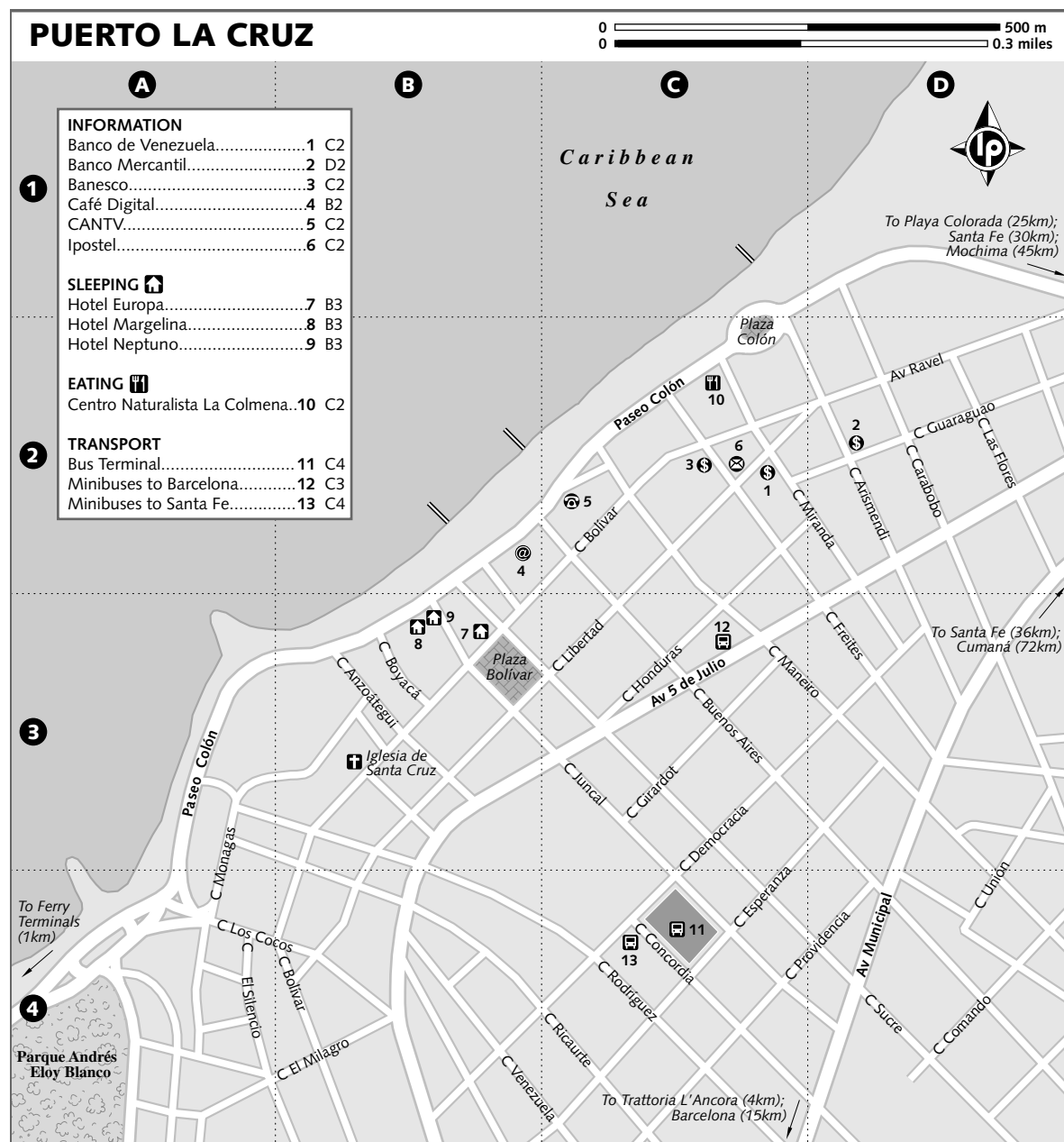
The terminal in Puerto La Cruz has more routes, so it's better to go there instead of waiting in Barcelona. To Puerto La Cruz, catch a *buseta* going north on Av 5 de Julio (US30¢, 45 minutes). They use two routes, Vía Intercomunal and Vía Alterna. Either will drop you in the center of Puerto La Cruz. There are faster *por puesto* minibuses (US40¢), which depart from Av 5 de Julio 2½ blocks south of Banesco.

**PUERTO LA CRUZ**

☎ 0281 / pop 215,000

Puerto La Cruz is one of the principal departure points to Isla de Margarita (p1029), and the last town of size before Parque Nacional Mochima (p1022). Major bus lines arrive in Puerto La Cruz, where you can visit banks, pharmacies and take care of other chores. However, if you seek beaches it is best to stay in the smaller Playa Colorada, Santa Fe, Mochima or further along the coastline.

The city is a bustling, youthful and rapidly expanding place. It is generally not an attractive town, though it features a lively waterfront boulevard, Paseo Colón, packed with hotels, bars and restaurants. This area comes to life in the late afternoon and evening



as temperatures cool, street stalls open and locals reemerge from their siestas.

### Information

Most major banks are within a few blocks south of Plaza Colón. The following banks all have 24-hour ATMs.

**Banco de Venezuela** (Calle Miranda)

**Banco Mercantil** (Calle Arismendi)

**Banesco** (Calle Freites)

**Café Digital** (Centro Comercial Cristoforo Colombo, No 29, upper fl, Paseo Colón; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat)

For internet access, try here.

**CANTV** (Paseo Colón; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10:30am-4pm Sun) Has telephones and good internet access.

**Ipostel** (☎ 268-5355; Calle Freites; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) For post.

### Tours

Tours to the Parque Nacional Mochima are offered by a number of agencies nestled along Paseo Colón. However, tours from Puerto La Cruz are more expensive and require more time in transit than those from Santa Fe or the town of Mochima.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Margelina** (☎ 268-7545; Paseo Colón; s/d/tr US\$11/14/16; 🍷) While none of the bare-bones hotels in Puerto La Cruz can claim style, Margelina does have a certain fusty character. And if you don't expect luxury, you should be pleased with the position right on the seafront and near several restaurants.

**Hotel Neptuno** (☎ 265-3261; fax 265-5790; Paseo Colón at Calle Juncal; s/d/tr US\$12/16/24; 🍷) The Neptune has corridors painted in a yellow and green paint giving way to good-value rooms with hot-water bathrooms and cable TV, while the hotel's biggest attraction is its open-sided restaurant (mains US\$3.50 to US\$8) with sweeping views out to sea.

**Hotel Europa** (☎ 268-8157; Plaza Bolívar at Calle Sucre; d/tr US\$15/17; 🍷) The Europa is a sparsely adorned hotel whose only extravagance is a neonlit image of the Virgin Mary at the top of the stairs. Rooms are plain but spacious, with bathrooms. The staff is very friendly.

**Centro Naturalista La Colmena** (Paseo Colón 27; 3-course menu US\$3; ☎ 11:45am-2pm Mon-Fri) This lunch-only vegetarian café and natural products shop has a tiny covered terrace looking out across the boulevard to the sea. It serves budget set lunches.

**Trattoria L'Ancora** (Centro Comercial Plaza Mayor; pizzas US\$5-9.50, pasta US\$4-6; ☎ noon-11pm; 🍷) Overlooking the canals of El Morro, where you can watch expensive boats glide past, L'Ancora serves up tasty pizza and pasta dishes. You can relax in its open-air terrace or indoor glass-walled area with air-con.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

The airport is in Barcelona (p1020).

#### BOAT

Puerto La Cruz is the major departure point for Isla de Margarita, with services offered by **Conferry** (☎ 267-7847; www.conferry.com; Sector Los Cocos) and **Gran Cacique Express** (☎ 263-0935; www.grancacique.com.ve; Sector Los Cocos). Smaller excursion boats leave from the small piers in town.

The ferry terminals are accessible by *por puesto* from the center or a taxi will cost US\$2. Go in the daytime as it's a spectacular journey out through the islands of Parque Nacional Mochima.

#### BUS

The bustling bus terminal is just three blocks from Plaza Bolívar. Frequent buses run west to Caracas (US\$7 to US\$11, five hours) and east to Cumaná (US\$2.50, 1½ hours); many of the latter continue east to Carúpano (US\$4 to US\$7, four hours) and some go as far as Güiria (US\$8, 6½ hours). If you go eastward (to Cumaná or further on), grab a seat on the left side of the bus, as there are some spectacular views over the islands of Parque Nacional Mochima. *Por puesto* cars also run to Caracas (US\$12, four hours), Maturín (US\$6, 2½ hours) and Cumaná (US\$4, 1¼ hours).

## PARQUE NACIONAL MOCHIMA

### ☎ 0293

Straddling the states of Anzoátegui and Sucre, Parque Nacional Mochima comprises a low, dry mountain range that drops down to fine bays and beaches and continues offshore to some three dozen beautiful islands. The best beaches are to be found on the islands and are accessed by short boat trips from Santa Fe, Mochima or other coastal towns. Coral reefs surround a few of the islands and provide decent snorkeling and scuba diving. Tranquility seekers will be happy midweek, when only a handful of beachgoers is to be found on the more far-flung islands.

## Playa Colorada

This crescent of orange sand is shaded with coconut groves and draws hordes of young Venezuelan partyers and sun-seekers on the weekends. It can also be an easy day trip from both Santa Fe and Puerto La Cruz.

There's quite a choice of places to stay close to the beach.

The Scottish-managed camp **Jakera Lodge** (☎ 0281-276-3112; www.jakera.com; hammocks/beds US\$4/6; 📶) offers accommodations, meals, kayak and bicycle rental, tours, Spanish courses and more.

**Posada Nirvana** (☎ 0414-824-5607; Calle Marchán, 500m uphill from the coastal road; s without bathroom US\$5, d/tr with bathroom US\$10/12.50, ste with bathroom & kitchen US\$16) is an informal Swiss-run *posada*. Its garden has hammocks and an outdoor Jacuzzi. The owner prepares fabulous breakfasts (US\$4).

Opposite Posada Nirvana, neatly maintained country home stay **Quinta Jaly** (☎ 0416-681-8113; Calle Marchán; s/d/tr US\$11/12.50/16; 📶) is run by an affable French-Canadian. Here, too, guests have free access to the kitchen, and an optional breakfast is available for US\$2.50.

**Café Las Carmitas** (3ra Transversal No 57; mains US\$3-6), a small Portuguese-owned café with flexible hours, has an ebullient chef who serves up pizza, pasta, fish and meat dishes with a dose of personal charm.

## Santa Fe

Santa Fe comprises two different worlds: the beach, which is a sedate backpackers haven, and the rest of the town, a rough-and-tumble fishing village. For travelers there is little reason to leave the *posada*- and café-lined beach other than to visit one of the town's two night-clubs or walk to the bus terminal. The beach is a chill spot to sit in the sand and sip on beers and fruit juices with new friends. If you are looking for more remote and pristine beaches, small boats make day trips from Santa Fe to the islands of Parque Nacional Mochima.

There is frustratingly slow internet access in an unnamed building behind Posada Café del Mar.

The following are all along the beach or one block away.

**Posada Café del Mar** (☎ 231-0009; Calle la Marina, entering the beach; d US\$9), a German-run café, bar and *posada*, is one of the best-value budget haunts, offering 14 simple rooms with fans and hot water on upper levels, and hearty

budget food. There's also a breezy rooftop terrace hung with hammocks, and the manager offers cheap boat tours.

The pioneer hotel in Santa Fe, **La Sierra Inn** (☎ 231-0042; cooperativasantafedemisamores@hotmail.com; on the beach, d US\$12.50; 📶), has smart yet simple rooms, several outdoor terraces and a BBQ area. Kayak rental and tours are available too.

The new French addition of **Le Petit Jardin** (☎ 416-6611; lepetit.jardin@yahoo.com; Calle Cochima; d US\$25-35; 📶 📶) has nicely decorated rooms and bungalows around a swimming pool. It is a block behind the beach but right behind Playa Santa Fe Resort.

**Playa Santa Fe Resort & Dive Center** (☎ 0414-773-3777; www.santaferesort.com; d US\$35-75; 📶) is a secure and comfortable upper-end *posada* with a range of breezy rooms. Ask for those on the 2nd floor that get good sunlight (though the downstairs rooms have access to a serene garden). The hotel also has a diveshop and organizes tours of Parque Nacional Mochima and surrounding areas.

**Náutico** (clubnautico\_1@hotmail.com; Calle la Marina, entering the beach; mains US\$3-7) One of the better, if touristy, places to eat on the beach. The open-air restaurant has delicious seafood and the best *pabellón criollo* (shredded beef, rice, black beans, cheese and fried plantain; Venezuela's national dish) in town.

**Posada Los Siete Delfines** (☎ 431-4166; lossietedelfinessantafe@hotmail.com; on the beach; d/tr/q US\$9.50/12.50/16) is one of the more budget *posadas*. It is only an average place to stay, but the restaurant-café that spreads out onto the sand is the most popular place for travelers to hang out, eat and drink beers and *batidos* (juices).

Regular buses and *por puestos* from Puerto La Cruz and Cumaná will deposit you on the highway at Santa Fe's main junction. Walk 1km through the town to the market on the seafront. Turn left to reach the beach, which is lined with *posadas*. Be careful at night.

## Mochima

Mochima may be close to Santa Fe, but is a completely different experience. There is no beach in town but Mochima is a quaint, attractive village on the edge of its namesake national park. Also unlike Santa Fe, it is more popular with Venezuelan families than international backpackers. Frequent boats run from the waterfront to the numerous island beaches of the park. The town is nearly empty during the week.

**TOURS**

Transportation to the beaches is provided from the wharf in the village's center, where boats anchor and *lancheros* (boatmen) sit on the shore and wait for tourists. They can take you to any beach, among them Playa Las Maritas (US\$12.50), Playa Blanca (US\$12.50), Playa Manare (US\$16), and Playas Cautaro and Cautarito (US\$16). The listed figures are round-trip fares per boat (number of passengers depends on size of boat), and you can be picked up whenever you want. Don't hesitate to bargain!

Longer tours, which can include cruises to Islas Caracas, La Piscina and Playa Colorada, plus snorkeling, are also available. **Posada Villa Vicenta** (☎ 416-0916) has good prices.

**Aquatics Diving Center** (☎ 430-1649, 0414-777-0196; [aquaticsdic@cantv.net](mailto:aquaticsdic@cantv.net)) organizes diving courses, dives and excursions, and handles snorkel rental. The diving is decent but nothing spectacular and the service is questionable.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

Mochima has a fair choice of accommodation and food facilities. Locals also rent out rooms and houses if there is demand. Budget-priced meals, especially breakfast, can be hard to come by. One of the few inexpensive places to get breakfast is in the unnamed store No 1 at the Mini Centro Comerical Corozal near the basketball court. There is also a small café at the dock called Exquisitas Empanadas which offers, yes, empanadas in the mornings. The signless Manglar Café (between El Mochimero and the liquor store) is friendly and has affordable sandwiches and fruit drinks.

**Posada Villa Vicenta** (☎ 416-0916; s/d/tr US\$9/10/12.50; 📶) Located one block back from the wharf, this *posada* has four levels stepping their way back up the hillside, each with a terrace boasting fine vistas over the bay (better on the higher floors). The no-frills, stone-walled rooms have fans and cold-water bathrooms.

**Posada Doña Cruz** (☎ 0414-993-2690; d US\$16; 📶) This colorful, though impersonal, little *posada* with two parts (one near the dock and the other by the miniplaza) has small but decent rooms with private bathroom. The elderly owners can be tracked down by the sign for the hotel at the dock, where they pass the hot afternoons sitting in the shade.

**El Mochimero** (Calle La Marina; mains US\$6-15; 🕒 11am-9pm) This is one of the best advertised and most popular tourist restaurants selling seafood dishes. It has uninterested service and greatly inflated prices, though sometimes it is the only place open in town.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Jeeps departing from Cumaná will bring you to the village's center (US\$65¢, 35 minutes), next to the wharf. There's no direct transportation from Puerto La Cruz.

**CUMANÁ**

☎ 0293 / pop 310,000

Founded in 1521, Cumaná takes pride in being the oldest remaining Spanish settlement on the South American mainland. That and its proximity to other attractions along the coastline are about the only reason to visit. Cumaná is not a bad place, but it is best used as a portal to Isla de Margarita, Península de Araya, Santa Fe, Mochima and the Cueva del Guácharo. Like Puerto La Cruz, it is a smart move to stock up on cash and other city conveniences here before visiting the smaller towns.

**Information**

Most major banks are on Calle Mariño and Av Bermúdez.

**Banco de Venezuela** (Calle Mariño at Calle Rojas)

**Banco Mercantil** (Av Bermúdez at Calle Gutierrez)

**Ipostel** (☎ 432-2616; Calle Paraíso) For snail mail.

**Pacho's Café** (☎ 431-1777; Calle Sucre; 🕒 9am-8pm Mon-Sat) Internet access.

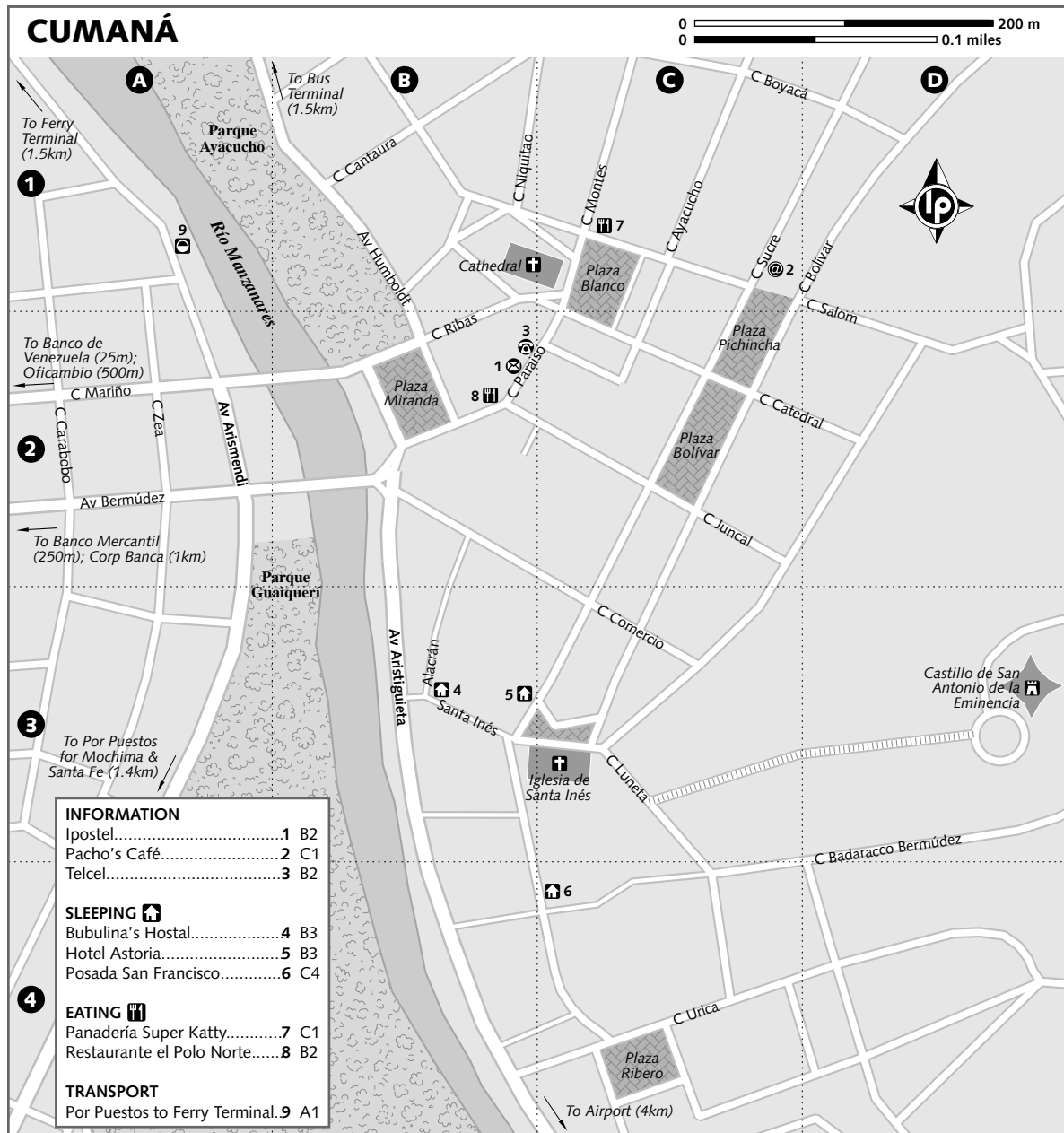
**Oficambio** (☎ 433-1626; Calle Mariño; 🕒 8am-noon & 2:30-6pm Mon-Fri) The only *casa de cambio*, 600m west of Plaza Miranda. It changes cash and traveler's checks.

**Telcel** (Calle Paraíso; 🕒 9am-8:30pm Mon-Sat, 10:30am-2pm Sun) Telephones and internet access.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Hotel Astoria** (☎ 433-2708; [hotelastoria\\_7@hotmail.com](mailto:hotelastoria_7@hotmail.com); Calle Sucre 51; s/d/tr US\$10/11.50/14; 📶 📶) This is the best central option for those on a strict budget. Though nothing fancy, it has an ever-smiling host, comparatively good-sized and well-lit rooms, fans, and air-con that's switched on from 7pm to the morning.

**Bubulina's Hostal** (☎ 431-4025; Callejón Santa Inés; d US\$17; 📶) A stylish choice is this one-story historical building down a narrow colonial street. The interior is a totally new construction, but retains a cozy charm and airiness in



its rooms. There's an attached restaurant too, serving Venezuelan dishes.

**Panadería Super Katty** (Plaza Blanco; ☎ 6am-10pm) This bakery has excellent pastries and enough frosted cakes to cater for a dozen weddings. Plus it has a supercool name.

**Restaurante El Polo Norte** (Calle Paraíso at Calle Juncal; set meals US\$2-3; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat) Large, inexpensive meals can be had at this humble restaurant hidden from the busy street via a narrow passageway. It serves a long list of *criollo* favorites.

**Posada San Francisco** (☎ 431-3926; Calle Sucre; d US\$20; mains US\$5-9; ☎ 8am-9pm) The quiet open-air patio restaurant at the Posada San Francisco makes for a romantic atmosphere in the evening, when lights are left low and the

stars are visible above. The *posada*, which is in one of the town's loveliest colonial mansions, hasn't always welcomed nonguests to its restaurant, so double-check in advance.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

The airport is about 4km southeast of the city center. There are frequent flights to Caracas (US\$55 to US\$75) with Avior and other airlines, and to Porlamar, on Isla de Margarita (US\$50) with Rutaca and others.

#### BOAT

All ferries and boats to Isla de Margarita depart from the docks next to the mouth of the Río Manzanares and go to Punta de

Piedras. Operators are **Gran Cacique II** (☎ 432-0011; www.grancacique.com.ve) and **Naviarca** (☎ 431-5577; naviarca@telcel.net.ve).

Naviarca also operates a ferry to Araya on the Península de Araya, although it's often easier to go by the small boats called *tapaditos*.

The area around the ferry docks in Cumaná is not famous for its safety, so take a *por puesto* (US\$30¢) from just north of the bridge, or a taxi (US\$1.25).

## BUS

The bus terminal is 1.5km northwest of the city center and is linked by frequent urban buses along Av Humboldt.

There are regular services to Caracas (US\$9 to US\$13, 6½ hours). All buses go through Puerto La Cruz (US\$2.50, 1½ hours), and there are also frequent *por puestos* to Puerto La Cruz (US\$3, 1¼ hours).

Half-a-dozen buses depart daily for Ciudad Bolívar (US\$8 to US\$12, six hours) and a few less to Güiria (US\$6, five hours). Buses to Carúpano run regularly throughout the day (US\$2.50 to US\$3, 2½ hours), as do *por puestos* (US\$4.50, four hours).

To Caripe, there is one departure daily, theoretically at 12:30pm (US\$4, 3½ hours). More reliable, however, may be a private minibus, which is supposed to depart at 3pm (US\$5, three hours). They all pass the Cueva del Guácharo shortly before arriving at Caripe and can let you off at the cave's entrance.

*Por puesto* cars to Santa Fe (US\$1, 1.25 hours) and Mochima (US\$1, one hour) depart from near the Mercadito, one block off the Redoma El Indio. During the day, jeeps do both of those trips with many less stops for a few more bolivars.

## PENÍNSULA DE ARAYA

☎ 0293 / pop 30,000

A solitary road runs the length of this 70km-long and 10km-wide peninsula of arid red sands and scrubby dunes that wrap around between Cumaná and Isla de Margarita. The Península de Araya's sparse population is scattered through a handful of villages on the northern coast. If super-touristy Isla de Margarita is not your style, this is the place to visit for kilometer after kilometer of unpopulated beaches.

Araya is normally visited on a day trip from Cumaná, but should you like to stay longer, there are half-a-dozen budget *posadas*

to choose from. You'll find more *posadas* on the opposite side of the village, around Plaza Bolívar.

The **salinas** (salt mines) of Araya were discovered by the Spaniards in 1499 and are Venezuela's largest salt deposits. They produce half a million tons of salt per year. A *mirador* (lookout), built on the hill 2km north of Araya, provides a good view over the rectangular pools filled with saltwater and left to evaporate.

The biggest and oldest colonial fort in the country is commonly referred to as **El Castillo** (the Castle). The four-pointed structure stands on the waterfront cliff at the southern end of the bay, a 10-minute walk along the beach from the wharf. Although damaged, the gargantuan coral-rock walls are an awesome sight and give a good impression of how the fort must have once looked. You can wander freely around the site, as there's no gate.

The most stylish of the five or six low-key *posadas* in the town, **Posada Araya Wind** (☎ 437-1132; Calle El Castillo; d/tr with air-con & bathroom US\$12.50/16, d/tr/q with fan & shared bathroom US\$9.50/11/12.50; 🚻) is close to the fortress and a quiet little beach. Inside, the neatly decorated *posada* has cane roofing and furniture, plus a scattering of antique-style wooden chairs.

Eating places in the same area include **Restaurant Araya Mar** (mains US\$3-4; 🕒 8am-11pm), an open-fronted café that catches the breeze. It also has newish air-con matrimonial rooms for US\$12.

## CARIPE

☎ 0292 / pop 12,000

While a nice town surrounded by coffee and citrus plantations, Caripe draws most of its importance from its closeness to the Cueva del Guácharo (12km from town). It does get a number of Venezuelan weekend visitors who come for the mild weather and flood the city for its renowned Easter celebrations.

There is a **BanESCO** (Av Guzmán Blanco) in town. For internet access, head to the telecommunications office **Telsenet** (off Plaza Bolívar; 🕒 8am-8:30pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun).

There are a number of eating and sleeping options along the road from Caripe to the village of El Guácharo. The following are in Caripe.

If you are looking for an inexpensive place, you will get that (but you will get exactly what you pay for) at **La Posada** (☎ 0416-892-4130; Av

Enrique Chaumer; d without bathroom US\$6.50), a somewhat ramshackle place. Look for it opposite the town church.

Considered the best spot in town, **Hotel Samán** (☎ 545-1183; Av Chaumer No 29; s/d/tr US\$14/16/21) has comfortable rooms, a stream running beneath the building and a courtyard full of plants. The knowledgeable manager can put you in touch with local guides. Check out Restaurant Mogambo next door for a full menu of Venezuelan favorites.

**Mini Hotel Familiar Nicola** (☎ 545-1489; Av Gusmán Blanco; d/tr US\$14/18) is a good choice if you can't stay at Samán. It is a small, tidy family house that rents out a few clean, modern rooms with hot-water bathrooms. It's on the road toward Maturín.

Ask for the homemade pasta at **Trattoria Da Stefano** (Calle Cabello; mains US\$3-5; ☎ noon-6pm Mon-Wed, noon-9pm Thu-Sun), a bona fide Italian joint. The food is good, as are the prices. The owner is helpful and knowledgeable about the area.

The bus terminal is at the northeastern end of town, behind the market. There's an evening bus to Caracas via Cumaná at 6pm (US\$10, nine hours). Another daily bus runs to Cumaná in the morning (US\$4, 3½ hours), and a private minibus also goes at 6am (US\$5, three hours). They all pass the Cueva del Guácharo en route. A round trip-taxi from Caripe to the cave only costs US\$2 if you tell them to come back in two hours. If they wait for you, it will cost US\$10. Some tour operators and hotels also organize trips.

## CUEVA DEL GUÁCHARO

☎ 0292

With 10.2km of caverns, the **Guácharo Cave** (☎ 641-7543; 12km from Caripe toward the coast, adult/student US\$6/3; ☎ 8am-4pm; 📍) is Venezuela's longest and most magnificent cave. The huge cave is inhabited by the *guácharo* (oilbird), which lives in total darkness and leaves the cave only at night in search of food. It has a radar-location system (similar to bats) and enormous whiskers that enable it to navigate and feel about in the dark. From August to December, the population in the cave is estimated at 10,000 *guácharos*, and occasionally up to 15,000. The cave also shelters a maze of stalactites and stalagmites that shine with calcium crystals.

All visits to the cave are by guided tours in groups of up to 10 people; tours take about 1½ hours and are organized at the entrance.

A 1200m portion of the total of the cave is normally visited, though occasionally water rises in August and/or September, limiting sightseeing to 500m.

You can camp (US\$5) at the entrance to the cave after closing time and watch the hundreds of birds pouring out of the cave mouth at around 6:30pm and returning at about 4am. Possible jumping-off points for the cave include Cumaná (p1024), Caripe (opposite) and Maturín. See those sections for transportation details.

## RÍO CARIBE

☎ 0294 / pop 7500

The old port town of Río Caribe's former splendor can be spotted along the wide, tree-shaded Av Bermúdez with its once-magnificent mansions. As the cocoa boom has long since ended, these days the town serves as a laid-back holiday destination and a springboard for beaches further east. Don't miss the 18th-century church on Plaza Bolívar.

For a taste of local culture, family home **Pensión Papagayos** (☎ 646-1868; Calle 14 de Febrero; s/d US\$5/10) rents out four well-maintained rooms sharing two bathrooms, and you can use the kitchen and fridge. The doorstep is often overrun with kids from the neighboring school.

One of more than a dozen cheap places in town, **Posada Don Chilo** (☎ 646-1212; Calle Mariño No 27; d/tr US\$6.50/9.50) competes for the cheapest and most basic. All rooms have a shared bathroom.

Housed in a restored 19th-century mansion, the quiet **Villa Antillana** (☎ 646-1413; antilla99@cantv.net; Calle Rivero 32; s/d/tr/q US\$21/26/37/45) has a handful of doubles and suites around an attractive tiled courtyard. All rooms have been painstakingly reconstructed with modern amenities, comfortable mattresses, fans and hot-water bathrooms.

**Parian@Café** (Av Bermúdez; ☎ 5:30pm-11pm Mon-Sat; 📍) is an internet café popular with foreign travelers for typical regional dishes and a cool, casual atmosphere.

*Por puestos* depart frequently to Carúpano from Plaza Bolívar (US\$1, 30 minutes), and there are also buses marked 'Ruta Popular' (US50¢).

Infrequent *por puesto* pickup trucks run to the villages of Medina (US\$1), Pui Puy (US\$1.50) and San Juan de Las Galdonas (US\$3). They don't get as far as the beaches of Medina and Pui Puy; you need to walk

the rest of the way, about a half-hour trip in either case. Otherwise, you'll need to rent the vehicle, which costs 10 times more than the *por puesto* fare. Trucks depart from the southeastern end of Río Caribe, opposite the gas station.

## AROUND RÍO CARIBE

☎ 0294

There are some two dozen beaches on the 50km coastal stretch between Río Caribe and San Juan de Unare (the last seaside village accessible by road). These beaches are some of the most gorgeous in the country and some of the least visited.

The first beaches worth visiting east of Río Caribe are side-by-side **Playa Loero** and **Playa de Uva**. They lie 6km from Río Caribe by the road to Bohordal, then another 6km by a paved side road that branches off to the left.

Proceeding east, a paved road branches off 4km beyond the working cacao plantation of Hacienda Bukare and goes 5km to the village of Medina then northward for 1km to a fork. The left branch goes for 2km to the crescent-shaped **Playa Medina**. The right branch leads 6km over a potholed road to the village of Pui Puy and continues for 2km to the beautiful **Playa Pui Puy**.

Few travelers venture further to the east, though beaches dot the coast as far as the eye can see. The seaside village of **San Juan de Las Galdonas** has especially fine beaches. Its main access road is a wholly paved 23km stretch that branches off the Río Caribe–Bohordal road 6.5km beyond the turnoff to Medina.

From San Juan de Las Galdonas, a dirt road (serviced by sporadic transportation) goes for 20km to the village of **San Juan de Unare**. Walk another hour to find the expansive Playa Cipara.

## GÜIRIA

☎ 0294 / pop 30,000

Güiria, 275km from Cumaná, is the easternmost point on Venezuela's coast reachable by road. It's the largest town on the Península de Paria and an important fishing port. The town itself is rather ordinary, though the rugged neighboring Parque Nacional Península de Paria, along the peninsula's northern coast, is attractive. Güiria is most importantly a major transit point between Venezuela and Trinidad. See the boxed text, right for more information about the crossing.

## Information

Both banks below give cash advances on Visa and MasterCard.

**Banco Mercantil** (Calle Bolívar at Calle Juncal)

**Banesc** (Calle Bolívar)

**Conexiones Buz3** (Calle Valdez; ☎ 9am–8pm Mon–Sat, 11am–5pm Sun; internet per hr US\$70¢)

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Miramar** (☎ 982-0732; Calle Turipari; d US\$7.50; 🍽) To save more bolivars, you can stay in this primitive little place further toward the port. It has dark but neatly kept rooms out the back.

**Hotel Plaza** (☎ 982-0022; Calle Vigirima at Plaza Bolívar 18; d US\$12.50; 🍽) This travelers' favorite has a newer extension upstairs with small but freshly decorated rooms with cold-water bathrooms. The *posada* has its own cheap eatery downstairs.

**La Posada de Chuchú** (☎ 982-1266; Calle Bideau 35; d US\$12.50; 🍽) Alternatively this *posada* has larger, beige-colored rooms with cable TV, a writing desk and plentiful hot water. It's also situated directly above the best seafood restaurant in town, **El Timón de Máximo** (Calle Bideau; mains US\$6–10; ☎ noon–3pm & 6–11pm Mon–Sat, noon–3pm Sun).

## Getting There & Away

### BOAT

*Peñeros* (fishing boats) leave from the northern end of Güiria's port to Macuro. Irregular fishing boats (a few per week – Thursday around noon is a good bet) go to Pedernales,

### GETTING TO TRINIDAD

The Windward Lines' representative **Acosta Asociados** (☎ 982-0058; grupoacosta@cantv.net; Calle Bolívar 31; ☎ 9am–noon & 3–5pm Mon–Fri) operates the *Sea Prowler*, a comfortable and air-conditioned passenger boat that runs between Güiria and Chaguaramas, near Port of Spain, Trinidad. It is supposed to arrive every Wednesday at noon and depart back to Chaguaramas at 3pm – although 5pm is closer to average departure time (it takes 3½ hours) Either way, you should be there at 1:30pm. Fares are US\$73 one way, and US\$121 round trip including port tax on the outward journey (for those returning from Trinidad there is an additional port tax of US\$12).



at the mouth of the Delta del Orinoco. The trip takes four to five hours and the fare is negotiable; usually around US\$7 per person. Be prepared to get wet from the waves, if not from rain. From Pedernales, riverboats go south to Tucupita.

### BUS

Several bus companies servicing Güiria have their offices close to each other around the triangular Plaza Sucre, where the Carúpano highway enters the town.

There are six buses a day to Caracas, departing in the early morning and late afternoon (US\$14 to US\$25, 12 hours). They all go via Cumaná (US\$7, five hours) and Puerto La Cruz (US\$9, 6½ hours). *Por puestos* run frequently to Carúpano (US\$5, two hours) from Plaza Sucre.

## ISLA DE MARGARITA

☎ 0295 / pop 350,000

Isla de Margarita is Venezuela's isle of tourism. Sun-seekers and bargain-hunters come from the world over for its top-notch beaches and rock-bottom duty-free prices. Charter flights and package tours besiege the island from all directions. It is an urbanized and highly developed beach vacation experience replete with fancy restaurants, high-rise international hotel chains and, again, plenty of shopping.

However, Margarita is large enough and has enough variety to still satisfy the interests of independently minded travelers. It showcases a spectrum of habitats, from mangrove swamps to mountainous cloud forest and desert. Margarita is also a world-class snorkeling, windsurfing and kite-surfing destination.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

Almost all the major national airlines fly into **Aeropuerto Internacional del Caribe General Santiago Mariño** (☎ 0295-269-1027). There are about 20 flights a day to Caracas with various carriers, including Aerpostal, Aserca and Avior. The normal one-way fare is US\$60 to US\$100, but discounted fares – sometimes as low as US\$35 – are occasionally available, so shop around. There are scheduled direct flights to Barcelona (US\$50), Carúpano (US\$40), Cumaná

(US\$40), Maracay (US\$80 to US\$100), Valencia (US\$60 to US\$80) and Maturín (US\$40 to US\$60) among others, and indirect flights to just about anywhere else in the country. Aereotuy and Rutaca fly to Los Roques (US\$100 to US\$200). Avior flies direct to Port of Spain, Trinidad (US\$200 to US\$225 round trip).

The following airline offices are located in Porlamar:

**Aerpostal** (☎ 263-9374; www.aerpostal.com; Centro Comercial Galerías, Av 4 de Mayo)

**Linea Turistica Aereotuy** (LTA; ☎ 263-2211; www.tuy.com/aereotuy.htm; Av Santiago Mariño)

**Aserca** (☎ 261-6186; www.asercaairlines.com; Centro Comercial Galerías, Av 4 de Mayo)

**Avior** (☎ 263-8615; www.avior.com.ve; Av 4 de Mayo)

**Laser** (☎ 269-1429; www.laser.com.ve; Calle Zamora)

**Rutaca** (☎ 263-9236; www.rutaca.com.ve; Calle Cedeño)

### BOAT

Isla de Margarita has links with the mainland via Puerto La Cruz and Cumaná from the ferry terminal, Punta de Piedras (29km west of Porlamar), and also has small boats to Chacopata from Porlamar itself. Small buses regularly shuttle between Punta de Piedras and Calle Mariño in Porlamar.

Tickets for the **Conferry** (☎ 239-8148, Porlamar office 239-8339; www.grancacique.com.ve; Av Santiago Mariño, Porlamar) ferries can be bought at the office or at the Punta de Piedras ferry terminal. Tickets for Gran Cacique are also available in the Porlamar office and in Punta de Piedras (☎ 239-8339). Frequent small buses (US50¢) run between Punta de Piedras and Porlamar; taxis charge US\$6 to US\$8.

For ferry information to Isla de Margarita, see the relevant transportation sections from Puerto La Cruz (p1022), Cumaná (p1025), La Guaira and the Peninsula de Araya.

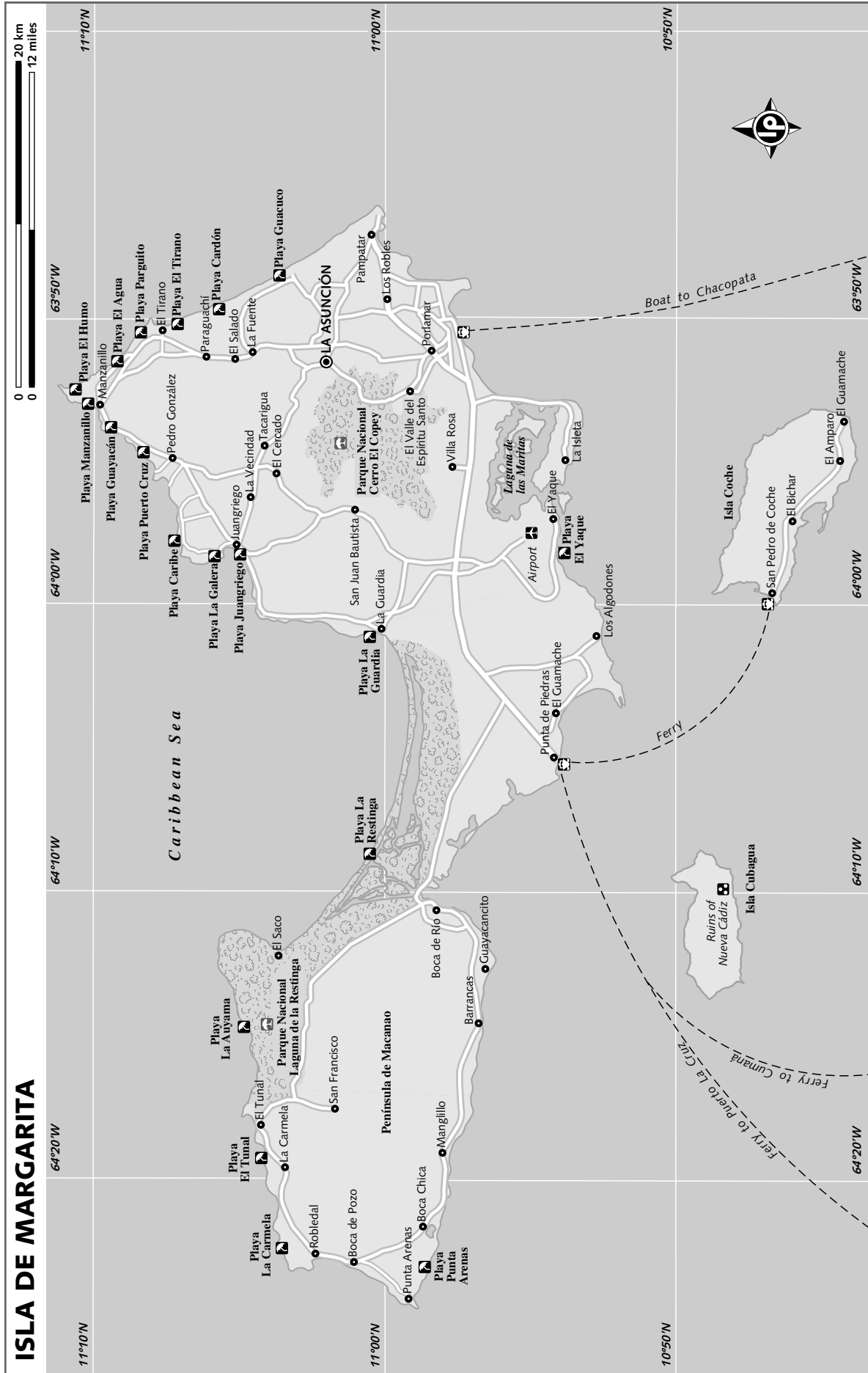
### PORLAMAR

☎ 0295 / pop 105,000

Porlamar is Margarita's largest and busiest city and is likely to be your first stop when you arrive from the mainland. Tree-shaded Plaza Bolívar is Porlamar's historic center, but the city is rapidly expanding eastward, with new suburbs, tourist facilities, hotels and restaurants creeping along the coast towards Pampatar.

### Information

Stores will accept cash dollars for payment using the official exchange rate. Credit cards



are widely accepted in shops, upmarket hotels and restaurants. There are *casas de cambio* in the airport and in the city.

**Banco de Venezuela** (Blvd Guevara)

**Banesco** (Av 4 de Mayo)

**Café Utopia** (Centro Comercial Costa Azul, Av Bolívar; ☎ 11am-late) Internet access.

**Corpotur** (☎ 262-2322; corpoturmargarita@cantv.net; Centro Artesanal Gilberto Menchini, Av Jovito Villalba, Los Robles; ☎ 8:30am-12:30pm & 1:30-5:30pm Mon-Fri) This government-run tourist office is midway between Porlamar and Pampatar.

**Cyber Café** (Ciudad Comercial Jumbo; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat) Internet.

**DIEX** (☎ 263-4766; Calle Arismendi No 7-85; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) This is the place to get visa or tourist-card extensions. Ask here or at the tourist office for foreign-consulate representatives in Margarita.

**Digicom** (Calle Fermín; ☎ 9am-12:30pm & 2-8pm Mon-Sat) Internet.

**Ipostel** (☎ 263-4577; Calle Maneiro; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri)

## Sleeping

Porlamar has plenty of hotels at every price. Most cheap spots are in the historic center, particularly to the west and south of Plaza Bolívar.

**Hotel España** (☎ 261-2479; Calle Mariño; s/d US\$4.50/6) This is the cheapest accommodation near the waterfront. It is also one of the lowest-quality accommodations near the waterfront. España isn't a bad choice if you're the kind of person who doesn't plan to spend a lot of time in the room.

**Hotel Malecón** (☎ 263-8888; Calle La Marina; s/d US\$6.50/7.50) Malecón is one of the friendliest places on the more affordable Colonial side of town. It has quirky, narrow passageways and sunny doubles, some overlooking the sea.

**Hotel Central** (☎ 264-7162; Blvd Gómez; d/tr US\$9/12.50; ☎) Located on a bustling boulevard with a large balcony from which to watch the world go by, this is a quiet, family-run affair that sees few travelers. Rooms have little natural light.

**Hotel Tamaca** (☎ 261-1602; tamaca@unete.com.ve; Av Raúl Leoni; s/d with fan US\$11/13.50, with air-con & hot water US\$14/17, tr with air-con & hot water US\$21-24; ☎) The most popular backpacker hotel in the more upmarket eastern side of Porlamar – and deservedly so. It has a wide variety of basic rooms, and the hotel has its own bar-cum-restaurant surrounded by trees and lit with multicolored lights in the evening.

## Eating

Budget eateries are plentiful across the city, particularly in the old town.

**Panadería 4 de Mayo** (Calle Fermín at 4 de Mayo; snacks & sandwiches US\$60¢-\$1; ☎ 7am-10pm) The most popular of several bustling bakeries in the vicinity, 4 de Mayo has beautiful pastries, sandwiches and cakes with as much cream and strawberries as you can eat, and its terrace is Porlamar's top people-watching spot.

**Alinsuca** (Calle Cedeño; mains US\$2.50-4; ☎ noon-4pm Mon-Sat) You'll get plenty of calories for your bolivars at this inexpensive pizza and pasta joint; you can take away or eat in.

**Restaurant Punto Criollo** (☎ 263-6745; Calle Igualdad 19; mains US\$3-6; ☎ 8am-midnight; ☎) Deservedly popular with locals for its dependable Venezuelan food and budget prices, this large, no-nonsense restaurant has a lengthy bit-of-everything menu, smartly bow-tied waiters and a long drinks list.

**Hotel Tamaca** (☎ 261-1602; Av Raúl Leoni; US\$3-8) Tamaca's tiny garden bar sees plenty of backpackers devouring pizza and downing a beer in the evening.

**La Casa de Rubén** (☎ 263-7964; Final Av Santiago Mariño; mains US\$4-9; ☎ 11:30am-11pm Mon-Sat) Somewhat hidden from the road, this homestyle restaurant serves all the typical Margariteña seafood dishes. Add your thoughts to the growing collection of customers' scribbles on the walls.

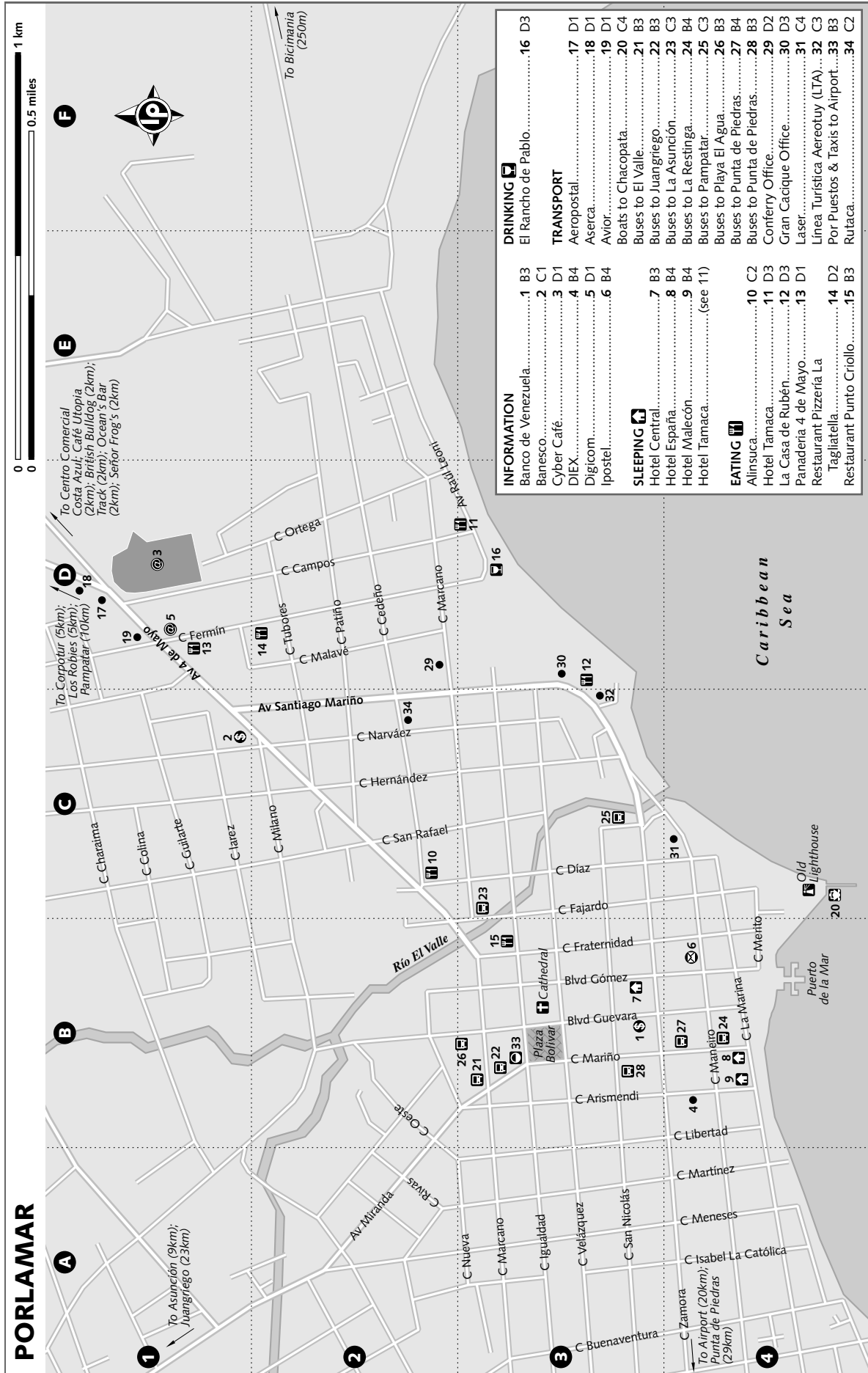
**Restaurant Pizzería La Tagliatella** (☎ 264-1096; Calle Fermín; pizzas US\$5-8; ☎ 11:30am-11pm Mon-Sat; ☎) This snug little restaurant serves great Italian pasta, pizzas, risotto and grills. It also has a wide wine list to enjoy.

## Drinking

Bars appear and disappear at lightning speed in Margarita, so check locally for the latest hot spots. There's always a collection of rustic shacks, well stocked with cold beers, on the beach. Most of the trendy nightclubs and bars are outside the city center.

**British Bulldog** (☎ 267-1527; Centro Comercial Costa Azul, Av Bolívar; ☎ 9pm-late Thu-Sat, in high season Tue-Sat) Margarita's first and only British-style pub, with a cheerful British-Venezuelan running the show behind the bar. It often has live rock music at weekends.

**El Rancho de Pablo** (☎ 263-1121; Av Raúl Leoni; mains US\$5-9; ☎ 8am-11pm) It's hard not to slip into a mellow mood at El Rancho de Pablo, a beachside bar and restaurant. There are



several other options nearby, but this one also serves good seafood.

**Track** (Centro Comercial Costa Azul, Av Bolívar, top fl; ☎ Thu-Sun) A sharper crowd tends to frequent this more exclusive club, where DJs pump out hip-hop, house, chillout and trance.

**Ocean's Bar** (Centro Comercial Costa Azul, Av Bolívar; ☎ Thu-Sat) Another option at the ever-popular Costa Azul center, this VIP-style bar has to be the most stylish of the bunch. Don't expect the 'in' crowd to arrive before 11pm.

**Señor Frog's** (☎ 262-0451; Centro Comercial Costa Azul, Av Bolívar; ☎ 6pm-late Tue-Sun) This gimmicky family restaurant by day becomes a thumping Latin pop-orientated disco by night.

## Getting Around

Small buses, locally called *micros* or *carritos*, run frequently throughout most of the island, including to Pampatar, La Asunción and Juangriego. They leave from different points in the city center; departure points for some of the main tourist destinations are indicated on the map. For sportier visitors, **Bicimania** (☎ 262-9116; bicimania@cantv.net; Centro Comercial AB; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4:30-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat), east of town, rents out bicycles.

## PAMPATAR

☎ 0295 / pop 35,000

Pampatar is just 10km northeast of Porlamar and the two towns are gradually melding into one. Pampatar was one of the earliest settlements on Margarita and once the most important port in what was to become Venezuela. It still has some colonial buildings and a nostalgic hint of faded glory. Pampatar's fort, the **Castillo de San Carlos Borromeo** (admission free; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun), is in the center of town, on the waterfront. It was built from 1662 to 1684 on the site of a previous stronghold that was destroyed by pirates.

Few travelers stay in Pampatar, but there are several budget lodgings on Calle Almirante Brion, one block back from the beach. You'll also find many open-air eateries along the beach. Buses between Porlamar and Pampatar run every five to 10 minutes (US\$25¢, 20 minutes).

## JUANGRIEGO

☎ 0295 / pop 24,500

This smaller town, famous for its burning golden sunsets, shows a side of Margarita quite different from busy Porlamar. Set on

the edge of a fine bay in the northern part of the island, Juangriego is a relaxing place to hang out on the beach, with rustic fishing boats, visiting yachts and pelicans. The sun sets over the peaks of Macanao far off on the horizon.

Juangriego is increasingly catering to tourism.

**El Caney** (☎ 253-5059; Calle Guevara 17; d/tr US\$10/15) is a colorful little Peruvian-run *posada*. Nice touches include a palm-thatched terrace out front, and a pool table out back.

About 200m north along the beach, the French-run **Hotel-Restaurant Patrick's** (☎ 253-6218; Calle El Fuerte; d/tr US\$12.50/19; ☎) offers nine clean rooms, and continental food.

**Hotel Nuevo Juangriego** (Calle La Marina; d with bath-room & fan US\$16, with air-con US\$22; ☎) is smack in the middle of the beach, and the five rooms facing the bay have balconies from where you can enjoy a postcard view of the sunset.

Restaurants and bars line the beachfront, all perfectly positioned to keep sunset-watchers fed and watered with romantic suppers and cold beer. They include the recommended **El Viejo Muelle** (Calle La Marina; mains US\$4-8) and **El Búho** (☎ 239-8340; Calle La Marina; ☎).

## BEACHES

Isla de Margarita has some 50 beaches large enough to deserve a name, not to mention a number of other unnamed little stretches of sand. Many beaches are built up with restaurants, bars and other facilities. Though the island is no longer a virgin paradise, you can still search out a relatively deserted spot if you look hard enough.

### Playa El Agua

This has been Margarita's trendiest beach for a few years. It's full of stylish Venezuelans and gawking hordes, though the true trendsetters have moved on to less-developed beaches. During holidays, the beach can get crammed with visitors but at other times it's a welcoming and wonderfully laid-back spot. It is generally an upmarket place, but there are some budget options in the back streets.

Though a little ways from the beach, **Hostería El Agua** (☎ 249-1297; on the Manzanillo road, 350m from beach; d/tr incl breakfast US\$16/28; ☎ ☎) is affordable and has a friendly bar, tours, and bicycle and motorcycle rental.

For tidy rooms at one of the lowest prices in town, the tiny, family-run **Chalets de Belén**

(☎ 249-1707; Calle Miragua 3; d with fan US\$16, with air-con US\$19, 6-person cabin with fan US\$32; (P) ♿) comes recommended. The chalets are only a short walk from the beach.

**La Isla Restaurant** (☎ 249-0035; mains US\$5-10; ☎ 11am-11pm) is an excellent thatched-roof spot right on the beach.

### Playa El Yaque

Playa El Yaque, located south of the airport, has tranquil waters and steady winds that are perfect for **windsurfing** and **kite-surfing**. The beach has already gained an international reputation and is a hangout for the windsurfing community from Venezuela and Europe (don't be surprised to see prices in euros). Several professional outfits on the beachfront offer windsurf rental (per hour/day/two days US\$15/45/75). They also offer lessons at US\$35 per hour, or US\$150 for an advanced course of 10 hours. As for kite-surfing, you can find lessons here for US\$39/180 for 1½/six hours. Kite-surfing rental costs US\$165 for 10 hours.

### Other Beaches

Other popular beaches include **Playa Guacuco** and **Playa Manzanillo**. Perhaps Margarita's finest beach is **Playa Puerto Cruz**, which arguably has the island's widest, whitest stretch of sand and still isn't overdeveloped. **Playa Parguito**, next to Playa El Agua, has strong waves good for surfing. If you want to escape from people, head for **Península de Macanao**, the wildest part of the island.

## GUAYANA

It is here in the southeastern region of Guyana (not to be confused with the country) that Venezuela is at its exotic best. The area is home to the world's highest waterfall, Angel Falls; the impossibly lush Canaima National Park; the wildlife rich Orinoco River Delta and Río Caura; the Venezuelan Amazon and La Gran Sabana (The Great Savanna) where *tepui* flat-topped mountains lord over rolling grasslands. It is common for visitors to spend an entire trip in this area of the country.

The majority of the country's indigenous groups live in Guyana, including the Warao, Pemón and Yanomami, which constitute about 10% of the region's total population.

## CIUDAD BOLÍVAR

☎ 0285 / pop 350,000

Most people visit Ciudad Bolívar as the jumping-off point to explore Canaima National Park, Angel Falls and Guyana's various other treasures. Upon arrival in the bus station or airport, Ciudad Bolívar deceptively looks like just another hectic mass of boxy concrete buildings. However, the surprisingly large and attractive *casco histórico* (historic core) has retained the flavor of an old river town and conserved its colonial-era architecture. It is worth spending an extra day or two to walk around the old town, sip a coffee, shop the street stalls, eat some *arepas* and get a feel for Ciudad Bolívar itself.

### Information

All internet cafés charge approximately US\$70¢ per hour.

**Banco de Venezuela** (cnr Paseo Orinoco & Calle Piar)

**Banco Mercantil** (cnr Paseo Orinoco & Calle Zaraza)

**Banescó** (cnr Calles Dalla Costa & Venezuela)

**CANTV** (cnr Paseo Orinoco & Calle Dalla Costa) Telephones.

**Estrella de Oriente** (cnr Calle Bolívar & Calle Igualdad) Internet.

**Galaxia.com** (Centro Comercial Abboud Center, Paseo Orinoco btwn Calles Piar & Roscio) For internet.

**Hospital Ruiz y Páez** (☎ 632-0077; Av Alemania)

**Ipostel** (Av Táchira btwn Avs Cruz Verde & Guasipati)

### Sights

**Plaza Bolívar** is the colonial heart of the city. **Paseo Orinoco**, the lively waterfront, is lined with old arcaded houses, some of which go back to the days of Bolívar. The iconic **Puente de Angostura**, a suspension bridge 5km upriver from the city, is the only bridge to cross the Orinoco at any point.

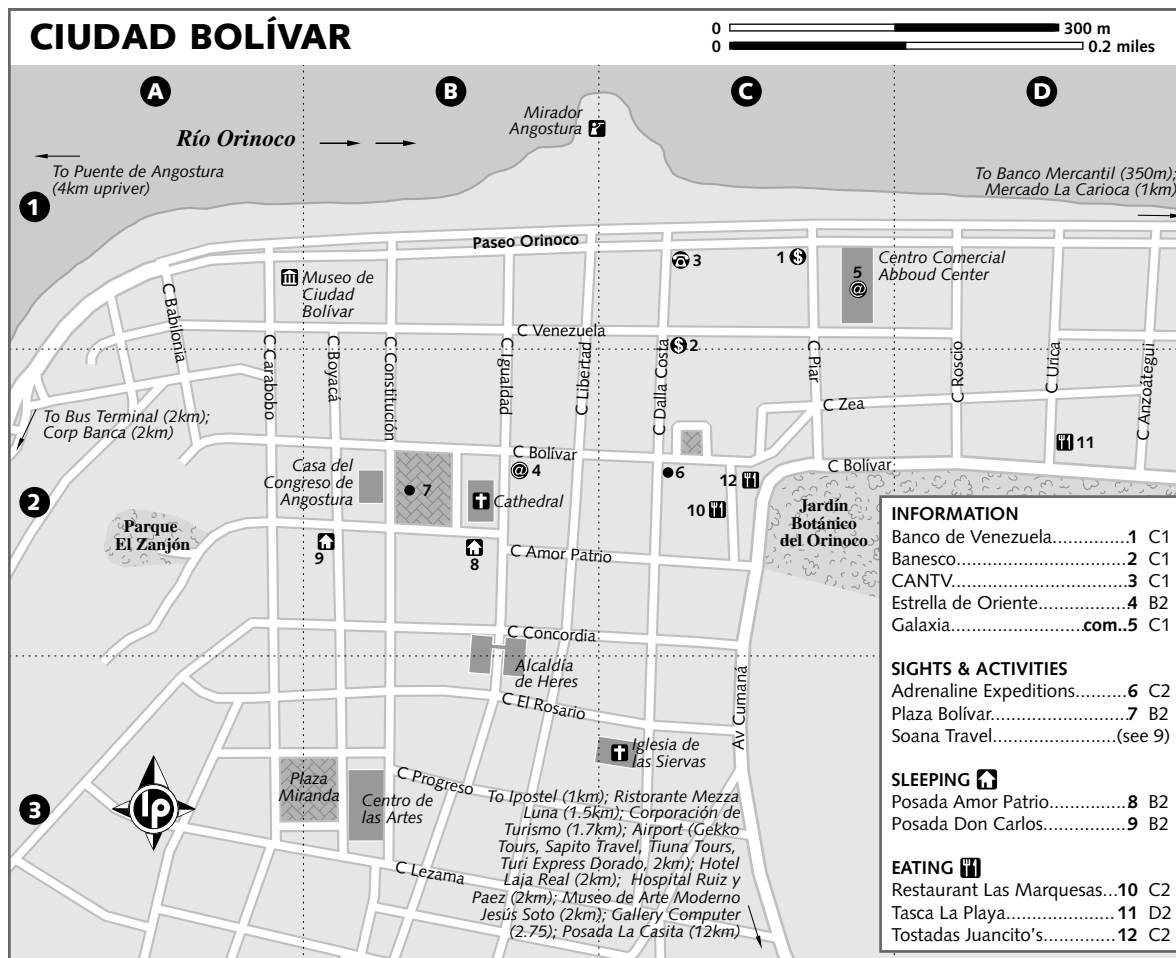
The **Museo de Arte Moderno Jesús Soto** (☎ 632-0518; cnr Av Alemania & Av Briceño Iragorry; admission free; ☎ 9:30am-5:30pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun) has an extensive collection of kinetic works by this internationally renowned artist.

In front of the airport terminal stands the **airplane of Jimmie Angel** that landed atop what was eventually named Angel Falls.

### Tours

Ciudad Bolívar is the departure point for tours to Canaima (Angel Falls), Río Caura and onward travel to Santa Elena (Roraima). Of the many options:

**Adrenaline Expeditions** (☎ 632-4804, 0414-886-7209; [adrenalinetours@hotmail.com](mailto:adrenalinetours@hotmail.com); cnr Calle Dalla Costa & El



Bldv; 🚗 24hr) Adrenaline is an adventure-oriented agency that does its best to cater to the needs of budget travelers. It has good Río Caura, Canaima and Gran Sabana tours and is extremely helpful with regional travel information.

**Gekko Tours** (☎ 632-3223, 0414-854-5146; www.gekkotours-venezuela.de; airport terminal) Run by Posada La Casita, Gekko is a responsible agency offering a wide range of quality tours across the region and the country.

**Jonas Tours** (☎ 651-3445; jonastours54@hotmail.com) Based out of Las Trincheras, the departure point for Río Caura trips, Jonas Camejo is the main man for excursions on the river. Many of the other company's tours are run through him. He can be contacted directly.

**Sapito Tours** (☎ 632-7989; 0414-854-8234; sapitotours@terra.com.ve; airport terminal) Representative of Bernal Tours from Canaima.

**Soana Travel** (☎ 632-6017, 0414-854-6616; soanatravel@gmx.de; Posada Don Carlos; cnr Calles Boyacá & Amor Patrio) Based at the Posada Don Carlos, Soana specializes in Río Caura tours.

**Tiuna Tours** (☎ 632-8697, 0414-893-3003; tiunatours@hotmail.com; airport terminal) Ciudad Bolívar's office of the major Canaima operator.

**Turi Express Dorado** (☎ 632-7086, 0414-893-9576; turiexpress@cantv.net; airport terminal) Long-standing, respectable company with good offers and reasonable prices.

## Sleeping




Ciudad Bolívar has some lovely *posadas*. As it happens, they are all run by Germans.

**Posada La Casita** (☎ 617-0832, 0414-854-5146; www.gekkotours-venezuela.de; Urbanización 24 de Julio; camping per person US\$4, hammocks US\$6, s/d/tr US\$14/18/24; 🚗 🚗) A good decompression point between the city and Canaima National Park, La Casita is set on spacious grounds past the airport. Its full range of accommodations includes tidy bungalows. There is free 24-hour pick-up from the airport and a shuttle to town.

**Posada Amor Patrio** (☎ 632-8819, 0414-854-4925; plazabolivar@hotmail.com; Calle Amor Patrio; hammocks US\$5, d/tr US\$12/16) Right behind the cathedral, in a historic house, this *posada* is popular with backpackers and has rooms with fan and shared bathrooms. Guests can use the kitchen.

**Posada Don Carlos** (☎ 632-6017, 0414-854-6616; soanatravel@gmx.de; Calle Boyacá; d with fan/air-con US\$14/25; 🚗 🚗) In a meticulously restored historic mansion with two ample patios, this newer *posada* has neat, clean accommodations along with a bar with antique German furniture.

**Hotel Laja Real** (☎ 632-7911, 632-7944; www.lajareal.com; cnr Avs Andrés Bello & Jesús Soto; s/d/tr US\$36/42/47;

**P**   ) This is the place to stay if you are in transit and need to be close to the airport – like, directly across the street. It also happens to be one of the nicer places in town, with fair-sized rooms with fridge and hot water.

### Eating & Drinking

The city center is full of cheap eateries.

**Tostadas Juancito's** (☎ 632-6173; cnr Av Cumaná & Calle Bolívar; set meal US\$2-3, arepas US\$1; 🕒 6:30am-6:30pm) This popular *arepa* and snack bar has occupied this busy street corner forever. It is the place to hang out with local characters, have a beer and watch the city pass by.

**Mercado La Carioca** (Paseo Orinoco; mains US\$2-4; 🕒 lunch) Popularly called 'La Sapoara,' this market at the eastern end of the Paseo Orinoco has several simple restaurants lining the riverfront serving inexpensive meals. The fish comes straight from the river.

**Restaurant Las Marquesas** (Av Cumaná; set meal US\$2, mains US\$2-4) Run by a Colombian family, Las Marquesas has copious home-cooked meals and a few popular Colombian specialties.

**Tasca La Playa** (☎ 632-0231; cnr Calles Urica & Zea; mains US\$4-7) Don't be deterred by the smoky, dim interior – La Playa serves satisfying steaks and seafood at reasonable prices. It's also one of the better bars in town.

**Ristorante Mezza Luna** (☎ 632-0524; cnr Av Táchira & Bolívar; pasta & pizza US\$5-7, mains US\$7-10) Ciudad Bolívar's pizza and pasta place, Mezza Luna is also a smart choice to escape the heat of the day.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

The **Aeropuerto Ciudad Bolívar** (☎ 632-4978; Av Jesús Soto) is 2km southeast of the riverfront and is linked to the city center by local transport. Avior and Rutaca fly daily to Caracas (US\$50 to US\$80). There are plenty of tour operators with flights to Canaima (see Tours, p1034).

#### BUS

The **Terminal de Pasajeros** (cnr Avs República & Sucre) is 1.5km south of the center. To get there, take the westbound *buseta* marked 'Terminal' from Paseo Orinoco.

Plenty of buses go to Caracas (US\$11 to US\$16, nine hours, 591km); most of them depart in the evening. There are also direct buses to Maracay (US\$11 to US\$16, 9½ hours, 627km) and Valencia (US\$12 to US\$17, 10½ hours, 676km), which don't go through Ca-

racas, but via the shorter Los Llanos route. These are the buses to take if you want to go to Venezuela's northwest or the Andes and avoid connections in Caracas.

Buses to Puerto La Cruz (US\$6 to US\$8, four hours, 302km) run every hour or two. A dozen buses a day go to Puerto Ayacucho (US\$10 to US\$13, 10 to 12 hours, 728km). To Ciudad Guayana (US\$1.50, 1½ hours, 115km), buses depart every 15 to 30 minutes.

Several bus companies operate buses to Santa Elena de Uairén (US\$11 to US\$19, 10 to 12 hours, 716km), with a total of eight departures daily.

## CIUDAD GUAYANA

☎ 286

Ciudad Guayana is not just set on two rivers, Río Orinoco and Río Caroní, but is, in fact, two cities. It comprises the old colonial town of **San Félix**, on the eastern side of the Caroní, and the newish port of **Puerto Ordaz**, on the opposite bank. The two parts couldn't be more different: San Félix is a polluted commercial sector, with frenzied, crowded and sometimes unsafe streets, while Puerto Ordaz is the well-laid-out, clean and somewhat modern home to the middle and upper classes.

Locals generally refer to 'San Félix' or 'Puerto Ordaz,' and tend to disregard the official title of 'Ciudad Guayana.' So don't bother to ask for Ciudad Guyana at a bus station or travel agency, because the place is little more than a name.

### Information

Puerto Ordaz has plenty of internet facilities and they are usually fast and cheap (US60¢ to US80¢):

**Banco de Venezuela** (cnr Avs Las Américas & Monseñor Zabaleta)

**Banco Mercantil** (cnr Av Ciudad Bolívar & Vía Venezuela)

**CANTV** (Carrera Padre Palacios, Puerto Ordaz) Telephone.

**Ciberlibrería S@las** (Centro Comercial Topacio, Carrera Uputa) For internet access.

**Telcel** (Torre Loreto, Av Las Américas, Puerto Ordaz) Telephone.

### Sleeping

Both San Félix and Puerto Ordaz have a range of hotels, but it's advisable to stay in the latter for convenience, surroundings and security.

**La Casa del Lobo** (☎ 961-6286; lobo\_travel@yahoo.de; Calle Zambia No 2, Villa Africana, Manzana 39; s/d US\$10/14)



This German-owned house rents out four rooms with fan and bathroom and prepares great meals on request. It also provides a free pickup service from the Puerto Ordaz bus terminal, or take a taxi (US\$3). It's a friendly, good-value place to stay.

**Posada Turística Kaori** (☎ 923-4038; [kaoriposada@cantv.net](mailto:kaoriposada@cantv.net); Calle Argentina, Campo B; d/tr US\$20/22; **P** ♻️) This smart *posada*, within walking distance of the center, has reasonable standards, is quiet and has hot water.

**Residencia Ambato 19** (☎ 923-2072; Calle Ambato No 19; d US\$24; **P** ♻️) This small family-run *posada* has no name on the door, just a number. It has seven tranquil and spotless rooms, all with a double bed and bathroom. It's often full, so call and check for vacancies.

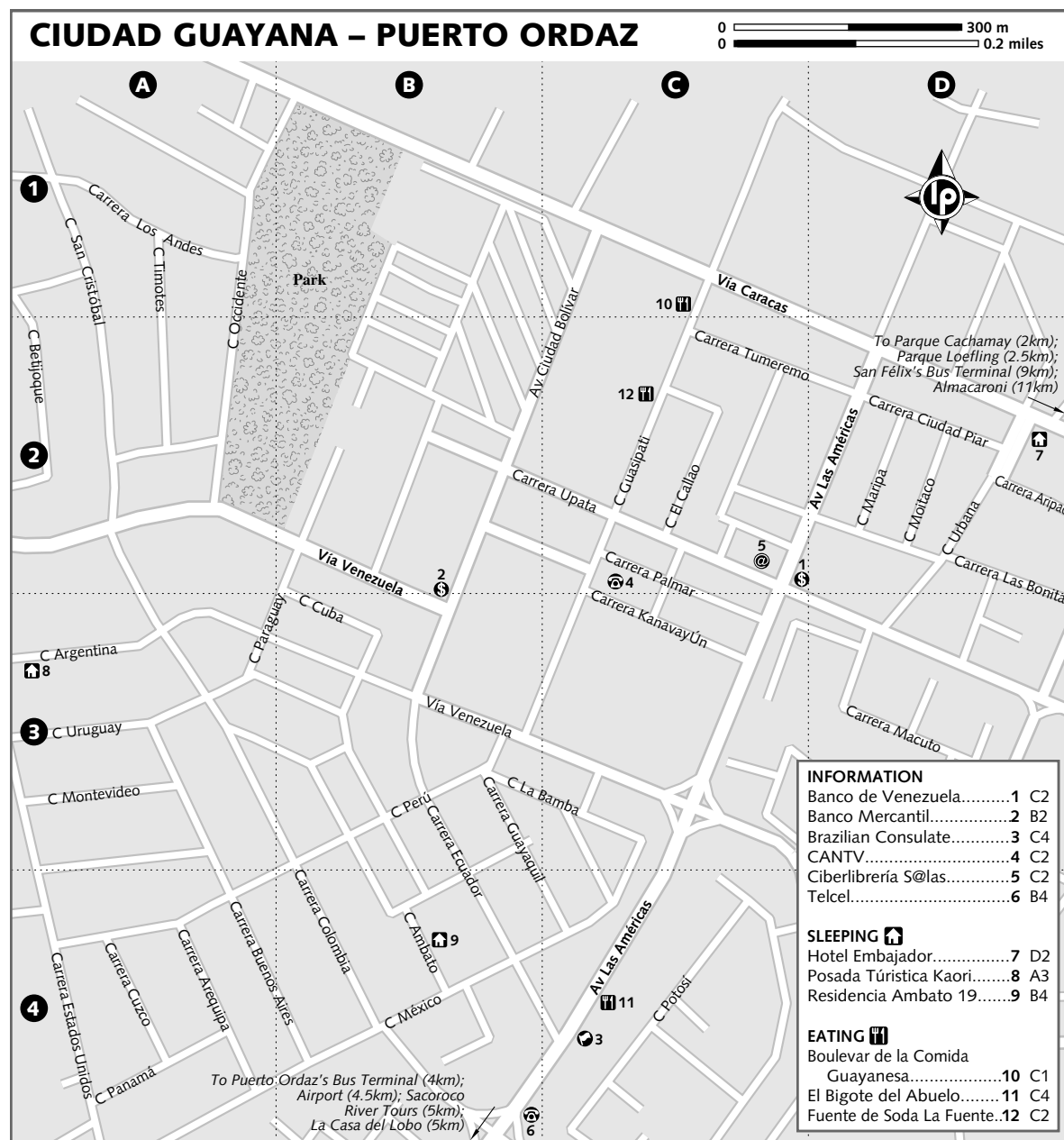
**Hotel Embajador** (☎ 922-5511; [hembajador@hotmail.com](mailto:hembajador@hotmail.com); cnr Av Principal de Castillito & Calle Urbana; s/d US\$27/32, ste US\$32-40; ♻️) The seven-story, modern Embajador doesn't offer great luxuries, but is very central and well kept, and doesn't cost a fortune.

### Eating

All the places listed are in Puerto Ordaz's center.

**Boulevard de la Comida Guayanesa** (Calle Guasipati; meals US\$2-4; 🍽️ lunch) This is a line of 12 or so food kiosks serving typical local fare on the street sidewalk. The food is cooked in front of you in a marketlike atmosphere.

**Fuente de Soda La Fuente** (Edificio La Meseta, Calle Guasipati; set lunch US\$2-4; 🍽️ 7am-9pm) La Fuente



offers all you need for an unsophisticated meal at any time of the day, but it's at lunchtime that it gets packed with patrons who arrive en masse for one of the four appetizing set lunches.

**El Bigote del Abuelo** (Av Las Américas; mains US\$5-9; ☎ 11:30am-midnight) The 'Grandfather's Mustache' is a large, relaxing timber-decked restaurant that offers popular Venezuelan grilled and barbecued fare and lots of frosty beers.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The **Aeropuerto Puerto Ordaz** (☎ 951-2482; Av Guayana) is at the western end of Puerto Ordaz on the road to Ciudad Bolívar. Buses marked 'Sidor Directo' from Alta Vista will leave you at the terminal's entrance. Note that the airport appears in all schedules as 'Puerto Ordaz,' not 'Ciudad Guayana.'

Puerto Ordaz is the busiest air hub in eastern Venezuela and is serviced by most major domestic airlines, including **Aerpostal** (☎ 0800-284-6637), **Aserca** (☎ 962-9229), **Avior** (☎ 953-0064) and **Rutaca** (☎ 951-6904).

### BUS

Ciudad Guayana has two bus terminals. The **Terminal de Pasajeros San Félix** (☎ 974-2778; Av José Gumilla), about 1km south of San Félix's center, is the city's main terminal. Its environs can be unsafe, particularly after dark, so don't walk there; take a bus or taxi. Plenty of urban buses pass by the bus terminal on their way between Puerto Ordaz and San Félix, but they become infrequent after 8pm and stop running around 9pm. If you arrive later, you'll need a taxi to move around.

The **Terminal de Pasajeros Puerto Ordaz** (Av Guayana) is 1km east of the airport. It's smaller, cleaner, quieter and safer, but handles far fewer buses than the San Félix station. It's essentially a pick-up/drop-off spot rather than the final bus destination or departure point, and not all buses pass through here.

From the San Félix terminal, buses to Caracas (US\$13 to US\$18, 10½ hours, 706km) depart either in the morning or, mostly, in the evening, and most of them stop en route at the Puerto Ordaz terminal. There are also direct buses to Maracay (US\$13 to US\$18, 11 hours, 742km) and Valencia (US\$14 to US\$19, 12 hours, 791km). They don't pass through Caracas, but take a shorter route via Los Llanos. They are convenient if you wish

to go straight to Venezuela's northwest or the Andes, avoiding spending time and money on connections in Caracas.

Eight buses daily come through from Ciudad Bolívar on their way to Santa Elena de Uairén (US\$10 to US\$17, nine to 11 hours, 601km); all call at San Félix, but only a few stop in Puerto Ordaz. Buses to Ciudad Bolívar depart from both terminals every half hour or so (US\$1.50, 1½ hours, 115km).

## TUCUPITA

☎ 0287 / pop 70,000

Originally founded in the 1920s as a Capuchin mission to convert the local indigenous population to Catholicism, Tucupita is now a steamy river port and the only sizable town in the Delta del Orinoco. You can take a pleasant stroll around the central streets and along Paseo Mánamo, the riverbank esplanade, but Tucupita is mainly visited as a base for exploring the delta.

## Information

**Banco de Venezuela** (Calle Mánamo)

**Banescó** (Calle Petión)

**Compucenter.com** (Centro Comercial Delta Center, Plaza Bolívar) Internet access.

**Dirección de Turismo** (Oficina 18, Piso 2, Edificio San Juan, Calle Bolívar; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri)

**Gos's Computer** (Calle Petión) Internet access.

**Ipostel** (Calle Pativilca) For all your postal needs.

**Mi Casa** (Plaza Bolívar) Convenient ATM on the main plaza.

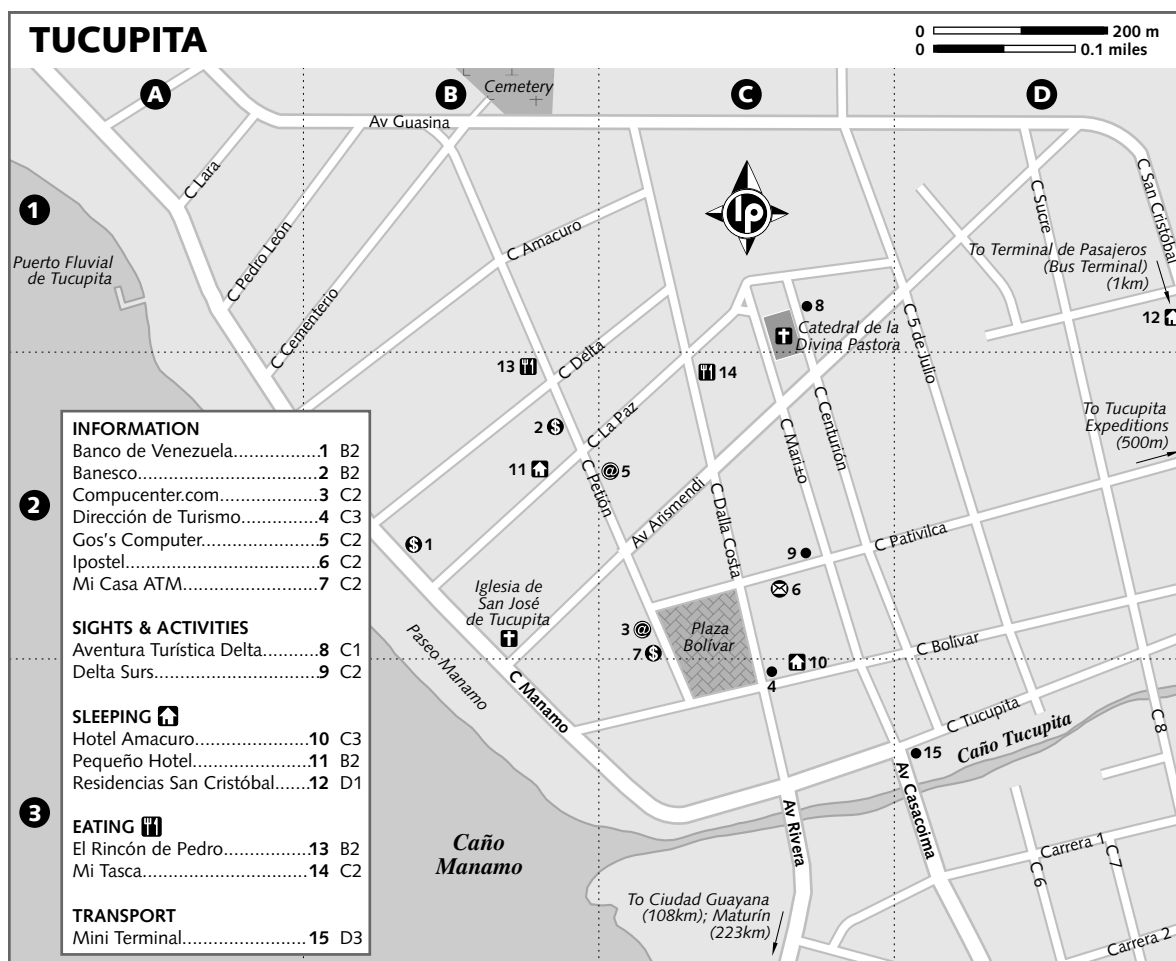
## Tours

All local tour operators focus on trips into the delta. Tours are usually all-inclusive two- to four-day excursions and the going rate is US\$40 to US\$80 per person a day. All the companies have *campamentos* (camps) that serve as a base for trips around the area.

**Aventura Turística Delta** (☎ 721-0835; a\_t\_d\_1973@hotmail.com; Calle Centurión) The most popular company with travelers, and probably the more affordable. The facilities are simple and its two basic camps have hammocks only.

**Delta Surs** (☎ 721-3840; cnr Calles Mariño & Pativilca) The oldest local tour company, operating since 1987, and the only one that offers tours to the far eastern part of the delta. Its Campamento Maraisa, in San Francisco de Guayo, has *cabañas* with beds and bathrooms.

**Tucupita Expeditions** (☎ 721-0801; www.orinoco-delta.com; Calle Las Acacias) Just 700m east of the center,



this is possibly the most expensive agency. It works principally with organized groups and generally doesn't focus on individual travelers.

### Sleeping & Eating

There are four or five hotels in the town center, and a few more outside the central area. None are great. There are many basic and inexpensive not worth naming here.

**Pequeño Hotel** (☎ 721-0523; Calle La Paz; d with fan US\$6-8, with air-con US\$8-10, tr with fan/air-con US\$10/12; 🚽) The family-run Pequeño Hotel has dim rooms and lumpy beds, but is just about the cheapest place in town and has a homey atmosphere. The *señora* locks the door at 10pm and goes to bed, so don't be late.

**Residencias San Cristóbal** (☎ 721-4529; Calle San Cristóbal; d US\$8-9, tr US\$10; 📍) Not really central and without air-con, the 40-room San Cristóbal is otherwise cheap and good value. It has revamped private bathrooms and new mattresses. Choose a room upstairs.

**Hotel Amacuro** (☎ 721-0404; Calle Bolívar; d/tr with fan US\$10/14, with air-con US\$14/20; 🚽) Just off Plaza Bolívar, Amacuro is nothing particularly special, but it has reasonably clean, good-sized

rooms, and a large terrace to sit, sip cold beer and relax.

**El Rincón de Pedro** (Calle Petión; mains US\$2-3) 'Pedro's Corner' is a tiny family-run joint serving unpretentious meals at proletarian prices.

**Mi Tasca** (☎ 721-0428; Calle Dalla Costa; mains US\$3-6) Ask most locals where to go for a lunch or dinner, and they'll send you to Mi Tasca. Tucupita's best eatery has a varied menu, good prices, generous portions and quick service. Try the *lau lau* (catfish).

### Getting There & Away

The **Terminal de Pasajeros** (cnr Carrera 6 & Calle 10) is 1km southeast of the center; walk or take a taxi (US\$1). The **Mini Terminal** (Calle Tucupita) handles local and suburban bus traffic.

Five buses nightly make a run to Caracas (US\$13 to US\$18, 11 hours, 730km) via Maturín. Expresos La Guayanesa has two buses daily to Ciudad Guayana (US\$4, 3½ hours, 137km), but faster *por puestos* (US\$6, 2½ hours) serve this route regularly. The trip includes a ferry ride across the Río Orinoco from Los Barrancos to San Félix (no extra charge).

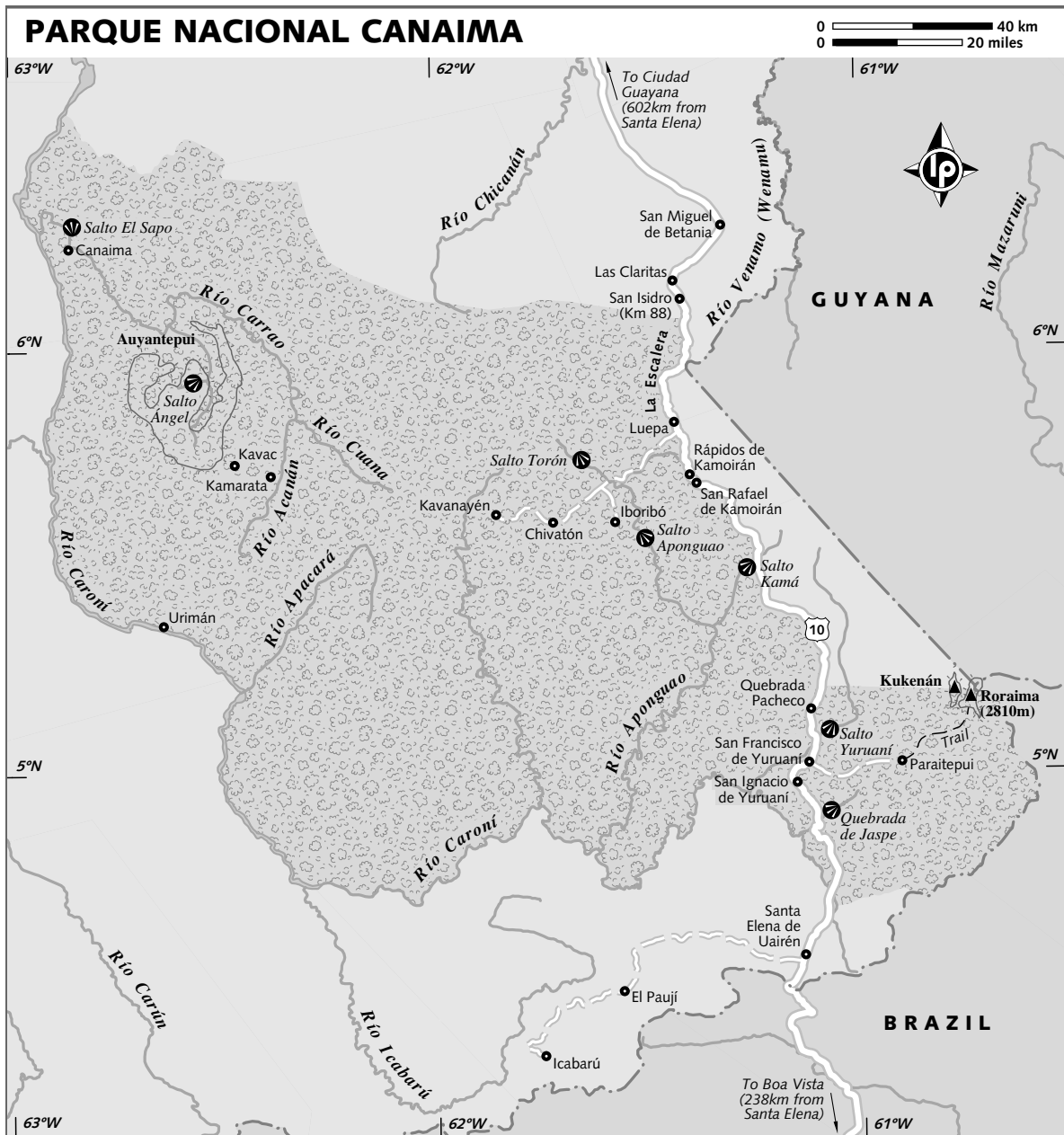
For Caripe and Cueva del Guácharo, take a bus to Maturín (US\$5, four hours, 217km), or one of the more frequent and faster *por puestos* (US\$8, three hours), and change.

### SALTO ÁNGEL (ANGEL FALLS)

Salto Ángel is the world's highest waterfall and Venezuela's number-one tourist attraction. Its total height is 979m, of which the uninterrupted drop is 807m, about 16 times the height of Niagara Falls. The cascade pours off the towering Auyantepui, one of the largest of the *tepuis*. Angel Falls is not named, as one might expect, after a divine creature, but after an American bush pilot Jimmie Angel, who landed his four-seater airplane atop Auyantepui in 1937 while in search of gold.

The waterfall is situated in a distant, lush wilderness with no road access. The village of Canaima, about 50km northwest, is the major gateway to the falls. Canaima doesn't have an overland link to the rest of the country either, but is accessed by numerous small planes from Ciudad Bolívar and Isla de Margarita.

A visit to Angel Falls is normally undertaken in two stages, with Canaima as the stepping-stone. Most tourists fly into Canaima, where they take a light plane or boat to the falls. Most visitors who visit by boat opt to stay overnight in hammocks at one of the camps near the base of the falls. The trip upriver, the surrounding area and the experience of staying at the camp are nearly as memorable as the waterfall itself.



**RAIN OR SHINE?**

The amount of water going over the falls depends on the season, and the contrast can be quite dramatic. In the dry months (normally January to May), it can be pretty faint – just a thin ribbon of water fading into mist before it reaches the bottom. Boat access is impossible in the driest months. In the rainy season, and particularly in the wettest months (August and September), the waterfall is a spectacular cascade of plummeting water – but you run the risk of rain and of the view being obscured by clouds.

Salto Ángel, Auyantepui, Canaima and the surrounding area lie within the boundaries of 30,000 sq km Parque Nacional Canaima. All visitors coming to Canaima pay a US\$8 national-park entrance fee.

**CANAIMA**

☎ 0286 / pop 1500

Canaima is a mixture of indigenous village and tourist center that serves as a base for Angel Falls. It lies on a peaceful, wide stretch of Río Carrao known as Laguna de Canaima, just below the point where the river turns into a line of seven magnificent falls. Rather than being jaded by the mass of arriving tourists, locals are friendly and welcoming to foreigners.

The waterfalls on Laguna de Canaima are an attraction in themselves, particularly Salto el Sapo, Sapito and Hacha. They can be visited by a short boat trip and hike, which allows you to walk behind some of the falls. The town also opens up onto a sandy beach on Laguna de Canaima. Be careful and don't swim close to the waterfalls or the water-processing plant.

**Information**

**Tienda Canaima** (☎ 962-0443, 0414-884-0940)

A souvenir-cum-grocery shop near the airport that changes US dollars and traveler's checks for a bad rate. Most of Canaima's tour operators will accept payment in US dollars, but not credit cards, or will charge 10% more if you pay with plastic.

**Wakü Lodge** (☎ 962-5560; internet per hr US\$10)

The fanciest hotel in town and is the only one that offers internet (a single computer in one of its lounges).

**Tours**

All Canaima-based tour companies run boat trips and can arrange flights. They also ar-

range lodging and meals. The main operators include the following:

**Bernal Tours** (☎ 632-7989, 0414-854-8234; www.bernaltraveltours.com) Family-run company based on an island in Laguna de Canaima, where participants stay and eat before and after the tour. Bernal Tours has its *campamento* on Isla Ratoncito, opposite Angel Falls.

**Tiuna Tours** (☎ 962-4255, 0414-884-0502; tiunatours@hotmail.com) The biggest and cheapest local player, with a large *campamento* in Canaima and another one up the Río Carrao at the Aonda.

**Excursiones Kavac** (☎ 0414-884-0511, 0414-853-2338; www.churumtours.com) Agency managed by the indigenous Pemón community. Marginally cheaper than Bernal Tours, it too has its *campamento* in front of Angel Falls.

**Jorge Abati** (piayma@hotmail.com) Canaima-based, English-speaking freelance guide can tailor individual trips for more intrepid visitors. He's the grandson of the Pemón chief who hosted the first *National Geographic* expedition to the falls.

**Sleeping & Eating**

There are a dozen *campamentos* and *posadas* in Canaima. Most are managed by the tour agencies listed above and serve all meals inclusive.

**Campamento Churúm (Kavac)** (☎ 0414-884-0511, 0414-880-3555; www.churumtours.com; hammocks/r per person US\$5/13) Opposite the soccer pitch, this is the camp for the clients of Excursiones Kavac, but it often has vacancies available to all. It is clean, cool and puts you in touch with locals more than most other options.

**Campamento Tiuna** (☎ 962-4255, 0414-884-0502; hammocks/r per person US\$10/25) The *campamento* of Tiuna Tours is in a big stone building at the northern part of the village. It offers open beds and hammocks to independent tourists and can also provide meals. Inquire at the office in the Ciudad Bolívar airport.

**Posada Wey Tüpü** (☎ 0414-893-3170, 0414-884-0524; r per person US\$20) Opposite the school in the south part of the village, Wey Tüpü is one of the best value places around. It has rooms with fans and bathrooms, and provides some of the cheapest meals for guests.

**Posada Kusarí** (☎ 962-0443, 0414-884-0940; r per person US\$30) This well-maintained *posada* has 14 rooms with fans and private facilities – inquire at the Tienda Canaima for vacancies and current rates.

**Getting There & Away**

Prices can change seasonally, so the following are averages: Avior flies between Caracas and

Canaima (US\$115 to US\$135) a couple of days a week. Several regional carriers fly between Canaima and Ciudad Bolívar on a semiregular or charter basis (US\$50 to US\$60). Various small airlines, including LTA, Sasca and Rutaca, go to and from Porlamar (US\$120 to US\$140); check LTA first – it's usually the cheapest carrier. Rutaca has daily flights between Canaima and Santa Elena de Uairén (US\$145).

## GRAN SABANA

The Gran Sabana (Great Savanna) is the green, undulating highland in the basin of the upper Río Caroní. The immense, empty region lies within the boundaries of Parque Nacional Canaima and is one of the country's most enchanting and unusual places. There is a certain beauty in the vast monotony of the savanna's rolling grasslands, though the landscape is broken up by the striking and unique *tepui*s. More than 100 of these plateau mountains dot the countryside from the Colombian border in the west to Guyana and Brazil in the east, but most of them are here in the Gran Sabana. The most famous *tepui*, Roraima, extends into Brazilian and Guyanese territory.

The only town in the Gran Sabana is Santa Elena de Uairén, close to the Brazilian border. The remainder of the sparsely populated region is inhabited mostly by the 15,000 indigenous Pemón people, who live in nearly 300 scattered villages.

### Getting Around

The Ciudad Guayana–Santa Elena de Uairén Hwy provides access to this fascinating land,

but public transport on this road is infrequent, making individual sightseeing inconvenient and time consuming. A comfortable solution is a tour from Ciudad Bolívar (p1034) or Santa Elena de Uairén (p1044).

### RORAIMA

Gran Sabana's greatest adventure destination, the massive table mountain of Roraima, is Venezuela's lost world and the highlight of most trips to the country. The challenging hike is worth every step and a stay atop the mountain is unforgettable.

Roraima was the first of the *tepui*s on which a climb was recorded (in 1884). It's the easiest table mountain to ascend and doesn't require any particular skills or technical climbing. It can be done by anyone who is reasonably fit and healthy (so long as porters carry the heavier gear), but it's still not an easy walk. It takes a minimum of five days to do the round trip, and you need camping equipment and food. Be prepared for a strenuous trek and some discomfort, including plenty of rain, cold and *puri puris* (invisible biting insects). The weather is always unpredictable.

### Climbing Roraima

Roraima lies approximately 40km east of the El Dorado–Santa Elena highway, just east of San Francisco de Yuruaní. The hamlet of Paraitepui is the usual starting point for the trip. You can organize a compulsory guide in Santa Elena, San Francisco or Paraitepui. Most people opt to go on an organized tour (p1044) from Santa Elena, which contracts the guides and porters and arranges for meals, transportation and equipment.

#### THE LOST WORLD OF THE TEPUIS

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 1912 book *The Lost World* tells the story of an expedition to a plateaulike mountain in South America where dinosaurs and apemen still survive. This novel was influenced by the mystique of Roraima in southeastern Venezuela. Roraima, and more than 100 or so other mountains like it, are what is known as *tepui*s.

'*Tepui*' (also spelled '*tepuy*') is a Pemón Indian word for 'mountain,' and it has been adopted internationally as the term to identify this specific type of table mountain. Geologically, these sandstone tablelands are the remnants of a thick layer of sediments (some two billion years old) that gradually eroded, leaving behind only the most resistant rock 'islands.' As they were isolated from each other and from the world below for millions of years, the tops of *tepui*s saw the independent evolution of flora and fauna. There are no dinosaurs up there, but roughly half of some 2000 plant species found on top of the *tepui*s are unique to the specific mountains and there are small endemic animals, such as miniature frogs. The topography of the mountains is also amazing as they have been sculpted by the wind and rain for eons.

The trip to the top normally takes two to three days (total net walking time is about 12 hours up and 10 hours down). There are several campsites (with water) on the way. They are Río Tek (four hours from Paraitepui), Río Kukenán (30 minutes further on) and at the foot of Roraima at the so-called *campamento base* (base camp), three hours uphill from the Río Kukenán. The steep, tough, four-hour ascent from the base camp to the top is the most spectacular (yet demanding) part of the hike.

Once atop Roraima, you will camp in one of the dozen or so *hoteles* (hotels), which are semisheltered camping spots under rock overhangs. The guides coordinate which group sleeps where.

The scenery is a moonscape sculpted by the wind and rain, with gorges, creeks, pink beaches, lookout points and gardens filled with unique flowering plants. An eerie, shifting fog often snakes across the mountaintop. While guides may have seemed superfluous on the clear trails below, they are helpful on the labyrinthine plateau. If you stay for two nights on the top you will have time to hike with your guide to some of the attractions, including **El Foso** (a crystalline pool in a massive sinkhole), the **Punto Triple** (the tri-border of Venezuela, Brazil and Guyana), **Bahia de Cristal** (a small valley brimming with quartz) and a number of other great attractions and viewpoints.

### San Francisco de Yuruaní

San Francisco, 67km north of Santa Elena de Uairén by highway, is the last town with restaurants or places to stay before starting the Roraima trek (which actually departs from Paraitepui, right). You can come here to eat a hearty meal before or after your hike and also arrange for a guide (US\$25 to US\$50 a day per group – remember that in terms of quality, you generally get what you pay for) and porters (US\$20 a day). Both guides and porters can be hired (for much the same price) in Paraitepui, although San Francisco has more options.

The town has a few nameless accommodation options along the main road (US\$5 to US\$10 per person) and simple eateries that serve grilled chicken and cold beer.

San Francisco de Yuruaní is on the Ciudad Guayana–Santa Elena Hwy. Eight buses a day run in either direction.

### Paraitepui

Paraitepui is a nondescript, small village at the gateway to the Roraima trek. It's 26km east of San Francisco; to get there, hire a jeep in San Francisco (US\$50 for up to eight passengers) or walk. The hot, dusty seven-hour roadside walk is only recommended to masochists.

The Inparques station is in Paraitepui and you must sign in before the hike (there is no park entrance fee). You are allowed to camp in the parking lot and use the covered table area, but the ranger may hit you up for a fee after the fact. There are technically no restaurants in town, but local families can cook chicken dinners (ask at the convenience store next to the Inparques station, around US\$7 per person).

### SANTA ELENA DE UAIRÉN

☎ 0289 / pop 18,500

This small yet happening town is a good base for exploring the Gran Sabana, particularly Roraima, and is the crossing point for those traveling on to Brazil. Santa Elena may be in the middle of nowhere, but there is a lot going on. Every other store buys or sells gold and diamonds and hundreds of Brazilians pour into the city every morning to buy the inexpensive gasoline in this duty-free zone. Brazilians are only allowed to leave Venezuela with a single tank of gas. Those who try to return with more have their car confiscated (notice the lots of impounded cars near the border). Santa Elena is also noted for being safe, friendly and blazingly hot.

### Information

US dollars can easily be exchanged with the money changers who hang around the corner of Calle Bolívar and Calle Urdaneta, popularly known as Cuatro Esquinas.

**Banco Guyana** (Plaza Bolívar) Has a 24-hour ATM.

**Banco Industrial de Venezuela** (Calle Bolívar) Has a 24-hour ATM.

**Brazilian Consulate** (☎ 995-1256; Av Mariscal Sucre; ☎ 8am-noon Mon-Fri) The consulate is opposite the petrol station. A yellow-fever vaccination certificate is likely to be required before issuing a visa.

**CANTV** (Calle Zea btwn Calles Roscio & Lucas Fernández Peña) Telephones.

**Ipostel** (Calle Urdaneta btwn Calles Bolívar & Roscio) Post.

**Iruk Café** (Calle Bolívar; per hr US\$1) Internet.

**Lavandería Cristal** (Calle Urdaneta; per load US\$2.50)

**Mundo Cyber** (per hr US\$1; ☎ 8:30am-9pm Mon-Thu, to 10pm Fri, 9:30-10pm Sat, 1-9pm Sun) Decent internet connection.



**Tours**

Santa Elena has about a dozen tour agencies. Their staple is a one-, two- or three-day jeep tour around the Gran Sabana, with visits to the most interesting sights, mostly waterfalls. Budget on roughly US\$25 per person per day in a group of four or more. This price includes transportation and a guide, but no accommodations or food.

The other main attraction is the Roraima tour, which is normally offered as an all-inclusive six-day package for US\$150 to US\$360 (you will get what you pay for with the cheapest tours). The operators who organize this tour usually also rent out camping equipment and can provide transportation to Paraitepui, the starting point for the Roraima trek, for US\$60 to US\$80 per jeep each way for up to six people. Check on your group size and hiker-to-guide ratio before signing up for any Roraima tour.

Some operators offer tours to El Paují area, noted for its natural attractions and gold and diamond mines.

Following is a list of recommended local tour companies.

**Adrenaline Expeditions** (☎ 632-4804, 0414-886-7209; [adrenalineptours@hotmail.com](mailto:adrenalineptours@hotmail.com)) This sibling company of the Ciudad Bolívar agency has energetic, adventurous tours of the Gran Sabana with its Indiana Jones-styled owner Ricardo. It can also facilitate Roraima trips.

**Backpacker Tours** (☎ 995-1524, 0414-886-7227; [www.backpacker-tours.com](http://www.backpacker-tours.com); Calle Urdaneta) The Cadillac of agencies in town, it has the most organized, best-equipped and most expensive tours of Roraima and the region.

**Cooperativa MauraK-Kon Tours** (☎ 0414-385-2846; [rstagransabana@hotmail.com](mailto:rstagransabana@hotmail.com); new bus terminal) This dependable agency arranges regional tours, hotels and any other details that you may need.

**Mystic Tours** (☎ 416-0558, 0414-886-1055; [www.mystictours.com.ve](http://www.mystictours.com.ve); Calle Urdaneta) Run by Roberto Marrero, author of various maps and books on the region, this agency has good tours to Roraima and is one of the few operators that organizes El Paují tours.

**New Frontiers Adventure Tours** (☎ 995-1584, 0414-927-7140; [www.newfrontiersadventures.com](http://www.newfrontiersadventures.com); Calle Urdaneta) Run by a team of experienced guides, this agency specializes in trekking tours, including trips to the top of Roraima, and provides competent guidance and good equipment.



## Sleeping

**La Casa de Gladys** (☎ 995-1171; Calle Urdaneta; s/d/tr/q US\$6/7/10/13) A long-established travelers' lodge, La Casa de Gladys is fairly basic, but all rooms have private facilities and guests can use the kitchen and fridge.

**Posada Michelle** (☎ 995-1415; [hotelmichelle@cantv.net](mailto:hotelmichelle@cantv.net); Calle Urdaneta; s/d/tr US\$8/15/18) Some of the best-value budget rooms in the country. Ask for a room upstairs as there is some noise (and less light) on the street level. Cheap laundry service is available for guests of the *posada*.

**Hotel Michelle** (☎ 995-1415; [hotelmichelle@cantv.net](mailto:hotelmichelle@cantv.net); Calle Urdaneta; s/d/tr US\$8/15/18) Next door to Posada Michelle and administered by the same manager, the hotel has 10 still larger rooms and is equally spotless. Cheap laundry service is available for the guests of the hotel.

**Hotel Lucrecia** (☎ 995-1105; [hotellucrecia@cantv.net](mailto:hotellucrecia@cantv.net); Av Perimetral; s/d/tr US\$13/15/20; (P) (♿) (♿)) Lucrecia is a friendly, family-run old-fashioned house with a lovely patio in bloom year-round. The rooms, arranged around the patio, have hot water. The hotel has a dependable water supply and a fair-sized pool, and guests are served breakfast and dinner on request.

## Eating

**Restaurant Michelle** (☎ 995-1415; Calle Urdaneta; mains US\$2-4) Run by the manager of the two Michelle lodgings, the restaurant offers fairly authentic and tasty Chinese food, cooked personally by the manager.

**Restaurant Nova Opção** (☎ 995-1013; Plaza Bolívar; buffet per kg US\$5; (☺) lunch & dinner) This Brazilian buffet eatery sells a wide variety of scrumptious prepared foods by weight. This is the place to load up on calories before or after your big hike. The other branch on Calle Urdaneta serves dinner meals with spaced-out service.

**Darwin Pizzeria** (Calle Icaburú; US\$3-6) This casual place serves a pretty decent pizza for being in the middle of nowhere. There are a few vegetarian options.

**Alfredo's Restaurant** (☎ 995-1628; Av Perimetral; pasta & pizza US\$4-5, mains US\$5-9; (♿)) This enjoyable restaurant has an unusually long menu, reasonable steaks, and fine pizzas from its wood-burning oven. You can either sit inside or at the front tables alfresco-style.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The airport is 7km southwest of town, off the road to the border with Brazil. There's no

### GETTING TO BRAZIL

Both Venezuelan and Brazilian passport formalities are now done at the border itself, locally known as La Línea, 15km south of Santa Elena. The bus stops at the office. Be sure to have your passport stamped upon leaving or entering Venezuela and carry a yellow-fever card for entering Brazil. Sometimes they charge a US\$16 tax for leaving Venezuela, but not always. For information on entering Venezuela from Brazil, see p394.

public transport; a taxi will cost around US\$5. Tour operators are often waiting for incoming flights and will usually give you a free lift to town, hoping you might be interested in their offers. Rutaca has daily flights on five-seater Cessnas to Ciudad Bolívar (US\$145), via Canaima (US\$145).

### BUS

Santa Elena has a new bus terminal, on the Ciudad Guayana highway about 2km east of the town's center. There are no urban buses – you need to go by taxi (US\$1.50).

Eight buses depart daily to Ciudad Bolívar (US\$11 to US\$19, 10 to 12 hours, 716km), and they all pass through Ciudad Guayana (US\$10 to US\$17, nine to 11 hours, 601km).

## AMAZONAS

Amazonas, Venezuela's southernmost state, is predominantly Amazonian rainforest crisscrossed by rivers and sparsely populated by indigenous communities. The current indigenous population, estimated at 40,000, comprises three main groups – the Piaroa, Yanomami and Guajibo – and a number of smaller communities.

In contrast to the Brazilian Amazon, Venezuela's Amazonas state is topographically diverse, with *tepuis* as one of the most striking features. Though not as numerous as those in the Gran Sabana, the *tepuis* give the green carpet of rainforest a distinctive appearance. At the southernmost part of Amazonas, along the border with Brazil, is the Serranía de la Neblina. It is a scarcely explored mountain range and contains the highest South American peaks east of the Andes.

The best time to explore the region is from October to December, when the river level is high enough to navigate but rains have started to ease.

### Getting Around

As there are no roads in most of the region, transportation is by river or air. There's no regular passenger service on the rivers, which makes independent travel difficult, if not impossible, but tour operators in Puerto Ayacucho can take you just about everywhere – at a price, of course.

### PUERTO AYACUCHO

☎ 0248 / pop 80,000

Hot, rainy Puerto Ayacucho, the only town of size in Amazonas, is a regional tourist center and the entryway to the Venezuelan Amazon. It is home to more than a dozen tour companies that can take you up the Orinoco and its tributaries, and deep into the jungle. It is also a transit point on the adventurous back routes to Colombia and Brazil. The town itself is a lively place on a dazzling stretch of the Orinoco. It has a few interesting sights, including an Indian craft market, but is mainly a place to rest and gear up for adventures in the surrounding areas.

### Information

**Banco de Venezuela** (Av Orinoco)

**Banco Provincial** (Calle La Guardia)

**Banesco** (Av Orinoco)

**Biblionet** (Biblioteca Pública, Av Río Negro) Half-hour free internet access.

**CANTV** (cnr Av Río Negro & Calle Atabapo) Telephones.

**Cibercafé Compuserv** (Calle Evelio Roa) Internet access.

**Colombian Consulate** (☎ 521-0789; concolptoayacu@cantv.net; Calle Yacapana Qta Beatriz 5; 🕒 7am-1pm)

**DIEX** (Av Aguerrevere; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri)

This is where you have to get your passport stamped when leaving or entering Venezuela. Note that the opening hours listed above are strictly a guideline.

**El Navegante** (Centro Comercial Maniglia, Av Orinoco) Internet access.

### Sights

The small but interesting **Museo Etnológico de Amazonas** (Av Río Negro; admission US\$50¢; 🕒 8:30-11:30am & 2:30-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon & 3:30-7pm Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) will give you an insight into the culture of regional indigenous groups including the Piaroa, Guajibó, Ye'kwana and Yanomami. Note the Ye'kwana ritual weapons labori-

ously carved in wood, the Yanomami body adornments made of colorful feathers and the Piaroa ceremonial masks used in traditional dances.

### Tours

Among the popular shorter tours are a three-day trip up the Río Cuaó and a three-day trip up the Sipapo and Autana Rivers to the foot of Cerro Autana. Expect to pay from US\$30 to US\$60 per person per day all-inclusive.

The far southeastern part of Amazonas beyond La Esmeralda, basically all the Parima-Tapirapeco National Park, where the Yanomami live, is a restricted area; you need special permits that are virtually impossible to get – some agents get around the ban by visiting Yanomami villages on the Río Siapa off Brazo Casiquiare.

Recommended tour operators:

**Coyote Expediciones** (☎ 521-4583;

coyotexpedition@cantv.net; Av Aguerrevere) A popular company with travelers, its main offerings are the three-day Autana and Cuaó tours (US\$100 per person), but it also runs longer trips.

**Cruising Tours** (☎ 0416-785-5033, 0416-448-5391; cruisingtours@hotmail.com; Valle Verde Triángulo) The German owner of this company personally guides diverse tours and expeditions in the region and beyond at reasonable prices (from US\$30 a day), and offers accommodations in his home for tour participants. The office is 5km east of the centre.

**Tadae** (☎ 521-4882, 0414-486-5923; Centro Comercial Maniglia, Av Orinoco) Apart from the staple Autana and Cuaó tours, Tadae offers rafting on Raudales Atures (US\$30) and rainforest walks guided by local indigenous people (US\$20).

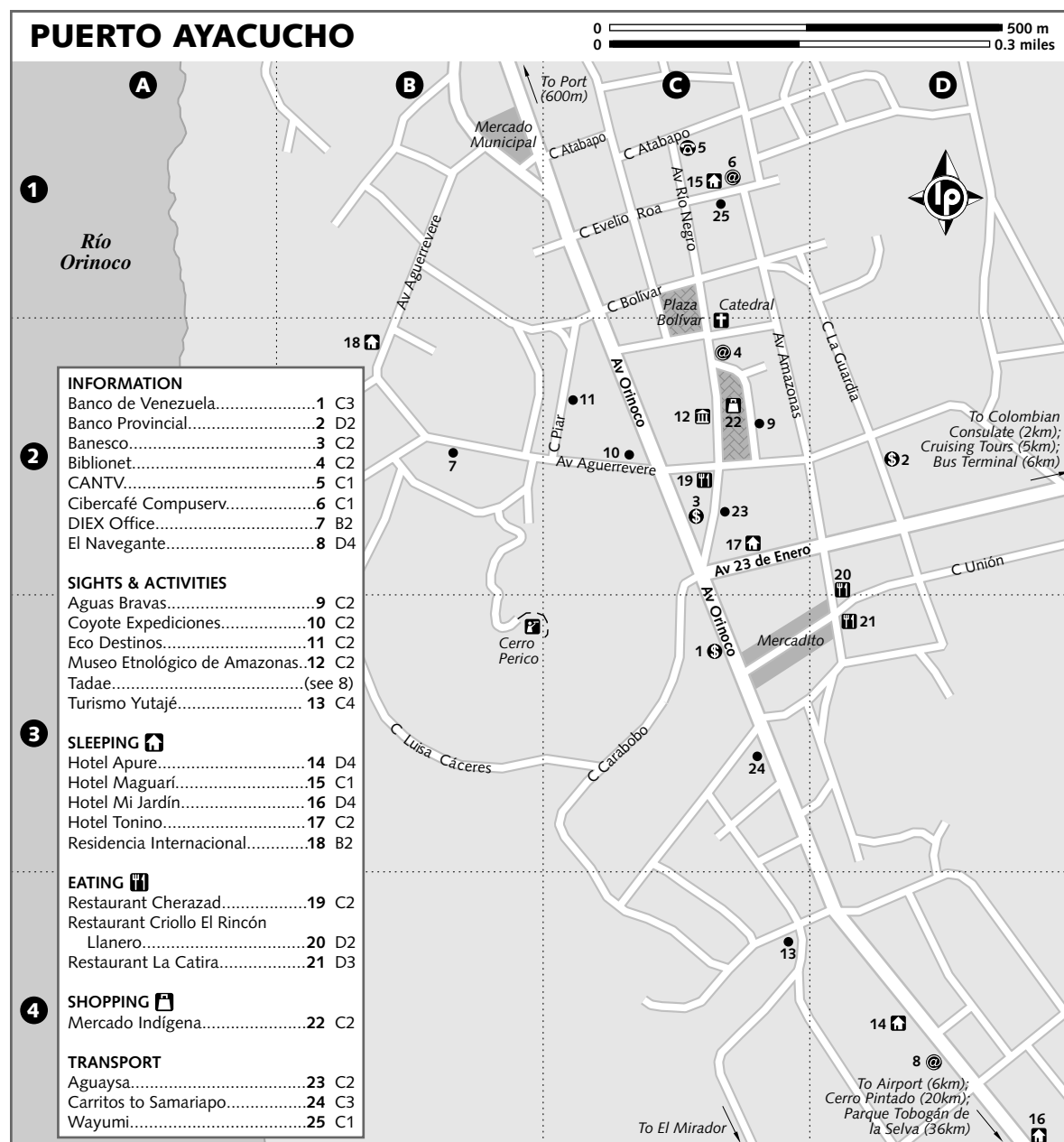
### Sleeping & Eating

Puerto Ayacucho has a good choice of budget accommodations.

**Hotel Tonino** (☎ 521-1464; Av 23 de Enero; d US\$12-14, tr US\$18; 🍴) Tonino is a tiny spot with a few clean, ample rooms. The hotel is on a busy road, but rooms are well away from the city bustle.

**Residencia Internacional** (☎ 521-0242; Av Aguerrevere; d US\$12-20; 🍴) This backpacker favorite is pleasant and friendly, with 24 rooms (all with bathrooms) arranged around a long patio, and a rooftop terrace. It is a good place to meet other travelers.

**Hotel Mi Jardín** (☎ 521-4647; Av Orinoco; d US\$14-18, tr/q US\$22/28; 🍴) South of the center, Mi Jardín has its own restaurant and 18 good,



clean rooms arranged around a central patio-garden, which is probably where its name came from.

**Hotel Apure** (☎ 521-4443; Av Orinoco; d US\$15-18, tr/q US\$22/30; P 🚻) Close to Mi Jardín, the Apure offers much the same rates and standards, including good-sized rooms, comfy beds and attentive service.

**Restaurant Cherazad** (☎ 521-5679; cnr Avs Aguerrevere & Río Negro; mains US\$5-7) One of the best dining establishments in town, Cherazad provides a reasonable choice of pasta, steaks and fish, plus some Middle Eastern dishes – try the *plato mixto*, which has samples of various specialties.

One of the favorite inexpensive places to eat among locals is **Mercadito** (Little Market; Av Ori-

noco), which boasts half-a-dozen rudimentary eateries, including **Restaurant Criollo El Rincón Llanero** (Av Amazonas; mains US\$3-4) and **Restaurant La Catira** (Av Amazonas; mains US\$3-4). Try the fried fish, which comes straight from the river.

## Shopping

**Mercado Indígena** (Av Río Negro) Held every morning (but busiest from Thursday to Saturday) on the square opposite the museum, it has indigenous crafts for sale. Look for the handmade hammocks, and human figures carved in wood.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The airport, 6km southeast of town (accessible by taxi; US\$3), handles daily flights to Caracas

## GETTING TO COLOMBIA OR BRAZIL

### To Colombia

The nearest Colombian town of size, Puerto Carreño, at the confluence of the Meta and Orinoco Rivers, is accessible via Puerto Páez, a Venezuelan village 93km north of Puerto Ayacucho. You can get there by the San Fernando bus (US\$3, two hours); the trip includes a ferry crossing of the Orinoco from El Burro to Puerto Páez. You then take a boat from the village's wharf across the Río Meta to Puerto Carreño (US\$1); the boat runs regularly during the day. Remember to get an exit stamp in your passport at DLEX in Puerto Ayacucho before setting off.

Puerto Carreño is a long, one-street town with an airport, a half-dozen budget hotels and a number of places to eat. Go to the DAS office (Colombian immigration), one block west of the main plaza, for an entry stamp in your passport. A number of shops will change bolivars to pesos.

There are three flights per week from Puerto Carreño to Bogotá (US\$90 to US\$100). Buses go only in the dry season, roughly from mid-December to mid-March, but they are not recommended because of the strong presence of guerrillas in the region.

### To Brazil

Take a flight from Puerto Ayacucho south to San Carlos de Río Negro, from where irregular boats will take you to San Simón de Cocuy, on the border. From here take a bus to São Gabriel da Cachoeira (Brazil) and continue by boat down the Río Negro to Manaus (three boats per week). Most of Puerto Ayacucho's tour companies can tailor a tour that concludes in San Carlos de Río Negro, or even escort you to São Gabriel.

(US\$68 to US\$93). Two small local carriers, **Aguaysa** (☎ 521-0026; Av Río Negro) and **Wayumi** (☎ 521-0635; Calle Evelio Roa), operate flights within Amazonas to a few smaller destinations.

## BUS

The bus terminal is 6km east of the center, on the outskirts of town. City buses go there from Av 23 de Enero, or take a taxi (US\$2). Buses to Ciudad Bolívar (US\$10 to US\$13, 10 to 12 hours, 728km) depart regularly throughout the day. There are about six morning departures daily to San Fernando de Apure (US\$10, seven hours, 299km), from where you can get buses to Caracas, Maracay, Valencia, Barinas and San Cristóbal. Carritos to Samariapo (US\$2, 1¼ hours, 63km) depart from Av Orinoco, one block south of the Banco de Venezuela.

# VENEZUELA DIRECTORY

## ACCOMMODATIONS

Hotels are not hard to come by in Venezuela and there are budget and midrange options in most towns (though Caracas is conspicuously short on quality budget accommodations). Popular tourist areas like Isla de Margarita and Canaima can become quite full on major holidays, but it is almost always possible to find a vacant room. Campgrounds are rare,

but you can rough it in the countryside. Camping on the beach is popular, but be cautious and don't leave your tent unattended. Venezuela has almost no youth hostels. Be aware that urban budget hotels may double as hourly-rates love motels.

A good choice of accommodation is the *posada*, a small, family-run guesthouse. These have mushroomed over past decades, particularly in smaller towns and the countryside. They usually have more character than hotels and offer more personalized attention. Most are budget places but there are also some midrange and a few top-end *posadas*.

Another kind of countryside lodging are the *campamentos* (literally 'camps'), which have sprung up even in the most remote areas. Not to be confused with campgrounds, *campamentos* can be anything from a rustic shelter with a few hammocks to a posh country lodge with a swimming pool and its own airstrip. More commonly, it will be a collection of cabins plus a restaurant. *Campamentos* provide accommodation, food and usually tours, sometimes selling these services as all-inclusive packages.

Places to stay can legally charge a 16% VAT on top of the room price, though few budget hotels or *posadas* actually do. The prices listed in this book include this tax. As in most developing countries, prices are not set in stone and can change due to the day of the week or if

the person at the front desk feels like it. Never count on being able to use a credit card – even if they say that they accept plastic.

## ACTIVITIES

Venezuela has many outdoor activities ranging from walking and bird-watching to adrenaline pumping paragliding and kitesurfing. Although all regions of the country have something to offer, Mérida is Venezuela's adventure sports capital.

Many of Venezuela's 40-odd national parks provide a choice of **walks** ranging from easy, well-signposted trails to wild jungle paths. Parque Nacional El Ávila (p998) near Caracas has some of the best easy walking trails, while the surrounds of Mérida (p1015) offer fabulous opportunities for **high-mountain trekking**. Other hiking possibilities include Parque Nacional Henri Pittier (p1003) and one of the most adventurous and fascinating treks, to the top of Roraima (p1042).

The region around Mérida (p1015) is excellent for **mountain biking**. Tour operators in the city organize biking trips and rent out bikes.

Mérida (p1011) is the best place to go **paragliding**. Novices can go on a tandem flight while the more daring can take a course to learn solo flight.

**Rafting** trips are run on some Andean rivers (arranged in Mérida; p1014), in the Parque Nacional Mochima (organized from Mochima; p1024), and over Orinoco rapids (arranged in Puerto Ayacucho; p1046). The Mérida region is also the home of **canyoning** (climbing, rappelling and hiking down a river canyon).

Venezuela has excellent **snorkeling** and **scuba diving** around the offshore archipelagos such as Los Roques (p1000) and Isla de Margarita (p1029). There's also some good snorkeling and diving around the islands closer to the mainland, including in Parque Nacional Mochima (p1022) and Parque Nacional Morrocoy (p1005). In all these places, local operators offer courses and diving trips, and rent equipment.

Los Llanos is one of the best regions to see **wild animals** including caimans, capybaras, anacondas, anteaters and birds. **Wildlife safaris** are organized from Ciudad Bolívar (p1034) and from Mérida (p1014). If you are particularly interested in **bird-watching**, consider Parque Nacional Henri Pittier (p1003) or Río Caura (p1034).

Venezuela has some **windsurfing** and **kitesurfing** areas of international reputation, in-

cluding Adícora (p1008) and El Yaque (p1034). You can also do both at Los Roques (p1000).

## BOOKS

For more detailed travel information, get a copy of Lonely Planet's *Venezuela*. Of the useful local publications, *Ecotourism Guide to Venezuela* by Miro Popic is a bilingual Spanish-English guidebook focusing on ecological tourism, while *Guide to Camps, Posadas and Cabins in Venezuela* by Elizabeth Kline is a bilingual edition detailing 1200 accommodations options. Both are updated yearly.

*The Search for El Dorado* by John Hemming offers a fascinating insight into the conquest of Venezuela. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* was inspired by the Roraima tepui in the southeast. *Venezuela: A Century of Change* by Judith Ewell provides a comprehensive 20th-century history.

There are a number of books on Chávez and his 'Bolivarian Revolution,' though most sources take either a fervent pro- or anti-Chávez stance. Some of the more recent and widely sold titles are *Hugo Chavez: Oil, Politics, and the Challenge to the US* by Nikolas Kozloff; *Chavez: Venezuela and the New Latin America* by Hugo Chavez, David Deutschmann and Javier Salado; *Hugo Chavez: The Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela* by Richard Gott and Georges Bartoli.

Travelers with a serious interest in bird-watching may want to check *A Guide to the Birds of Venezuela* by Rodolphe Meyer de Schauensee and William H Phelps. *Birding in Venezuela* by Mary Lou Goodwin is also a good reference.

## BUSINESS HOURS

The working day is theoretically eight hours, from 8am to noon and 2pm to 6pm Monday to Friday, but in practice, many businesses work shorter hours. Remember that Venezuela functions on a more lax schedule than European or North American countries and sometimes businesses close earlier or close for days on end with no warning and no apologies. Business hours are simply a guideline, so don't count on them too much.

## CLIMATE

Venezuela's climate features dry and wet seasons, though the tourist season runs year-round. The dry season runs roughly from December to April, while the wet season lasts

the rest of the year. The dry season is more pleasant for traveling, but some sights – such as waterfalls – are more impressive in the wet season. There are many regional variations in the amount of rainfall and the length of the seasons.

For more information and climate charts, see p1062.

## CUSTOMS

Customs regulations don't differ much from those in other South American countries. You are allowed to bring in personal belongings and presents you intend to give to Venezuelan residents, as well as cameras, camping equipment, sports accessories, a personal computer and the like. Chávez has whipped up a national paranoia about foreign spies, so think twice about bringing in complex audiovisual equipment or other unusual and potentially suspect technology. Chances are that the soldier searching your belonging will be 19, uneducated and difficult to reason with. Drug penalties are stiff – don't even think about it.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Venezuela is a reasonably safe place to travel. However, the country's getting poorer and consequently theft, robbery and common crime are on the increase. Theft is more serious in the larger cities and urban centers than in the countryside. Caracas is, far and away, the most dangerous place in the country, and you should take care while strolling around the streets, particularly at night. Also be aware of your surroundings when withdrawing cash from an ATM at any time of the day. Police are not necessarily trustworthy (though many are), so do not blindly accept the demands of these authority figures.

Malaria and dengue fever are present in some tropical areas and other insect bites, while they don't necessarily cause illness, can cause major discomfort. Overall, your biggest dangers are the standard risks of travel: sunburn, foodborne illness and traffic-related concerns.

## DRIVER'S LICENSE

You do not need any special type of driver's license to operate a car in Venezuela. However, you need a superhuman level of patience and Formula 1 driving skills to make your way around Caracas in a car.

## ELECTRICITY

Venezuela operates on 110V at 60 Hz. The country uses US-type plugs.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Embassies & Consulates in Venezuela

The following embassies are located in Caracas, unless otherwise noted. If you can't find your home embassy, check a Caracas phone directory, which will include a full list.

**Australian Consulate** (☎ 263-4033; caracas@dfat.gov.au; Av Francisco de Miranda, & Av Sur, 1st floor, Altamira)

**Brazil** Consulate (Map p1044; ☎ 995-1256; Av Gran Mariscal, Santa Elena de Uairén); Embassy (Map pp990-1; ☎ 261-5505; www.embajadabrasil.org.ve; Centro Gerencial Mohedano, cnr Calle Los Chaguaramos & Av Mohedano, La Castellana, Caracas)

**Canada** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 264-0833, 266-7176; crcas@dfait-maeci.gc.ca; cnr Avs Francisco de Miranda & Sur Altamira, Altamira, Caracas)

**Colombia** Consulate in Maracaibo (Map p1009; ☎ 792-1483; Av 3Y No 70-16); Consulate in Puerto Ayacucho (☎ 521-0789; Calle Yapacana off Av Rómulo Gallegos); Embassy (Map pp990-1; ☎ 261-5584; Torre Credival, cnr 2a Av de Campo Alegre & Av Francisco de Miranda, Campo Alegre, Caracas)

**France** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 909-6500; www.francia.org.ve; Edificio Embajada de Francia, cnr Calle Madrid & Av La Trinidad, Las Mercedes, Caracas)

**Germany** Consulate (Map pp990-1; ☎ 261-0181; diplogermacara@cantv.net; Torre La Castellana, Av Principal de la Castellana, La Castellana, Caracas)

**Guyana** (☎ 977-1158; embaguy@caracas-office.org.ve; Quinta Roraima, Av El Paseo, Prados del Este, Caracas)

**Netherlands** Consulate (Map pp990-1; ☎ 263-3076, 263-3622; Edificio San Juan, cnr 2a Transversal & Av San Juan Bosco, Altamira, Caracas)

**Spain** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 263-2855; espanve@cantv.net; Quinta Marmolejo, Av Mohedano btwn 1a & 2a Transversal, La Castellana, Caracas)

**Suriname** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 261-2724; embsur1@cantv.net; Quinta Los Milagros, 4a Av btwn 7a & 8a Transversal, Altamira, Caracas)

**Trinidad & Tobago** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 261-3748; embassytt@cantv.net; Quinta Serrana, 4a Av btwn 7a & 8a Transversal, Altamira, Caracas)

**UK** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 263-8411; www.britain.org.ve; Torre La Castellana, Av Principal de la Castellana, La Castellana, Caracas)

**USA** (Map pp990-1; ☎ 975-6411, 975-7811; www.embajadausa.org.ve; cnr Calle F & Calle Suapure, Colinas del Valle Arriba, Caracas)

## Venezuelan Embassies & Consulates Abroad

Venezuelan embassies abroad include the following:

**Canada** (☎ 613-235-5151, 235-0551; www.misionvenezuela.org; 32 Range Rd, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 4J8)

**Colombia** (☎ 1-640-1213; embajada@embaven.org.co; Carrera 11 No 87-51, Bogotá)

**France** (☎ 01-45 53 29 98, 01-47 55 00 11; www.embavenez-paris.com; 11 rue Copernic, Paris 75116)

**Germany** (☎ 030-832 24 00; www.botschaft-venezuela.de; Schillstrasse 9-10, 10785 Berlin)

**Netherlands** (☎ 0703-65 12 56, 0703-63 38 05; embavene@xs4all.nl; Nassaulaan 2, 2514 JS The Hague)

**Spain** (☎ 01-598 12 00; embvenez@teleline.es; Edificio Eurocentro, Calle Capitan Haya No 1, 28020 Madrid)

**Trinidad & Tobago** (☎ 627-9821; embaveneztt@carib-link.net; Venezuelan Centre, 16 Victoria Av, Port of Spain)

**UK** (☎ 020-7581 2776, 7584 4206; www.venezlon.demon.co.uk; 1 Cromwell Rd, London SW7 2HW)

**USA** (☎ 202-342-2214; www.embavenez-us.org; 1099 30th St NW, Washington DC 20007)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Given the strong Catholic character of Venezuela, many holidays follow the church calendar – Christmas, Carnaval, Easter and Corpus Christi are celebrated all over the country. Carnaval is particularly big in Isla de Margarita, El Callao and Carúpano. The religious calendar is dotted with saints' days, and every village and town has its own patron saint and will hold a celebration on that day. Cultural events such as festivals of theater, film or classical music are almost exclusively confined to Caracas.

One of Venezuela's most colorful events is the **Diablos Danzantes** (see the boxed text, p999). It's held on Corpus Christi in San Francisco de Yare, about 70km southeast of Caracas. The ceremony consists of a spectacular parade and the dance of devils, performed by dancers in elaborate masks and costumes.

## FOOD & DRINK

On the whole, dining options in Venezuela are good and relatively inexpensive. Various local dishes, international cuisine and an array of snacks and fast foods are available. Budget travelers should look for restaurants that offer a *menú del día* or *menu ejecutivo*, a set meal consisting of soup and a main course. It will cost roughly US\$3 to US\$5 (a little more in Caracas), which is cheaper than any à la carte dish. A budget alternative can be roasted chicken, usually called *pollo en brasa*. Filling

local choices include *pabellón criollo*, *arepas*, *cachapas* and *empanadas*. For more information see Venezuelan Cuisine following.

For breakfast, visit any of the ubiquitous *panaderías* (bakeries), which serve sandwiches, croissants, pastries and a variety of snacks, plus delicious espresso.

In almost every dining or drinking establishment, a 10% service charge will automatically be added to the bill. It's customary to leave a small tip at fancier places.

## Venezuelan Cuisine

The following list includes some of the most typical Venezuelan dishes and a few international foods that have different names in Venezuelan Spanish.

**arepa** (a-re-pa) – small, grilled corn pancake stuffed with a variety of fillings

**cachapa** (ka-cha-pa) – larger, flat corn pancake, served with cheese and/or ham

**cachito** (ka-chee-to) – croissant filled with chopped ham and served hot

**cambur** (kam-boor) – banana

**carabina** (ka-ra-bee-na) – Mérida version of *hallaca*

**caraoa** (ka-ra-o-ta) – black bean

**casabe** (ka-sa-be) – huge, flat bread made from yucca. a staple in Indian communities

**empanada** (em-pa-na-da) – deep-fried cornmeal turnover stuffed with various fillings

**guasacaca** (gwas-a-ka-ka) – a green sauce made of peppers, onions and seasoning

**hallaca** (a-ya-ka) – maize dough with chopped meat and vegetables, wrapped in banana leaves and steamed; like a Mexican tamale

**lau lau** (lau-lau) – catfish

**lechosa** (le-cho-sa) – papaya

**muchacho** (moo-cha-cho) – hearty roast-beef dish

**pabellón criollo** (pa-be-yon cree-o-yo) – shredded beef, rice, black beans, cheese and fried plantain; Venezuela's national dish

**papelón** (pa-be-lon) – crude brown sugar; drink flavoring

**parchita** (par-chee-ta) – passion fruit

**pasapalos** (pa-sa-pa-los) – hors d'oeuvres, small snacks, finger food

**patilla** (pa-tee-ya) – watermelon

**quesillo** (ke-see-yo) – caramel custard

**tequeño** (te-ke-nyo) – cheese strips wrapped in pastry and deep fried

**teta** (te-ta) – iced fruit juice in plastic wrap, consumed by sucking

## Drinks

Venezuela has good, strong espresso coffee at every turn. Ask for *café negro* if you want

it black; *café marrón* if you prefer half coffee, half milk; or *café con leche* if you like milkier coffee.

A staggering variety of fruit juices is available in restaurants, cafés and even in some fruit stores. Juices come as *batidos* (pure or cut with water) or as *merengadas* (milk with milk).

The number-one alcoholic drink is *cerveza* (beer), particularly Polar beer, the dominant brand. Other popular brands include Solera (which is owned by Polar), Regional and Brahma (which is Brazilian). Beer's sold everywhere in cans or small bottles at close to freezing temperature. Among spirits, *ron* (rum) heads the list and comes in numerous varieties. Cacique is the most popular brand.

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Homosexuality isn't illegal in Venezuela, but it is suppressed and frowned upon by the overwhelmingly Catholic society. Caracas has the largest gay and lesbian community and the most open gay life. Homosexual men, in particular, should be very discreet in smaller towns and rural areas. At the same time, pockets of tolerance do exist.

Caracas' contacts include the **Movimiento Ambiente de Venezuela** (☎ 0212-321-9470) and the gay 'what's on' guide **En Ambiente** (☎ 0414-219-1837; [enambiente@latinmail.com](mailto:enambiente@latinmail.com)). Also check local gay websites [www.republicagay.com](http://www.republicagay.com) and [www.rumbacaracas.com](http://www.rumbacaracas.com) (both in Spanish).

## HEALTH

Venezuela has a wide array of pharmacies, clinics and hospitals, but health services have deteriorated over the past decade due to the economic situation. Be sure to have a good health-insurance policy to cover an emergency flight home or to Miami if something goes wrong. If you need hospital treatment in Venezuela, by far the best facilities are in Caracas. Smaller issues can be dealt with directly in pharmacies, as they are allowed to give injections and administer a wide array of medicines.

It is also smart to avoid drinking tap water (bottled water is sold everywhere) and to be cautious of street snacks, sun overexposure and insect bites, and be doubly careful while crossing city streets.

## HOLIDAYS

Keep in mind that Venezuelans usually take holidays over Christmas, Carnaval (several days prior to Ash Wednesday) and Semana

Santa (the week before Easter Sunday). In these periods, you'll have to plan ahead as it can be tricky to find a place to stay in more popular destinations. The upside is that they really come alive with holiday merrymakers.

Some official public holidays:

**New Year's Day** January 1

**Carnaval** Monday and Tuesday prior to Ash Wednesday, February/March

**Easter** Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, March/April

**Declaration of Independence** April 19

**Labor Day** May 1

**Battle of Carabobo** June 24

**Independence Day** July 5

**Bolívar's Birthday** July 24

**Discovery of America** October 12

**Christmas Day** December 25

## INTERNET ACCESS

Virtually all cities and most towns have cybercafés. An hour of internet access will cost between US50¢ and US\$2, depending on the region, city and particular place. Mérida and Caracas have the most widespread number of cybercafés and some of the best prices.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

Some useful websites for information on Venezuela:

**Latin World** ([www.latinworld.com/sur/venezuela](http://www.latinworld.com/sur/venezuela)) Useful directory with links to English- and Spanish-language sites. Categories include arts, traditions, travel, sports and books.

**Online Newspapers** ([www.onlinenewspapers.com/venezuel.htm](http://www.onlinenewspapers.com/venezuel.htm)) Links to at least 30 Venezuelan online newspapers.

**Think Venezuela** ([www.think-venezuela.net](http://www.think-venezuela.net)) General information on Venezuela, including politics, geography, economy, culture, education and national parks.

**University of Texas** ([www.lanic.utexas.edu/la/venezuela](http://www.lanic.utexas.edu/la/venezuela)) Impressive directory of Venezuelan websites provided by the Latin American Network Information Center.

**Venezuela Tuya** ([www.venezuela-tuya.com](http://www.venezuela-tuya.com) in Spanish) A comprehensive tourism portal for Venezuelan tourism.

**Zmag** ([www.zmag.org/venezuela\\_watch.htm](http://www.zmag.org/venezuela_watch.htm)) Website containing articles analyzing the current political and economic issues from a pro-government perspective.

## LEGAL MATTERS

Venezuela police are to be treated with respect, but with a healthy dose of caution. Cases of police corruption, abuse of power and use of undue force are unfortunately common.

Some travelers associate the tropics with open and relaxed drug policy. That is far from the truth in Venezuela. Penalties for traffick-



ing, possessing and using illegal drugs are some of the heaviest in all of Latin America.

## MAPS

The best general map of Venezuela (scale 1:1,750,000) is published by International Travel Maps (Canada). Within Venezuela, folded road maps of the country are produced by several local publishers and are available in tourism offices, some hotels and stores that cater to foreign visitors.

## MEDIA

All major cities have daily newspapers. The two leading Caracas papers, *El Universal* and *El Nacional*, have countrywide distribution. Both have reasonable coverage of national and international affairs, sports, economics and culture. The *Daily Journal* is the main English-language newspaper published in Venezuela. It's available at major newsstands and select bookshops in Caracas. Elsewhere in Venezuela, it can be difficult to find.

Most of Venezuela's numerous radio stations are dominated by musical programs, principally Latin music, imported pop, rock, disco and the like. Three government and three private TV stations operate out of Caracas and reach most of the country. They all offer the usual TV fare, including news-casts, music, feature films, sports and culture. Prime-time hours are dominated by *telenovelas* (soap operas). Several cable/satellite TV providers offer mixed Spanish/English multichannel packages.

## MONEY

### ATMs

*Cajeros automáticos* (ATMs) are the easiest way of getting cash. ATMs can be found at most major banks, including Banco de Venezuela, Banco Mercantil, Banco Provincial and Banesco. ATMs are normally open 24 hours. Always have a backup option as some machines will eat cards. A lost or damaged bankcard can cause some major disruptions to your trip.

### Bargaining

As in most Latin American countries, bargaining in Venezuela is part of everyday life. Since part of the economy is informal, quasi-legal or uncontrolled, prices for some goods and services, including products purchased at the market, taxi fares, rates in some budget

hotels or even bus and *por puesto* fares, are to some extent negotiable.

## Black Market

There is a thriving black market for American dollars and euros and many people will ask to change currency in airports, bus stations or the center of towns. You can get a much better rate with these money traders, but do so at a higher risk of getting ripped off. Make sure that you are familiar with current Venezuelan currency before wading into the black market, so you don't come away with obsolete bills. Consider dealing with someone who works out of a storefront so you can track them down later if there is any issue.

## Credit Cards

Visa and MasterCard are the most useful credit cards in Venezuela. Both are accepted as a means of payment for goods and services (though many tour operators may refuse payment by credit card or charge 10% more for the service). They are also useful for taking cash advances from banks or ATMs. Make sure you know the number to call if you lose your credit card, and be quick to cancel it if it's lost or stolen. Also remember that just because an establishment claims that it takes credit cards doesn't mean that its machine functions.

## Currency

The unit of currency is the bolivar, abbreviated to Bs. There are 50-, 100- and 500-bolivar coins, and paper notes of 1000, 2000, 5000, 10,000, 20,000 and 50,000 bolivars. Two different kinds of notes in 1000, 2000, 5000 and 10,000 bolivars denominations are in circulation, and both are legal. Watch the notes carefully before you pay (and also those you receive) because some notes are easy to confuse – particularly the 1000 and the 10,000.

## Exchanging Money

US dollars, euros and American Express traveler's checks are the most popular and accepted in Venezuela. Theoretically, they can be exchanged in some banks, but very few banks handle foreign-exchange transactions.

The *casas de cambio* (authorized money-exchange offices) are more likely to exchange your money, but may pay less and charge higher commission. The best-known *casa de cambio* is Italcambio, which has offices in most major cities and exchange both cash and

traveler's checks. If you are comfortable with Spanish and Venezuelan currency, the black market will get you the best exchange rates. Exchange rates at press time included the following:

Country	Unit	Bs (bolivar)
Australia	A\$1 =	1625
Canada	C\$1 =	1900
euro zone	€1 =	2691
Japan	¥1 =	18
UK	UK£1 =	4016
United States	US\$1 =	2145

### Tipping

Most restaurants include a 10% service charge. A small tip of 5% to 10% beyond the service charge is standard in a nicer restaurant, but is not required. Taxi drivers are not usually tipped unless they help carry bags. Tipping of hotel employees, dive masters, guides etc is left to your discretion. It is rarely required but always appreciated. The simple act of buying a drink for a boat driver or cook can go a long way.

### Traveler's Checks

American Express is the most recognized traveler's check brand. *Casas de cambio* will often change traveler's checks (try Italcambio), but will charge a commission of about 3% or more. Some tour operators will accept traveler's checks as payment.

### POST

The postal service is run by Ipostel, which has post offices throughout the country. The usual opening hours are 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday, with regional variations. Some offices in the main cities may open longer hours and on Saturday. Airmailing a letter up to 20g costs US50¢ to anywhere in the Americas, US60¢ to Europe or Africa and US70¢ to the rest of the world. Sending a package of up to 500g will cost US\$6/8/10, respectively. The service is unreliable and slow. Airmail to Europe can take up to a month to arrive, if it arrives at all. If you are mailing something important or time-sensitive, seek out a reliable international express mail carrier.

### RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Visiting a different culture can pose a great deal of challenges and you'll need to remind yourself how important it is to minimize the

negative impact of your visit. Be sensitive to the needs and beliefs of the local people, and resist trying to impose your standards and way of life.

Also resist the temptation to stuff your pockets with crystals, jasper or jade from the waterfalls and creeks of the Gran Sabana. Never touch coral or take home seashells while snorkeling or diving. Refrain from purchasing articles made from tropical shells, tortoises or corals, no matter how beautiful. Don't even dream of the belt you could make from the caiman leather you saw in the market and stay away from the arts and crafts with the bits of jaguar or anaconda skin (the story about how it was killed to defend a child is an old con). The purchasing of drugs and partaking in sexual tourism cause rippling societal damage that continues long after you have returned home.

Encourage and use truly ecological tourist companies and projects. Many tourist operators use the 'eco' label as a sales strategy. Find out what they do for the protection of the environment, how they minimize impact and how they contribute to local communities.

### STUDYING

Venezuela has a number of language schools in most big cities. You can also find an independent teacher and arrange individual classes. Mérida is a popular place to study Spanish as it is an attractive, affordable city with a major university population (see p1013).

### TELEPHONE

Bright blue CANTV public phones are everywhere, though only about 50% of them work. Phonecards for these phones come in a few different values and can be purchased at most stores and kiosks.

During the day entrepreneurs set up small tables on street corners with a few mobile phones chained to the tabletop. They charge by the minute for calls. This can be more convenient than using a card in a public phone, but can get expensive unless you are calling a domestic number.

Call centers (owned by Telcel, CANTV or independents known as *centros de comunicaciones*) are the best for international calls. In large cities, these centers are everywhere and are normally open from about 7am to 9pm daily.

Those who plan to stay a longer period of time in Venezuela may opt to purchase a mobile phone or buy a local SIM card for their own handset. The malls all have numerous competing mobile-phone offices. Generally the less expensive services have poorer reception, especially in areas outside of Caracas. Telcel (numbers begin with ☎ 0414) is the major operator of mobile telephone services, followed by Movilnet (☎ 0416) and Digitel (☎ 0412). Venezuela has one of the highest cellular-phone-per-capita ratios in Latin America. Note that calling cellular numbers is expensive and eats quickly into a phonecard.

All phone numbers in the country are seven digits and area codes are three digits. Area codes are listed under the headings of the relevant destinations throughout this guide. The country code for Venezuela is ☎ 58. To call Venezuela from abroad, dial the international access code of the country you're calling from, Venezuela's code (☎ 58), the area code (drop the initial 0) and the local phone number.

## TOILETS

Since there are no self-contained public toilets in Venezuela, use the toilets of establishments such as restaurants, hotels, museums, shopping malls and bus terminals. Don't rely on a public bathroom to have toilet paper and remember to always throw the used paper into the wastebasket provided (except at fancy hotels).

The most common word for toilet is *baño*. Men's toilets will usually bear a label reading *señores* or *caballeros*, whereas women's toilets will be marked *señoras* or *damas*.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Inatur** (Instituto Autónomo de Turismo de Aragua; www.inatur.gov.ve) is the Caracas-based government agency that promotes tourism and provides tourist information; see p988 for contact details. Outside the capital, tourist information is handled by regional tourist bodies that have offices in their respective state capitals and in some other cities. Some are better than others, but on the whole they lack city maps and brochures, and the staff members rarely speak English.

## TOURS

Independent travelers who have never taken an organized tour in their lives will find themselves signing up with a group in Venezuela.

As vast areas of the country are virtually inaccessible by public transport (eg the Orinoco Delta or Amazon Basin) or because a solitary visit to scattered sights in a large territory (eg the Gran Sabana) may be inconvenient, time consuming and expensive, tours are a standard option in Venezuelan travel.

Although under some circumstances it makes sense to prebook tours from Caracas (like when stringing together various tours in a short period of time), it is most cost effective to arrange a tour from the regional center closest to the area you are going to visit. Information about local tour operators is included in the relevant destination sections.

## TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Venezuela offers very little to people with disabilities. Wheelchair ramps are available only at a few upmarket hotels and restaurants, and public transportation will be a challenge for any person with mobility limitations. Hardly any office, museum or bank provides special facilities for disabled persons, and wheelchair-accessible toilets are virtually nonexistent.

## VISAS

Nationals of the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the UK and most of Western and Scandinavian Europe don't need a visa to enter Venezuela; a free Tourist Card (Tarjeta de Ingreso, officially denominated DEX-2) is all that is required. The card is normally valid for 90 days (unless immigration officers note on the card a shorter period) and can be extended. Airlines flying into Venezuela provide these cards to passengers while on the plane. Overland visitors bearing passports of the countries listed above can obtain the card from the immigration official at the border crossing (it's best to check this beforehand at the nearest consulate).

On entering Venezuela, your passport and tourist card will be stamped (make sure this happens) by Dirección de Identificación y Extranjería (DIEX or DEX) border officials. Keep the yellow copy of the tourist card while traveling in Venezuela (you may be asked for it during passport controls), and return it to immigration officials when leaving the country – although not all are interested in collecting the cards.

Visa and tourist-card extensions are handled by the office of DIEX in Caracas (p986).

### A MAN ON A MISSION

Chávez's 'Bolivarian Revolution' is famed for its *misiones* (missions). The missions are government sponsored outreach programs, often into the poorest communities of Venezuela. You will see billboards for these public works along the highways and on the sides of buildings. More and more visitors are coming to observe the missions or to volunteer at them. See [www.gobiernoenlinea.ve/miscelaneas/misiones.html](http://www.gobiernoenlinea.ve/miscelaneas/misiones.html) for more information. Some of the more well-known and important missions:

**Misión Barrio Adentro** (Inside the Neighborhood) has created free community health care clinics in the impoverished *barrios*.

**Misión Ribas** provides a second educational chance for some five million Venezuelan high school dropouts.

**Misión Robinson** ([robinson@misionrobinson.gov.ve](mailto:robinson@misionrobinson.gov.ve)) uses volunteers to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic to millions of illiterate Venezuelan adults.

**Misión Sucre** offers basic education courses to the two million adult Venezuelans who had not completed their elementary-level education.

**Misión Vuelta al Campo** (Return to the Countryside) tries to reverse the trend of urban migration and return the urban poor to the countryside.

**Misión Vuelvan Caras** (About Face) has the lofty goals to transform the economy from financial goals to the goal of a generally improved society that is fair to all.

**Misión Zamora** is the controversial program that seeks to expropriate unused land and redistribute it to poor Venezuelans.

## VOLUNTEERING

There are few volunteering opportunities with international organizations in Venezuela as the government has thrown out numerous religious charities and US-based organizations. There is the possibility to volunteer for Venezuelan government programs (though it is likely that you will need to speak Spanish).

**Mission Robinson** (see the boxed text, above) is a popular choice.

Lonely Planet's *Code Green* recommends **Peace Villages Foundation** ([www.peacevillages.org](http://www.peacevillages.org)). PVF offers a range of projects in childcare, assistant teaching, conservation and sustainable living, building and maintenance. Placements are also available for skilled volunteers in medicine, psychology and physiotherapy. Accommodation is provided at the Foundation's affiliated guesthouse or through home-stays with local families.

## WOMEN TRAVELERS

Like most of Latin America, Venezuela is very much a man's country. Women travelers will attract more curiosity, attention and advances from local men than they would from men in North America or Western Europe. Local males will quickly pick you out in a crowd

and are not shy to show their admiration through whistles, endearments and flirtatious comments. These advances are usually lighthearted, though they can seem rude (or actually be rude).

The best way to deal with unwanted attention is simply to ignore it. Dressing modestly will make you less conspicuous to the local piranhas. Even though Venezuelan women wear revealing clothes, they are a lot more aware of the culture and the safety of their surroundings. A cheap, fake wedding band is also a good trick to quickly end awkward chat-ups.

## WORKING

Travelers looking for a paid job in Venezuela will almost always be disappointed. The economy is just not strong enough to take on foreigners for casual jobs. Qualified English teachers have the best chance of getting a job, yet it's still hard to arrange work once you're in the country. Try English-teaching institutions such as the **British Council** ([www.britishcouncil.com](http://www.britishcouncil.com)), private-language schools or linguistic departments at universities. Note that you need a work visa to work legally in Venezuela.

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