

Costa Rica

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Parque Nacional Tortuguero** Paddle a maze of canals with growling howlers, sloths, crocs, turtles and manatees (p571)
- **Caribbean Coast** Groove to the reggae beat and rugged surf of Puerto Viejo de Talamanca (p565)
- **Montezuma** Wander the luminous sands of Reserva Natural Absoluto Cabo Blanco (p601)
- **Parque Nacional Chirripó** Scale Costa Rica's highest peak (3820m), where the panorama yawns from the Atlantic to Pacific (p616)
- **Monteverde** Stalk two-toed sloths and tarantulas in a night tour of the cloud forest (p575)
- **Off the beaten track** Blaze a trail through the pristine rain forest of Parque Nacional Corcovado, pulsing and chattering with wildlife (p618)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 51,100 sq km
- **ATMs** Plentiful (except for the Caribbean coast) using Cirrus & Plus systems
- **Budget** US\$35 per day
- **Capital** San José
- **Costs** Dorm bed US\$10, bottle of beer US\$1.50, 3hr bus ride US\$4, set lunch US\$4
- **Country Code** ☎ 506
- **Electricity** 110V AC, 60Hz (same as the USA)
- **Famous for** rain forests, sloths, surf spots, coffee plantations & canopy tours
- **Head of State** President Oscar Arias Sánchez
- **Languages** Spanish, English on the Caribbean coast
- **Money** US\$1 = C\$518 (colones)
- **Phrases** *Pura vida* (literally 'pure life'; thumbs up, a salutation), *maje* (dude or buddy), Tico (Costa Rican)
- **Population** Four million
- **Time** GMT minus 6 hours; no daylight savings time
- **Traveler's Checks** Cashed at most banks (1-3% commission)
- **Visas** Not required for residents of the USA, Canada, EU, Australia or New Zealand



TRAVEL HINTS

Splurging to hike with a naturalist your first time out will clue you into what to look for on independent hikes, and make them more rewarding. The best bet for cheap eats are *sodas*, which offer healthy and fresh local fare.

OVERLAND ROUTES

You can enter overland from Nicaragua (Peñas Blancas, Los Chiles) and Panama (Sixaola, Paso Canoas). Check visa requirements in advance.

Mention Costa Rica and people think paradise. The country's Disneylike cast of creatures – ranging from howler monkeys to toucans – are populous and relatively easy to spot. The waves are prime, the beauty is staggering and the sluggish pace seductive. A peaceful oasis in a tumultuous region, this tiny nation draws 1.5 million visitors every year.

What's on tap? The question is what isn't. Active travelers can surf, hike, snorkel and spot wildlife for starters. The incredibly varied topography means you can cruise the cloud forest one day, climb a volcano the next, and finish passed out on a hot sandy beach. Adrenaline junkies have a myriad ways to make mothers worry – among them zipping through canopy lines hundreds of meters long and riding the rough surf of the Pacific. Choice and variety name the game.

Of course, the frenzy to snatch up a piece of Shangri-la has its consequences. Since the boom, tourism is more chic and less cheap. Classic destinations are now crowded destinations and local culture is often lost or cast aside. Lucky for Costa Rica that its do-gooder fans, ranging from ecologists to proud Ticos (Costa Ricans), are vocal and vigilant. Nature here suffers its blows, like everywhere, but at least it is taken seriously.

CURRENT EVENTS

With a huge influx of expats, US retirees and foreign travelers, Costa Rica has become the tropical backyard of gringos. This has ignited a real-estate frenzy alongside a focus on expensive goods and services (SUV dealerships and bagel shops) geared toward this new market. While foreigners bring much-needed investment, they also drive up property prices and displace cash-strapped locals.

It's no wonder Ticos bristle at the thought of being in Uncle Sam's pocket. This fear has been a major impetus behind the current debate to ratify the Central American Free Trade Agreement (Cafta). Its proponents, foremost President Oscar Arias, tout its economic benefits which include increased access to US markets and thousands of new jobs. Critics argue Costa Rica's small farmers and domestic industries will come out the losers, unable to compete with the anticipated flood of cheap US products.

What's interesting is that this economic and cultural alignment with the USA is unique in today's Central America. While most of Latin America has elected leftist, socialist governments in a turning away from the USA, Costa Rica has placed its bets on this strategic alliance, sometimes to the ire of its citizens.

HISTORY Lost Civilization

Costa Rica's rain forests have been inhabited for 10,000 years. The region long served as an intersection for America's native cultures. About 500 years ago, on the eve of European discovery, as many as 400,000 people lived in today's Costa Rica.

The Central Valley hosted roughly 20 small tribes, organized into chiefdoms, with a *cacique* (chief) leading a hierarchical society that included shaman, warriors, workers and slaves. To the east, the fierce Caribs dominated the Atlantic coastal lowlands. Adept at seafaring, they provided a conduit of trade with the South American mainland. Concentrated tribes of indigenous people in the northwest tended cornfields and were connected to the great Meso-American cultures. Aztec religious practices and Maya jade and craftsmanship are in evidence in the Peninsula de Nicoya, while Costa Rican quetzal feathers and golden trinkets have turned up in Mexico. The three chiefdoms found in the southwest showed the influence of native Andean cultures, including coca leaves, yucca and sweet potatoes.

Heirs of Columbus

On his fourth and final voyage to the New World in 1502, Christopher Columbus was forced to drop anchor near today's Puerto Limón after a hurricane damaged his ship. Waiting for repairs, Columbus ventured into the verdant terrain and exchanged gifts with welcoming natives. He returned from this encounter claiming to have seen 'more gold in two days than in four years in Spain.' Columbus dubbed the stretch of shoreline from Honduras to Panama as Veragua, but his excited descriptions of 'la costa rica' gave the region its lasting name.

Anxious to claim its bounty, Columbus petitioned the Spanish Crown to have himself appointed governor. However, by the time he returned to Seville, his royal patron Queen Isabella was on her deathbed, and King Ferdinand awarded the prize to a rival.



Columbus never returned to the 'Rich Coast,' Worn down by ill health and court politics, he died in 1506.

To the disappointment of his conquistador heirs, the region did not abound with gold and the locals were not so affable. The pestilent swamps, volcano-topped mountains and oppressive jungles made Columbus's paradise seem more like hell for new colonies. Balboa's crossing of Panama in 1513 found a western beachhead from which to assault Costa Rica. The Spanish targeted the indigenous groups living near the Golfo de Nicoya. Intercontinental germ warfare caused outbreaks of feverish death on both sides. Scarce in mineral wealth and indigenous laborers, the Spanish eventually came to regard the region as the poorest and most miserable in all the Americas.

It was not until the 1560s that a Spanish colony was established at Cartago. This small community in the interior settled to cultivate the rich volcanic soil of the Central Valley.

Central Valley Sunday

Central America formed a loosely administered colony. Its political-military headquarters was in Nicaragua. Lacking strategic significance or exploitable riches, Costa Rica became a minor provincial outpost.

Costa Rica's colonial path diverged from the typical Spanish pattern in that a powerful land-holding elite and slave-based economy never gained prominence. Instead of large estates, mining operations and coastal cities, modest-sized villages of small-holders developed in the interior Central Valley. Workers toiled six days a week, while Central Valley Sundays were just for prayer and rest. There were several well-connected families whose lineage went back to the founding of the colony, but anyone could acquire wealth by agricultural processing or trade. In national lore, this relative egalitarianism is touted as 'rural democracy.'

Colonial life centered on agriculture. Costa Ricans grew corn, beans and plantains for subsistence, and produced sugar, cacao and tobacco for sale. However, indigenous raids and pirate attacks kept villagers on nervous guard. When Cartago was leveled in 1723 by Volcán Irazú, new settlements sprouted in Heredia, San José and Alajuela. As the 18th century closed, the population topped 50,000.

COSTA RICA

COSTA RICA

As Spanish settlement expanded, the indigenous population plummeted. From 400,000 at the time Columbus first sailed, the number was reduced to 20,000 a century later, and to 8000 a century after that. While disease was the main source of death, the Spanish exploited native labor relentlessly. Outside the valley, several tribes managed to prolong survival under forest cover, staging occasional raids, but were eventually defeated by military campaigns.

A Sovereign Struggle

In 1821 the Americas wriggled free of Spain's imperial grip. The newly liberated colonies pondered their fate: stay together in a United States of Central America or go their separate national ways. The first solution, the Central American Federation (CAF), suffered an imbalance of power and no ability to raise taxes or have defense. Costa Rica formally withdrew in 1938.

An independent Costa Rica took shape under Juan Mora Fernandez, first head of state (1824–33). In 1824 the Nicoya-Guanacaste province seceded from Nicaragua and joined its more easygoing southern neighbor, defining the territorial borders. In 1852 Costa Rica received its first diplomatic emissaries from the USA and Great Britain.

As one empire receded, another rose. In the 19th century, the USA was in an expansive mood and Spanish America looked vulnerable. In 1856 the soldier of fortune William Walker landed in Nicaragua intending to conquer Central America, establish slavery and construct an interoceanic canal. When Walker marched on Costa Rica, he faced a hastily mobilized volunteer army of 9000 civilians. They stopped the Yankee mercenaries at Santa Rosa, chasing them back into Nicaragua. During the fight, a daring drummer boy from Alajuela, Juan Santamaría, was killed while setting fire to Walker's defenses. The battle became a national legend and Santamaría a national hero (and inspiration for an airport). You can see a memorial to this battle in Parque Nacional in San José.

Coffee Rica

In the 19th century, the introduction of the caffeinated red bean transformed the impoverished nation into the wealthiest in the region.

When an export market emerged, the government promoted coffee to farmers by providing free saplings. By the 1840s, local

merchants scouted out their own overseas markets, persuading the captain of the HMS *Monarch* to transport several hundred sacks of Costa Rican coffee to London, percolating the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Children of the 1940s learned to read with a text that stated, 'Coffee is good for me. I drink coffee every morning.' Coffee's quick fix made it popular among working-class consumers in the industrializing north. Enterprising German immigrants improved the technical and financial aspects of the business. By century's end, more than one-third of the Central Valley was dedicated to coffee cultivation, and coffee accounted for more than 90% of all exports.

The coffee industry in Costa Rica developed differently than in the rest of Central America. The coffee economy created a wide network of high-end traders and small-scale growers; in the rest of Central America, a narrow elite controlled large estates, worked by tenant laborers. However, with three-quarters of the coffee barons descended from just two colonial families, the coffee elite's economic interests became a priority in national politics. Today Costa Rica has an estimated 130,000 coffee farms.

The Banana Boom

The coffee trade unintentionally gave rise to Costa Rica's next export boom – bananas. Getting coffee out to world markets necessitated a rail link from the central highlands to the coast and Limón's deep harbor made an ideal port. But inland was dense jungle and infested swamps. The government contracted the task to Minor Keith, nephew of an American railroad tycoon.

The project was a disaster. Malaria and accidents forced a constant replenishing of workers. Tico recruits gave way to US convicts and Chinese indentured servants, who were replaced by freed Jamaican slaves. Keith's two brothers died during the arduous first decade that laid 100km of track. The government defaulted on funding and construction costs soared over budget. To entice Keith to continue, the government turned over 324,000 hectares of land along the route and a 99-year lease to run the railroad. In 1890, the line was finally completed, and running at a loss.

Bananas were first grown along the railroad tracks as a cheap food source for workers. Desperate to recoup his investment, Keith shipped some to New Orleans. Consumers went, well,

bananas. *Fincas* (plantations) replaced lowland forests and bananas surpassed coffee as Costa Rica's most lucrative export by the early 20th century. Although Costa Rica became the world's leading banana exporter, the profits shipped out along with the bananas.

Joining with another American importer, Keith founded the infamous United Fruit Company, soon the largest employer in Central America. Known as *el pulpo*, the octopus, to locals, United Fruit owned huge swathes of lush lowlands, much of the transportation and communication infrastructure, and bunches of bureaucrats. The company promoted a wave of migrant laborers from Jamaica, changing the country's ethnic complexion and provoking racial tensions.

In 1913, a banana blight known as 'Panama disease' shut down many Caribbean plantations and the industry relocated to the Pacific. Eventually United Fruit lost its banana monopoly.

Unarmed Democracy

Early Costa Rican politics followed the Central American pattern of violence and dictatorship. In the 19th century, a few favored aristocrats competed to control patronage in the new state. The military, the Church and, most of all, the coffee barons were the main sources of influence. Presidents were more often removed at gunpoint than by the ballot box.

By the late 19th century, the eligible electorate expanded from 2% to 10% of the adult population. Military strongman Tomas Guardia forced higher taxes on the coffee barons to finance social reform. By the early 20th century, Costa Rica had free public education, a guaranteed minimum wage and child protection laws. Denied the right to participate, disenfranchised groups resorted to protest politics. In 1918 female schoolteachers and students staged effective strikes against the despotic displays of President Frederico Tinoco, who soon resigned.

Beginning in 1940, events would lead Costa Rica onto a more democratic path. At this time, President Rafael Calderon defied elite expectations by championing the rights of the working class and the poor. Calderon orchestrated a powerful alliance between workers and the Church. The conservative backlash resulted in civil war after disputed elections. Armed workers battled military forces, and

Nicaraguan and US forces joined in the fray. Peace was restored in under two months at the cost of 2000 deaths.

Coffee grower and utopian democrat, José Figueres Ferrer became head of a temporary junta government. The 1949 constitution granted full citizenship and voting rights to women, Blacks, indigenous groups and Chinese minorities. His copious decrees taxed the wealthy, nationalized banks and built a modern welfare state. Most extraordinarily, Figueres abolished the military, calling it a threat to democracy. These actions became the foundation for Costa Rica's unique and unarmed democracy.

The Contra Conflict

The sovereignty of the small nations of Central America was limited by their northern neighbor, the USA. Yankees, with their big sticks, gunboats and dollar diplomacy, were hostile toward leftist politics. During the 1970s, radical socialists forced the military regimes of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua onto the defensive. When they toppled the American-backed Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua in 1970, President Ronald Reagan decided to intervene. The Cold War arrived in the hot tropics.

Under intense US pressure, politically moderate Costa Rica was reluctantly dragged in. The Contras set up camp in Costa Rica, from where they staged guerrilla raids and built a secret jungle airstrip to fly in weapons and supplies. Costa Rican authorities were bribed to keep quiet. Diplomatic relations between Costa Rica and Nicaragua grew nastier and border clashes became bloodier.

The war polarized Costa Rica. Conservatives pushed to re-establish the military and join the anticommunist crusade. On the opposing side, in May 1984, over 20,000 demonstrators marched through San José to give peace a chance. The debate peaked with the 1986 presidential election. The victor was 44-year-old Oscar Arias, an intellectual reformer in the reformist mold of Figueres.

Once in office, Arias affirmed his commitment to a negotiated resolution and reasserted Costa Rican national independence. He vowed to uphold neutrality and kick out the Contras. Soon, the US ambassador quit his post and a public ceremony had Costa Rican schoolchildren planting trees on the secret CIA airfield. Most notably, Arias became

the driving force in uniting Central America around a peace plan, which ended the Nicaraguan war. In 1987, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Paradise Found

Five hundred years later, the same dense rain forest that conquistadors had cursed revealed a hidden wealth: ecotourism.

An oversupply of coffee caused a crash in prices in the 1970s. The new market unpredictability brought together an unusual alliance of big business and environmentalists. If wealth could not be sustained through the country's exports, then what about imports – of tourists? Costa Rica embarked on a green revolution. By 1995, there were more than 125 government-protected sites. Almost one-third of the entire country is under some form of environmental protection.

Success encouraged private landholders to build reserves as well. It started slowly: Monteverde reserve recorded only 500 tourists in 1975; 20 years later the number surpassed 50,000. Tourism contributed more than US\$750 million in 1995, passing coffee and bananas as the main source of foreign currency earnings.

Modern Currents

Costa Rica's clean-living image has proven wildly alluring, but is it really the Switzerland of Central America? Skyrocketing numbers of tourists and the accoutrements that serve them have created great stress on ecological habitats – ironic, since nature is the country's primary attraction. The market is saturated with a host of largely unregulated small hotels and services which struggle for their piece of an increasingly divided pie. Big-business developers pose another, perhaps greater threat. Costa Rica is finding that, with a fine line between economic profits and environmental conservation, sustainable tourism is difficult to execute. Communities also must face the tourism boom's nasty side effects of rampant child prostitution and drug addiction.

With economic change has come social change. Call it the hamburger effect, but the ubiquitous rice and beans has been upgraded to regular doses of American fast food. Homes are changing. Divorce rates have increased and family size has shrunk. More women have entered the workforce though opportunities in the tourism and service sectors.

More Ticos are entering higher education while migrant laborers from Nicaragua work the coffee plantations. Rightly or wrongly, immigrants are often blamed for increases in crime, fueling ongoing animosity between Nicas and Ticos.

As the country becomes more diverse and cosmopolitan it faces inevitable tensions and growing pains. In 2006 Oscar Arias was re-elected president. This time around the tables appear to have turned. After just a year in office, his support of Cafta and strong US relations has drawn sharp criticism from the voting public.

THE CULTURE

The National Psyche

Costa Ricans take pride in defining themselves by what they are not. In comparison with their Central American neighbors, they aren't poor, illiterate or beleaguered by political instability. Their country is an oasis of peace, in a land degraded by warfare. To keep the peace, they will avoid conflict at all costs. Costa Ricans say 'yes' even if they mean 'no' and 'maybe' replaces 'I don't know.' They are well-mannered to a fault, sparing no effort to *quedar bien* (leave a good impression). You will rarely see a Tico engaged in a heated debate or fight. And while the stereotype of Costa Rican friendliness is largely true, it's sometimes hard to distinguish good manners from genuine affection.

Lifestyle

The absence of war, strong exports and stronger tourism has meant that Costa Rica enjoys the highest standard of living in Central America. Primary education is free and compulsory for all school-aged children and though it is overburdened, a nationwide system provides free health care. Even though 23% of the populace lives below the poverty line, beggars are few and you won't see abject poverty in plain view. Families have the requisite 2.4 children and for the large part, Costa Rican youths spend ample time worrying about dating, music, fashion and *fútbol* (soccer).

People

Costa Ricans call themselves Ticos (men; groups of men and women) or Ticas (females). Spanish is the dominant language. Two-thirds of the nation's four-million-plus people live in the *Meseta Central*, a central

plain that lies at an altitude between about 1000m and 1500m.

Most inhabitants are mestizo (of mixed Spanish and indigenous blood). Indigenous groups comprise only 1% of the population; and including the Bribri from the Talamanca in the southeast and the Borucas in the southern Pacific coastal areas.

Less than 3% of the population are Black, concentrated on the Caribbean coast. They speak English, Spanish and a Creole dialect and trace their ancestry to immigrants from Jamaica who built railroads and worked banana plantations in the late 19th century. Chinese (1% of the population) also first arrived to work on the railroads and since then have had regular waves of immigration, particularly from Taiwan.

The great increase of North American and European immigration lead some to feel that Costa Rica represents a 'less authentic' Latin American experience. But it is worth noting some of these very immigrants were instrumental in founding the first national parks.

With a life expectancy of 76 years, Costa Rica enjoys the highest life expectancy in Latin America after Cuba. Over 30% of the population is below the age of 15.

ARTS

There is little indigenous cultural influence in the nation's arts. Cultural activities of any kind are centered primarily on Western-style entertainment. San José has the lion's share of museums, in addition to a lively theater and music scene. International rock, folk and hip hop artists visit the capital and venues around the city host live performances in a variety of musical styles.

RELIGION

More than 75% of Ticos are Catholic (at least in principle) and 14% are evangelical Christians. The Black community on the Caribbean coast is largely Protestant. While a healthy reverence for the Virgin Mary is typical, few are married to the dictates coming from Rome – apparently *pura vida* has its concessions.

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

Smaller than West Virginia and larger than Switzerland, Costa Rica (51,100 sq km) packs in some of the world's most diverse natural landscapes. Wedged between Nicaragua and

Panama, its craggy western border is constantly pounded by Pacific surf, while the temperate Caribbean hugs tropical lowlands and swamps to the east. Costa Rica is defined by its diverse climates and topography: mangroves, swamps, sandy beaches, numerous gulfs and peninsulas, tropical dry forests, rain forests, cloud forests, temperate highlands and a variety of offshore islands. It is split in two by a series of volcanic mountain chains that run from Nicaragua in the northwest to Panama in the southeast. The highlands reach up to 3820m above sea level.

Wildlife

ANIMALS

Poison arrow frogs, giant tarantulas and spider monkeys inhabit our imagination of the tropics. In reality, few places live up to our wild expectations – except for Costa Rica. Considered the world nucleus of wildlife diversity, it has over 615 species (per 10,000 sq km). Compare that to the USA's 104 species.

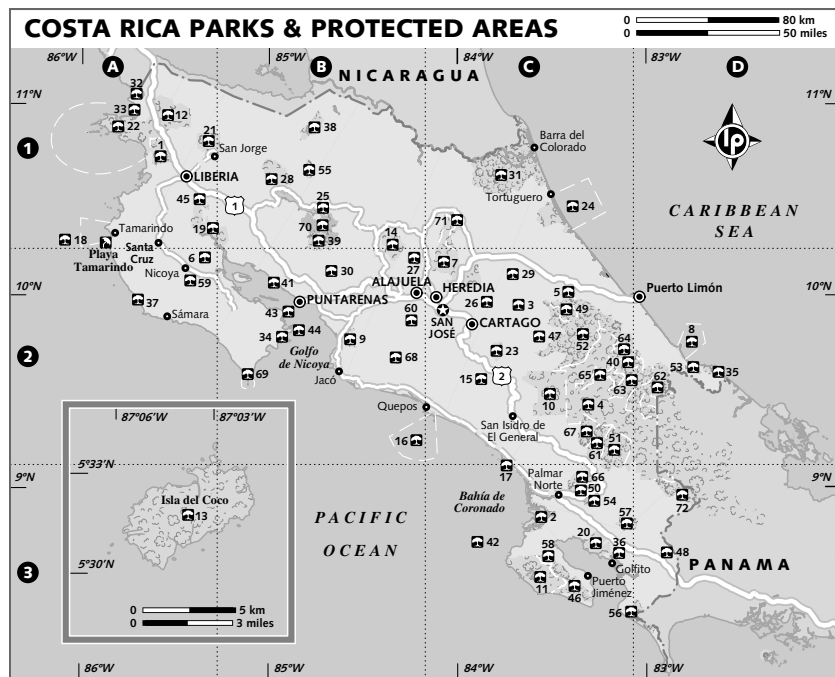
Birding calls naturalists to Costa Rica, where there are over 850 recorded species. Because many species have restricted ranges, completely distinct populations are found region to region. Some 200-plus species of migrating birds come from as far away as Alaska and Australia, so it's not unusual to see your backyard birds feeding alongside trogons and toucans.

WE LOVE IT TO DEATH

Tourism may be the hidden threat to Costa Rica's environment. Some 1.5 million tourists visit every year. Not only are many parks taxed, but tourist infrastructure is strained and the local flavor is leaking out of places. What can you do?

- Ask hotels how they dispose of waste water. Or have a look around – foul odors and pipes that empty into the street all say something.
- Buy at markets instead of supermarkets, support small businesses and use local guides.
- Communicate with locals. Find out what the local issues are and follow through with sensitivity toward them.

For more ideas, see p630.



Spotting wild monkeys and sloths is a highlight, yet an additional 260 animal species await the patient observer. The most exotic sightings include species such as the four-eyed opossum, the jaguarundi and the elusive tapir. The prime places to spot wildlife are national parks, wildlife refuges and other protected areas (as well as their buffer zones). Early morning is the best time to see animals, as many species stay still during the hotter part of the day. Nocturnal species – such as Baird's tapir, the silky anteater and the kinkajou – require night sightings, preferably with a guide.

Working with a knowledgeable guide increases the probability of seeing wildlife and understanding its behavior. Good local guides can recognize bird calls and animal sounds. They also know where creatures tend to congregate – whether because they like the fruit of a certain tree (as the quetzal in the avocado tree), or because they fish at the mouth of the river (as the American crocodile).

ENDANGERED SPECIES

The number-one threat to most of Costa Rica's endangered species is habitat destruc-

tion, followed by hunting and trapping. Numerous species have declining populations or are danger of extinction.

The legendary resplendent quetzal – topping every naturalist's must-see list – approaches extinction as its home forests are felled. A booming pet trade has extirpated the population of large, squawky scarlet macaws. Endangered sea turtles get a lot of attention in Costa Rica, with a wide variety of programs supporting population growth. Central America's largest land mammal, Baird's tapir, is a target for hunters, as is the placid gigantic West Indian manatee. A host of volunteer programs help visitors participate in preservation.

PLANTS

Floral biodiversity is staggering – over 10,000 species of vascular plants have been described in Costa Rica, and more join the list every year. Orchids alone account for about 1300 species. Use your visit to explore the rich variety of plant communities found in rain forests, mangrove swamps, tropical dry forests and cloud forests.

Estación Experimental Forestal		Parque Nacional Volcán Poás.....	27	B2	Reserva Forestal Golfo Dulce.....	46	C3	
Horizontes.....	1	A1	Parque Nacional Volcán Tenorio.....	28	B1	Reserva Forestal Río Macho.....	47	C2
Humedal Nacional Terraba-Sierpe.....	2	C3	Parque Nacional Volcán Turrialba.....	29	C2	Reserva Indígena Arojo-Montezuma.....	48	D3
Monumento Nacional Arqueológico			Refugio de Vida Silvestre Peñas	30	B2	Reserva Indígena Barbilla.....	49	C2
Guayabo.....	3	C2	Blancas.....	30	C2	Reserva Indígena Boruca.....	50	C3
Parque Internacional La Amistad.....	4	C2	Refugio Nacional Barra del Colorado.....	31	C1	Reserva Indígena Cabagra.....	51	C2
Parque Nacional Barbilla.....	5	C2	Refugio Nacional de Fauna Silvestre Isla Bolaños.....	32	A1	Reserva Indígena Cocles/KékóLdi.....	53	D2
Parque Nacional Barra Honda.....	6	A2	Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Bahía Junquilla.....	33	A1	Reserva Indígena Guatuso.....	55	B1
Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo.....	7	C2	Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Curú.....	34	B2	Reserva Indígena Guaymí de Conte Burica.....	56	C3
Parque Nacional Cahuita.....	8	D2	Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo.....	35	D2	Reserva Indígena Guaymí de Osa.....	58	C3
Parque Nacional Carara.....	9	B2	Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Golfito.....	36	C3	Reserva Indígena Matambú.....	59	A2
Parque Nacional Chirripó.....	10	C2	Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Ostional.....	37	A2	Reserva Indígena Quitirrisí.....	60	B2
Parque Nacional Corcovado.....	11	C3	Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Negro.....	38	B1	Reserva Indígena Salitre.....	61	C2
Parque Nacional Guanacaste.....	12	A1	Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde.....	39	B1	Reserva Indígena Talamanca Bribri.....	62	D2
Parque Nacional Isla del Coco.....	13	A3	Reserva Biológica Hitoy-Cerere.....	40	C2	Reserva Indígena Talamanca-Cabécar.....	63	C2
Parque Nacional Juan Castro Blanco.....	14	B1	Reserva Biológica Isla de los Pájaros.....	41	B2	Reserva Indígena Taynín.....	64	C2
Parque Nacional Los Quezales.....	15	C2	Reserva Biológica Isla del Caño.....	42	C3	Reserva Indígena Telire.....	65	C2
Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio.....	16	B2	Reserva Biológica Isla Guayabo.....	43	B2	Reserva Indígena Terraba.....	66	C3
Parque Nacional Marino Ballena.....	17	C3	Parque Nacional Volcán Arenal.....	25	B1	Reserva Indígena Ujarrás.....	67	C2
Parque Nacional Marino Las Baulas.....	18	A1	Parque Nacional Volcán Irazú.....	26	C2	Reserva Indígena Zapotón.....	68	B2
Parque Nacional Palo Verde.....	19	A1				Reserva Natural Absoluta Cabo Blanco.....	69	B2
Parque Nacional Piedras Blancas.....	20	C3				Reserva Santa Elena.....	70	B1
Parque Nacional Rincón de la Vieja.....	21	A1				Zona Protectora La Selva.....	71	C1
Parque Nacional Santa Rosa.....	22	A1				Zona Protectora Las Tablas.....	72	D3
Parque Nacional Tapanti.....	23	C2						
Parque Nacional Tortuguero.....	24	C1						
Parque Nacional Volcán Arenal.....	25	B1						
Parque Nacional Volcán Irazú.....	26	C2						

National Parks & Protected Areas

The national-park system began in the 1960s, and today 35 national parks cover 11% of the country. Scores of other protected zones include wetlands and mangroves, in addition to a slew of privately owned and operated reserves. For this reason Costa Rican authorities claim that over 25% of the country is under conservation. There are hundreds of small, privately owned lodges and reserves set up to protect the land, and many are well worth visiting.

While the national-park system appears impressive, much of the protected area is at risk. Logging, hunting and overfishing are classic problems. The government doesn't own all of this land – almost half of the areas are in private ownership – and there is no budget to buy it. Technically, the private lands are protected from development, but many landowners are finding loopholes in the restrictions and selling or developing their properties.

Most national parks can be entered without permits, though a few limit the number they admit on a daily basis and others require advance reservations to sleep within the park's boundaries (Chirripó, Corcovado and La Amistad). The entrance fee to most parks is US\$6 to US\$8 per day for foreigners, plus an additional US\$2 to US\$5 for overnight camping where it is permitted. Some of the more isolated parks may charge higher rates.

Environmental Issues

Despite Costa Rica's national-park system, the major problem facing the nation's envi-

ronment is deforestation. Originally, Costa Rica was almost all forest, but it has mostly been cleared for pasture or agriculture. Illegal logging compounds the problem. About only 5% of the lands outside of parks and reserves remains forested, while only 1% of the dry forests of northwestern Costa Rica are left.

Apart from the direct loss of tropical forests, and the plants and animals that depend on them, deforestation has led directly or indirectly to other severe environmental problems. The greatest issue is soil erosion. Forests protect the soil beneath them from the ravages of tropical rainstorms – after deforestation much of the topsoil is washed away, lowering the productivity of the land and silting up watersheds. Some deforested lands are planted with Costa Rica's main agricultural product, bananas, the production of which entails the use of pesticides and blue plastic bags to protect the fruit. Both the pesticides and the plastic bags end up polluting the environment.

Deforestation and related logging activities also create inroads into formerly inaccessible regions, leading to an influx of humans. One consequence, especially in national parks where wildlife is concentrated, is unrestrained poaching. Because the government has little funding for enforcement, some companies illegally clear-cut without fear of consequences.

National parks in remote areas suffer from a lack of rangers and protection. Others are extremely popular for their world-class scenic and natural beauty, as well as their wildlife.

In the once-idyllic Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio, a tiny park on the Pacific coast, annual visits rocketed from about 36,000 visitors in 1982 to more than 150,000 by 1991. This invasion threatened to ruin the diminutive area by driving away the wildlife, polluting the beaches and replacing wilderness with hotel development.

In response, park visitors have since been 'limited' to 600 per day, and the park is closed on Monday to allow a brief respite from the onslaught. But any visitor to Manuel Antonio can tell you that, yes, the animals are plentiful but conditions (with many visitors feeding the wildlife and wildlife becoming aggressive) can be horrendous.

Costa Rica has a world-famous reputation for its national-park system – but a lack of funds, concentrated visitor use and sometimes fuzzy leadership show troubles in paradise. As the Costa Rican government changes every four years, there is an apparent lack of cohesive, standard-operation plans. Earnings from the patronage of parks contribute significantly to both the national and local economies. The country has a vested interest in land preservation, and its citizens appreciate the income and jobs ecotourism generates. In spite of all this, questions remain as to how ecotourism will co-exist with expanding agricultural enterprises.

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Entering Costa Rica is usually hassle-free. There are no fees or taxes payable on entering the country, though some foreign nationals will require a visa. Be aware that those who need visas cannot get them at the border. For information on visas, see p631. Travelers officially need a ticket out of Costa Rica before they are allowed to enter, but the rule is rarely enforced.

DEPARTURE TAX

There is a US\$26 departure tax on all international outbound flights, payable in cash (US dollars or colones, or a mix of the two). At the Juan Santamaría airport you can pay with credit cards, and Banco de Costa Rica has an ATM (on the Plus system) by the departure-tax station.

Air

Costa Rica is well connected by air to other Central and Latin American countries, as well as the USA. The national airline, Lacsá (part of the Central American Airline consortium Grupo TACA), flies to numerous points in the USA and Latin America, including Cuba. The US Federal Aviation Administration has assessed Costa Rica's aviation authorities to be in compliance with international safety standards. Fares go up during high season (from December through April).

International airport Juan Santamaría is about 17km outside San José, in the city of Alajuela.

Bus & Boat

Costa Rica shares land borders with Nicaragua and Panama. Many travelers, particularly shoestringers, enter the country by bus since an extensive bus system links the Central American capitals and it's vastly cheaper than flying.

If crossing the border by bus, note that international buses may cost slightly more than taking a local bus to the border, then another onwards from the border, but they're worth it. These better-quality buses travel faster and can help you cross efficiently.

The most popular crossing point between Nicaragua and Costa Rica is on the Interamericana at Peñas Blancas. While processing is slow, travelers report that for the most part, it's hassle-free. The crossing at Los Chiles, further east, is infrequently used but reportedly easy to navigate. There is a regular boat service connecting Los Chiles with San Carlos, on the southeast corner of Lake Nicaragua.

For Panama, the main point is on the Interamericana at Paso Canoas. Expect long lines, generally free of complications. On the Caribbean side, the crossing at Sixaola is much more sedate.

See p631 for entry requirements.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Costa Rica's domestic airlines are **NatureAir** (☎ 220 3054; www.natureair.com) and **Sansa** (☎ 221 9414; www.flysansa.com); the latter is linked with Grupo TACA.

NatureAir flies from Tobías Bolaños airport, 8km west of the center of San José in the suburb of Pavas. Sansa operates out of Juan Santamaría airport. Both fly small pas-

senger planes with a baggage allowance of 12kg. Space is limited and demand great in high season, so reserve ahead.

Bicycle

The traffic may be hazardous and the roads narrow, steep and winding, but cyclists do pedal Costa Rica. Mountain bikes and beach cruisers can be rented in towns with a significant tourist presence for US\$8 to US\$15 per day.

Boat

Ferries cross the Golfo de Nicoya connecting the central Pacific coast with the southern tip of Península de Nicoya. The **Coonatramar ferry** (☎ 661 1069; passenger/car US\$2/9) links Puntarenas with Playa Naranjo four times daily. The **Ferry Peninsular** (☎ 641 0515; passenger/car US\$2/9) travels between Puntarenas and Vaquero every two hours.

On the Golfo Dulce, a daily passenger ferry links Golfito with Puerto Jiménez on the Península de Osa, and a weekday water taxi travels to and from Playa Zancudo. On the other side of the Península de Osa, water taxis connect Bahía Drake with Sierpe.

On the Caribbean coast, a bus-and-boat service runs several times daily, linking Cariari and Tortuguero (p572). Canal boats travel from Moín to Tortuguero, although no regular service exists. A daily water taxi connects Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí with Trinidad, Nicaragua on the Río San Juan. Arrange boat transport in any of these towns for Barra del Colorado.

Bus

Buses are the best way of getting around Costa Rica. They are frequent and cheap, with the longest domestic journey out of San José costing less than US\$10.

San José is the transportation hub for the country (see p548), but there is no central terminal. Bus offices are scattered around the city: some large bus companies have big terminals that sell tickets in advance, while others have little more than a stop – sometimes unmarked. (One San José bus station consists of a guy with a clipboard sitting on a lawn chair.)

Normally there's room for everyone on the bus, and if there isn't, squeeze in. The exceptions are days before and after a major holiday, especially Easter, when buses are

ridiculously full. (Note that there are no buses on the Thursday to Saturday before Easter Sunday.) There are two types of bus: *directo* and *colectivo*. *Directos* charge more and presumably make few stops. However, it goes against the instinct of Costa Rican bus drivers not to pick up every single roadside passenger.

Trips longer than four hours usually include a rest stop (buses do not have bathrooms). Space is limited on board, so periodically check that your stored luggage isn't 'accidentally' given away at intermediate stops. Keep your day pack with important documents on you at all times. Thefts from overhead racks are rampant.

Bus schedules fluctuate, so always confirm the time when you purchase your ticket. If you are catching a bus roadside, arrive early. Departure times are estimated and if the bus comes early, it will leave early.

For information on departures from San José, the master schedule is online at www.visitcostarica.com. Another more thorough but less reliable source is www.costaricabuybus.com.

SHUTTLE BUS

Tourist-van shuttles are provided by **Grayling's Fantasy Bus** (☎ 220 2126; www.graylinecostarica.com) and **Interbus** (☎ 283 5573; www.interbusonline.com). Both run overland transport from San José to the most popular destinations and between other destinations (see their websites for information). Fares start at US\$19 for trips between San José and Puntarenas, and US\$29 for the bumpy ride to Monteverde. These services provide hotel pick-up, air-con and are faster than public buses. Reserve online or through local travel agencies and hotels.

Car & Motorcycle

The roads vary from quite good (the Interamericana) to barely passable (just about everywhere else). Even the good ones can suffer from landslides, sudden flooding and fog. Most roads are single lane and winding, lacking hard shoulders – others are dirt-and-mud affairs that climb mountains and traverse rivers.

Speed limits are 100km per hour or less on primary roads and 60km per hour or less on others. Traffic police use radar and enforce speed limits. The wearing of seat belts is compulsory.

Most car-rental agencies can be found in San José and in popular tourist destinations on the Pacific coast (Tamarindo, Jacó, Quepos and Puerto Jiménez). Car rental is not cheap, but it is worth investing in a 4WD. Prices start at US\$450 per week for a 4WD, including *kilometraje libre* (unlimited mileage). Required basic insurance costs an additional US\$12 to US\$20 per day. Above and beyond this, you can purchase full insurance. Alternately, your credit card may insure you for car rentals – check. As most insurance plans do not cover water damage, be extra careful when cruising through those rivers (drive slowly so as not to flood the engine).

To rent a car you need to be 21 years old, have a valid driver's license, a major credit card and a passport. A foreign driver's license is acceptable for up to 90 days. Carefully inspect the car and make sure any previous damage is noted on the rental agreement.

If you plan to drive from North America, you'll need all the usual insurance and ownership papers. In addition, you must buy Costa Rican insurance at the border (about US\$20 a month) and pay a US\$10 road tax. You are not allowed to sell the car in Costa Rica. If you need to leave the country without the car, you must leave it in a customs warehouse in San José.

Never leave valuables inside your car, even for brief periods. Always use a guarded parking lot at night and remove all luggage.

Motorcycles (even Harleys) can be rented in San José.

Hitchhiking

People who hitchhike will be safer if they travel in pairs and let someone know where they are planning to go. Single women should use greater discretion. Hitchhiking is never entirely safe and Lonely Planet doesn't recommend it.

Hitching in Costa Rica is unusual on main roads with frequent buses. On minor rural roads, it's more common. To get picked up, most locals wave to cars in a friendly manner. Hitchhikers should offer to pay upon arrival: *¿Cuanto le debo?* (How much do I owe you?) Many will wave the offer aside, but it is polite.

Taxi

Taxis serve urban and remote areas. They are useful for remote destinations, such as

national parks, where bus services are unavailable. In small villages without clearly marked taxis, ask at the local *pulpería* (corner store) about service. If the taxi doesn't have a meter, set the fare ahead of time.

SAN JOSÉ

pop 343,000 / metropolitan area 1.5 million

Chepe, as it's affectionately called by Ticos, teeters between the cosmopolitan and just plain ol' commercial. On first impressions, the city center, thick with office towers, malls and fried-chicken chains, could be *anywhere* in today's modern world. But wander Barrio Amón and you'll find that colonial stylings still radiate. In the shifting light of dusk Parque España becomes a riot of tropical birdsong. Cool clubs and bars abound and *Josefinos* (inhabitants of San José) are friendly and fast to order up another round of beers.

San José was founded in 1737, but little remains of its colonial era. Booming capitalism has left many disenfranchised and the city struggles to manage a growing crime rate so atypical of the *pura vida* spirit. For travelers, a stopover in San José is regarded as a necessary evil before heading to the 'real' Costa Rica. However, as the home of one-third of all Ticos, Chepe's complexity offers an unadulterated vista on modern-day Costa Rica.

ORIENTATION

The city is in the heart of a wide and fertile valley called the *Meseta Central* (Central Valley). San José's center is arranged in a grid with avenidas running east to west and calles running north to south. Av Central, the nucleus of the city, becomes a pedestrian mall between Calles 6 and 9. It turns into Paseo Colón west of Calle 14.

The center has several loosely defined districts or barrios. The central area is a commercial area with bus stops and cultural sights. Perhaps the most interesting district to visitors is Barrio Amón, northeast of Av 5 and Calle 1, with its concentration of landmark mansions, largely converted into hotels and fine-dining establishments. Just west of the city center is La Sabana, named after the park.

While this book indicates streets and avenues, most locals instead use landmarks to guide themselves. Learn how to decipher Tico directions by turning to the boxed text, p629.

GETTING INTO TOWN

From the Airport

Taxis to downtown San José from Juan Santamaría airport cost between US\$15 to US\$20, depending on traffic. When leaving the airport terminal, look for the official **Taxi Aeropuerto stand** (☎ 221 6865; www.taxiaeropuerto.com) as you exit baggage claim, and pay in advance. The official airport taxis are orange. The 20-minute ride can take over an hour during rush hour.

The cheapest option is the red **Tuasa bus** (US\$0.60; up to 45min), which runs between Alajuela and San José, and passes the airport every few minutes from 5am to 11pm. The stop is on the far side of the parking lot outside the terminal (a short walk, even with luggage.) **Interbus** (☎ 283 5573; www.interbusonline.com) airport shuttle service costs US\$5 per person; you can reserve online.

From the Bus Stations

International and domestic buses arrive at various bus terminals west and south of downtown. The area is perfectly walkable provided you aren't hauling a lot of luggage. If arriving at night, take a taxi to your hotel as most bus terminals are in seedy areas; taxis cost US\$1 to US\$2 within downtown.

A warning – many taxi drivers are commissioned by hotels to bring in customers. In the capital, the hotel scene is so competitive that drivers say just about anything to steer you to the places they represent. They'll tell you the establishment you've chosen is a notorious drug den, it's closed down, or that, sadly, it's overbooked. Don't believe them. Be firm, and if you're still met with resistance, grab another taxi.

INFORMATION

Bookstores

7th Street Books (☎ 256 8251; Calle 7 btwn Avs Central & 1; ☎ 9am-6pm) New and used books in English and other languages as well as magazines and newspapers.

Mora Books (Omni Center, Av 1 btwn Calles 3 & 5) Highly recommended secondhand bookstore has books mainly in English; guidebooks and comics are a specialty.

Emergency

Emergencies (☎ 911)

Fire (☎ 118)

Police (☎ 117)

Traffic police (☎ 222 9330)

Internet Access

Checking email is easy in San José, where cybercafés are more plentiful than lottery peddlers. Rates run US\$1 to US\$2 per hour. These days most hotels provide free internet to guests.

1@10 Café Internet (☎ 258 4561; www.1en10.com; Calle 3 btwn Avs 5 & 7; per hr US\$1) Also a gay and lesbian information center.

CyberCafé searchcostarica.com (☎ 233 3310; Las Arcadas, Av 2 btwn Calles 1 & 3; per hr US\$0.75; ☎ 7am-11pm) Also houses a book exchange and a pizza and fresh-juice bar.

Medical Services

Clínica Bíblica (☎ 257 5252; www.clinicabiblica.com; Av 14 btwn Calles Central & 1) The top private clinic in the downtown area; doctors speak English, French and German; an emergency room is open 24 hours.

Hospital Clínica Católica (☎ 246 3000; www.clinicacatolica.com; Guadalupe) A private clinic north of downtown.

Hospital San Juan de Dios (☎ 257 6282; cnr Paseo Colón & Calle 14) The free public hospital is centrally located, but waits are long.

Money

Any bank will change foreign currency into colones, but US dollars are by far the most accepted currency for exchange.

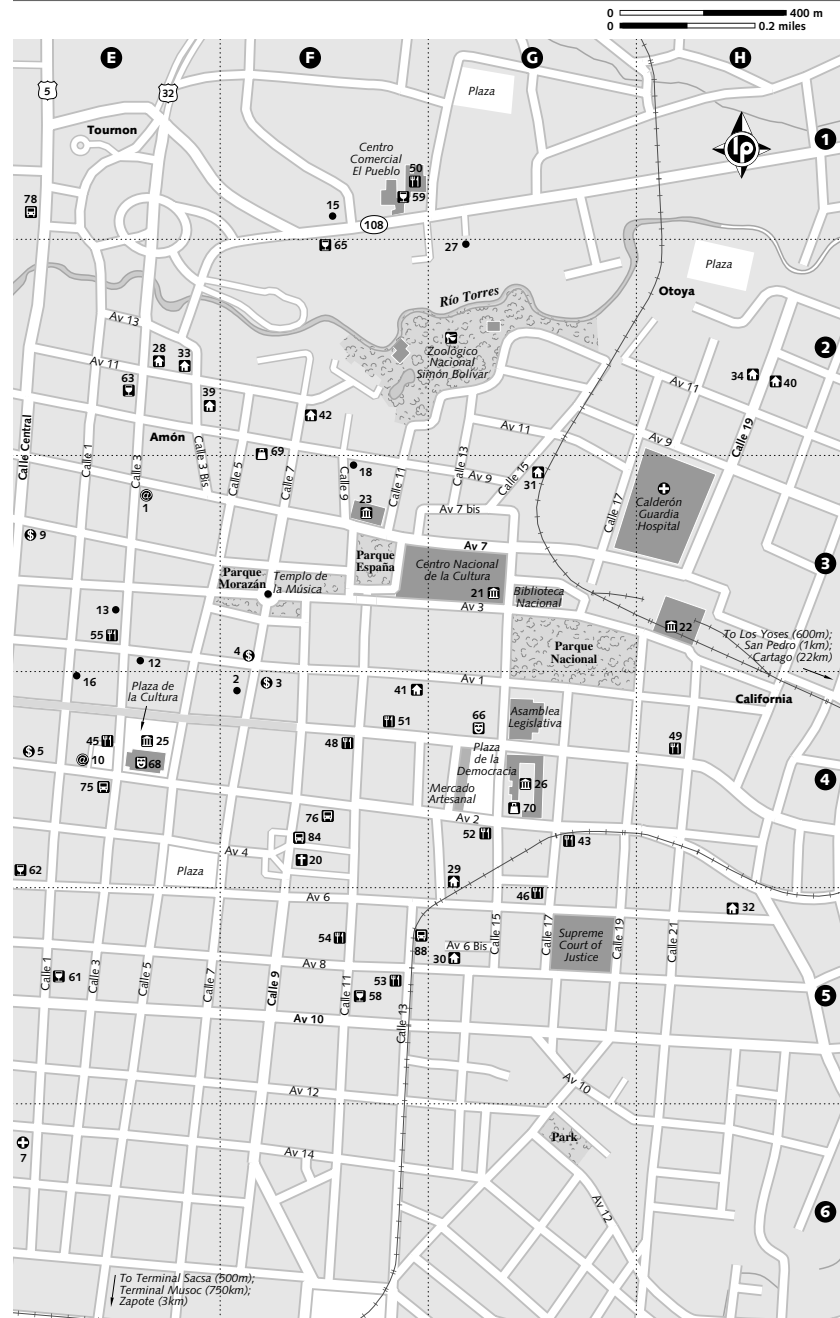
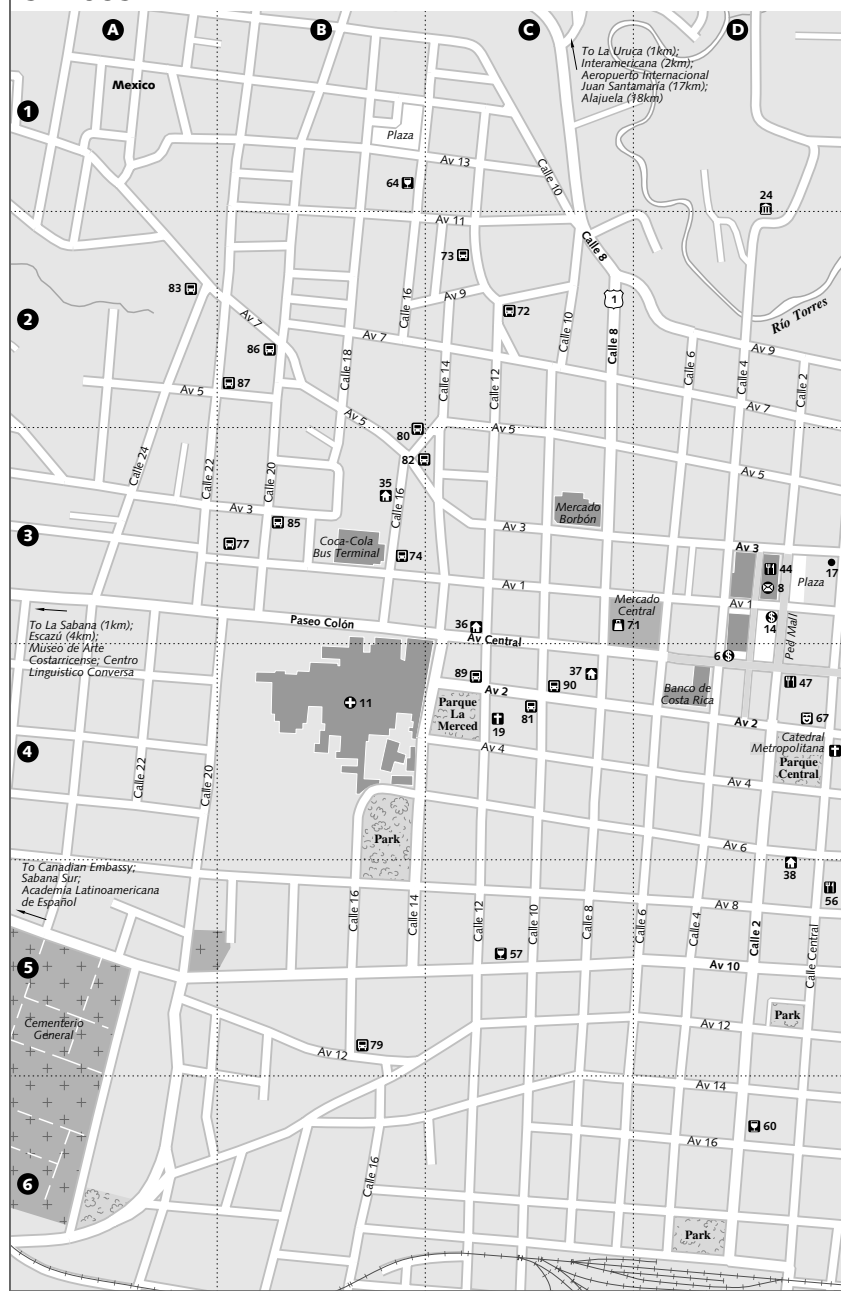
Banco de Costa Rica (☎ 221 8143; www.bancobcr.com; Av 1 btwn Calles 7 & 9; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Fri)

Banco de San José (☎ 295 9595; www.bancosan jose.fi.cr; Av 2 btwn Calles Central & 1; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Has ATMs on the Plus and Cirrus systems.

Banco Nacional de Costa Rica Exchange House (cnr Av Central & Calle 4; ☎ 10:30am-6pm) A good find in the event of a Sunday cash-exchange emergency since it's open seven days. Expect long lines.

Credomatic (☎ 295 9000; inside Banco de San José; Calle Central btwn Avs 3 & 5) Gives cash advances on Visa and MasterCard.

SAN JOSÉ



INFORMATION		SLEEPING		La Avispa	
1@10 Café Internet.....	1 E3	Casa Hilda.....	28 E2	Los Cucharones.....	62 E4
7th Street Books.....	2 F4	Casa León.....	29 G4	Luna Roja Café.....	63 E2
Banco de Costa Rica.....	3 F4	Casa Ridgway.....	30 G5	México Bar.....	64 B1
Banco de Costa Rica.....	4 F3	Cinco Hormigas Rojas.....	31 G3	¿Por Que No?.....	65 F2
Banco de San José.....	5 E4	Costa Rica Backpackers.....	32 H5		
Banco Nacional de Costa Rica		Hostel Pangea.....	33 E2	ENTERTAINMENT	
Exchange House.....	6 D4	Hotel Aranjuez.....	34 H2	Teatro Fanal.....	66 G4
Clinica Bíblica.....	7 E6	Hotel Musoc.....	35 B3	Teatro Melico Salazar.....	67 D4
Correo Central.....	8 D3	Hotel Nuevo Alameda.....	36 C3	Teatro Nacional.....	68 E4
Credomatic.....	9 E3	Hotel Nuevo Johnson.....	37 C4		
Credomatic.....	(see 5)	Hotel Principe.....	38 D5	SHOPPING	
Cybercafé searchcostarica.com.....	10 E4	Jolupa Guesthouse.....	39 E2	Galería Namu.....	69 F2
Hospital San Juan de Dios.....	11 B4	Kap's Place.....	40 H2	Mercado Artesanal.....	70 G4
Instituto Costarricense de		Pensión de la Cuesta.....	41 F4	Mercado Central.....	71 C3
Turismo (ICT).....	(see 25)	Tranquilo Backpackers.....	42 F2		
Mora Books.....	(see 12)			TRANSPORT	
Omni Center.....	12 E3	EATING		Atlántico Norte Terminal.....	72 C2
OTEC.....	13 E3	Café de la Posada.....	43 G4	Blanco Lobo.....	73 C2
Scotiabank.....	14 D3	Café del Correo.....	44 D3	Buses to Escazú.....	74 B3
Swiss Travel Service – Hotel		Café del Teatro Nacional.....	(see 68)	Buses to Irazú Volcano.....	75 E4
Radisson Europa Branch.....	15 F1	Café Parisienne.....	45 E4	Buses to Juan Santamaría	
TAM Travel Corporation.....	16 E4	Café Saudade.....	46 G5	Airport.....	(see 90)
		Churrería Manolos.....	47 D4	Buses to San Pedro.....	76 F4
		Churrería Manolos.....	48 F4	Buses to Tobias Bolaños Airport.....	77 B3
		Kafé Ko.....	49 H4	Caribe Terminal.....	78 E1
		La Cocina de Leña.....	50 F1	Empresarios Unidos.....	79 B5
		Más x Menos		Empresas Alfaro.....	80 B3
		Supermercado.....	51 F4	Heredia.....	81 C4
		Nuestra Tierra Restaurant.....	52 G4	Panaline.....	82 B3
		Restaurant Shakti.....	53 F5	Pullmitan.....	83 A2
		Restaurante Tin-Jo.....	54 F5	Sirca Express.....	(see 82)
		Vishnu.....	55 E3	Tica Bus (International).....	84 F4
		Vishnu.....	56 D5	Tracopa.....	(see 80)
				Tralapa.....	85 B3
				Tralapa.....	86 B2
				Trans Nica.....	87 B2
				Transtusa.....	88 F5
				Tuasa (to Alajuela & Poás).....	89 C4
				Tuasa (to Alajuela).....	90 C4

Scotiabank (☎ 287 8700; www.scotiabank.com; Av 1 btwn Calles 2 & 4; ☎ 8:15am-5pm Mon-Fri) Good service and ATMs on the Cirrus system dispensing US dollars too.

Post

Correo Central (Central Post Office; www.correos.go.cr; Calle 2 btwn Avs 1 & 3; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 7:30am-noon Sat) The most efficient place in Costa Rica to send and receive mail.

Telephone

Local and international calls can be made from most public phones, which are widespread. Chip and Colibrí phonecards are sold at souvenir shops, newsstands and Más X Menos supermarkets. Hotels usually have lobby phones. For general information, see p630.

Tourist Information

Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT) (☎ 223 1733 ext 277; www.tourism-costarica.com; Calle 5 btwn Av Central & 2; ☎ 9am-5pm with flexible lunch Mon-Fri)

Correo Central (in the post office at Calle 2 btwn Avs 1 & 3) The government tourism office is good for a copy of the master bus schedule and free maps.

Travel Agencies

The following are long-standing and reputable agencies.

OTEC (☎ 256 0633; www.turismojuven.com; Calle 3 btwn Avs 1 & 3) Specializes in youth travel; can also issue student discount cards.

TAM Travel Corporation (☎ 256 0203; www.tamtravel.com; Calle 1 btwn Avs Central & 1) Airline ticketing, local travel and more.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Street crime is the principal concern of most travelers in the city. While violent crime is low compared with American cities, pickpocketing is extremely common. Always carry your money and passport in an inside pocket or a money belt. Never leave valuables in the outer pocket of your backpack.

Between January 2004 and April 2005, there were 599 reported tourist assaults in Costa Rica, most of which occurred in San José. If you're held at knife or gunpoint, do not resist or fight back. Stay anonymous by not wearing flashy jewelry or watches and by walking confidently. If lost, go inside a store or café to check a map or get directions. After dark, always travel by taxi – they are cheap and will save you plenty of aggravation. Women walking alone at night are sometimes tailed and mistaken for prostitutes. If bar-hopping, don't go alone.

In a common scam, thieves spill something on a passerby, who is then pick-pocketed by the person who steps in to help 'clean up.' Another trend is for motorists to mug pedestrians and speed off.

Neighborhoods reviewed in this book are generally safe during the day, though be especially careful around the Coca-Cola bus terminal and the red-light district south of the parque central, especially at night. Men should beware of friendly Ticas who turn out to be prostitutes. They may take more than their customers bargained for – namely their wallets. Also, AIDS is on the rise in Central America and prostitution is certainly not regulated.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Museo Nacional de Costa Rica

Located inside the Bellavista Fortress, the **Museo Nacional** (☎ 257 1433; Calle 17 btwn Avs Central & 2; adult/student US\$4/2; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Tue-Sun) offers a quick survey of Costa Rican history. You'll find a wide range of pre-Columbian artifacts as well as numerous colonial objects and religious art. The natural-history wing has flora and fauna specimens, minerals and fossils.

Museo de Oro Precolombino/Museo de Numismática

This three-in-one **museum** (☎ 243 4202; www.museosdelbancocentral.org; Plaza de la Cultura basement; admission US\$5; ☎ 9:15am-4:30pm Tue-Sun) houses a glittering collection of pre-Columbian gold artifacts, a small exhibit detailing the history of Costa Rican currency and a temporary display space for local art. Security is tight – all visitors must leave bags at the door.

Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo

Commonly referred to as MADC, the **contemporary art and design museum** (☎ 257 7202; www.madc.ac.cr; Av 3 btwn Calles 13 & 15; admission US\$1; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat) is housed in the historic

National Liquor Factory building, which dates from 1856. MADC primarily shows the contemporary work of Costa Rican and Central American artists, though there are frequent rotating exhibitions on display here as well.

Museo de Jade

San José's most famous **museum** (☎ 287 6034; Edificio INS, Av 7 btwn Calles 9 & 11, 11th fl; adult/child 10 & under US\$2/free; ☎ 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri) is located on the 11th floor of the Instituto Nacional de Seguros (National Insurance Institute). It houses the world's largest collection of American jade (pronounced *ha-day*). Archaeological exhibits of ceramics and stonework offer insight into Costa Rica's pre-Colombian cultures.

Museo de los Niños & Galería Nacional

This unique **children's museum** (☎ 258 4929; www.museocr.com; Calle 4, north of Av 9; admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-4:30pm Tue-Fri, 9:30am-5pm Sat & Sun) resides in an old penitentiary built in 1909. Science, music and geography displays are plentiful but grown-ups will be captivated by the **Galería Nacional** (admission free), which displays modern art in old, abandoned prison cells.

Museo de Arte Costarricense

This sunny **museum** (☎ 222 7155; www.musarco.go.cr; Parque La Sabana; US\$1, free on Sun; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun) features Costa Rican art from the 19th and 20th centuries. Rotating exhibits feature works by Tico artists past and present. Next to this Spanish colonial-style building you'll find an impressive open-air sculpture garden.

Museo de Formas, Espacios y Sonidos

This **interactive museum** (☎ 222 9462; Av 3 btwn Calles 17 & 23; admission US\$1; ☎ 9:30am-3pm Mon-Fri) is geared to small kids or people who like to act like them. Housed in the old San José Atlantic train station, you can clamber on an antique locomotive and traipse through old rail cars. There are also several small exhibits dedicated to the senses of sound, touch and sight.

Teatro Nacional

The **National Theater** (☎ 221 1329; Calles 3 & 5 btwn Avs Central & 2; admission US\$3; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12:30pm & 1:30-5:30pm Sat) is the city's most impressive public building. Built in 1897, it features a columned neoclassical facade. It is flanked by statues of Beethoven and Calderón de la Barca, a 17th-century Spanish

dramatist. Paintings depicting 19th-century life line the lavish lobby and auditorium. The most famous is *Alegoría al café y el banano*, portraying idyllic coffee and banana harvests, painted by an Italian with no apparent experience in the matter (observe how the laborers hold the banana bunches). Across the street, the theater's **Galería Joaquín García Monge** (cnr Av 2 & Calle 5) shows worthwhile exhibits by contemporary artists. Admission is free.

Galería Andrómeda

If you're wandering around Barrio Amón, the **Galería Andrómeda** (☎ 223 3529; andromeda@amnet.co.cr; cnr Calle 9 & Av 9) is a free local art space behind the Museo de Jade, worth a peek to see works by emerging local artists.

Spirogyra Jardín de Mariposas

This small **butterfly garden** (☎ 222 2937; adult/student US\$6/5; ☎ 8am-4pm), 150m east and 150m south of Centro Comercial El Pueblo, houses over 30 different species of butterflies and five hummingbird species. Morning is the best time to visit. Arrive on foot (about a 20- to 30-minute walk from downtown), by taxi, or bus to El Pueblo where there is a sign.

Parks & Plazas

The shady, cobblestone-lined **Parque Nacional** (Avs 1 & 3 btwn Calles 15 & 19) ranks as one of the best parks in San José. In its center is the dramatic **Monumento Nacional**, which depicts the Central American nations (with Costa Rica in the lead, of course) driving out the American filibuster William Walker.

South of the Asamblea is the stark **Plaza de la Democracia** (Avs Central & 2, Calles 13 & 15) which is unremarkable, except for the crafts market.

Parque España (Avs 3 & 7 btwn Calles 9 & 11) is surrounded by heavy traffic, but manages to become a riot of birdsong every day at sunset when the local avians come here to roost. It is also the most notorious prostitution center in the country. Tragically (or perhaps fittingly), the concrete gazebo in its center is referred to as the **Templo de Música** (Music Temple), and is regarded by many as the symbol of San José.

The heart of the city is the **Plaza de la Cultura** (Avs Central & 2, Calles 3 & 5), an unremarkable park that's nonetheless safe since security guards protecting the Museo de Oro Precolombino (located underground) stroll it. The nearby **parque central** (Avs 2 & 4, Calles Central & 2) is the place to catch a taxi or a local city bus. To the east

is the modern and well-maintained **Catedral Metropolitana**.

Parque La Sabana, at the west end of Paseo Colón, is the most popular retreat from the grit and the grime. La Sabana is home to two museums, a lagoon, a fountain and a variety of sports facilities including the Estadio Nacional, where international and division-one soccer matches are played. During the daytime, it's a great place for a stroll, picnic or a relaxed jog. During the nighttime, it's a great place for getting mugged.

COURSES

The San José area has fine Spanish-language schools. Those listed here are well established or have received reader recommendations. Most also organize volunteer placements, a great way to learn Spanish while giving back to those who need it most.

Prices include five four-hour days of instruction, with/without a week's homestay with a local family and breakfast and dinner.

Academia Latinoamericana de Español (☎ 224 9917; www.alespanish.com; Av 8 btwn Calles 31 & 33, San Pedro; US\$290/135) This highly professional institute caters to groups of less than six students, and is staffed with linguists and philologists.

Central America Institute for International Affairs (ICAI; ☎ 233 8571; www.educatur.com; 25m west from the emergency room entrance of Hospital Calderón Guardia; US\$450/300) With over 20 years' experience, this institute offers substantially cheaper rates for longer courses of study.

Centro Lingüístico Conversa (☎ 221 7649, in the USA 800 367 7726; www.conversa.net; Centro Colón, cnr Calle 38 & Paseo Colón, La Sabana; US\$500) Students can live on the school's private campus for US\$125 to US\$220 per week, depending on occupancy.

TOURS

Tired of the dull babble of most city tours? **Urban Addicts** (www.urbanaddicts.com) gives them rooted in psycho-geography. Urbanist Juan Ignacio Salom designed these original jaunts through San José's blue-collar neighborhoods, whose initial guides have been the kids who live there.

SLEEPING

Central San José

Though close to the buses, downtown isn't the most desirable location for travelers. At nighttime the bustle winds down and security can be an issue.

Hotel Musoc (☎ 222 9437; Calle 16 btwn Avs 1 & 3; s/d US\$9/15, with bathroom US\$12/16) An oasis in the not-so-great Coca-Cola neighborhood, Musoc proves nicer inside than out, where immaculate but airless little singles have stiff mattresses and desks. It's hard to miss your bus here – the back rooms look out over the terminal.

Hotel Nuevo Johnson (☎ 223 7633; www.hotelnuevojohnson.com; Calle 8 btwn Avs Central & 2; r per person US\$10) If this is the New Johnson, we'd shudder to see the old. But beyond dark hallways and paneling there's decent-sized rooms with firm beds and clean, hot showers. A game room with a pool table makes it more palatable.

Hotel Nuevo Alameda (☎ 233 3551; www.hotelnuevoalameda.com; cnr Calle 12 & Av Central; r per person US\$12; ☎) A clean but tired option in the city center. Bright rooms have views of Plaza de la Merced but mattresses are bowed and the carpet is downtrodden. It does sport an elevator.

Hotel Príncipe (☎ 222 7983; Av 6 btwn Calles 2 & Central; r US\$13) A pleasant surprise with bright, spacious tiled rooms with solid beds and funky retro headboards. The bathrooms are spanking new. The only bummer is the barrio, definitely not fit for princes.

Barrio Amón & Surrounds

Most travelers lodge in this amenable area within easy walking distance of downtown and grocery stores. Hostels listed following offer airport transfers.

Tranquilo Backpackers (☎ 223 3189, 222 2493, 555 5103; www.tranquilobackpackers.com; Calle 7 btwn Avs 9 & 11; dm/s US\$8/13; ☎) Located in an old mansion, relaxed Tranquilo is a reader favorite. Japanese lanterns, bright murals and low hammocks adorn the big common rooms where mounted guitars can satisfy impromptu sing-alongs. The shared rooms are tall and narrow but skylights help you battle the claustrophobia. Perks include a communal kitchen and the universally loved free pancake breakfast.

Costa Rica Backpackers (☎ 221 6191; www.costaricabackpackers.com; Av 6 btwn Calles 21 & 23; dm/d US\$9/22; ☎) This sprawling hostel complex centers around beautiful gardens and a free-form pool. Friendly and ultra-cool, it offers communal kitchens and a TV lounge, showing two movies nightly. The rooms are plain and pillows pancake-thin.

Hostel Pangea (☎ 221 1992; www.hostelpangea.com; cnr Av 13 & Calle 3 bis, Av 11 btwn Calles 3 & 3 bis, Av 7 btwn Calles 3 & 3 bis; dm US\$10, d with/without bathroom US\$29/25;

☎ ☎) A backpacker's dream digs. Start with the rooftop deck, serving great breakfasts, sandwiches and beer. The many shared spaces nurture a social atmosphere – where you can play pool, swim in one, or check internet (wait a sec, that's not social...). The installations are well looked after and the bilingual service is typically outstanding. There are two locations: the older is quieter and has access to the new building's many amenities, which now even includes a mechanical bull.

Casa Ridgway (☎ 233 6168; www.amigosparalapaz.org; casaridgway@yahoo.es; cnr Calle 15 & Av 6 bis; dm/s US\$10/12; ☎) This welcoming guesthouse, on a quiet dead-end street near the Supreme Court building, is run by the adjacent Friends' Peace Center which promotes peace and social justice. Rooms are tidy, the shared showers are hot, the communal kitchen is spotless and the atmosphere is, well, peaceful. The library offers an extensive collection of books on religion, Central American politics and society. It's less ideal for party people – there's no smoking, alcohol or drugs allowed and quiet hours are from 10pm to 6am.

Casa León (☎ 843 8633; casa_leon_sa@hotmail.com; Av 6 btwn Calles 13 & 15; dm/s/d US\$10/15/23, s/d with bathroom US\$25/33) This small Swiss-run guesthouse is quiet, clean and modern. Perfect for the dorm-weary, its remodeled rooms are well-appointed and there's wi-fi, laundry service and breakfast available at an extra charge.

Penión de la Cuesta (☎ 256 7946; www.suntoursandfun.com/lacuesta; Av 1 btwn Calles 11 & 15; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$14/28/39, child under 12 free) Situated on a little hill behind the Asamblea Legislativa, this 1920s wooden house looks styled by Barbie and Ken. Nine small but appealing rooms with private bathrooms share a homey TV lounge, perfect for relaxing with the owners and guests.

Hotel Aranjuez (☎ 256 1825; www.hotelaranjuez.com; Calle 19 btwn Avs 11 & 13; s/d US\$22/25, with bathroom US\$28/38; ☎) Great value, this quiet charmer consists of vintage homes linked by gardens and a lush backyard. The spotless rooms vary in size and price. The hosts serve a sumptuous breakfast of omelets to order (included in the rates) under the mango tree.

Kap's Place (☎ 221 1169; www.kapsplace.com; Calle 19 btwn Av 11 & 13; s US\$22-38, d US\$24-48, tr US\$36-58, 2-/3-/4-/5-person apt US\$90/100/110/120; ☎) This original guesthouse gushes cheer. Tropical colors and mosaic floors adorn a sprawling space with rooms of every price, shape and size. Cozy is

the operative word here and you'll find beds in batik covers, and free tea and coffee. There's also a shared kitchen and free internet. Spanish, English and French are spoken. It also has an annex nearby.

Casa Hilda (☎ 221 0037; c1hilda@racsa.co.cr; Av 11 btwn Calles 3 & 3 bis; s/d incl breakfast US\$26/36) This peach-colored inn is home to the friendly Quesada family. While the rooms are simple, domestic warmth abounds. Check out the natural spring in the center of the house – it's been bubbling for 90 years.

Cinco Hormigas Rojas (☎ 257 8581; www.cincohor migasrojas.com; Calle 15 btwn Aves 9 & 11; r US\$30-58; ☒) Set amid rampant greenery, this guesthouse is the love child of artist and conservationist Mayra. Chirping birds take you far from the city streets but the patchouli ambience of swirly nude paintings and batiks is not necessarily for all.

Joluva Guesthouse (☎ 223 7961; www.joluva.com; Calle 3 bis btwn Aves 9 & 11; s/d US\$36/50; ☒) This quaint guesthouse has seven small but well-appointed rooms scattered around a number of cozy public areas. The management speaks English and can provide information on the gay scene.

La Sabana

Upmarket and secure, La Sabana is ideal for those settling in for a while. Lodgings are close to San José's best park and a slew of language schools. Modernity, in the form of ubiquitous car dealerships and fast-food joints, may be its only drawback.

Galileo Hostel (☎ 221 8831, 248 2094; www.galileo hostel.com; dm US\$7, d US\$16; ☒) In a sturdy colonial building, the Galileo is well maintained but lacking flavor. Its rooms are drab and even singles come equipped with bunks. Perks include the communal kitchen, hot showers, TV lounge, and outdoor patio. It's 100m south of the Banco de Costa Rica.

Gaudy's (☎ 258 2937; www.backpacker.co.cr; Av 5 btwn Calles 36 & 38; dm US\$7, d with bathroom US\$25; ☒) This big, bright stone-and-cement home has well-appointed dorms, each with its own bath. Ample doubles have impeccable private bathrooms. Though worn at the seams, the house has a pleasant air and free wi-fi. It's 200m north and 150m east of Banco de Costa Rica.

Mi Casa Hostel (☎ 231 4700; www.micasahostel.com; dm US\$8-10, r US\$25-30; ☒) La Sabana's best backpacker option is this airy, modern home with polished-wood floors and antique furnishings.

Fusbol, pool and a decked-out kitchen round out the amenities. Dorms are sex-separate and the staff are extremely helpful. Rates include breakfast and internet. To get here, go 50m west and 150m north of the ICE Building.

JC & Friends (☎ 374 8246; www.jcfriends hostel.com; cnr Calle 34 & Av 3; dm US\$10, s/d US\$16/24, campsite US\$7; ☒) JC is a friendly, can-do personality whose hostel is decked out in whimsical colors and smartened up with a deluxe recreation room and outdoor hammock lounge (complete with artificial 'sand'). Only fans are lacking. Enjoy a free cereal-and-toast breakfast and 2nd-floor volcano views. The Tuasa airport bus (see p539) conveniently stops in front.

EATING

The popular proverb *panza llena, corazón contento* (full stomach, happy heart) sums up what Costa Ricans value most: abundant food, preferably consumed in good company. In San José's multitude of restaurants it's not hard to find something for most tastes and budgets.

Ticos adore the increasingly prevalent American fast-food. Local families save all week and dress up to treat the kids at air-conditioned McDonald's or Pizza Hut come Saturday.

Central San José

Mercado Central (Av Central btwn Calles 6 & 8) One of the cheapest places for a good lunch is at the market where you'll find a variety of restaurants and *sodas* serving *casados* (cheap set meals) tamales, seafood and everything in between.

Vishnu (Av 1 btwn Calles 1 & 3; also Calle Central btwn Aves 6 & 8; US\$3-5) Vinyl booths and plastic counter-tops betray that this vegetarian restaurant is actually a chain, but it's still fresh, bountiful and cheap. Veggie burgers on whole-wheat bread are heaped with fresh coleslaw, and yogurt parfaits make a smooth finish.

Churrería Manolo's (Av Central btwn Calles Central & 2, also Av Central btwn Calles 9 & 11; churros US\$0.50, meals US\$3-5; ☒) 24hr) The cream-filled *churros* (doughnut tubes) here draw crowds in search of a sugar fix. They're freshest around 5pm, when the hungry office workers are released from their cubes. The downtown west location serves killer *casados*, with a 2nd-floor balcony overlooking the lively pedestrian mall below.

Restaurant Shakti (☎ 222 4475; cnr Av 8 & Calle 13; dishes US\$4-6; ☒) 7am-7pm Mon-Sat) Fresh whole-grain breads, greens and local root vegetables

comprise the wholly healthy fare here. The service is fast and friendly, and even despairing carnivores can sometimes get chicken on the sly.

Café de Correo (Calle 2 near Av 3; dishes US\$5-6; ☒) 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat) Located in the Correo Central, this is an excellent spot to sip a hot (or iced) espresso while writing postcards – the drop box is right around the corner. The small selection of pasta dishes will satisfy the ravenous.

Café del Teatro Nacional (Plaza de la Cultura; dishes US\$5-6; ☒) 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12:30pm & 1:30-5:30pm Sat) The most beautiful café in the city is, not surprisingly, located in the most beautiful building in the city. The coffee drinks and small sandwiches here are good enough, though the real reason you're here is to soak up the ambience of the building's stunning frescoes.

Café Parisienne (Plaza de la Cultura; dishes US\$6-10; ☒) 24hr) The perfect place for people-watching is this overpriced European-style café in the Gran Hotel Costa Rica. Views of the Teatro Nacional aren't bad either. Meals are fairly ordinary but if you grab a cup of coffee the wait staff will leave you alone.

Barrio Amón & Surrounds

Café de la Posada (☎ 258 1027; Calle 17 btwn Aves 2 & 4; US\$3-6; ☒) 11am-7pm Mon-Fri, 11am-5pm Sat & Sun) Atmosphere emanates from this Argentine café, decked in prints and paintings. Tables front a quiet pedestrian walkway where patrons sip superb coffee drinks and eat authentic Argentine *empanadas*. For substance, the 'plate of the day' is a good choice.

Café Saudade (☎ 233 2534; Calle 17 btwn Aves 2 & 4; US\$4-12; ☒) 10am-6:30pm Mon-Thu, 11am-5pm Fri & Sat, closed Sun) This hidden gem is coveted for its eclectic menu of sushi, hummus, crêpes and salads in addition to standard café fare. Table-top displays showcase the work of local artists and photographers.

Kafé Ko (☎ 258 7453; cnr Av Central & Calle 21; US\$5-10; ☒) 11am-midnight Mon-Fri, 5pm-1am Sat) Hip and candlelit Ko serves gourmet Western-style sandwiches, quiche and salads. On week nights it becomes a hotspot for live music – it cooks with live DJs spinning on weekends.

La Cocina de Leña (☎ 223 3704, 255 1360; Centro Comercial El Pueblo; dishes US\$5-9; ☒) 11am-11pm Sun-Thu, 11am-midnight Fri & Sat) One of the best-known restaurants in town, 'the Wood Stove' prints its menu on brown paper bags. The long list

of national favorites served here includes black-bean soup, tamales and stuffed peppers, and oxtail served with fried plantain. Try the *guaro*, a highly recommended local firewater. Live marimba bands occasionally liven up dinner.

Nuestra Tierra (cnr Av 2 & Calle 15; casados US\$7; ☒) 24hr) With rustic tables surrounded by hanging bunches of onions and plantains, this popular spot charms the bills out of your wallet. OK, musical trios and tasty, fresh *chorreadas* (pan-grilled corn cakes) make a good match, but some steep prices need wrangling.

Restaurante Tin-Jo (☎ 222 2868; cnr Calle 11 & Av 8; appetizers US\$3-5, mains US\$6-12; ☒) 11:30am-3pm & 5:30-10pm Mon-Thu, 11:30am-3pm & 5:30-11pm Fri & Sat, 11:30am-10pm Sun) Screened rooms with lovely Asian artwork and artifacts set the scene for this relaxed dining experience. Let loose on all things Asian – you won't be disappointed. The menu somehow manages Szechwan, Thai, Indian, Cantonese, Indonesian and Japanese cuisine with aplomb. Reservations are recommended – this place gets packed.

La Sabana & Surrounds

Soda Tapia (cnr Av 2 & Calle 42; casados US\$3-4; ☒) 6am-midnight) This unpretentious spot is a local favorite – you can't go wrong with any of their featured *casados*, though it's worth saving some room for the sinful sundaes.

Machu Picchu (☎ 222 7384; Calle 32 btwn Av 1 & 3; US\$6-11; ☒) 11am-3pm & 6-10pm Mon-Sat) This highly recommended Peruvian outpost is hot with the upmarket crowd, and with good reason. Patrons can choose from a variety of *ceviches*, tremendous seafood stews and traditionally prepared meat and fish. Start your engine with a pisco sour, a tart and potent drink.

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

The much recommended Centro Comercial El Pueblo or simply 'El Pueblo' is a mall-type complex jam-packed with hip bars and clubs. It gets going at about 9pm and shuts down by 3am. Stringent security keeps any trouble outside, making this one place in Chepe where you can kick back a few and let loose. Bring your ID.

Across the street and about 100m west of Centro Comercial El Pueblo, you'll find **¿Por Que No?** (☎ 233 6622), connected to Hotel Villa Tournón. The bar is a local favorite, especially on Friday when there's live music.

Leave the zip-off pants at home and don black for **Luna Roja Café** (☎ 223 2432; Calle 3 btwn Avs 9 & 11), a bastion of the young and trendy. There's a US\$2.50 cover most nights, though Wednesday is free.

Next to the Barrio México church, **México Bar** (cnr Av 13 & Calle 16) is a trendy but interesting bar with good *bocas* (appetizers) and mariachis some nights. It's undoubtedly local, with few tourists or expats, and the neighborhood leading to it is a poor one, so go by taxi.

The historic, 77-year-old **Bar Chavelona** (Av 10 btwn Calles 10 & 12; ☎ 24hr) bar is frequented by radio and theater workers, giving the place an old-world bohemian feel. The area south of the town center becomes somewhat deserted at night, so take a taxi.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

San José's thriving gay-and-lesbian scene tends toward the periphery, meaning the best clubs operate in some of the worst areas. Travel by cab at night and, if possible, bring a friend. Clubs charge US\$2 to US\$5 covers on weekends. For the latest, log on to **Gay Costa Rica** (www.gaycostarica.com), providing info in English and Spanish.

Upmarket gay bar **Bochinche** (☎ 221 0500; Calle 11 btwn Avs 10 & 12) is preferred by young professionals. The rocking **Deja Vú** (☎ 223 3758; Calle 2 btwn Avs 14 & 16) is a massive dance club with open-bar for men on Wednesday and go-go boys on Saturday.

Popular with men, reader-recommended **La Avispa** (☎ 223 5343; Calle 1 btwn Avs 8 & 10) features pool tables and a boisterous dance floor. Known for raucous, over-the-top drag shows, **Los Cucharones** (☎ 233 5797; Av 6 btwn Calles Central & 1) caters to the young working class.

ENTERTAINMENT

Pick up *La Nación* on Thursday for a complete listing (in Spanish) of the coming week's nightlife and cultural events. The *Tico Times* 'Weekend' section (in English) has a calendar of events. Available at the tourist office, *Guía de Ciudad*, published by *El Financiero*, features local happenings. Visit www.entretainmentto.co.cr for more up-to-date movie, bar and club listings all over the San José area.

San José has a booming Spanish theatrical scene. The most revered theater is the **Teatro Nacional** (performance listing ☎ 221 5341), staging plays, dance, symphony and Latin music from March to November. Other major venues in-

clude the **Teatro Fanal** (☎ 257 5524; Av 3 btwn Calles 11 & 15), adjacent to the contemporary arts museum, the restored 1920s **Teatro Melico Salazar** (☎ 221 4952; cnr Av 2 & Calle Central), opposite the parque central and the **Auditorio Nacional** (☎ 249 1208), inside Museo de los Niños.

SHOPPING

Assuming you've dressed down and stuck a wad of extra cash in your sock, the gritty **Mercado Central** (Avs Central & 1 btwn Calles 6 & 8) is the best place for hammocks *hecho en* (made in) Nicaragua and '*Pura Vida*' tees (made in China). To really go native, get some export-quality coffee beans sold here for a fraction of the boutique price.

One of the city's best shopping experiences, the **Mercado Artesanal** (Plaza de la Democracia; Avs Central & 2 btwn Calles 13 & 15) has a hundred open-air stalls hawking handcrafted jewelry, elaborate woodwork, Guatemalan sarongs and Cuban cigars.

For a quick education about local indigenous cultures, **Galería Namu** (Av 7 btwn Calles 5 & 7; ☎ 9:30am-6:30pm Mon-Sat, 9:30am-1:30pm Sun) selectively brings together quality artwork and crafts from Costa Rica's small but diverse population. And where else can you pick up a Bribri dugout canoe?

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The two airports serving San José are **Aeropuerto Juan Santamaría** (☎ 437 2626), near Alajuela, and **Aeropuerto Tobias Bolaños** (☎ 232 2820) in Pavas. The former handles international traffic. Tobias Bolaños is for domestic flights by NatureAir. Airlines with offices in San José include:

Continental (☎ 296 4911; next to Hotel Barceló, La Uruca)
Delta (☎ 256 7909, press 5 for reservations; Paseo Colón) Located 100m east and 50m south of Toyota.
Grupo TACA (☎ 296 0909; cnr Calle 42 & Av 5) Across from the Datsun dealership.
Iberia (☎ 257 8266; Centro Colón, 2nd fl)
Mexicana (☎ 295 6969; Torre Mercedes Benz on Paseo Colón, 3rd fl)
United (☎ 220 4844; Sabana Sur)
Varig (☎ 290 5222) About 150m south of Channel 7, west of Parque La Sabana

To get to Aeropuerto Juan Santamaría, catch the Tuasa bus bound for Alajuela (US\$0.60) from Calle 10 on the corner of Av 2. **Interbus**

(☎ 283 5573) charges US\$5 and does hotel pickups. A street taxi will cost from US\$15 to US\$20. It's best to reserve a pick-up with **Taxi Aeropuerto** (☎ 221 6865).

Buses to Aeropuerto Tobias Bolaños depart every half hour from Av 1, 150m west of the Coca-Cola terminal. A taxi from downtown costs about US\$3.

Bus

The **Coca-Cola bus terminal** (Av 1 btwn Calles 16 & 18), is a well-known local landmark. Scores of buses leave from a four-block radius around it. Several terminals serve specific regions. Just northeast of the Coca-Cola, the **Terminal San Carlos** (cnr Av 9 & Calle 12) serves northern destinations such as Monteverde, La Fortuna and Sarapiquí. The **Gran Terminal del Caribe** (Caribe Terminal; Calle Central, north of Av 13) serves the Caribbean coast. On the south end of town, **Terminal Musoc** (Av 22 btwn Calles Central & 1) caters for San Isidro. Other companies have no more than a bus stop (in this case pay the driver directly); some have a tiny office with a window on the street; some operate out of a terminal.

Buses are crowded on Friday evening and Saturday morning, even more so during Christmas and Easter. Thefts are common around the Coca-Cola terminal, so stay alert. Bus schedules change regularly and prices change with fluctuating fuel costs. Get a master bus schedule at the ICT office (p542) or online at www.visitcostarica.com.

INTERNATIONAL BUSES

Take a copy of your passport when buying tickets to international destinations.

Changuinola/Bocas del Toro, Panama (Panaline; cnr Calle 16 & Av 3) US\$15; 8hr; departs 10am
David, Panama (Tracopa; Calle 14 btwn Avs 3 & 5) US\$14; 9hr; 7:30am
Guatemala City (Tica Bus; cnr Calle 9 & Av 4) US\$39; 60hr; 6am & 7:30am
Managua, Nicaragua US\$12; 9hr; Nica Bus (Caribe Terminal) departs at 5:30am & 9am; Transportes Deldu/Sirca Express (Calle 16 btwn Avs 3 & 5) departs 4:30am; Tica Bus (cnr Calle 9 & Av 4) departs 6am & 7:30am; Trans Nica (Calle 22 btwn Avs 3 & 5) departs 4:30am, 5:30am & 9am
Panama City US\$25/42 for Tica/Panaline; 15hr; Tica Bus (cnr Calle 9 & Av 4) departs 10pm; Panaline (cnr Calle 16 & Av 3) departs 1pm
San Salvador, El Salvador (Tica Bus; cnr Calle 9 & Av 4) US\$42; 48hr; 6am & 7:30am
Tegucigalpa, Honduras (Tica Bus; cnr Calle 9 & Av 4) US\$32; 48hr; 6am & 7:30am

DOMESTIC BUSES

To the Central Valley

Alajuela (Tuasa; Av 2 btwn Calles 12 & 14) US\$0.60; 40min; departs every 15min from 4:45am to 11pm
Cartago US\$0.50; 40min; Sacsá (Calle 5 btwn Avs 18 & 20) departs every 5min; Transportes (Calle 13 btwn Avs 6 & 8) departs hourly from 8am to 8pm
Heredia (Av 2 btwn Calles 10 & 12) US\$0.50; 20min; departs every 20 to 30min from 4:40am to 11pm
Turrialba (Calle 13 btwn Avs 6 & 8) US\$2; 1¼hr; departs hourly 8am to 8pm
Volcán Irazú (Av 2 btwn Calles 1 & 3) US\$4.50; departs 8am on weekends only
Volcán Poás (Tuasa; Av 2 btwn Calles 12 & 14) US\$4.5hr; departs 8:30am

To the Central Pacific Coast

Dominical (Transportes Morales; Coca-Cola) US\$4.50; 6½hr; departs 7am, 8am, 1:30pm & 4pm
Jacó (Transportes Jacó; Coca-Cola) US\$2.50; 3hr; 7:30am, 10:30am, 1pm, 3:30pm & 6:30pm
Puntarenas (Empresarios Unidos; cnr Av 12 & Calle 16) US\$2.50; 2¼hr; many buses from 6am to 7pm
Quepos/Manuel Antonio (Transportes Morales; Coca-Cola) US\$4; 4hr; 6am, 7am, 10am, noon, 2pm, 4pm & 6pm
Uvita, via Dominical (Transportes Morales; Coca-Cola) US\$5; 7hr; 6am & 3pm

To Península de Nicoya

Nicoya (Empresas Alfaro; Av 5 btwn Calle 14 & 16) US\$5.25-6; 5hr; departs 6am, 6:30am, 8am, 10am, 10:30am, 12:30pm, 1:30pm, 2pm, 3pm, 4pm, 5pm & 6:30pm
Playa del Coco (Pullmitan; Calle 24 btwn Avs 5 & 7) US\$5.25; 5hr; 8am, 2pm & 4pm
Playa Nosara (Empresas Alfaro; Calle 16 btwn Avs 3 & 5) US\$5; 7hr; 6am
Playa Sámara (Empresas Alfaro; Calle 16 btwn Avs 3 & 5) US\$5; 5hr; 12:30am
Playa Tamarindo (Empresas Alfaro; Calle 16 btwn Avs 3 & 5) US\$5; 5hr; 11am & 3:30pm
Santa Cruz, via Tempisque bridge US\$5.25; 4¼hr; Tralapa (Av 7 btwn Calles 20 & 22) departs 7am, 10am, 10:30am, noon, 1pm & 4pm; Empresas Alfaro (Calle 16 btwn Avs 3 & 5) departs 6:30am, 8am, 10am, 1:30pm, 3pm & 5pm

To Northwestern Costa Rica & Northern Lowlands

Cañas US\$3; 3¼hr; Tralapa (Av 7 btwn Calles 20 & 22) departs hourly; Transportes Cañas (Calle 16 btwn Avs 1 & 3) departs 8:30am, 9:50am, 11:50am, 1:40pm, 3pm & 4:45pm
Ciudad Quesada (San Carlos) (Autotransportes San Carlos; San Carlos terminal) US\$2.50, 2½hr; departs hourly 5am to 7pm

La Fortuna (San Carlos terminal) US\$3, 4½hr; departs 6:15am, 8:40am & 11:30am

Liberia US\$5; 4hr; Pullmitan (Calle 24 btwn Avs 5 & 7) departs hourly from 6am to 7pm; Tralapa (Av 7 btwn Calles 20 & 22) departs 3:25pm

Los Chiles, the Nicaragua Border Crossing (San Carlos terminal) US\$3.75; 5hr; departs 5:30am & 3:30pm
Monteverde/Santa Elena (Trans Monteverde; San Carlos terminal) US\$4.50, 4½hr; departs 6:30am & 2:30pm (this bus fills very quickly – book ahead)

Peñas Blancas, the Nicaragua Border Crossing (Transportes Deldú; Calle 16 btwn Avs 3 & 5) US\$5.50; 4½hr; departs 4am, 5am, 7am, 7:30am, 10:30am, 1:20pm & 4pm weekdays, every 15min from 3am to 4pm weekends

Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí (Autotransportes Sarapiquí; Caribe Terminal) US\$2.50; 1½hr; 7:30am, 10am, 11:30am, 1:30pm, 2:30pm, 3:30pm, 4:30pm, 5:30pm & 6pm
Tilarán (Autotransportes Tilarán; San Carlos terminal) US\$3.50; 4hr; departs 7:30am, 9:30am, 12:45pm, 3:45pm & 6:30pm

To the Caribbean Coast

The following services depart from the Caribe terminal:

Cahuita (Autotransportes Mepe) US\$6.50; 3¾hr; departs 6am, 10am, 1:30pm & 3:30pm

Cariari, for transfer to Tortuguero (Empresarios Guapileños) US\$2.50; 2¼hr; 6:30am, 9am, 10:30am, 1pm, 3pm, 4:30pm, 6pm & 7pm; for detailed information on transfer to Tortuguero, see p572

Guápiles (Empresarios Guapileños) US\$1.75; 1¼hr; departs hourly from 6:30am to 7pm

Puerto Limón (Autotransportes Caribeños) US\$3.50; 3hr; departs every 30min from 5:30am to 7pm

Puerto Viejo de Talamanca (Autotransportes Mepe) US\$7.75; 4¼hr; 6am, 10am, 1:30pm & 3:30pm

Siquirres (Líneas Nuevo Atlántico) US\$2; 1¾hr; departs 6:30am to 7pm

Sixaola, the Panama Border Crossing (Autotransportes Mepe) US\$9.50; 5hr; 6am, 10am, 1:30pm & 3:30pm

To Southern Costa Rica & Península de Osa

Ciudad Neily (Tracopa; Calle 14 btwn Avs 3 & 5) US\$8.25; 7hr; departs 5am, 7:30am, 11am, 1pm, 4:30pm & 6pm

Golfito (Tracopa; Calle 14 btwn Avs 3 & 5) US\$8.25, 8hr; 7am & 3pm

Palmar Norte (Tracopa; Calle 14 btwn Avs 3 & 5) US\$5; 5hr; 5am, 7am, 8:30am, 10am, 1pm, 2:30pm & 6pm

Paso Canoas, the Panama Border Crossing (Tracopa; Calle 14 btwn Avs 3 & 5) US\$9; 7¼hr; 5am, 7:30am, 11am, 1pm, 4:30pm & 6pm

Puerto Jiménez (Blanco Lobo; Calle 12 btwn Avs 9 & 11) US\$6.50; 8hr; 6:30am & 3:30pm

San Isidro de El General Transportes Musoc (cnr Calle Central & Av 22) US\$3.25; 3hr; departs hourly from 5:30am to 6:30pm; Tracopa (Av 4 btwn Calle 14 & 16) US\$3.75; 3hr; departs hourly from 5am to 6pm

TOURIST BUSES

Grayline's Fantasy Bus (☎ 220 2126; www.graylinecostarica.com) and **Interbus** (☎ 283 5573; www.interbusonline.com) shuttle passengers from all over San José to popular tourist destinations. More expensive than standard bus services, they are also much faster.

GETTING AROUND Bus

Local buses generally run from 5am to 10pm and cost from US\$0.25 to US\$0.60. Buses into downtown from Parque La Sabana head east on Paseo Colón then jog over to Av 2 at the hospital before heading into the center by various routes. To return, catch a 'Sabana-Cementario' along Calle 11 (between Avs Central and 2). For San Pedro and Los Yoses, take a 'Mall San Pedro' from Av 2 (between Calles 9 and 11) and to get to Escazú, look for the blue buses just east of the **Coca-Cola bus terminal** (Calle 16 btwn Avs 1 & 3).

Taxi

Red taxis can be hailed day or night. *Mariás* (meters) are supposedly used, but some drivers will pretend they are broken or forget to turn them on and try to charge you more. Make sure the *mariá* is operating when you get in or negotiate the fare up front. Within San José fares are US\$0.60 for the first kilometer and US\$0.30 for each extra one. Short rides downtown cost about US\$1. There's a 20% surcharge after 10pm. Taxi drivers are not usually tipped.

AROUND SAN JOSÉ Los Yoses & San Pedro

About 2km east of central San José, hoity-toity residential areas **Los Yoses** and **San Pedro** are home to a number of embassies as well as the most prestigious university in the country, la Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR). The area serves as the nightlife hub of under-30 *Josefinos*, with trendy bars, restaurants and nightclubs. Much like a Latin love affair, hot spots sizzle and fizzle quickly.

In San Pedro, the **Scotiabank** (Av Central btwn Calles 5 & 7) changes cash and has a 24-hour ATM on the Cirrus network. The neighborhood abounds with internet cafés; try **Internet Café Costa Rica** (☎ 224 7295; 75m west of old Banco Popular;

per hr US\$0.60; ☎ 24hr). In Barrio Dent, **Librería Internacional** (☎ 253 9553; 300m west of Taco Bell, behind San Pedro Mall; ☎ 9:30am-7:30pm Mon-Sat, 1-5pm Sun) has new books mostly in Spanish (but some in English) as well as travel and wildlife guides.

SIGHTS

San Pedro's principal attraction is partying on Calle La Amargura. If you're not the drinking type, head to the malls and movie theaters for a quick Western culture-fix. The **Museo de Insectos** (☎ 207 5318, 207 5647; admission US\$1; ☎ 1-5pm Mon-Fri) brings you up close and a bit too personal with a vast assortment of exotic creepy crawlies. At **Bolicho Dent** (☎ 234 2777; cnr Av Central & Calle 23, Los Yoses) you can bowl for US\$5 per hour.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hostel Bekuo (☎ 234 5486; www.hostelbekuo.com; Av 8 btwn Calles 29 & 41; dm US\$9, s/d/tr US\$18/26/33; ☑) This place is a gorgeous take on Japanese minimalist design – think low tables, bean-bag chairs and hanging lanterns. Facilities include a communal kitchen, a recreation room with pool table and a TV lounge. Guests have free internet access (including wireless).

Casa Yoses (☎ 234 5486; www.casayoses.com; Av 8 at Calle 41; dm US\$9, s/d/tr US\$18/25/33; ☑) Kick back in this 19th-century mansion tailored to traveling couples and upmarket backpackers. A garden with hammocks, sun chairs and tropical plants invites guests to read a book or nurse a hangover. The three Tico-owners speak English and French.

Hostel Toruma (☎ 234 8186; www.hosteltoruma.com; Av Central btwn Calles 29 & 31; dm US\$10, s/d/tr with bathroom & private garden US\$30/40/50; ☑) Snooze soundly in a former president's digs at this cool Spanish-colonial mansion. It's abuzz with amenities like a swimming pool, TV lounge, free internet and a communal kitchen, all extremely well kept. Owned by the folks at Hostal Pangea, you can count on great bilingual service and camaraderie.

Pizzería Il Pomodoro (meals US\$3-7) About 100m north of the San Pedro church, this place attracts a loyal following for its tasty Italian food. It's also open on Sunday.

Comida Para Sentir (Calle Central; daily specials US\$4-8) This veggie venue, 50m north of the church, serves whole-grain pastas, meatless mains and mean cappuccinos to a packed house.

Spoon (Calle 43 & Av 10; mains US\$2-8; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) Locals hit this place for big breakfasts after a rough night.

Al Muluk (Calle 3 north of Av Central; dishes US\$3-7) Pleasant Al Muluk has delectable falafel and a wide variety of Lebanese specialties.

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

In San Pedro, Calle 3, north of Av Central, is also known as Calle la Amargura (Sorrow St). However, Calle la Cruda (Hangovers St) would be more apt, as it offers the highest concentration of bars of any street in town. Many pack with customers even during daylight. Terra U, Mosakos, Caccio's and Tavarúa are raucous, beer-soaked places packed with a steady stream of rowdy young patrons. A more relaxed (and slightly grown-up) spot is La Villa, in a distinctive wood house with a candlelit back patio. There's live music some weekends.

For live music, the top choice is the stylish **Jazz Café** (Av Central at Calle la Amargura; cover US\$4-6; ☎ 6pm-2am), featuring different live bands each night. The recommended **El Retro-visor** (Arte Plaza San Pedro; ☎ 6pm-2am) is an Argentinean-owned retro café adorned with '80s pop culture memorabilia, hip amongst trendy UCR students.

ENTERTAINMENT

Multicines San Pedro (☎ 283 5715/6; top level of Mall San Pedro; admission US\$4) has 10 screens showing the latest Hollywood flicks. Your other option is **Cine El Semáforo** (☎ 253 9126; www.cinesemaforo.com; beside train tracks, east of Calle 3; admission US\$3; ☎ 11am-8pm), a hip little theater showing Spanish and Latin American movie classics every day in Spanish.

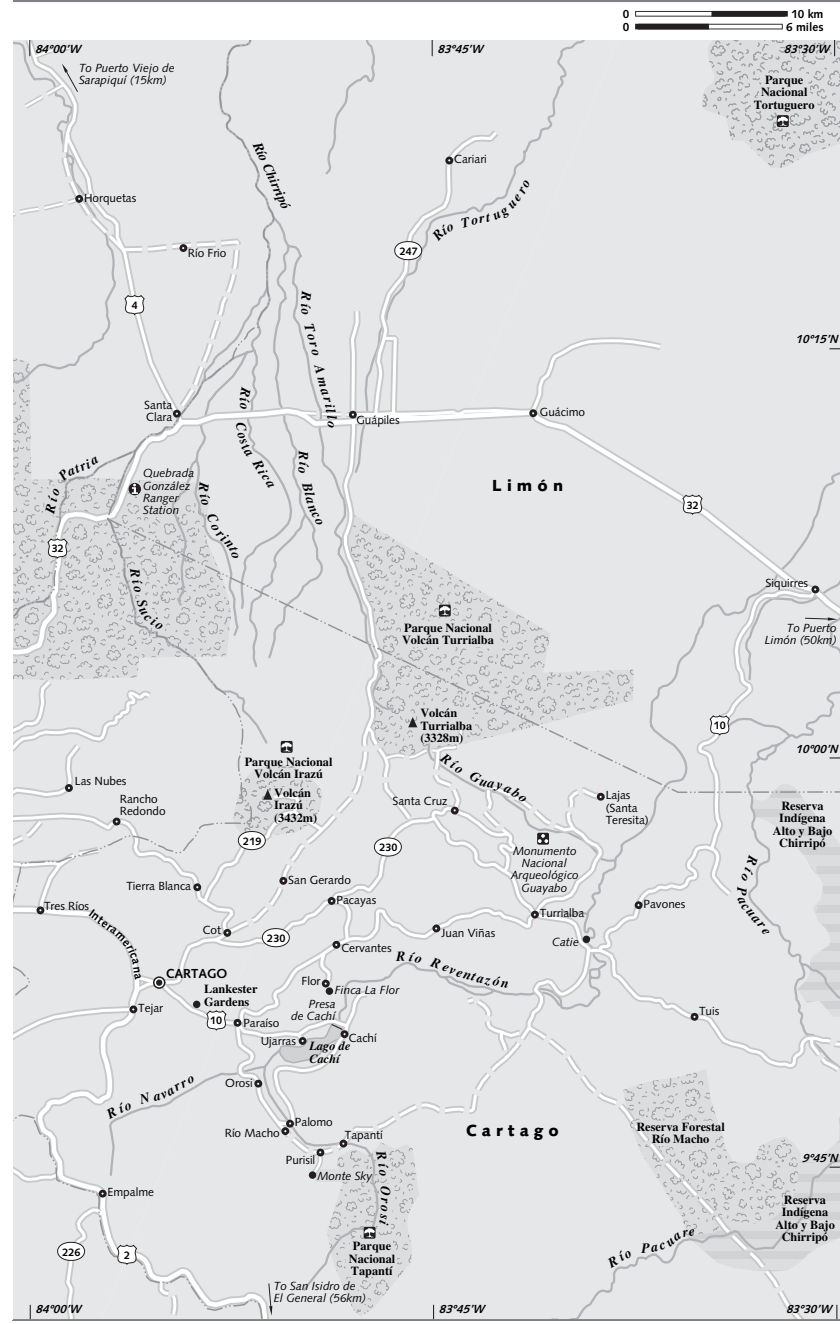
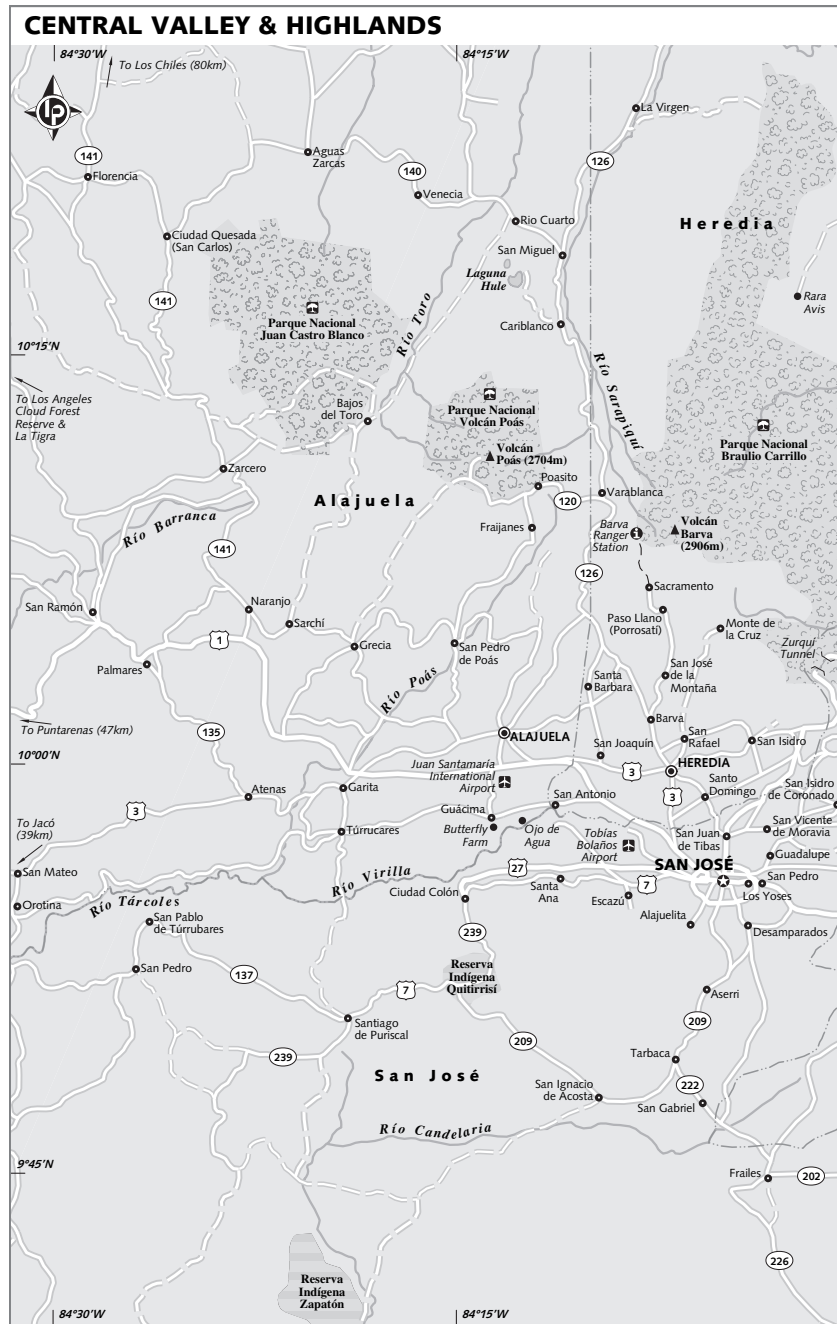
GETTING THERE & AWAY

From the Plaza de la Cultura in San José, take any bus marked 'Mall San Pedro.' A taxi ride from downtown will cost US\$1.50 to US\$2.

CENTRAL VALLEY & HIGHLANDS

First cultivated by indigenous people, then coffee barons and now computer companies, the fertile Central Valley is Costa Rica's quintessential heartland. With San José at its booming core, and the cities of Alajuela, Heredia and Cartago filling its perimeter, *el valle* is the country's main population center. It is also one of the world's largest microchip production centers, tapping a workforce that's young, educated and increasingly bilingual. While

COSTA RICA



COSTA RICA

some quaint areas remain, this destination is more likely to resemble your own crowded backyard. Sprawling, savvy and modern, the Central Valley reveals a Costa Rica left off most tour brochures.

ALAJUELA

pop 160,000

Warm and welcoming, ordinary Alajuela has an upbeat vibe that is virtually absent in the capital. This may be Costa Rica's 'second city' but its best features seem undeniably provincial – the mango-lined plaza, old-fashioned barbershops and a soaring alabaster cathedral. It makes a convenient base for those taking early-morning flights or visiting Volcán Poás to the north.

Banks include **Scotiabank** (cnr Av 3 & Calle 2), with an ATM on the Cirrus network. Internet access is available at **BYTE** (cnr Calle 3 & Av 1, 2nd fl; per hr US\$0.75; ☎ Mon-Sat). Stock up for long trips with the literary snacks at **Goodlight Books** (Av 3 btwn Calles 1 & 3), run by Larry, an expat with lots of helpful information.

Northwest of the parque central, **Museo Juan Santamaría** (☎ 441 4775; cnr Av 3 & Calle 2; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) commemorates Juan Santamaría, the drummer-boy martyred while torching William Walker's stronghold in the war of 1856. Once the town jail, it now houses maps, paintings and historical artifacts. The **parque central** is a pleasant place to read in the shade.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Cortéz Azul (☎ 443 6145; cortezazul@latinmail.com; Av 5 btwn Calles 2 & 4; dm US\$10, d US\$20-30) Art enthusiasts will dig this old home fronted by a studio where artists-in-residence design sculptures and mosaics. While it's worn at the edges, soft lighting, a grassy garden and cool abstract designs add up to a darling ambience.

Hostel Trotamundos (☎ 430 5832; www.hosteltrotamundos.com; Av 5 btwn Calles 2 & 4; dm US\$10, d US\$25-30; ☎) Tidy bunkrooms, a pleasant patio and extra amenities such as internet and cable TV make this a solid budget choice. There's a communal kitchen and continental breakfast is included.

Hotel Pacandé (☎ 443 8481; www.hotelpacande.com; Av 5 btwn Calles 2 & 4; s US\$20, d US\$25-45; ☎) Pacandé beams with soft color, fresh tiles and carved colonial furniture. Breakfast is included – hit the garden for fresh pineapple and morning brew. Shared and private bathrooms are available.

Vida Tropical B&B (☎ 443 9576; www.vidatropical.com; 250m northeast of the courthouse; s/d US\$30/40; ☎) The Vida tropical is an American-run B&B awash in bright murals, with plenty of hammocks, comfy couches, complimentary breakfast and the warm company of the owners. Located in a quiet neighborhood just north of the city center.

Mercado Central (Calles 4 & 6 btwn Avs 1 & Central; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat) Head to the enclosed market for *sodas*, produce stands and more.

Coffee Dreams Café (Calle 1 btwn Avs 1 & 3; US\$2-4) This cozy place serves up decadent desserts and homemade quiche and tamales.

La Mansarda (☎ 441 4390; Calle Central btwn Avs Central & 2, 2nd fl; meals US\$3-7; ☎ 11am-1am) Join the locals on the balcony at La Mansarda, which serves grilled fish and *patacones*. The best deal are the US\$2 bar appetizers.

Jalepeños Central (☎ 430 4027; Calle 1 btwn Avs 3 & 5; US\$3-6; ☎ 11:20am-9pm, closed Sun) For the home-sick, nothing says American like eating Tex Mex grilled up by a chatty Colombian chef from Queens. This unpretentious place has a congenial atmosphere and spicy shredded-beef tacos.

Getting There & Away

Buses to the airport and San José (US\$0.75, 45 minutes) leave from Av 4 between Calles 2 and 4, from 5am to 11pm. Airport taxis (US\$5) leave from the parque central. The **Alajuela bus terminal** (Av 1 btwn Calles 8 & 10) has buses to other towns and Volcán Poás.

PARQUE NACIONAL VOLCÁN POÁS

Ever wanted to peer into an active volcano without the drama of actually scaling it? Costa Rica's most heavily trafficked **national park** (admission US\$7; ☎ 8am-3:30pm) is just 37km north of Alajuela by a winding and scenic road. The centerpiece is Volcán Poás (2704m) and its steaming, belching cauldron. The crater, measuring 1.3km across and 300m deep, occasionally belches sulphurous mud and steaming water hundreds of meters into the air.

From the visitors center, a paved road leads directly to the crater lookout. Toxic fumes (and regulations) will keep you from going into the crater, but two trails branch out from it. To the right is **Sendero Botos**, a 30-minute round-trip hike through dwarf cloud forest nurtured by the acidic air and freezing temperatures. Bromeliads, lichen and mosses cling to the twisted trees growing in volcanic

soil. Birds abound; look for the magnificent fiery-throated hummingbird, a high-altitude specialty of Costa Rica. The trail ends at **Laguna Botos**, a peculiar cold-water lake that has filled in one of the extinct craters. Going left of the crater is **Sendero Escalonia**, a slightly longer trail through taller forest. It gets significantly less traffic than the other parts of the park.

A veil of clouds envelops the mountain almost daily, appearing at around 10am. Even if it's clear, get to the park as early as possible or you won't see much. The best time to visit is dry season and on the less-crowded weekdays.

From San José, Tuasa buses (US\$4, three hours) depart 8:30am daily from Av 2 between Calles 12 and 14, stopping in Alajuela at 9:30am, and returning at 2:30pm. Hours are inexact, it's best to arrive early if departing from Alajuela.

HEREDIA

pop 80,000

Although only 11km from San José, Heredia is worlds away from the grit and grime of the capital. Its cosmopolitan bustle comes courtesy of the multinational high-tech corporations whose Central American headquarters are here. More bohemian stylings radiate from the National University. Heredia's historic center is one of the most attractive in the country, and the city serves as a convenient base for exploring the diverse attractions of the province.

Scotiabank (Av 4 btwn Calles Central & 2) changes money and has a 24-hour ATM on the Cirrus network. The university district is full of copy shops and internet cafés.

Watch the older generation square off in checker tournaments at the **parque central**. It's also the place to soak up Heredia's colonial heritage. Built in 1798, **La Inmaculada Concepción** sits east of the park. This squat and sturdy construction has survived the worst earthquakes in Costa Rica. North of the park, the 1867 guard tower called **El Fortín** is the last remaining turret of a Spanish fortress and the official symbol of Heredia. You'll find the **Casa de la Cultura** (☎ 262 2505; www.heredianet.co.cr/casacult.htm, in Spanish; cnr Calle Central & Av Central; admission free; ☎ hours vary) at the park's northeast corner. This former residence of President Alfredo González Flores (1913–17) now houses permanent historical exhibits, art shows and events.

Courses

Spanish courses are available at a couple of places.

Centro Panamericano de Idiomas (☎ 265 6306; www.cpi-edu.com; without/with homestay US\$275/395) In the Heredia suburb of San Joaquín de Flores.

Intercultura (☎ 260 8480, in the USA ☎ 800 552 2051; www.spanish-intercultura.com; without/with homestay US\$260/370) Also arranges volunteer positions.

Sleeping

Hotel El Verano (☎ 237 1616; Calle 4 btwn Avs 6 & 8; s/d US\$8/10) Friendly but dilapidated, at least Verano spruces up its paper-thin walls with bright colors. It's in the seedy area by the bus terminal.

Hotel Las Flores (☎ 261 1477; Av 12 btwn Calles 12 & 14; s/d US\$12/22) Heredia's best value is this large peach building on the city outskirts. It boasts tip-top rooms in earthy tones with tiled floors and modern baths – request one with a balcony.

Hotel Heredia (☎ 238 0880; www.hamerica.net; Calle 6 btwn Avs 3 & 5; s/d/tr US\$15/20/30) This conspicuously adorable house was recently renovated from the ground up. The beds here continue to be noodly soft but the rooms are ample and bright, with solar-heated showers and cable TV.

Hotel Rambles (☎ 238 3829; Av 8 btwn Calles 10 & 12; s/d US\$16/20) Elegant and airy, this impeccable white stucco colonial hotel is a refreshing upgrade. The rooms are lovely, as is the older hostess, who unfortunately has two-tiered prices for locals and foreigners.

Eating & Drinking

Mercado Municipal (Calle 2 btwn Avs 6 & 8; ☎ 6am-6pm) Compensate for your overpriced hotel by eating cheap at the market where there's fresh produce and *sodas* to spare.

Vishnu Mango Verde (Calle 7 btwn Avs Central & 1; US\$3-5; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) This is known for fresh veggie fare.

Fresas (cnr Av 1 & Calle 7; mains US\$3-8; ☎ 8am-midnight) Popular with students, Fresas serves fresh fruit shakes and salads, and *casados* round out the menu.

La Candelaria (☎ 237 4630; 150m west of road to Aurora; mains US\$4-8; ☎ 11:30am-10pm) The best dinner in town is a short taxi hop away at this romantic Portuguese restaurant with a creative menu including trout crêpes, grilled meat and fish. Order the *tiramisu* – it's arguably more stimulating than most dates.

A thriving and thirsty student body means there's no shortage of live music, *fútbol* or the odd happening. La Choza, El Bulevar and **El Rancho de Fofó** (cnr Calle 7 & Av Central) are three popular student spots.

Getting There & Away

There is no central terminal; buses leave from stops near the parque central and the market. Buses to **San José** (US\$0.50, 20 minutes) depart from Av 4 between Calles Central and 1, every half-hour. Buses for Barva (US\$0.25, 20 minutes) leave from **Cruz Roja** (Red Cross; Calle Central btwn Avs 1 & 3). Buses to San José de la Montaña and Sacramento, with connections to Volcán Barva in Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo, leave from Av 8 between Calles 2 and 4.

PARQUE NACIONAL BRAULIO CARRILLO

Thick virgin forest, gushing waterfalls, swift rivers and deep canyons – it's hard to believe that you are only 30 minutes north of San José while walking around this underexplored national park. Braulio Carrillo's extraordinary biodiversity is attributed to its range in altitude, from Volcán Barva's misty cloud forest to the lush, humid lowlands reaching toward the Caribbean.

Founded in 1978, the park protects primary forest threatened when the highway between San José and Puerto Limón was built. Driving through it will give you an idea of what Costa Rica looked like prior to the 1950s – rushing rivers and rolling hills steeped in mountain rain forest.

Several rivers traverse the park: the Río Sucio ('Dirty River'), whose yellow waters carry volcanic minerals, and the crystal-clear Río Hondura. They intersect next to the main highway, and it's fascinating to see the contrast of colors. Volcán Barva is located at the southwestern corner of the park.

There have been many reports of thefts from cars and armed robbers on the trails or along the highway. It's best to either hike with a park ranger or arrange for a guide through any of the stations.

For more details, check the website of **Minae** (www.minae.go.cr/acccv/braulio.htm).

Quebrada González Sector

The most popular hiking area is accessed at the northern end of the park at the **Quebrada González ranger station** (☎ 233 4533; admission US\$6;

🕒 7am-4pm), 22km past the Zurquí tunnel to the right of the San José–Limón highway. It has a guarded parking lot, toilets and well-marked trails. Hourly buses between San José and Guápiles can drop you off at the entrance, but it's a 2km walk back along the highway to reach the restaurant where returning buses stop. Take precautions, as muggings have been reported along this stretch.

Barva Sector

Climbing Volcán Barva is a good four- to five-hour round-trip along a well-maintained trail. Begin on the western side of the park at the Sacramento entrance, north of Heredia. From there, the trail is signed and fairly obvious. It's a leisurely climb to the summit. Keep your eyes peeled for a quetzal. Near the summit there are several chilly lakes.

It is best to hike in the dry, or less-wet, season between December and April, as paths get muddy and cloud cover can disorientate hikers. Night temperatures can drop below freezing. Camping is allowed but there are no facilities.

From Heredia, three buses a day (6:30am, 11am and 4pm) pass Paso Llano (also called Porrosati). From there, it's a 5km walk to Sacramento and then another 3km to the **Barva ranger station** (☎ 261 2619; 🕒 7am-4pm high season), which may or may not be manned.

CARTAGO

pop 127,000

Peace rules Cartago, where the quiet of the central plaza is only broken by rogue pigeons and the shouts of the lottery lady. Once the colonial capital, Cartago's grandeur has been somewhat diminished by mother nature's rumblings. Still, it retains great religious significance and a certain conservative charm. For most visitors, Cartago is the spot to catch your breath, a peaceful modern city with attractions nearby.

Considered to be the holiest shrine in Costa Rica, **La Basílica de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles** (Av 2 at Calle 16) is the home of the revered La Negrita (see boxed text, opposite). Leveled by the 1926 earthquake, the church is now rebuilt in Byzantine style. The **parque central** (cnr Av 2 & Calle 2) houses the shell of another church destroyed by the 1910 earthquake, known as **Las Ruinas**. It now has a pleasant garden to visit.

You can check your email 50m east of Las Ruinas at **Internet Alta Velocidad** (Calle 1 btwn Av 1 &

LOCAL LORE: LA NEGRITA

La Negrita or 'The Black Virgin' is a statuette of an indigenous Virgin Mary found by a *mulatto* woman named Juana Pereira in Cartago on August 2, 1635. According to lore, Juana twice took the statuette home with her, though on each occasion it reappeared where she had first found it. Astounded by the miracle that transpired, the townspeople built the Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles on the original spot where it was found. In 1824 La Negrita was declared Costa Rica's patron saint.

On two separate occasions, La Negrita was stolen from the basilica, though each time it later reappeared on its altar (once was by future novelist José León Sánchez, who was sentenced to Isla San Lucas for 20 years). These strange occurrences have led people to believe that the statuette has curative properties, and it's common for petitioners to offer *milagros* (metal charms) representing the body parts they hope to have healed. Even the spring that flows near the basilica is said to have curative properties, and the statuette has been credited with everything from healing toe fungus to football victories.

Each August 2, on the anniversary of the statuette's discovery, devotees walk a grueling 22km in the summer heat from San José to Cartago, arriving on their knees. It's an incredible sight, and you're more than welcome (*sans* kneepads) to participate.

3; per hr US\$1; 🕒 9am-9pm). Several banks change money – try **Banco Nacional** (cnr Av 4 & Calle 5).

The family-run **Mistiko B&B** (☎ 371 3216; dm US\$13, s/d with bathroom US\$20/35; 📺) offers rooms in a spotless concrete apartment with cable TV, internet, kitchen, sun deck and backyard BBQ. Fruit and coffee are set out in the morning. It is 200m north of Av 6 between Calles 1 and 2. With balconies overlooking the Plaza de la Basílica, the comfortable **Los Angeles Lodge** (☎ 551 0957; Av 4 btwn Calles 14 & 16; s/d incl breakfast US\$25/40; 📺) stands out. Indulge in the steamy showers and big breakfasts made to order.

Stroll Avs 2 and 4 for a range of *sodas* and bakeries. **La Puerta del Sol** (Av 4; mains US\$2-8; 🕒 8am-midnight), opposite the basilica, draws a hearty hometown crowd to its cushioned booths and long narrow bar; fare runs from sandwiches to meat and seafood.

Getting There & Away

Most buses arrive along Av 2 and reach the Basílica before returning to the main terminal on Av 4. Destinations:

Finca la Flor de Paraíso (US\$1) Take a La Flor/Birrisito/El Yas bus from in front of Padres Capuchinos church, 150m southeast of Las Ruinas. Get off at the pink church in La Flor; entrance to the *finca* is 100m to the south.

Paraíso & Lankester Gardens (US\$0.50) Departs from the corner of Calle 4 and Av 1 hourly from 7am to 10pm.

For the gardens, ask the driver to drop you off at the turnoff – from there, walk 750m to the entrance.

Orosi (US\$0.75; 40min) Departs hourly from the corner of Calle 4 and Av 1 from 8am to 10pm Monday to Saturday. The bus will stop in front of the Orosi Mirador.

San José (US\$0.50; 45min) Departs every 15 minutes from Calle 2 and Av 6, north of the parque central.

Turrialba (US\$1; 1½hr) Departs from Av 3 between Calles 8 and 10 (in front of Tribunales de Justicia) every 45 minutes from 6am to 10pm weekdays; 8:30am, 11:30am, 1:30pm, 3pm and 5:45pm weekends.

Volcán Irazú (US\$4; 1hr) Departs only on weekends from Padres Capuchinos church, 150m southeast of Las Ruinas. The bus originates in San José at 8am, stops in Cartago at about 8:30am and returns from Irazú at 12:30pm.

AROUND CARTAGO

While Cartago may not be a hotbed of excitement, the surrounding areas provide plenty to do. Visitors can explore botanical gardens, serene mountain towns, organic farms and an active volcano, all within a two-hour radius. See left for transportation.

Lankester Gardens

The University of Costa Rica runs the exceptional **Lankester Gardens** (☎ 552 3247; admission US\$3.50; 🕒 8:30am-4:30pm), started by a British orchid enthusiast. Orchids are the big draw, with 800 at their showiest from February to April. A trail through the winding gardens browses tropical forest filled with bromeliads, palms and heliconias. It's 6km east of Cartago.

Finca la Flor de Paraíso

Dirty your hands at the nonprofit organic farm **Finca la Flor** (☎ 534 8003; www.la-flor-de-paraíso.org; two-day visit with lodging & guide US\$35, volunteers US\$15 daily). Highly recommended volunteer

programs offer instruction in sustainable agriculture and reforestation. There are hiking trails and Spanish courses (per week US\$370 with homestay and meals). Check out the website for details. Advise the *finca* well before your intended arrival. It's 14km west of Cartago on the road to El Yás.

Río Orosi Valley

Resplendent mountain vistas, crumbling churches and lazy hot springs define the appeal of this valley of coffee plantations southeast of Cartago.

Beyond Paraíso, head south 8km to the pleasant village of **Orosi**, named after a 16th-century Huetar chief. Built in 1743, the white-washed **Iglesia de San José** is the country's oldest church still in the business of serving wafers and wine. Nearby hot springs include **Los Balnearios** (☎ 533 2156; admission US\$2; ☎ 7:30am-4pm), on the southwest side of town next to Orosi Lodge, and **Los Patios** (☎ 533 3009; admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-4pm, closed Mon), 1.5km south of town. These modest pools of warm water are popular with locals and a few foreigners in the know.

Festive hostel **Montaña Linda** (☎ 533 3640; www.montanalinda.com; dm US\$6.50, s/d US\$10.50/17, d with bathroom US\$25, campsite US\$3.50; ☎) offers top-notch budget lodgings, with hot showers and kitchen privileges (US\$1) or home-cooked meals (US\$1 to US\$3). In addition, it has a reader-recommended **Spanish school** (per week with homestay US\$155). It's located two blocks south and three blocks west of the bus stop.

Outside of **Purísil**, 8km southeast of Orosi, the private reserve **Monte Sky** (www.intnet.co.cr/montesy) offers excellent birding. Ask at Montaña Linda about guided walks (US\$10), camping and overnight stays (per person US\$25 including meals). Almost 3km further east is the little-known **Parque Nacional Tapantí** (admission US\$7; ☎ 6am-4pm) where dense woods, waterfalls and over 200 bird species flourish in the wettest park in the country. Few trails break the rugged terrain – dry-season visits are recommended. There's a visitors center and a basic but adequate **guesthouse** (dm US\$5; meals US\$3) with a communal kitchen and bathrooms at the ranger station.

Parque Nacional Volcán Irazú

Named Thunderpoint (*ara-tzu*) by the indigenous, the large and looming Irazú is Costa Rica's tallest (3432m) active volcano. Its last major eruption was on March 19, 1963,

MILKING THE MENNONITE LIFE

Sample tropical farming Mennonite-style with **Mighty Rivers Eco-farm** (☎ 765 1116, 307 9218; www.mightyrivers.net; San Bosco; per person with breakfast US\$15, full day-night package per person US\$20). Run by a sincere and welcoming family from upstate New York, this holistic tropical-lowland dairy is wedged between two stunning rivers. The serene atmosphere speaks volumes for the simple life. You can start the day at 4am to help with milking (or not), ride a cart driven by rare Norwegian Fjords horses or hike to waterfalls and swimming holes. Meals feature fresh fixings from the farm. It's 30 minutes from Siquirres; the hosts can arrange transport from the bus station for a fee.

welcoming the visiting US President John F Kennedy by throwing a blanket of hot volcanic ash over most of the Central Valley. Since then, activity has dissipated to a few hissing fumaroles and tremors.

There's a small **visitors center** (☎ 551 9398; US\$7; ☎ 8am-3:30pm) and basic café, but no accommodations or camping facilities. A paved road reaches the summit. From the parking lot, a 1km trail leads to a lookout over the bare landscape of craters and ash. When the clouds clear there are amazing views of the Pacific and Caribbean, but most days you have to employ your imagination. Clear skies are most probable in the early morning from January to April. Temperatures can drop so bring appropriate clothing.

The park is 19km north of Cartago. Most visitors arrive with an organized tour or private transportation. The only public transport to Irazú departs San José (US\$4.50, 1½ hours) on Saturday and Sunday. It stops in Cartago (US\$4, one hour), departing about 8:30am. The bus departs Irazú at 12:30pm.

TURRIALBA

pop 80,000

Turrialba is a laid-back town near the headwaters of the Río Reventazón, a favorite of rafters and kayakers. It's also a good base for jaunts to the Monumento Nacional Arqueológico Guayabo to the north. For river running, reputable local outfitters include **Tico's River Adventures** (☎ 556 1231; www.ticoriver.com), 150m east of the gas station, **Loco's** (☎ 556

6035; riolocos@racsa.co.cr), 500m east of town, and **Exploranatura** (☎ 556 4932; www.costaricacanyoning.com), 250m southwest of the park, which also runs a reader-recommended canyoning course.

Agronomists the world over recognize **Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza** (Catie; Center for Tropical Agronomy Research & Education; ☎ 556 6431; www.catie.ac.cr; admission free; ☎ 7am-4pm) as one of the most important agricultural stations in the tropics. Visitors can reserve for tours of the agricultural projects in advance, or pick up a free map for a self-tour. Walk or take a taxi (US\$2); it's 4km east of town.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel la Roche (☎ 556 7915; Calle 4 btwn Aves 2 & Central; d with/without bathroom US\$10/8) You know it's a gem when signs posted say, 'Don't stick your gum here.' Still, it's cheap.

Whittingham's Hotel (☎ 550 8927; Calle 4 btwn Aves 2 & Central; s/d US\$8/10) Seasoned budget travelers won't mind the cool, clean and cavernous rooms with private bathrooms, served up with cement walls and lace curtains.

Hotel Interamericano (☎ 556 0142; www.hotelinteramericano.com; hotelint@racsa.co.cr; Av 1; s/d US\$11/20, with bathroom US\$25/35; ☎) This rambling house is a kayaker favorite, offering bilingual service and immaculate rooms with super-sturdy mattresses. Open spaces are ideal for cozying up with a book or a beer after a hard day's paddle. Heck, there's even labradors to pat. Perks include the white-water shuttle and in-house bar and restaurant.

Café Azul (Av Central btwn Calle 2 & 4; set lunch US\$3.50; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Sat) With such great coffee growing on the hillsides, it is a relief to find a great little café. Here, the ambience is relaxed, the pastries are fresh and the coffee is strong.

La Feria (☎ 556 0386; dishes US\$3-8; ☎ 10am-10pm) Considered solid value by the locals, La Feria is a friendly spot with blaring *telenovelas*, filling *casados* and typical meat and fish dishes. A quick snack of beans and chips costs only US\$1.

There are several *sodas*, Chinese restaurants, bakeries and grocery stores in town.

Getting There & Away

The spanking-new bus terminal is on the western edge of town off of Hwy 10. Destinations include:

Monumento Nacional Guayabo (US\$0.75; 1hr)

Departs 11:15am, 3:10pm & 5:20pm

San José (US\$2; 1¼hr) Departs hourly from 5am to 9pm.

Siquirres, with transfer to Puerto Limón (US\$1.50; 1¼hr) Departs almost hourly.

MONUMENTO NACIONAL ARQUEOLÓGICO GUAYABO

This is the largest and most important archaeological site (☎ 559 1220; admission US\$4; ☎ 8am-3:30pm) in Costa Rica, though it pales alongside the Maya sites of northern Central America. Only 19km north of Turrialba, the area was occupied from about 1000 BC to AD 1400, its peak population reached around 10,000. Thought to be an ancient ceremonial center, it featured paved streets, an aqueduct and decorative gold. The still-functioning aqueduct is considered the most impressive find (especially considering some of the plumbing in modern-day coastal towns). Archaeologists are unsure of the site's exact significance and the reason for its abandonment. Visitors can explore its cobbled roads, stone aqueducts, mounds and petroglyphs. Much has yet to be excavated.

There's an information and exhibit center, but many of the best pieces are displayed at the Museo Nacional in San José (p543). **Camping** (US\$2) services include latrines and running water.

See left for arrival info for Turrialba.

SOUTHERN CARIBBEAN COAST

You knew it would have something to do with seduction. Around you thick emerald forests rim sandy beaches, coconut stews simmer on gas cookers, and reggae beats drift from open doors. The heat beckons you to retreat to a hammock or float in the salty bay. Traveling the Caribbean coast is like leaving Costa Rica. But it is not just hotter and wetter. The definitive difference is cultural, with over one-third of the population descended from English-speaking Jamaicans and Barbadians.

Afro-Caribbean immigrants arrived in the 19th century to build the railroad and harvest bananas. Marginalized by a succession of governments (Black Costa Ricans were not allowed to even access the Central Valley until after 1948), the Caribbean coast developed to its own beat and it shows. Cultural isolation nurtured a relaxed, Rasta-inflected culture that most visitors can't get enough of.

A steady flow of visitors go to the coastal towns where enclaves of North Americans and Europeans are cropping up. A few thousand Bribri and Cabecar populate the remote Cordillera de Talamanca to the south. To the north, Parque Nacional Tortuguero hosts prolific wildlife and is the seasonal nesting site for endangered marine turtles.

PUERTO LIMÓN

pop 85,000

A ragged port city with a faded colonial air, Puerto Limón has a deservedly rough reputation, but it is not without appeal. The birthplace of the United Fruit Company, Limón is removed from San José's sphere of influence and totally without pretension. After all, busi-

ness around here still means shuffling tons of bananas, not tourists. A wacky plan to expand the port for cruise ships should help bring some investment for much-needed infrastructure. In the meanwhile, most travelers zip through town heading south to Cahuita and Puerto Viejo de Talamanca or north to Tortuguero.

Information & Sights

Upstairs at Terminal Caribeño, **Internet Café** (☎ 798 0128; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, noon-7pm Sat) has fairly fast computers. Take advantage of the banking facilities since they are scarce on the coast. **Scotiabank** (☎ 798 0009; cnr Av 3 & Calle 2; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-3:30pm Sat) exchanges money and traveler's checks, and

has a 24-hour ATM on the Plus and Cirrus systems.

Always abuzz, the dusty **mercado** is the spot to grab a beach blanket or rhinestone push-up bra if you forgot yours. The waterfront **Parque Vargas** has a run-down bandstand shaded by tropical trees and flowers. Local legend has it that sloths live in the tree. Beware those on the ground (downing bottles wrapped in paper bags) if you investigate.

Limón's big claim to fame is that Christopher Columbus landed at **Isla Uvita** (1km to the east) on his fourth and final trans-Atlantic voyage in 1502. As a result, **Día de la Raza** (Columbus Day) is celebrated with aplomb – even Ticos stream in for the frenetic five-day carnival, celebrated around October 12. Book hotels in advance during this time.

The nearest beach with acceptable swimming is **Playa Bonita**, 4km northwest of town.

Dangers & Annoyances

Limón has an unsavory reputation. Take precautions against pickpockets during the day, particularly in the market. People get mugged, so stick to well-lit main streets at night, avoiding the sea wall and Parque Vargas.

Sleeping & Eating

Port town Limón has little touristy about it. As a result, lodging options can be grim, with budget options populated by dock workers and prostitutes. Restaurants tend to specialize in the fried and deep-fried but due to a large Chinese population, Chinese food is plentiful.

Hotel King (☎ 758 1033; Av 2 btwn Calles 4 & 5; r per person US\$5, s/d with bathroom US\$9/12) The King is valued for its bargain rate and location – a quick dash from the bus station – otherwise it's rather dark and cramped.

Hotel Palace (☎ 798 2604; Calle 2 btwn Avs 2 & 3; d US\$12) A whiff of former grandeur adds style points to this now-dilapidated palace with peeling paint and cracked tiles. Potted plants and tidy housekeeping do brighten it up.

Hotel Miami (☎ 758 0490; hmiamilimon@yahoo.com; Av 2 btwn Calles 4 & 5; s/d with fan US\$15/20, with air-con & hot water US\$20/28; ☎) Fresh and cool, this modern hotel is the best bet for travelers, with strong security and decent-sized rooms with muted colors and industrial-strength fans.

Restaurant Brisas del Caribe (☎ 758 0138; mains US\$3-5; ☎ 7am-11pm Mon-Fri, 10am-11pm Sat & Sun) Outdoor tables and a breezy balcony make

this an easy pick. The offerings are staggering (we counted 88). Somewhere between the *gallo pinto* and chop suey there's Caribbean fare – your best bet.

El Cevichito (Av 2 btwn Calles 1 & 2; meals US\$4) A cold bottle of Imperial and a plate of garlic fish are the charms of this no-frills patio filled with locals.

Bar Washington (cnr Calle 1 & Av 2; ☎ 9am-3am) Sink into an oversized bamboo chair and watch the world go by from this rock 'n' roll bar in the thick of it, on the pedestrian mall.

Getting There & Away

Buses from San José, Moín, Guápiles and Siquirres arrive at the **Terminal Caribeño** (Av 2 btwn Calles 7 & 8) on the west side, walking distance from hotels. These are the principal points served by the station:

Moín, for boats to Tortuguero (US\$0.25; 20min) Tracasa departs hourly from 5:30am to 6:30pm.

San José (US\$3.50; 3hr) Autotransportes Caribeños departs hourly from 5am to 8pm.

Buses to points south depart from **Autotransportes Mepe** (Av 4 btwn Calles 2 & 4), one block north of the *mercado*.

Bribri & Sixaola (US\$3; 3hr) Departs 5am, 7am, 8am, 10am, noon, 1pm, 4pm and 6pm.

Cahuita (US\$1; 1½hr) Departs 5am, 6am, 8am, 10am, 1pm, 2:30pm, 4pm and 6pm.

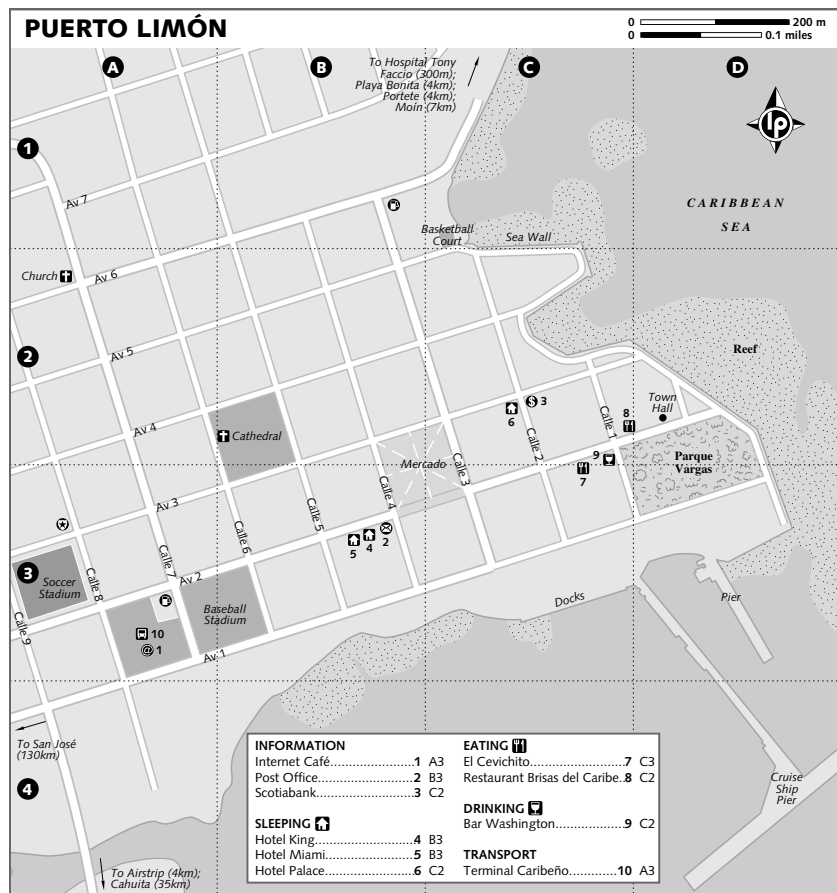
Manzanillo (US\$2; 2½hr) Departs 6am, 10:30am, 3pm and 6pm.

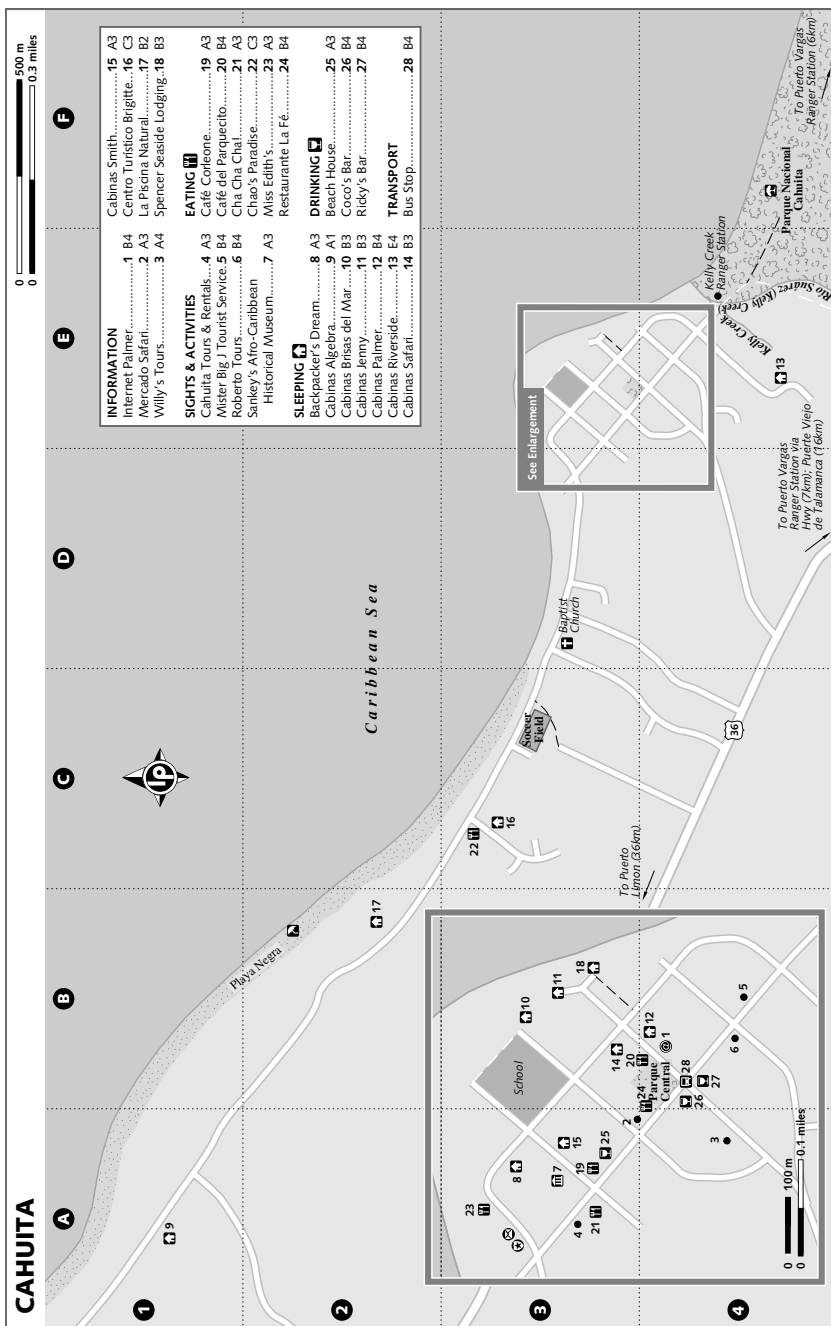
Puerto Viejo de Talamanca (US\$1.75; 2½hr) Departs 5am, 8am, 10am, 1pm, 4pm and 6pm.

CAHUITA

Imagine a sandy beach town where howler monkeys wake up the dogs, the electrician makes calls by bicycle and the locals recognize you after two days. Welcome to Cahuita, a cool little Afro-Caribbean beach settlement 43km south of Limón. Diversions include jungle walks and white- and black-sand beaches backed by almond groves. Don't expect to get a head start during lunch hour; the cook will keep you waiting as your fish simmers and stews an hour or more. The lesson here? Relax.

Founded by turtle fisherman William Smith in 1828, Cahuita is a tight-knit and proud community. When the park service proposed visitor's fees, residents protested by physically blocking the entrance to keep it under their control (and succeeded).





Sensimilla might be in the air, but locals don't put up with any funny stuff.

Information

Come with cash as there are no banks here. Get online at **Internet Palmer** (per hr US\$2; ☎ 9am-8pm) or at numerous hotels. You can exchange money or traveler's checks at **Mercado Safari** (☎ 6am-4pm); fees are steep.

For a better understanding of local culture, pick up the book *What Happen?*, a collection of oral histories, available at JC's store and souvenir shops.

Dangers & Annoyances

The biggest security concerns are petty theft and residential burglaries. Keep an eye on your belongings, especially at the beach, and make sure your hotel room is secure.

Sights & Activities

Curiosities abound at home-grown **Sankey's Afro-Caribbean Historical Museum** (☎ 755 0183; entry by donation; ☎ 7am-noon & 2-7pm Mon-Sat), with a collection of household objects from Black colonial times, but probably the most interesting part is the heartfelt presentation by Sankey himself.

Northwest of town, **Playa Negra** is a long, black-sand beach flying the *bandera azul ecológica*, indicating its cleanliness. This is undoubtedly Cahuita's top spot for swimming. Most importantly, it is far enough from town that it never gets crowded. Your other option is to swim at the park beach.

Playa Negra's excellent beach break is not on the surfer circuit, which means more waves for you. Early-morning surfing is best, especially with a swell from the south or east. Sign up for a lesson (US\$25 for two hours) or just rent a board at the **Beach House** (☎ 369 4254; cariberen@yahoo.com).

In Playa Negra, the Swiss-run **Centro Turístico Brigitte** (☎ 755 0053; www.brigittecahuita.com) has guided horseback riding (US\$35 to US\$45) on the beach and through the jungle, with well-cared-for horses. It also rents mountain bikes for US\$8 a day.

Guides are required for snorkeling since the reef is a protected area. Local guides include **Mister Big J Tourist Service** (☎ 755 0328; ☎ 8am-7pm), **Roberto's Tours** (☎ 755 0117) and **Willie's Tours** (☎ 843 4700; www.willies-costarica-tours.com). The going rate is US\$15 to US\$25 per person, but prices vary according to the size

of your group and the mood of the guide. **Cahuita Tours** (☎ 755 0000/0232) offers an all-day trip on a glass-bottom boat, which includes snorkeling and hiking (US\$35 per person). These agencies can also provide park guides. **Cabinas Algebra** (☎ 755 0057; Playa Negra) runs recommended culturally sensitive trips to the Bribri indigenous reserves.

Sleeping

The town overflows with accommodation options; most are eerily identical. Cold showers are the norm.

IN TOWN

Backpacker's Dream (☎ 755 0174; s/d US\$6/10) These cramped clapboard rooms are furnished with a bed and fan, nothing more. Ignore the stairs to nowhere and the discarded planks. The real charm of the cheapest digs in town is its owner José – who might pen a tune mid-sentence if the mood strikes.

Spencer Seaside Lodging (☎ 755 0210; spencer@racsa.co.cr; s US\$12-15, d US\$20-30; ☎) A rambling wooden lodge with hammocks strung beneath the coconut palms. Sure, it's nothing fancy, but it is seaside and relaxed. Rooms on the 2nd floor provide an extra dose of privacy.

Cabinas Riverside (☎ 553 0153; s/d US\$15/20) Sometimes squeaky clean surfaces and hot water is all you need. This German-run budget option by Kelly Creek delivers just that. Simple rooms have mosquito nets and stone showers.

Cabinas Smith (☎ 755 0068; s/d/tr US\$15/20/25; ☎) These basic concrete *cabinas* sport well-scrubbed units with metal bunks, nice sheets and private bathrooms. The annex runs slightly cheaper.

Cabinas Palmer (☎ 755 0046; kainepalmer@racsa.co.cr; s/d US\$15/20) Small and friendly, this hotel offers clean rooms around a cement courtyard, close to the action (and the noise).

Cabinas Safari (☎ 755 0405; s/d/tr US\$15/20/30) Average rooms come a touch frilly, but you get your own hammock and the charm of host George to boot.

Cabinas Brisas del Mar (☎ 755 0011; s/d US\$20/25) Run by a gregarious local, these three spotless *cabinas* are set amidst overgrown gardens that face the water. Hammocks are conveniently hung to catch the sea breeze, as the name promises. Fenced and secure.

Cabinas Jenny (☎ 755 0256; d US\$20-30, extra person US\$5) Looming over the foaming surf, these

rooms are earthy and cozy, with raw wood details, fresh paint, soft sheets and mosquito nets. The private decks with sling-back lounges are a treat for tired guests. Call ahead to reserve.

PLAYA NEGRA

Northwest of town about 1.5km, Playa Negra is quieter and pleasant, with a limited choice of restaurants and services. If you want to bar-hop, stay in town as walking back at night is not recommended.

Centro Turístico Brigitte (☎ 755 0053; www.brigittetecahuita.com; d US\$20; ☑) Simple and spartan cabins have firm mattresses and mosquito nets, but the cozy ambience comes from the café and the quiet surrounds. Also provides bikes and horse tours.

Cabinas Algebra (☎ 755 0057; d \$18, d/tr with kitchen US\$25/33) This former cocoa plantation is now a German-run guesthouse ideal for families. Cabins are simple and cheerful, and the owners will pick you up if you call in advance. Eating in is not a sacrifice – the kitchen serves flavorful Creole dishes.

La Piscina Natural (☎ 755 0146; d/tr US\$30/35) Imagine a wild lawn with hibiscus bushes and almond trees that front the surf. This low-key retreat has spotless rooms with firm beds and stucco walls. With drinks available from the breezy bar, you may never feel the need to trek back into town.

Eating

Café del Parquecito (breakfast US\$3-5; ☎ 6:30am-noon) This thatched hut is all about breakfast, featuring strong coffee, scrambled eggs and huge fruit-filled crêpes.

Miss Edith's (☎ 755 0248; mains US\$7-12; ☎ 11am-10pm) One expat says, 'If you have two hours to kill, eat here.' The food – picture jerk chicken spiced with chili and cloves, or fragrant fish stews – is scandalously good and served up by Miss Edith herself. The best bet is to make orders in advance.

Restaurant la Fé (meals US\$5-10; ☎ 7am-11pm) Though service takes half an eternity (thus the name 'The Faith'), you're rewarded by shrimp in fresh coconut sauce and crispy *patacones*.

Café Corleone (☎ 394 4153; mains US\$4-8; ☎ 5pm-10pm Thu-Tue) This Italian-run pizzeria pays homage to the old country with thin-crust spinach pizzas dribbling with mozzarella. There's also homemade pastas, wild mushrooms and other delectable combos on offer.

Cha Cha Cha! (☎ 394 4153; mains US\$6-9; ☎ 6pm-10pm Tue-Sun) For candlelit ambience this converted clapboard is your best bet. The menu offers creative world cuisine without missing a beat. The Thai shrimp salad, with rice noodles and cashews, makes a strong showing, as do the cheesecakes. Vegetarians, it's your lucky night.

Chao's Paradise (☎ 755 0421; seafood mains US\$6-10; ☎ 11am-dose) Along Playa Negra, this open-air place offers spicy Caribbean cuisine. There's also a pool table and live reggae and calypso music some nights.

Drinking

Coco's Bar (☎ 4pm-midnight) Jam to a three-man reggae band or sip rum-somethings at this Rasta bar popular with the local and traveling crowds. Live music plays on Wednesday and weekends.

Ricky's Bar (☎ 755 0228; ☎ 4pm-midnight or so) Opposite Coco's and sharing the same clientele, thatched Ricky's offers outdoor seating and ample space to cut a groove. Live music usually goes down on Saturday nights.

Beach House (☎ 369 4254; cariberen@yahoo.com) An expat surf haunt renting boards by day and selling beers by night. Get in on the *quesadillas* (US\$6) and live calypso from Thursday through Saturday.

Getting There & Away

Buses arrive and depart from the stop at the parque central.

Puerto Limón/San José (US\$1/7; 1½/4hr) Autotransportes Mepe departs at 7:30am, 8:30am, 9:30am, 11:30am and 4:30pm, additional bus at 2pm on weekends.

Puerto Viejo de Talamanca/Bribri/Sixaola (US\$1/2/3; 30min/1hr/1½hr) Departs hourly from 7am to 9pm.

PARQUE NACIONAL CAHUITA

Among the country's most visited parks, Cahuita is small but beautiful. Humidity nurtures a dense tropical foliage of coconut palms, mango trees and sea grapes. The forest skirts white sandy beaches on a tranquil bay. Easy to access, it attracts scads of visitors who loll in the mild surf, scan the trails for sloths and monkeys and snorkel the coral reef.

At the east end of Cahuita, **Kelly Creek ranger station** (☎ 755 0461; entry by donation; ☎ 6am-5pm) sits next to **Playa Blanca** stretching 2km east. Signs the first 500m warn not to swim, but beyond this point the waves are gentle. After the rocky Punta Cahuita you'll find Vargas

Beach and **Puerto Vargas ranger station** (☎ 755 0302; admission US\$6; ☎ 6am-5pm). An easily navigable 7km **coastal trail** leads through the jungle from Kelly Creek to Puerto Vargas. Beware, Río Perezoso, near the end of the first beach, can be thigh-deep at high tide or dangerous to cross in rainy season.

Camping (US\$3) is permitted at Playa Vargas, less than 1km from the Puerto Vargas ranger station. The facilities include cold outdoor showers, drinking water and pit latrines. Don't leave anything unattended. Be especially careful to store food carefully as monkeys will scarf what's left unattended.

Snorkeling conditions vary daily. In general, the drier months in the highlands (from February to April) are best for **snorkeling** on the coast, as less runoff in the rivers means less silting in the sea. To protect the reef from further damage, snorkeling is permitted only with a licensed guide.

For a good day **hike**, take the Cahuita–Puerto Viejo bus at 8am to the Puerto Vargas entrance. Walk 1km to the coast then 7km more back to Cahuita. For birding or guided hikes, contact the travel agencies in Cahuita or ATEC in Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, next section.

PUERTO VIEJO DE TALAMANCA

Party town Puerto Viejo de Talamanca (not to be confused with Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí in the northern lowlands) shakes up a Caribbean concoction of palm-fringed beaches, slick surfing and stoned grins. The nightlife is young and thumping with great music and restaurants – easily the best on the coast. And yes, it's touristy, with a heavy stream of Tico students, backpackers and expat settlers. But

if you can let go of getting in touch with 'the real Costa Rica' for a moment, you'll have a blast.

'Downtown' Puerto Viejo is little more than one paved road following the coastline. It's stuffed with tourist traps, surf shops and open-air bars, exuding good music and Rasta vibes.

Information

The **Talamanca Association for Ecotourism & Conservation** (ATEC; ☎ 750 0398; www.greencoast.com/atec.htm; ☎ 8am-9pm; ☑) is a grassroots organization offering community tourism and one-stop shopping – books on nature, birding and culture, as well as **internet service** (per hr US\$2.45).

Do your banking at **Banco de Costa Rica** (main drag; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) with a Plus-system ATM. Visit www.greencoast.com for more information about Puerto Viejo.

Dangers & Annoyances

Crime, in the form of robberies and drug trafficking, is on the up and foreign visitors make easy targets. Locals are frustrated with the lack of police response; part of the problem is that offenders are rarely held on charges. Many responsible hotel owners are looking to combat crime by hiring private security patrols.

Most people visit Puerto Viejo without any problem – just use your smarts. Be very selective when choosing your accommodation. Check hotels for screens and secure locks and be wary of places without any reception person around. Always lock up valuables, and walk around with a copy of your passport only.

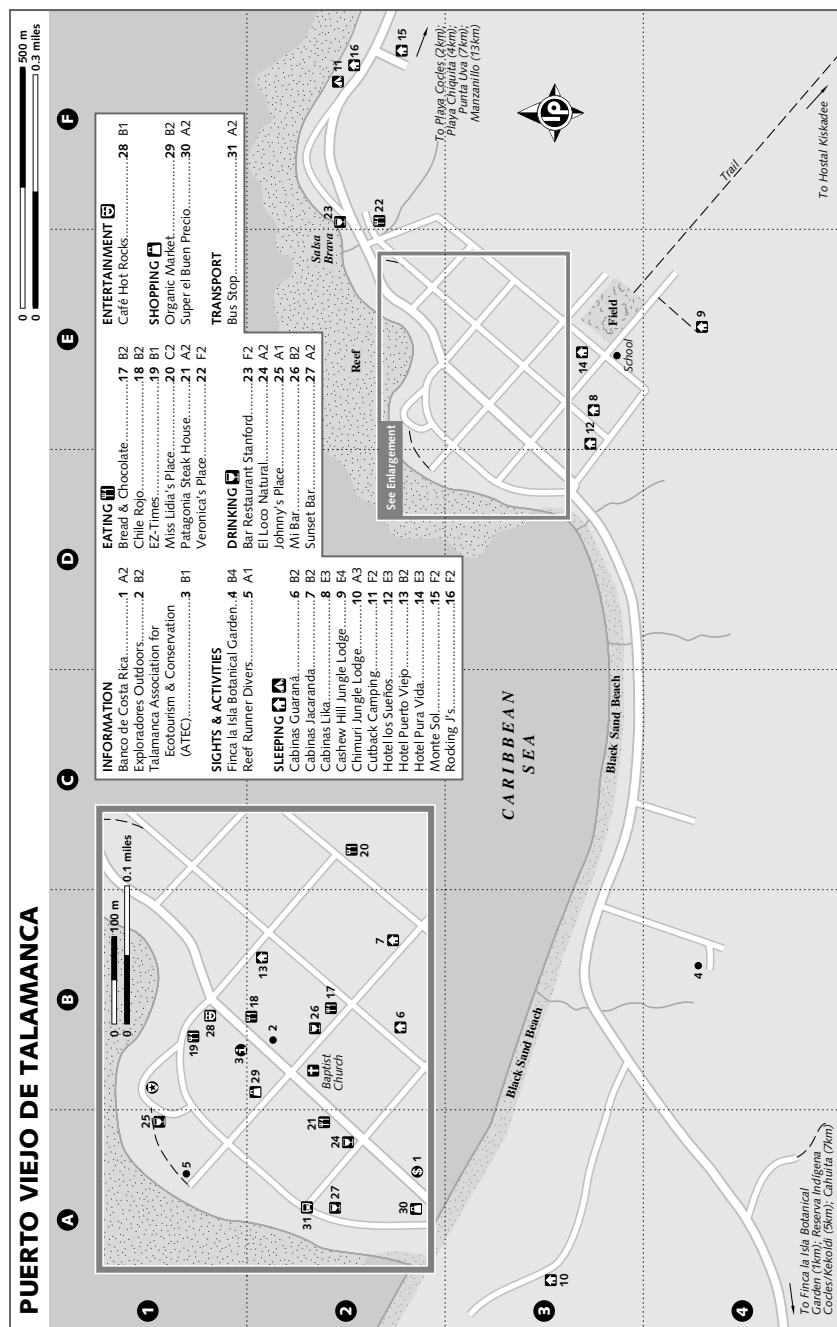
After dark, stay away from the beach and the area south of the soccer field (considered

GOT DRUGS, WILL TRAVEL

Drugs are plentiful in Costa Rica and tourists take it for granted that *pura vida* means pass the spliff. However, drugs are 100% illegal here. Recently the government put in place a zero-tolerance policy. Those charged with possession can be fined and imprisoned.

Nonetheless, hard drugs are becoming more prevalent. Both the Pacific and Atlantic coasts are used as a *punte* (bridge) with drug runners from further south, much to the chagrin of officials. On beaches such as Jacó, Puerto Viejo and Tamarindo, dealers approach backpackers fresh off the bus. The club scene is full of cocaine, and ecstasy, or what passes for it.

Ticos will tell you that the Colombians, Jamaicans, Panamanians and just about every other nationality are to blame for importing drugs into their country, but the truth is that they share an equal amount of blame. An eight-ball of cocaine yields a much larger profit than a wood-carving of a tree-frog, and many backpackers are happy to shell out US dollars for a dime-bag of dubious quality.



the red-light district). Muggings regularly occur on the road between Rocking J's and the town center – even to those walking in groups. Take a taxi at night.

Sights & Activities

BOTANICAL GARDEN

West of town, **Finca la Isla Botanical Garden** (☎ 750 0046; www.greencoast.com/garden.htm; self-guided/guided tour US\$2/5; ☎ 10am–4pm Fri–Mon) is a working tropical farm and botanical garden ideal for birding and wildlife observation (look for sloths and poison dart frogs).

CYCLING

The forested road to **Manzanillo** (13km) offers a scenic ride. Take the swimsuit and watch for howler monkeys and butterflies on the way.

DIVING & SNORKELING

Costa Rica's only two living reef systems form a naturally protected sanctuary from Cahuita to Manzanillo. They are home to 35 species of coral and over 400 species of fish, not to mention dolphins, sharks and, occasionally, whales. Underwater visibility is best when the sea is calm. If the surfing is bad, snorkeling is good.

Snorkel just south of **Punta Uva**, in front of the Arrecife restaurant, where you will find stunning examples of reindeer coral, sheet coral and lettuce coral. The reef at **Manzanillo** (p569) is also easily accessible. Rent equipment at Aquamor Talamanca Adventure in Manzanillo. Tour companies (right) offer guided trips for about US\$45 per person.

Dive outfitters include **Reef Runner Divers** (☎ 750 0480; www.reefrunnerdivers.net; one-/two-tank dive US\$55/80; ☎ 7am–8pm) and Aquamor Talamanca Adventure (see p569) in Manzanillo.

SURFING

Locals boast the country's best wave is **Salsa Brava**, a thick and fast moving break. The shallow reef means serious scrapes if you lose it; this is not beginners' territory. Almost as impressive are the waves at **Playa Codes**, about 2km east of town. Lefts and rights both break close to the steep beach. Conditions are usually best early in the day, before the wind picks up. Waves are best from December to March, and in June and July. **Kurt** (☎ 750 0620) at Puerto Viejo Hotel offers surf reports.

Surf schools charge US\$30 to US\$35 for two-hour lessons. Recommended are Puerto

Viejo Hotel or **Cut Bak** (☎ 366 9222, 885 9688), along the road south of town.

SWIMMING

Just northwest of town, **Playa Negra** offers the area's safest swimming, as well as excellent body-boarding. Southeast of town the jungle meets the sea and the waves are perfect for swimming and body-surfing.

Riptides and undertows can be dangerous. Inquire at your hotel or with local tour operators about current conditions.

Tours

Talamanca Association for Ecotourism & Conservation (ATEC; ☎ 750 0398; www.greencoast.com/atec.htm; half-/full-day US\$17/27; ☎ 8am–9pm; ☎) ATEC arranges tours with local guides to the nearby Reserva Indígena Kekoldi. It also offers rain forest hikes in Punta Uva, tropical farm and jungle walks, visits to Cahuita National Park and the Gandoca-Manzanillo Wildlife Refuge. Tours focus on native culture, natural history and environment.

Exploradores Outdoors (☎ 222 6262; www.exploradoresoutdoors.com) Offers rafting the Río Pacuare (US\$95), canopy tours and more.

Sleeping IN TOWN

Hotel Puerto Viejo (☎ 750 0620; r per person with/without bathroom US\$10/8, d with air-con US\$25; ☎) This surfer warehouse offers clean, functional rooms, hot showers and a security box. The new addition is screened and wood-trimmed – a big upgrade. Guests gather in the communal kitchen to talk waves, the specialty subject of surfer-owner Kurt Van Dyke.

Cabinas Liika (☎ 750 0209; r per person US\$8) A new cheap-and-clean budget option with private rooms with bathrooms. It's in an unsavory area but is fenced and gated.

Chimuri Jungle Lodge (☎ 750 0119; www.greencoast.com/chimurilodge.htm; dm/d/q US\$10/30/46) Four bungalows on the edge of the Kekoldi reserve offer consummate peace and quiet. There's a communal kitchen and a 2km walking trail with birds and wildlife.

Cabinas Jacaranda (☎ 750 0069; www.cabinasjacaranda.com; s/d US\$20/28) Mosaic walkways wind through a blooming garden in this hippie fantasy, a nice spot for kicking back. Rooms are decorated with batiks and hand-painted walls. Perks include hot water, weekly yoga (US\$10) and a security box – use it.

Hotel los Sueños (☎ 750 0369; www.costaricaguide.info/lossuenos.htm; s/d/tr US\$16/20/24) A peaceful Swiss-run spot with rustic, well-kept rooms with fans and mosquito nets. Shared bathrooms have hot showers and guests get kitchen privileges.

Hotel Pura Vida (☎ 750 0002; www.hotel-puravida.com in German; s/d/tr US\$20/25/33, with bathroom US\$25/30/40) Bright and stylish, Pura Vida pampers with an elegant open-air living-and-dining area, hot water, large spotless rooms and the affection of spoiled hound Duche. The owners are a helpful German-Chilean couple. Breakfasts (extra) are abundant and tasty.

Cabinas Guaráná (☎ 750 0244; www.hotelguarana.com; s/d/tr US\$25/35) From tree-house views of the Caribbean to the coconut-grove courtyard, this place spells hideaway. Shady *cabinas* with woven hammocks have high-ceiling rooms with stenciled walls. There's also a communal kitchen.

Cashew Hill Jungle Lodge (☎ 750 0256; www.cashewhillodge.co.cr; d US\$35-55; ♻️) Clean living (recycling, composting and water treatment) doesn't come cheap but it's a sure sign of success when all the guests look chipper and rested. Newly renovated rooms have bright walls, colorful tiles and orthopedic mattresses. The extensive grounds are well kept and secure, with a high fence and a few Hyundai-sized English mastiffs. Ask about low-season discounts.

EAST OF TOWN

Cutbak Camping (campsite US\$3, hammock US\$2) The only recommended campground is this surfer haven in an almond grove, a 15-minute walk from Playa Cocles. Guests have lockers, bathrooms and use of the communal kitchen. The onsite restaurant serves good, cheap grub and surfboards can be rented (US\$15) or repaired.

Rocking J's (☎ 750 0665; www.rockingjs.com; hammock US\$5, dm/d US\$7/20, campsite US\$4) The style is ghetto-cool, with basic bunkrooms as well as an immense tent village and hammock hut with 'Refugee Camp' written all over them. However, folks *love* Rocking J's. Maybe it's the homemade ice cream, graffiti-style mosaics or the lively bar, with arguably the best social scene (for foreigners) in town. Lockers and laundry service (US\$5) are available, as is a communal kitchen.

Monte Sol (☎ 750 0098; www.montesol.net in German; d US\$20-30; ♻️) Away from the hubbub, this German-run place says low-key with a

welcoming hammock terrace and immaculate cabins with barn-style shuttered windows and mosaic-tile baths.

Eating

Get groceries at **Super el Buen Precio** (☎ 630am-8:30pm) or the weekly **Organic Market** (☎ 6am-6pm Sat), with produce and typical regional snacks.

Miss Lidia's Place (mains US\$2-6) Locals and travelers alike pack the patio for good home cooking that ranges from *casados* to fish filets. Satisfy your stomach for under US\$2 with a BBQ chicken sandwich on homemade bread.

EZ-Times (mains US\$3-10; ☎ 10am-2:30am) Grab a veggie burger or portobello pizza on the outdoor terrace and you're good to go. Friday is live music night.

Bread & Chocolate (breakfast US\$2-4, lunch US\$4-8; ☎ 6:30am-6:30pm Wed-Sat, 6:30am-2:30pm Sun) Run by the amiable Tom, this café is a veritable addiction. Pick your passion – homemade bagels, eggs and biscuits or heaping rustic wheat sandwiches. Whatever's in the oven will make you want to linger for the next meal. Everything is fresh and made on site.

Veronica's Place (meals US\$3-5; ☎ 7am-9pm Sun-Thu, 7am-4:30pm Fri) Behind Supermercado El Pueblo, Veronica's Place revamps Caribbean cuisine with an emphasis on veggies and fruits. And where else can you get soy burgers and soy milk?

El Loco Natural (☎ 750 0263; meals US\$8-12; ☎ 6-11pm) Tacos, stir-fries and healthy salads are the staples of this upmarket fusion eatery. Twinkling with Christmas lights, a skinny balcony and a killer cocktail list, it's all about atmosphere.

Chile Rojo (☎ 750 0025; mains US\$8-12; ☎ noon-10pm) The smell of Thai curry wafting from this stylish shoebox might stop you in your tracks. Serving excellent Asian and Middle Eastern fare, it is a very popular spot.

Patagonia Steak House (☎ 390 5677; mains US\$5-11; ☎ 5pm-11pm) What ambience? It's all about the grill, where steaks ser and chorizo sausages cook. Uncork a vintage Malbec; this Argentine-owned restaurant is a godsend to carnivores.

Drinking & Entertainment

No-frills **Mi Bar** (near Jungle Internet) is basically a row of brightly painted seats topped with equally colorful characters, all fronting a nar-

row bar. In a big top tent in the town center, **Café Hot Rocks** (☎ 750 0525; meals US\$3-8; ☎ 11am-2:30am) shows free flicks most evenings and also hosts live calypso, reggae and rock bands. Booze and bonfires light up Johnny's Place, a Puerto Viejo institution where DJs spin reggae, hip-hop and salsa. Bar Restaurant Stanford does a brisk business with a local crowd shaking to salsa music. Local favorite **Sunset Bar** (☎ 750 0025; ☎ noon-dose) is one of the few places in town to perfect your pool. Upmarket **El Loco Natural** (☎ 750 0263; ☎ 6-11pm) hosts jazz and other acts at 8:30pm on Thursday and Saturday.

Getting There & Away

Buses arrive and depart at the main stop in town by the beach. Buses for Manzanillo stop at Playa Cocles, Playa Chiquita and Punta Uva.

Bribri/Sixaola (US\$1/2, 30min/1½hr) At 6:30am, 8:30am, 9:30am, 10:30am; 12:30pm, 1:30pm, 2:30pm, 3:30pm, 5:30pm, 6:30pm and 7:30pm.

Cahuita/Puerto Limón (US\$1/2, 30min/1½hr) Every hour on the half-hour from 5:30am to 7:30pm.

Manzanillo (US\$1.50, 30min) Departs 7:30am, 11:45am, 4:30pm and 7:30pm.

San José (US\$7.50, 5hr) At 7am, 9am, 11am and 4pm.

EAST OF PUERTO VIEJO

The 13km coastal route to Manzanillo slips past sandy beaches and dense canopy, passing through beach villages and the Reserva Indígena Cocles/Kekoldi, and ending up in Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo. Take a cruiser; the road is paved, but don't get too distracted spotting wildlife as the potholes are doozies.

Playa Cocles

The big waves and long beach break called Cocles lies 2km east of Puerto Viejo. The riptide claims lives every season; note that green flags mark safe areas.

The American-owned **Echo Books** (desserts US\$1-3; ☎ 11am-6pm Fri-Tue; ☎) is a rainy-day godsend, with probably the best collection of English-language books in Costa Rica, hand-picked by owner Shawn and spanning Cahill to Theroux. Treat yourself to a homemade chocolate, iced-coconut chai or coffee drink while you browse the stacks. To get here follow the signs from the main road.

For a homey atmosphere, **Cabinas El Tesoro** (☎ 750 0128; www.puertoviejo.net; dm US\$9, s/d/tr US\$21/28/41; ☎ ♻️) has great-value dorms, a cool hammock patio, community kitchen

and nightly movies. Freebies include coffee and internet.

Playa Chiquita

Playa Chiquita's beaches stretch 4km to 6km east of town. The cafés are worth a trip out.

The perfect budget getaway, **Cabinas Slothclub** (☎ 750 0358; d/apt US\$20/60) has five basic beachfront cabins set back in the tall grass, with snorkeling on the reef out the front.

In a country of rice and beans, you may find their most memorable incarnation at **Restaurante Elena Brown** (☎ 750 0265; mains US\$4-7; ☎ 8am-11pm), ladled up by Elena herself. Foodies can feast on fusion fare at **Jungle Love Garden Café** (☎ 750 0356; mains US\$6-8; ☎ lunch). Tokyo tuna with tamarind-ginger sauce (US\$8) is the house masterpiece, but there are generous wraps and salads too.

Punta Uva

Punta Uva has lovely, swimmable beaches, each better than the last. Newbie surfers longboard the point and swimmers take to its western side. Budget **Albergue Walaba** (☎ 750 0147; r per person US\$12) offers funky rooms and a communal kitchen amidst overgrown jungle. A hippie haven, yes, but a somewhat musty one.

Manzanillo

The road ends in Manzanillo, a happy dead-end with convivial locals and quiet beaches. The town itself is part of **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo**, a pristine remnant of wild Caribbean coastline stretching all the way to Panama.

Gandoca-Manzanillo's stunning coastal trail leads 5.5km through the rain forest and desolate beaches to Punta Mona. Wildlife includes the rare harpy eagle, monkeys and toucans. Accommodations can be found at **Punta Mona** (www.puntamona.org; dm US\$30; transportation US\$10; ♻️), an organic farm and retreat center, 5km south of Manzanillo, which also welcomes volunteers. A note of caution: trail robberies in the depths of the reserve have been reported, so it is advisable to hire a guide, or at least avoid hiking alone.

The coral reef 200m offshore is 10 times the size of the Cahuita reef, with the clearest waters and best diversity of sea life in Costa Rica. The best resource on the area is the Larkin family at **Aquamor Talamanca Adventures** (☎ 759 9012; www.greencoast.com), 100m west of Maxi's. Long-term area residents, they run a PADI dive school,

GETTING TO GUABITO & BOCAS DEL TORO, PANAMA

One of Costa Rica's most relaxed border crossings, **Sixaola-Guabito** is popular among those traveling to the islands of Bocas del Toro.

Arrive in Sixaola early. The border opens from 7am to 5pm (8am to 6pm in Guabito, Panama, one hour ahead); it closes for lunch at noon. Begin crossing the high metal bridge over the Río Sixaola, stopping at Costa Rica **migración** (☎ 754 2044) to process your paperwork.

Once over the bridge, stop in Panama **migración** on the left. US citizens pay an entry fee of US\$5. There is no bank, but colonias can be changed at the **mercado** across the street. Guabito has no hotels but taxis can take you further into Panama.

See p669 for more information on crossing the border from Panama.

rent snorkeling gear (US\$4 per hour) and kayaks, and offer dolphin-observation trips with excellent naturalist guides.

On the way into the village, **Cabinas Manzanillo** (☎ 759 9043; s/d/tr US\$15/20/25) offers immaculate rooms with TV and fans in a friendly setting. **Cabinas las Veraneras** (☎ 759 9050; s/d with fan US\$16/26) has scrubbed motel rooms and a pleasant *soda*. Free camping is permitted on the beach, but there are no organized facilities.

Local matrons preside over pleasant, informal *sodas* or sell *patís*, spicy meat and plantain turnovers. The big, breezy beachfront shanty **Maxi's** (meals US\$7-15) is a Caribbean institution, serving red snapper grilled to perfection and frosty cold ones. The atmosphere is lively – folks stay even when the lights short out, and there's live music some weekends.

Getting There & Away

Buses to Puerto Viejo (stopping at beaches) leave Manzanillo at 5am, 8:15am, 12:45pm and 5:15pm. The first two and last departures continue to Puerto Limón.

SIXAOLA

Falling in love in Sixaola would be tragic, as it's not the kind of place to be any length of time. Still, it has a relaxed border crossing, the fast track to Bocas del Toro, although most foreign tourists chose to travel via Paso Canoas.

Accommodation and restaurants are basic, those in Panama are a better value. The quiet and clean **Hotel Imperio** (☎ 754 2289; d with/without bathroom US\$9/7) is right across the street from the police checkpoint.

The bus station is one block north of the border crossing. Buses go to San José (US\$10, five hours) at 6am, 8am, 10am and 3pm. Eight buses travel to and from Puerto Limón (US\$3, three hours) via Cahuita and Puerto Viejo, departing between 5am and 6pm.

NORTHERN CARIBBEAN COAST

Rural and rain-drenched, this area is a top spot to see jungle wildlife. Most visitors choose Parque Nacional Tortuguero as the departure point for canoe trips but those who want a true backcountry experience should check out the remote outpost of Barra de Colorado.

TORTUGUERO

pop 750

In the rainiest of all rain forests, this remote village is wedged between the silty Atlantic surf and Parque Nacional Tortuguero's teeming green canals. At times, the spongy strip of clapboard houses saturates, flooding the narrow boardwalks. It is impossible to drive here. Big motor canoes rule the waterways and drivers enjoy a certain status relegated to diplomats and royalty in other cultures. Maybe you came here for the wildlife, specifically the turtles, but Tortuguero itself is a unique place to visit, with the bonus of good Creole cooking.

The town does have a seedy side, namely the international drug-running circuit which touches this remote area. Stay alert and careful, and don't go into isolated areas alone.

Information

Tortuguero's goods and services run higher than elsewhere, there's no avoiding it. There is no bank and few businesses accept credit cards, so bring all the cash you will need and stash it creatively.

Opposite the Catholic church, the **Tortuguero Information Center** (per hr US\$3; ☎ 8am-7pm) sells Sansa tickets and has internet.

Rain gear and insect repellent are necessary here.

Sights & Activities

PARQUE NACIONAL TORTUGUERO

This misty green coastal park sits on a broad flood plain parted by a jigsaw of canals. Referred to as the 'mini-Amazon,' Parque Nacional Tortuguero's intense biodiversity includes over 400 bird species, 60 known species of frogs, 30 species of freshwater fish, three monkey species as well as the threatened West Indian manatee. Caimans and crocodiles can be seen lounging on river banks while freshwater turtles bask on logs.

Over 50,000 visitors a year come to boat the canals and see the wildlife, particularly to watch turtles lay eggs. This is the most important Caribbean breeding site of the green sea turtle, 40,000 of which arrive every season to nest. Of the eight species of marine turtle in the world, six nest in Costa Rica, and four nest in Tortuguero. The problem of poaching is addressed by the vigilance of various volunteer organizations (see right).

Park headquarters is at **Cuatro Esquinas** (☎ 709 8086; one-/three-day admission US\$7/10; ☎ 5:30am-7pm), just north of Tortuguero village.

Sharks and strong currents make the beaches unsuitable for swimming.

Boating & Canoeing

A variety of guided **boat tours** (US\$15 plus park-entry fee) depart at 6am daily from the town of Tortuguero and surrounding lodges to see the canals and spot wildlife. Canoe and kayak rental and boat tours are available in the village.

Four aquatic trails wind their way through the Parque Nacional Tortuguero. The **Río Tortuguero** acts as the entrance way to the network of trails. This wide, still river is often covered with water lilies and frequented by aquatic birds such as herons and kingfishers, as well as peacocks.

The **Caño Chiquero** is thick with vegetation, especially artichoke trees and red *guacimo* trees. Black turtles and green iguanas hang out here. Caño Chiquero leads to the narrow **Caño Mora** and **Caño Harold**, popular with Jesus Christ lizards and caimans.

Hiking

Behind Cuatro Esquinas station, **El Gavilan Land Trail** is the park's only public trail. The muddy, 2km loop traverses tropical humid forest and follows a stretch of beach. Green parrots and several species of monkeys are commonly

sighted here. It is well-marked and does not require a guide.

Turtle Watching

Visitors are allowed to check out the turtle rookeries at night from March to October (late July through August is prime time) and observe eggs being laid or hatching. Seeing a 180kg turtle haul itself up onto the beach, dig a nest, lay 120 eggs the size of Ping-Pong balls and scoot back to sea, exhausted, can be awe-inspiring. Obviously, turtle sightings are not guaranteed. A guide must accompany all visitors. Camera flashes and flashlights are prohibited by law, as they disturb the egg-laying process.

If you're unable to visit during the peak green turtle breeding season, the next best time is February to July, when leatherback turtles nest in small numbers (the peak is from mid-April to mid-May). Hawksbill turtles nest sporadically from March to October, and loggerhead turtles are also sometimes seen. The tour fee is US\$10, which does not include admission to the park.

Volunteer Opportunities

Caribbean Conservation Corporation (CCC; ☎ in San José 710 0680; www.cccturtle.org; admission US\$1; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5:30pm) operates a research station 1km north of the village with a worthwhile visitors center. Volunteers assist scientists with tagging and research of both green and leatherback turtles (March to October). One-week volunteer programs (US\$1400 to US\$1600) include dorm lodging, meals and transportation from San José.

Volunteers at **Coterc** (☎ 709 8052, in Canada 905-831 8809; www.coterc.org; per day US\$65) assist with sea-turtle conservation, bird banding, and animal and plant diversity inventories. Lodging is in a brand-new dorm building, with full access to facilities. Fees include room and board.

CERRO TORTUGUERO

This 119m hill, 6km north of the village, is the highest coastal point north of Limón. The steep, muddy climb rewards with excellent views of the forest, canals and ocean. Look for colorful poison dart frogs.

Tours

A two-hour turtle tour costs around US\$10 per person, and half-day hikes or boat excursions cost US\$15. Some readers have reported

guides uncovering nests or allowing flash photography. If you see unscrupulous behavior, please report it and also write to us at Lonely Planet. Recommended local guides:

Barbara Hartung (☎ 709 8004; www.tinamontours.com) Offers culture tours and hiking, canoe and turtle tours in German, English, French or Spanish.

Castor Hunter Thomas (☎ 709 8050; ask at Soda Doña María)

Chico (☎ 709 8033; ask at Miss Miriam's) Hiking and canoe tours with rave reviews from readers.

Daryl Loth (☎ 833 0827, 392 3201; safari@racsa.co.cr) Canadian naturalist (formerly of Cotecr) with boat trips and turtle tours.

Sleeping

Cabinas Meryscar (☎ 711 0971; s with/without bathroom US\$7/5) These budget rooms barely squeeze in a bed, and claustrophobics should splurge for them with bath. Beds have fresh sheets but the cement-floor rooms are damp.

Tropical Lodge (☎ 840 2731; r per person US\$10) A last resort, with small, low beds and sandy showers, located behind Tienda Bambú and with an attached bar.

Cabinas Tortuguero (☎ 709 8114; s/d US\$10/16, with bathroom US\$20/26) A cheerful spot a few steps south of the main dock, set amongst pretty gardens hung with hammocks. Rooms are bare but clean with mint walls and hardwood floors.

Cabinas Aracari (☎ 798 6059 in Limón; s/d US\$10/15) Pleasing rooms with Spanish tile wrap around overgrown gardens. Set back by the sea, these *cabinas* enjoy a quiet, out-of-the-way location. Bathrooms have hot water.

Miss Miriam's (s/d US\$15/20) A top choice on the soccer field, with immaculate linoleum rooms (towels folded into swans) and a balcony facing the sea. The restaurant serves excellent Caribbean fare.

Cabinas Princesa (☎ 709 8107; s/d US\$15/20) Couples will prefer this ample nouveau-colonial building, south of the soccer field, with a sense of privacy. Three rooms have private baths and fans. The shared balcony offers views of the waves tumbling onto the beach. It's owned by Miss Miriam's hospitable clan.

Hotel Miss Junie (☎ 709 8029; s/d US\$22/32) At the northern end of the village, Miss Junie's extensive shady grounds straddle the river and the sea. Screened rooms let a breeze into the comfortable interior and hammocks dot the grounds. Prices include a full breakfast by the illustrious Miss Junie.

Eating

Mundo Natural (☎ 9am-10pm) For an afternoon refresher, Mundo Natural serves fresh juice, homemade ice cream and organic coffee.

Caribbean Flavor (mains US\$3-5, lobster US\$7) This place facing the soccer field does a bang-up job of cooking up rice and beans, and fresh whole lobsters.

Buddha Cafe (meals US\$4-6; ☎ 9am-9pm) This sleek-and-sophisticated café might seem out of place, but that shouldn't stop you from getting a pizza, savory shrimp crêpes or big bowl of fresh greens.

La Casona Restaurant (meals US\$4-7; ☎ 11am-10pm) Highly recommended La Casona, on the soccer field, offers a garlic-laden hearts-of-palm lasagna, pastas and Tico fare.

Miss Junie's (☎ 709 8029; dinner US\$8-10; ☎ 6-9pm) Order early here to let the seafood simmer and soak in the spicy coconut sauce. For truly memorable Caribbean food, it's an obligatory visit.

Getting There & Away

AIR

NatureAir (☎ 710 0323; one way US\$68) and **Sansa** (☎ 709 8015; US\$63) have daily flights to and from San José. The airstrip is 4km north of the village.

BUS & BOAT

Tortuguero is accessible by boat from Cariari or Moín. If you are traveling to Parismina, you should be able to get one of the boats to Moín to drop you off on the way.

To/From Moín

While tour boats ply these canals frequently, there is no reliable regular service. It is much easier to boat from Moín to Tortuguero than to return.

In theory, **Viajes Bananeros** (☎ 709 8005; www.tortuguero-costarica.com; US\$30) offers a daily transfer to Moín at 10am. Another **water taxi** (☎ 709 8005; each way US\$20) departs from Moín at 11am and returns from Tortuguero at 1:30pm.

To/From Cariari

The more common route to and from Tortuguero is through Cariari, from where you can catch buses to San José or Puerto Limón.

If you are coming to Tortuguero through Cariari, you have two options. The most common route to Tortuguero is through La Pavona. **Coopatreca** (☎ 767 7137; US\$10; departs 6am,

11:30am & 3pm) leaves for La Pavona from the central bus terminal in Siquirres, behind the police station. **Viajes Bananeros** (☎ 709 8005; US\$10; departs 7am & 11am) leaves from the San José bus terminal for Geest.

For return travel, buy tickets on the boat or at an information center in Tortuguero. Once the boat arrives in La Pavona or La Geest, a bus transfers passengers to Cariari. Those traveling on to San José should take a 6am boat to connect with the 11:30am bus from Cariari.

BARRA DEL COLORADO

Deep in the watery heart of nowhere, **Refugio Nacional de Fauna Silvestre Barra del Colorado** is the biggest national wildlife refuge in Costa Rica, with 90,400 hectares. It constitutes a wildlife bonanza – hosting the endangered West Indian manatee, caimans, crocodiles, big cats, Baird's tapirs and more. Anglers go for tarpon from January to June and snook from September to December.

Near the mouth of the Río Colorado, the village is reached only by plane or boat. Regional travel is almost exclusively by boat. Most residents live on the north side (Barra del Norte). The airstrip and **ranger station** (admission US\$6) are on the south bank (Barra del Sur).

If traveling on the Río San Juan to the north of Barra, take your passport. The river lies within Nicaraguan territory. Checkpoints along the way may charge a US\$10 fee for entry.

Camping is allowed in the refuge, but there are no facilities. Hotels are mostly sport fishing lodges, some accessed by boat. If you are coming for wildlife tours, let your hotel know in advance so that they may make arrangements. If you are not fishing, you can paddle these waterways in a canoe or kayak, available from some of the local lodges.

The cheapest hotel is **Tarponland Lodge** (☎ 710 2141; r per person US\$20; 📶), next to the airstrip. Run-down rooms have screens and private bathroom. Meals are extra. The long-established **Río Colorado Lodge** (☎ 232 4063, in the USA 800-243 9777; www.riocoloradolodge.com; r per person without/with fishing incl meals US\$120/400; 📶 📶) has breezy rooms in stilted buildings near the mouth of the Río Colorado. You can trade fish tales (or swap them for bus tales) at the happy hour with free rum drinks. It's walking distance from the airport.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The easiest way to get to Barra del Colorado is by plane. Sansa (one way US\$63) and Nature-Air (US\$68) fly daily from San José.

BOAT

There is no regular boat service to Barra, although you may be able to arrange a boat from Tortuguero (US\$50 per boat), Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí (p583; US\$60 per boat) or Moín. During the dry season, buses run from Cariari (opposite) to Puerto Lindo, from where you can try to hop on a lodge boat or a water taxi on Río Colorado to Barra.

NORTH CENTRAL COSTA RICA

The spark of adventure lures travelers to this sector, home of Monteverde's misty cloud forests and the smoking Volcán Arenal. Where else can you see iridescent tarantulas, careen through canopy on zip lines and top the day with a soak in bubbling hot springs? But good old-fashioned exploration (*sans* steel cables or zip-off pants) means a stop in the flat, tropical lowlands of Costa Rica's cattle country in rodeo season, or exploring the world-class wetlands at Refugio Nacional Caño Negro. At the region's northern limit, the Río San Juan forms the border with Nicaragua. In an earlier era it served as an important link with the Caribbean coast. Today, intrepid travelers can boat across the border, or all the way to Barra de Colorado. Now that's adventure.

Most travelers short for time take the popular circuit which shortcuts around Laguna Arenal from Monteverde with a jeep-boat-jeep (actually, van-boat-van) connection to La Fortuna, or vice-versa.

TILARÁN

This ranching boomtown makes a mellow rest stop for travelers. Friendly and western Tilarán showcases its first love – bulls – the last weekend in April with a **rodeo** and on June 13 with a bullfight dedicated to San Antonio. It's near the southwestern end of Laguna de Arenal.

You can check email while waiting for your bus at **Cybercafé Tilarán** (25m west of bus terminal; per hr US\$1.25; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat), with speedy connections.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Tilarán (☎ 695 5043; s/d US\$6/12) On the west side of the parque central, this is an excellent budget choice as the rooms with cable TV are well cared for (and quiet if you can get one facing the rear).

Hotel y Restaurant Mary (☎ 695 5479; s/d US\$12/16) An amiable and tidy option featuring linens that grandma would love. Wooden chairs on the balcony help you survey the local scene. The downstairs restaurant (mains US\$3 to US\$6; open 6am to midnight) with a cool tin counter serves Tico and Chino favorites.

Hotel & Restaurante y Cafetería Guadalupe (☎ 695 5943; s/d US\$16/28) Upstairs rooms are spacious and quiet, arranged around common areas made for rocking and reading. Locals pack the downstairs cafeteria (mains US\$2 to US\$6; open 6am to 9pm Monday to Friday, 7am to 5pm Saturday), serving a good fish fillet, nachos or mild fajitas.

Restaurante El Parque (☎ 695 5425; mains US\$3-5; ☎ 7am-11pm) Metal tables and Mexican *ranchera* music offer an everyman-type ambience to savor alongside *pinto gallo* and chop suey.

Getting There & Away

Buses depart from the terminal just west of the parque central. The route between Tilarán and San José goes via the Interamericana, not La Fortuna. Sunday afternoon buses to San José are often sold out by Saturday. Some routes:

Cañas (US\$0.50; 45min) Departs 5am, 6:40am, 7:30am, 8am, 10am, 11:30am and 3:30pm.

Ciudad Quesada, via La Fortuna (US\$2.50; 4hr) At 7am and 12:30pm.

Nuevo Arenal (US\$0.75; 1¼hr) Departs 5am, 6am, 8am, 9am, 10am, 11am, 1pm, 2:30pm and 3:30pm.

Puntarenas (US\$2.50; 2hr) At 6am and 1pm.

San José (US\$3.50; 3hr) Autotransportes Tilarán departs 4:45am, 7am, 9:30am, 2pm and 5pm.

Santa Elena (US\$1.75; 3 to 4hr) At 12:30pm.

MONTEVERDE & SANTA ELENA

Snug in the misty greenbelt of two cloud forest reserves, this slim corridor of human habitation consists of the Tico village of Santa Elena and the Quaker settlement of Monteverde. The area, first settled by loggers and farmers who came in the 1930s, later became populated by North American Quakers (a pacifist religious group also known as the 'Friends') in 1951. The emigration forever changed local history.

As pacifists, four Quakers refused to be drafted into the Korean War. They were jailed in Alabama in 1949. The incident ignited an exodus and members of the group came to dairy farm in these greener pastures, eventually conserving them. Tourism grabbed hold when a 1983 *National Geographic* feature described this unique landscape, and subsequently billed the area as *the* place to view one of Central America's most famous birds – the resplendent quetzal. Tourism here hasn't waned since.

Given the popularity of this area, it's important to respect the wildlife (by not feeding it) and others (by hiking quietly) and pack out all trash. Tourism takes its toll on the local population as well. Keep the small-town atmosphere by taking the time to say hello. Infrastructure is wobbly in these places – the electricity, water and phones blink off when you most need them. Blaming or moaning won't fix it any faster. Kick back for a candlelit dinner. It's part of the rustic charm – you'll see.

Orientation

In the cloud forest at 1200m to 1600m, the community of Monteverde is scattered along the several kilometers of road that leads to the reserve. Most of the budget hotels and restaurants are in the village of Santa Elena, while the more expensive lodges are found along the road. The Monteverde reserve is 6km southeast of Santa Elena, and the Santa Elena reserve is 5km north and east.

Information

Chunches (☎ 645 5147) offers all sorts of travel and natural history books, US newspapers, laundry service and coffee and snacks. Find events posted on flyers by the door. The Banco Nacional has an ATM and provides advances on Visa cards.

The town has an official website; www.monteverdeforever.com.

Sights

Donning rubbery rain gear and mud boots (for rent at park offices) is a rite of passage for those visiting these dripping, mossy cloud forests in search of resplendent quetzals, hummingbirds, howler monkeys, sloths, snakes and more. Just remember that wildlife absconds in the mist, so hold back wild expectations. Hiring a guide is often worth the expense.

BOSQUE ETERNO DE LOS NIÑOS

Founded by school children fed up with the childish squandering of our natural resources, **Bosque Eterno de los Niños** (Children's Eternal Forest; ☎ 645 5003; www.acmcr.org; adult/student day use US\$7/4, guided night hike US\$15/10; ☎ 7:30am-5:30pm) is an enormous 22,000-hectare reserve providing a home for local wildlife among the primary and secondary forest (and to allow former agricultural land to be slowly reclaimed by the jungle). The night tours here are highly recommended.

SAN GERARDO ECOLOGUE & RESEARCH STATION

Administered by the **Monteverde Conservation League** (☎ 645 5003; www.acmcr.org), this research station on the Atlantic slope sits at an elevation of 1200m. There are no crowds, the views of Arenal are gorgeous and wildlife spotting can be very good. The entrance is next to Santa Elena Reserve. Hike 3.5km downhill on a dirt track to the **research station** (adult/student US\$7/4; room per adult/student with 3 meals US\$45/28) with a number of trails through primary and secondary forest.

RESERVA BIOLÓGICA BOSQUE NUBOSO MONTEVERDE

When Quaker settlers first arrived, they agreed to preserve about a third of their property in order to protect the watershed above Monteverde. Fighting off squatters with the help of the Nature Conservancy and the World Wildlife Fund, they began what is now known as one of the country's most eminent reserves.

Trails in the reserve are clearly marked. The **Sendero Bosque Nuboso** is a pretty 2km (one-way) walk through the cloud forest to the continental divide. From there you can return via the wide **Sendero El Camino**, which branches off to a 25m-high suspension bridge. The circuit takes two to three hours. Half-day **tours** (US\$15) in English leave at 7:30am; call ahead to reserve a space or to arrange a night or birding tour.

You can't camp but three basic **shelters** (dm US\$5) provide drinking water, showers, propane stoves and cooking utensils. Hikers need to carry a sleeping bag, candles, food and other necessities (such as toilet paper). Make reservations at least one week in advance for the **dorms** (adult/student US\$37/33) near the park entrance. The **visitors center** (☎ 645

5122; www.monteverdeinfo.com/monteverde.htm; adult/student US\$13/6.50; ☎ 7am-4pm) has free trail maps, a snack bar and a restaurant.

RESERVA SANTA ELENA

When Monteverde gets crowded, this park provides a great alternative. An exquisitely misty reserve with 12km of trails, Santa Elena is slightly higher in elevation than Monteverde, with some secondary-growth forest. Open spots help for spotting birds and other animals. Monkeys and sloths may even be seen on the road in. Go on your own or book a guided tour (US\$15 plus entry fee), leaving from the **information center** (☎ 661 8290; www.monteverdeinfo.com/reserve-santa-elena-monteverde; adult/student US\$10/6; ☎ 7am-4pm) at 7:30am and 11:30am. Call to reserve.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

The **Monteverde Butterfly Garden** (☎ 645 5512; adult/student US\$8/6; ☎ 9:30am-4pm) offers fantastic naturalist-led tours (in Spanish, English or German) that include a fascinating walk through live insect exhibits (leave the fly-swatter at home). See the greenhouses where butterflies are raised and screened gardens where hundreds flutter about. Mornings are the best time to visit. Visitors can also explore on their own.

Hopping at night, the **Ranario** (Frog Pond; ☎ 645 6320; ranariomv@racsa.co.cr; adult/student US\$8/5; ☎ 9:30am-8:30pm) exhibits over 30 species of frogs, toads and salamanders. For more cold-blooded marvels, the **serpentarium** (☎ 645 6002; www.snaketour.com; adult/student/child US\$7/5/3; ☎ 9am-8pm) has 40 species of snakes.

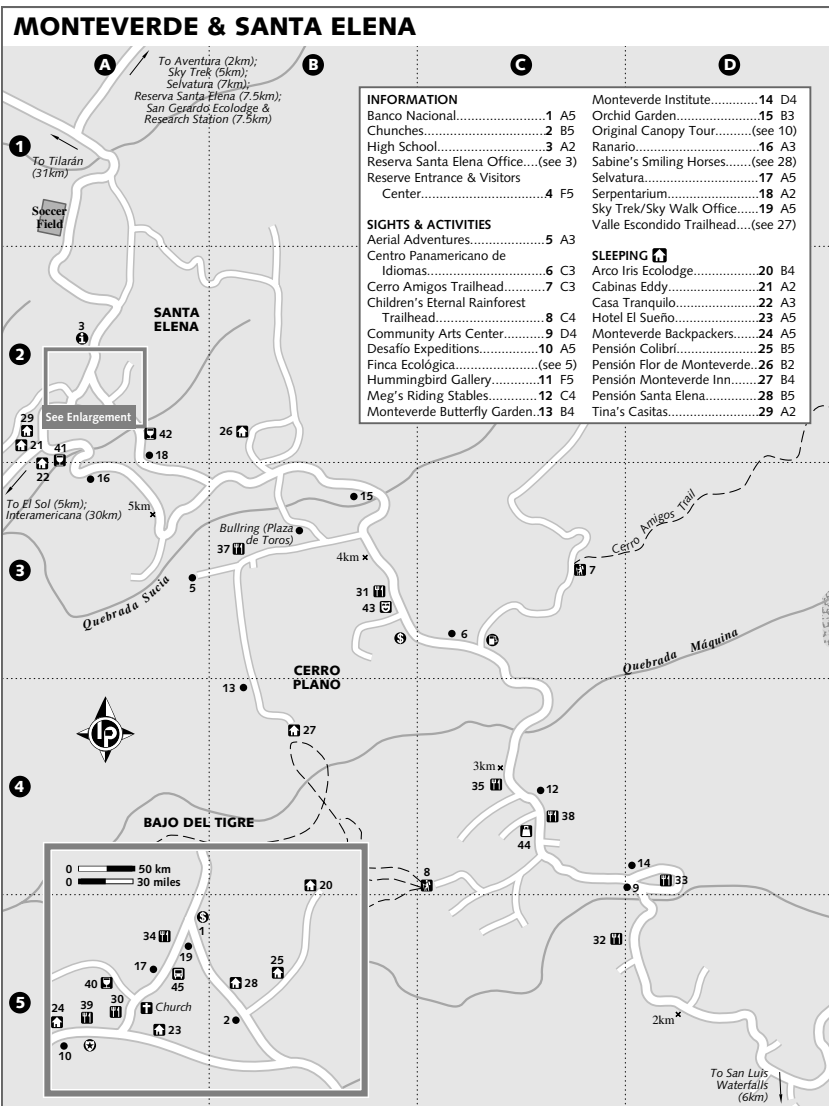
The roadside **orchid garden** (☎ 645 5510; adult/child US\$5/3; ☎ 8am-5pm) has shady trails winding past more than 400 types of orchids organized into taxonomic groups. Peak blooming period is November to February.

Casem (☎ 645 5190), a women's arts and crafts cooperative, sells crafts and souvenirs with profits benefiting the community. A number of art galleries around town are also worth exploring.

Activities

CANOPY TOURS & HANGING BRIDGES

On the grounds of Cloud Forest Lodge, **Original Canopy Tour** (☎ 291 4465; www.canopytour.com; adult/student/child US\$45/35/25; ☎ 7:30am-2:30pm) has the fabled zip lines that started an ecotourism movement of questionable ecological value.

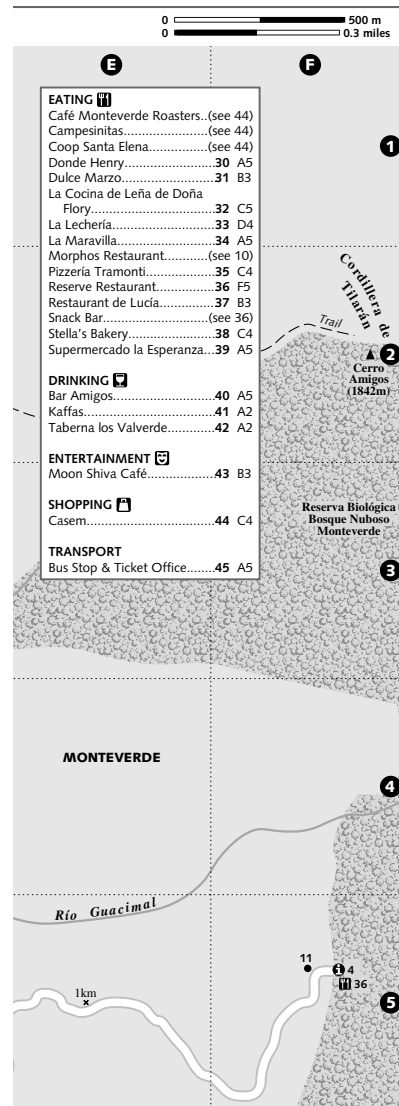


It's less elaborate than others, but at least living history here entertains more than most museums.

Aventura (☎ 645 6959; www.aventuramonteverde.com; adult/student US\$35/28; ☎ 7am-2:30pm) has 16 platforms, a Tarzan-swing and a 15m rappel. It's 3km north of Santa Elena. Hotel pick-ups are included in the price.

Selvatura (☎ 645 5929; www.selvatura.com; adult/child US\$40/30; ☎ 7:30am-4pm) is for those who find statistics sexy. It has 3km of cables, 18 platforms and one Tarzan-swing in primary forest. The office is across from the church in Santa Elena. For grannies there are hanging bridges.

If speed's your poison, then **SkyTrek** (☎ 645 5796; www.skywalk.co.cr; adult/student US\$40/32; ☎ 7:30am-



5pm) is for you. Steel towers join 11 platforms spread out along a road. You'll be thankful they invested in a real brake system. Hanging bridges provide a less balls-out alternative.

HIKING

Take a free hike up 1842m **Cerro Amigos** on a clear day for great views of Volcán Arenal,

20km away to the northeast. Near the top of the mountain, you'll pass by the TV towers for channels 7 and 13. The trail leaves Monteverde from behind Hotel Belmar (the road behind the gas station), ascending roughly 300m in 3km. From the hotel, take the dirt road going downhill, then the next left.

The strenuous hike to the **San Luis Waterfall** rewards you with views of a gorgeous stream cascading from the cloud forests into a series of swimming holes just begging for a picnic. It's only a few kilometers, but it's steep and the rocky, mud-filled terrain can get very slick. A taxi from town costs about US\$12.

HORSEBACK RIDING

A number of trails and scenic panoramas make the area ideal for horse riding. Inquire at **Pensión Santa Elena** for reader-recommended **Sabine's Smiling Horses** (☎ 645 6894; www.horseback-riding-tour.com; per hr US\$15), offering multiday trips and even a five-hour full-moon ride. Also popular is **Meg's Riding Stables** (☎ 645 5560; www.guanacaste.com/sites/stellas/stables.htm).

Riding from Monteverde and Fortuna is offered by most outfitters. Overworked horses made the route controversial in the past, but client pressure has really upped local standards. Of the two routes, the Mirador Trail is steep and unmanageably muddy in rainy season while the Lake Trail is flatter and easier. **Desafío Expeditions** (☎ 645 5874; www.monteverdetours.com) takes the Lake Trail to La Fortuna (US\$65).

Courses & Volunteering

The nonprofit **Monteverde Institute** (☎ 645 5053; www.mvinstitute.org) offers courses in tropical biology, conservation, sustainable development, Spanish and women's studies. It also offers internships and places student volunteers.

The **Children's Eternal Forest** (www.acmcr.org) is always looking for help. For information visit the website. To volunteer in the schools, check out opportunities online for the English-language **Monteverde Friends School** (www.mf-school.org) or the **Cloudforest School** (www.cloudforest-school.org).

Centro-Panamericano de Idiomas (☎ 265 6306; www.cpi-edu.com; classes without/with homestay US\$255/380) offers Spanish courses.

Sleeping

An overflow of hotels means you can find many options in addition to those following

if need be. These offer hot showers, unless otherwise noted.

In Santa Elena

Cabinas Eddy (☎ 645 6635; per person with/without bathroom US\$8/5; 📍) Readers recommend Eddy's for the cheap and clean rooms, helpful staff and the marimba-playing prowess of the owner. English is spoken.

Pensión Santa Elena (☎ 645 6240; www.pension.santaelena.com; dm US\$6, s/d/tr US\$10/14/21, with bathroom US\$15/20/25, s/d/tr/q cabins US\$20/25/30/40; 📍) Running on pure personality, this backpacker favorite has bare-bones rooms but stellar service. Tireless Texas natives Ran and Shannon man the free-advice booth all day. Help yourself to morning coffee and the occasional donated pineapple.

Casa Tranquilo (☎ 645 6782; www.casatranquilo.net; per person with/without bathroom US\$10/7; 📍) This place is geared toward backpackers with its plain wood-frame rooms with skylights and a chilled-out common space under the tin roof. Hearty buffet breakfasts and internet access are included.

Monteverde Backpackers (☎ 645 5844; www.monteverdebackpackers.com; dm/s/d incl breakfast US\$10/15/30; 📍) The bilingual managers work above and beyond to offer a five-star hostel experience. Breakfast comes out early on request and rooms are cozy, spotless and wood-paneled, all with new mattresses and private bathrooms. A hammock garden is in the works.

Cabinas El Pueblo (☎ 645 6192; www.cabinaselpueblo.com; s/d US\$8/10, with bathroom US\$15/20; 📍) Owners Marleny and Freddy are eager to please (you'll probably meet them first at the bus stop). They offer adequate cement rooms and homey common areas.

Pensión Colibrí (☎ 645 5682; r per person with bathroom US\$10) Down the street and up a quiet lane, the pension feels like it's perched among the trees. Country décor adorns large rooms and mini-balconies overlook the woods.

Hotel El Sueño (☎ 645 6695; d incl breakfast US\$20; 📍) This Tico-run hotel has huge, renovated wooden rooms and a great balcony with sweeping views of the area. Upstairs rooms are airier, though the best ones are in the new addition.

Around Santa Elena

Tina's Casitas (☎ 820 4821; www.tinascasitas.de; r per person US\$5, with bathroom US\$20) This is a terrific budget spot west of La Esperanza supermarket.

In the well-scrubbed rooms you'll find hand-carved furniture and firm beds.

Pensión Monteverde Inn (☎ 645 5156; s/d US\$15/25; 📍) Located in a tranquil corner of Cerro Plano is this small inn, which is conveniently located next to the trailhead for the Hidden Valley Trail (US\$5). Spartan rooms have private hot showers, though the remote location is primarily why you're here. The owners can pick you up at the bus stop if you have a reservation.

Pensión Flor de Monteverde (☎ 645 5236; d with/without bathroom incl breakfast US\$15/12, other meals extra US\$15) A sheltered hideaway with basic but comfortable rooms, and full board available. Owner Eduardo Venegas Castro is a fountain of information and can arrange tours and transportation.

Arco Iris Ecolodge (☎ 645 5067; www.arcoirislodge.com; d US\$45-85; 📍) This clutch of pretty cabins overlooking Santa Elena has the privacy and intimacy of a mountain retreat. There are private trails that wind throughout the property and a variety of rooms from rustic to ritzy. The multilingual German owners are delightful. Their excellent meals sometimes feature organic vegetables grown on the grounds.

El Sol (☎ 645 5838; www.elsolnuestro.com; d small/large cabin US\$60/80; 📍) This small farm with two guest cabins is located in the sunbelt, 5km outside of Santa Elena near Guacimal. Owners Elisabeth and Ignacio pamper guests with strong massages and delicious home cooking. Explore the private trails on foot or on horseback with their amiable son.

Eating

Campeñitas (mains US\$2-4; 🕒 7am-5pm) If your own mother were reincarnated as a bosomy Tica, this is how she would cook for you. Three feisty females shape hand-ground corn into delicious tortillas, cook them on a wood stove and heap them with fresh veggies or meat, beans and cheese.

Donde Henry (meals US\$3; 🕒 7am-8pm) For the price of a song, the talented chef Henry cooks up flavorful and creative versions of Tico favorites at this teeny takeout counter.

Stella's Bakery (mains US\$2-5; 🕒 6am-6pm) Gourmet sandwiches made to order and a pastry case brimming with fresh pies, sticky buns and cookies – jackpot for hungry trekkers. Eat in the bright vaulted space with oil paintings by the owner's mom, or in the garden yard.

Dulce Marzo (snacks US\$2-5; 🕒 8am-7pm) Run by a Californian native with a keen take on

caffeine treats, this cool little café is the favorite of locals. Stop by for a brownie and espresso or a heaping flatbread sandwich.

La Maravilla (meals US\$2-5; 🕒 6am-9pm) The most popular *soda* in Santa Elena is this haunt teamed with the napkin artwork of its world-wide clientele. On the menu? *Casados*, albeit damn good ones.

La Cocina de Leña de Doña Flory (mains US\$4-6; 🕒 8am-8pm Sun-Fri) An outdoor *soda* run by one of the area's original Quakers. Corn-husk tamales are tops and Sunday means a special stew. The turnover, by La Colina Lodge, is signposted.

Morpho's Restaurant (mains US\$5-10; 🕒 7:30am-9:30pm) Typical Costa Rican food gets gourmet flair (and gourmet prices). The sandwiches are especially hearty and fresh salads make a nice change.

Pizzería Tramonti (☎ 645 6120; mains US\$5-11; 🕒 11:30am-3pm & 5:30-10pm Tue-Sun) Nothing says *te adoro* like thin-crust pizza sizzled to crispness in a wood-fired oven. The pastas and seafood are tasty too.

Restaurant de Lucía (☎ 645 5337; mains US\$7-15; 🕒 11am-8:30pm) Uncork a bottle of red (it's Chilean owned) and feast on flawless eggplant parmesan or steak with mushrooms. Fare is conventional (no fusion here) but impeccably prepared and the starters always include a basket of warm tortillas with toppings.

Go to the source for homemade ice cream and cheeses at La Lechería (Monteverde Cheese Factory). Visit nearby Café Monteverde roasters for a fresh cup of brew.

Drinking & Entertainment

Nightlife usually means a guided tour of glow-in-the-dark creepy-crawlies. More urbane pursuits include a visit to **Kaffas** (🕒 11am-2am), a relaxed lounge with occasional live music. Locals fill Amigos Bar to drink brewskis and shoot pool. An interesting mix filters into Taberna los Valverde late night – but most have to bolster their dance floor (Latin and rock) courage with a shot of tequila. Look for cultural events at the Galerón Cultural, and live music or jam sessions at Bromelia's amphitheatre or **Moon Shiva** (🕒 10am-10pm; covers US\$3-5) restaurant.

Getting There & Around

All intercity buses stop at the terminal in downtown Santa Elena, and most continue on to the cheese factory in Monteverde. For safety tips see p580. Destinations include:

La Fortuna via Tilarán (US\$2; 7hr) Departs at 7am and includes a two-hour wait in Tilarán.

Puntarenas (US\$2.50; 3hr) Departs from Banco Nacional at 6am.

Reserva Monteverde (US\$0.50; 30min) Departs from Banco Nacional at 6:30am, 7:30am, 9:30am, 11:30am, 1pm and 2:30pm; returns 6:40am, 8am, 10:40am, noon, 2:10pm and 3pm.

Reserva Santa Elena (US\$2; 30min) Departs from Banco Nacional at 6:30am, 8:30am, 10:30am, 2:30pm and 3:30pm; returns 11am, 1pm and 4pm.

San José (US\$4.50; 4½hr) TransMonteverde departs from La Lechería at 6:30am and 2:30pm, with pick-up at the bus station in Santa Elena.

JEEP-BOAT-JEEP

The fastest route between Monteverde/Santa Elena and La Fortuna is a land/water combo (US\$30, three hours), arranged through hotels and tour operators. A taxi from La Fortuna takes you to Laguna de Arenal, meeting a boat that crosses the lake to the other side where a 4WD taxi continues to Monteverde. It's a popular option since it's incredibly scenic, reasonably priced and saves you half a day of rough travel.

LA FORTUNA & VOLCÁN ARENAL

pop 7000

Even without an active volcano popping fire-works overhead, the former farming town of La Fortuna would be a relaxing place to kick back for a few days. The flat grid town is near a playground of cascading waterfalls, steep trails and luxurious hot springs. As rapid development takes its toll, you might find yourself batting off tour-hawkers the minute you step off the bus. Relax, once you get settled in, these pests disperse and you can enjoy nature's many distractions – probably a good thing since it takes time for Volcán Arenal to peek out from the cloud cover.

Orientation & Information

La Fortuna offers few street signs, and most locals give directions using landmarks. The town is centered on a small park adjacent to the taxi stand. The clinic, police station and post office are all within two blocks of the plaza.

Quick internet access is available at **Expediciones** (per hr US\$1.55; 🕒 9am-10pm Mon-Sat), across from the parque central. The banks in town all change US dollars and Banco de Costa Rica has a Visa Plus ATM. Pay phones are on the main street and in the parque central.

USE YOUR WITS**On Theft**

Talented thieves ride the bus between San José and La Fortuna or Monteverde. When traveling these routes, do not leave your belongings on the shelf above the seats. Keep them on you and stay awake, even if that means drumming up a conversation with your seatmate in Spanglish. When in public spaces, resist the urge to repack your bag. And remember that lodgings that allow visitors *and* lodgers who insist on inviting new friends to visit put other guests at risk for theft or general creepiness.

On Tours

Sometimes the cheapest tours are scams, like the supposed raft trip to Río Pacuare that actually goes to a closer, tamer river, or the tour bus that was supposed to arrive at 8am but never comes. We've heard them all. It's worth going through a reputable agency or hotel to book your tours, even if that means paying more. At least you'll get to go, and if there's quality issues, you can hold someone accountable.

On Faith

Does this mean that all locals are out to scam you? No.

Sights & Activities**VOLCÁN ARENAL**

Just 15km west of Fortuna, **Parque Nacional Volcán Arenal** (admission US\$6; ☎ 8am-4pm) is home to Arenal – Costa Rica's most active volcano, producing ash columns, explosions and red streamers of molten rock almost daily since 1968. Climbing it is not allowed – hikers have been killed by explosions. Independent travelers can take an 8am bus toward Tilarán (ask to get off at the park) and catch the 2pm bus back to La Fortuna. From the 'Parque Nacional' sign off the main road, a 2km dirt road leads to the park. From the ranger station grab a trail map to choose from trails through old lava flows, tropical rain forest or to the lake.

HOT SPRINGS

For a Vegas feel, try **Baldi Hot Springs** (☎ 479 9651; without/with buffet US\$17/27; ☎ 10am-10pm), 5km west of La Fortuna, where pyramids sprout waterslides. If you're rich or simply fulfilling that last living wish, megaresort and spa **Tabacón Hot Springs** (☎ 256 1500; www.tabacon.com; adult/child US\$45/20, after 7pm US\$19/17; ☎ 10am-10pm), 13km west of La Fortuna, offers hyperbolic decadence. Hot tubs, a water slide, waterfalls and 12 cold and hot pools for swimming and soaking. The brochure's swimsuit models are conspicuously absent.

LA CATARATA DE FORTUNA

A ribbon of cold, clear water called **La Catarata de la Fortuna** (admission US\$6; ☎ 8am-5pm) pours

through a sheer canyon thick with bromeliads and ferns. Though it's dangerous to dive beneath the thundering 70m falls, you can take a dip in its perfect swimming holes. Keep an eye on your backpack. Rent a bike or walk. It's 7km from La Fortuna – all uphill – through pastureland and papaya trees.

VENADO CAVERNS

Located on a private farm outside town, these subterranean 2700m limestone caves attract fearless mud-trekkers to see colorless frogs, fish and countless bats. Operators in town book tours for about US\$45. Claustrophobics, avoid this one.

Tours

Tours are big business in La Fortuna, with scammers sneaking a piece of the action. Especially here, visitors need to be smart consumers. Ask other travelers for references, shop around and never buy a tour on the street.

Groups can work out discounts in advance with most outfitters. Hotels arranging trips may charge a small commission but provide a place to complain if the service stinks.

Volcán Arenal trips generally include afternoon excursions to the national park or a private overlook, a hot-springs visit, dinner and an evening jaunt to see some lava. Prices run US\$25 to US\$65 per person. Make sure your tour includes the entry fees. Make appropriate sacrifices to the god of clear skies since there are no refunds if it's cloudy.

Most agencies also arrange Jeep-Boat-Jeep transportation to Monteverde (see p579), which is the easiest and most scenic way to visit the cloud forests. The tour operators listed below are recommended by travelers:

Bobo Adventures (☎ 479 1952; tour US\$40) Bobo, 200m west of the park, specializes in caving in the spectacular Venado Caves.

Jacamar Tours (☎ 479 9767; www.arenaltours.com) Offers an incredible variety of naturalist hikes.

Sunset Tours (☎ 479 9800; www.sunsettourcr.com) Gives high-quality tours with bilingual guides.

Sleeping

There's no shortage of sleeping options in La Fortuna; just make sure yours is secure. Some lodgings (not included here) have experienced thefts.

Gringo Pete's (☎ 479 8521; gringopetes2003@yahoo.com; dm US\$3, r per person with/without bathroom US\$5/4, campsite US\$2) A content communal vibe emanates from the purple house, 100m south of the school, and why not? Lodging's cheaper than breakfast. The cavernous shared bunkrooms offer raw walls under a corrugated tin roof while cozier rooms have wooden bunks, fresh paint and mirrors. There's an ample kitchen and yard but don't expect privacy – the price of popularity.

La Posada Inn (☎ 479 9793; r per person with/without bathroom US\$7/5) A frayed but funky house across from the school with Rasta colors and, you got it, relaxed vibes. Rooms with bathroom are a steal – the installations are brand new (even if mattresses clearly aren't).

Sleep Inn Guesthouse (☎ 394 7033; carlossleepinn@hotmail.com; r per person with shared bathroom US\$5) Wacky and welcoming Carlos (aka Mr Lava-Lava) and Cándida run a modest guesthouse out of their home, 250m west of MegaSuper, and a hipper one in the center. Mr Lava-Lava, certainly the most hardworking man in (La Fortuna) show business, guarantees lava sightings or you tour again for free.

Hotel Dorothy (☎ 479 8068; noelsamuelsdouglass@hotmail.com; r per person US\$6; ☎) Beaming with Caribbean warmth, this worn but warm hotel, 300m south of town next to the bullring, offers large, bright rooms with clean shared baths and volcano views. The location, a few blocks out of town, guarantees your peace and quiet.

La Roca Virgen (☎ 479 9363; s/d/tr US\$8/12/15, with bathroom US\$14/18/24) A cozy, gay-friendly guesthouse, 400m north and 50m east of the park,

with a singing aesthetic of bright colors, Spanish tiles and wood sculptures. The tidy rooms vary but all have hot showers, and some have TVs and mini-fridges. The owners offer lots of travel information as well as bike rentals and internet.

Arenal Backpackers Resort (☎ 479 7000; www.arenalbackpackers.com; dm US\$10, d/tr/q US\$50/66/80; campsite US\$6; ☎ ☎ ☎) As glamorous as hostels get, starting with a crystalline swimming pool and covered bar area. Springy mattresses, air-con and scrupulously clean bathrooms guarantee your comfort. Unlimited internet and wi-fi, a shared kitchen and pool table offer you sustenance and entertainment. Guarded and 300m west of the church, it's the most secure hotel in town and offers great service to boot. Will you ever leave?

Hotel las Colinas (☎ 479 9107; www.lascalinasarenal.com; s US\$12-15) There's some character to this three-story place in the noisy heart of town, with worn wooden doors, soft vinyl sofas, large windows and saggy beds. Rooms look painstakingly scrubbed and all have private hot-water bathrooms.

Mayol Lodge (☎ 479 9110; s/d US\$16/32; ☎) A collection of cozy, yellow-paneled rooms 200m southeast of the parque central, with sparkling tile bathrooms, thick mattresses and matching bedding. Enjoy the volcano views from the swimming pool.

Eating

Soda El Río (casados US\$3) This casual place is the top choice for cheap eats. Pull up a plastic chair to enjoy *casados* topped with fresh shredded cabbage and tomato.

Mi Casa (pastries US\$1-2; ☎ 8am-5pm) For a brisk cup of joe, waffles or homemade pastries, try this Euro-style café, 200m east of the parque central.

Chelas (☎ 479 9594; mains US\$3-7) This popular, open-air place, next to Valle Cocodrilo, has great *bocas* including *chicharrones* (stewed pork meat) and *ceviche de pulpo* (octopus cured in lime). The bar stays open until 1am, so you can wash your meal down with a cold Imperial (or four).

La Choza de Laurel (meals US\$6; ☎ 7am-11pm) The smoky wood-fire grill seduces famished passersby to join the ranks at open-air picnic tables for charred roast chicken served with homemade tortillas.

Rancho la Cascada (dinner US\$4-15; ☎ 7-11am & 6pm-2am) Craving for a cocktail? Slip into this

thatched-roofed place on the northeastern corner of the parque central, with fires cackling on chilly nights.

Don Rufino (mains US\$7-15; ☎ 11am-10pm) Even if you can't afford to eat at gourmet Don Rufino, 100m east of the parque central, the bar by the street is fun and lively – the spot to slowly sip that Ron Centenario.

Getting There & Away

Buses now depart from a new terminal 100m south of the Iglesia Católica.

Ciudad Quesada (US\$1; 1hr) Autotransportes San José-San Carlos departs 5am, 8am, 12:15pm and 3:30pm.

Monteverde (US\$2; 6-8hr) At 8am – change at Tilarán at 12:30pm for Monteverde.

Monteverde via Jeep-boat-Jeep See p579.

San José (US\$3; 4½hr) Autotransportes San José-San Carlos departs 12:45pm and 2:45pm.

Tilarán (US\$1.40; 3½hr) Autotransportes Tilarán departs 8am and 5:30pm.

CIUDAD QUESADA

pop 34,000

Locals know Ciudad Quesada as San Carlos, the destination listed by local buses. For travelers, however, it's more of a stopover. Gritty and congested, this farm town is best known for its *talabaterías* selling top-notch saddles. The city is also home to the **Feria del Ganado** (cattle fair and auction), held every April and accompanied by carnival rides.

Check your email at **Internet Café** (per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 3-7pm Sun), 100m north of parque central. Banco de San José, 200m north of the parque, has an ATM.

You can grab some shut-eye at **Hotel del Norte** (☎ 460 1959; s/d US\$6/9, with bathroom US\$9/13), 200m north of Banco Nacional, where wafertin walls separate clean rooms with TVs (hope you enjoy what your neighbor is watching). The pleasant **Hotel Don Goyo** (☎ 460 1780; s/d US\$12/22), 100m south of the parque central, is the most established hotel in town, with private hot showers. The attached restaurant (US\$4 to US\$10) serves quality Tico favorites and a variety of Western dishes.

Twenty-somethings flank the upper deck of **Restaurant los Geranios** (mains US\$2-5), 100m south of the church, to down beers and *casados*. Those who have overdone on rice and beans can visit **soda Restaurant El Parque** (mains US\$3-6; ☎ 11am-9pm), 50m north of the parque, specializing in Italian pastas.

Terminal Quesada is 2km from the center, reached by taxis (US\$1) and a twice-hourly bus (US\$0.20). Cooptrac buses to La Fortuna (US\$0.75, 1½ hours) depart at 6am, 10:30am, 1pm, 3:30pm, 5:15pm and 6pm. Chilsaca buses to Los Chiles (US\$3, two hours) depart 12 times daily from 5am to 7:15pm. Empresarios Guapileños goes to Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí (US\$1.50, 2½ hours) at 4:40am, 6am, 9:15am, 10am, 3pm and 5:30pm. Autotransportes San Carlos departs for San José (US\$2.50, 2½ hours) hourly from 5am to 6pm. Transportes Tilarán goes to Tilarán (US\$4, 4½ hours) at 6:30am and 4pm.

LOS CHILES

pop 7000

Sweltering and sleepy, Los Chiles sits three rutted kilometers south of Nicaragua. Originally settled by merchants and fishermen, it recently served as an important supply route for Nicaraguan Contras, with a strong US military presence throughout the 1980s. Today gringo-traffic refers to travelers exploring the scenic water route to Caño Negro or the river route to Nicaragua, a one- to two-hour boat ride. Travelers crossing here must stop in Los Chiles for the necessary paperwork.

The Banco Nacional changes cash. **Viajes y Excursiones Cabo Rey** (☎ 471 1251, 839 7458) provides a boat service to the Caño Negro refuge (US\$45 per group) as well as to El Castillo and the Solentiname Islands in Nicaragua. Cabo himself can usually be found by the dock.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Río Frio (☎ 471 1127; r per person US\$3) Expect worn but clean plank rooms with a shared cold shower. It's where to meet migrant workers.

Cabinas Jabirú (☎ 471 1055; d with/without bathroom US\$20/10; ☎) Next to the bus terminal, this popular budget spot has bare rooms and cold water. The friendly owner Manfred Rojas also arranges Caño Negro tours and horseback riding.

Rancho Tulipán (☎ 471 1414; cocas34@hotmail.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$25/30; ☎ ☎) Relative luxury here means air-con, private hot-water bathrooms and cable TV, right next to the docks. The on-site restaurant (mains US\$3 to US\$7, open 7am to 10pm) offers good breakfasts and memorable pan-fried sea bass.

Restaurant El Parque (☎ 471 1373, 471 1090; mains US\$3-5; ☎ 6am-9pm) Cheap and crowded, El Parque opens early if you need a coffee fix before setting out on the river.

GETTING TO SAN CARLOS, NICARAGUA

Although there's a 14km dirt road between the **Los Chiles-San Carlos** border, using this crossing requires special permission. Most travelers cross by boat, which is easily arranged in Los Chiles proper. First process your paperwork at **migración** (☎ 471 1223; ☎ 8am-5pm), 100m west of the dock.

Regular boats (US\$7, 1½ hours) leave Los Chiles at 1pm and 4pm daily, with extra boats at 11am and 2:30pm if demand is high. Boats leave San Carlos for Los Chiles at 1pm and 3:30pm, with extras scheduled as needed. The Nicaragua-Costa Rican border is not known for its reliability, so make sure you confirm these times before setting out. While cruising Río San Juan, keep your fingers and toes in the boat as there are river sharks (we're not kidding).

Nicaragua charges a US\$9 entry fee (paid in US dollars). Those making day trips to Lago de Nicaragua or El Castillo probably won't be charged the fee but should bring a passport and a few US dollars, just in case.

See p509 for details on crossing the border from Nicaragua.

Getting There & Away

Twelve buses run daily between Ciudad Quesada and Los Chiles (US\$3, two hours), from 5am to 7:15pm. Buses to San José (US\$5, five hours) depart at 5:30am and 3:30pm. A bus to Upala (US\$2.50, 2½ hours), leaving at 5am and 2pm, passes by the entrance to Caño Negro Refuge. Regular boat transport is limited to shuttles across the Nicaraguan border (US\$7) and various day trips throughout the region.

REFUGIO NACIONAL DE VIDA SILVESTRE CAÑO NEGRO

World-renowned, this expanse of swamp marsh is defined by the Río Frio, which breaks its banks every rainy season to pour out an 800-hectare lake. Here anglers search for that elusive 20kg snook and birders search for roseate spoonbills, great potoos, northern jacanas, boat-billed herons and ospreys. January to March is the best time to spot large flocks though illegal poaching and logging are putting the reserve in grave danger.

Most of the year the refuge is only reached by boat from Los Chiles or Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí. In the dry season you can take a horse trail from the village of Caño Negro.

LA VIRGEN

Steeped in the tangled shores of the wild and scenic Río Sarapiquí, La Virgen prospered in the heyday of the banana trade (no double-entendres here). Today it's a little-known destination for world-class kayaking and rafting. Businesses line the highway. Check email at **Internet Café** (per hr US\$1.50; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat).

The area has numerous budget options. Our pick of the litter is **Rancho Leona** (☎ 761

1019; www.rancholeona.com; dm US\$12; ☎), a shady, riverside spot where you can swap tales of gnarly rapids, detox in the Native American-style sweat lodge and enjoy family-style dinners. Rooms (some private) share hot-water showers and a communal kitchen. **Kayaking trips** (6hr trip per person incl lunch US\$75) and guided hikes are arranged on an ad hoc basis.

Down the road is the friendly **Sarapiquí Outdoor Center** (☎ 761 1123; Sarapaqui outdoor@hotmail.com; d US\$25, campsite US\$5), where impeccable campsites overlook the river, with access to showers and bathrooms. The simple rooms are a bit overpriced. In addition to rafting and kayaking trips, the owners also arrange horseback rides and guided hikes to a nearby waterfall.

All the buses between Ciudad Quesada and Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí make stops in La Virgen.

PUERTO VIEJO DE SARAPIQUÍ

pop 6000

Banana and coffee booms once made Puerto Viejo the country's most important port. Largely reclaimed by the jungle, today it is redefined as a slightly seedy border town. It isn't to be confused with touristy Puerto Viejo de Talamanca on the Caribbean coast. There are, however, great opportunities here for bird-watching, rafting, boating and jungle exploration.

Banco Popular changes money and has an ATM. **Internet Sarapiquí** (☎ 8am-10pm) is at the west end of town. Stop by **Souvenir Río Sarapiquí** (☎ 766 6727), on the main street, for information on birding, kayaking, white-water rafting and zip lining.

Sights & Activities

ESTACIÓN BIOLÓGICA LA SELVA

The Organization of Tropical Studies (OTS) runs a **biological research station** (☎ 524 0629; www.ots.ac.cr; s/d with shared bathroom US\$56/70), 5km southeast of Puerto Viejo. On any given day, the station teems with scientists and students researching in the nearby private reserve. La Selva welcomes drop-ins, though it's best to phone ahead and reserve. Rooms here are basic, with fan and bunk beds (a few have doubles), but rates include all meals and guided hikes. You can day-trip here too (hikes US\$26/40 per person for four/eight hours; 8am and 1:30pm daily). A taxi from Puerto Viejo costs US\$5.

Sleeping & Eating

Cabinas Restaurant Monteverde (☎ 766 6236; s/d US\$4/8) The cheapest digs in town are dark and dingy. An attached restaurant, with low prices, serves Tico fare.

Mi Lindo Sarapiquí (☎ 766 6281; s/d US\$12/20; P) Rooms are simple but spacious and clean, and have hot showers and fans. The restaurant (mains US\$4-9, open 8am to 10pm) offers some of the freshest seafood in town. Located on the south side of the soccer field.

Trinidad Lodge (☎ 213 0661, 381 0621; s/d US\$15/20) Travelers rave about these rustic cabins on a working ranch with hearty home-cooked meals (US\$4 to US\$8), horse rentals and boat tours. Located on the Río San Juan across from the Nicaraguan border post, it's only accessible only by boat (US\$5), departing at 11am from Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí.

Posada Andrea Cristina B&B (☎ 766 6265; www.andreacristina.com; s/d/tr US\$25/45/65) About 1km west of the center, this recommended B&B offers quiet garden cabins in a rain forest with fans and private hot-water bathrooms. Birders can scope the action while enjoying an outdoor breakfast. The owner, Alex Martínez, is an excellent guide and a passionate frontline conservationist.

Soda Judith (mains US\$2-4; ☎ 6am-7pm) Early risers can grab brewed coffee, big breakfasts or an *empanada* to start the day at this *soda*, one block off the main road.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

There's regular service to Trinidad Lodge. You can arrange transportation anywhere along the river (seasonal conditions permit-

ing) through independent boat captains. Short trips cost about US\$10 per hour per person for a group of four, or US\$20 per hour for a single person.

Serious voyages to Tortuguero or Barra del Colorado cost about US\$350 for a round trip in a private boat. Rumor has it that from Trinidad you can take a public boat to Puerto San Juan on Tuesdays and Fridays, and look for further transportation there (write to us if it works!).

BUS

The bus terminal is across from the park. Empresarios Guapileños goes to Ciudad Quesada/San Carlos via La Virgen (US\$1.50, three hours), departing at 5:30am, 9am, 2pm, 3:30pm and 7:30pm; its buses go to Guápiles (US\$1.50, one hour) eight times daily from 5:30am to 6:40pm. Autotransportes Sarapiquí goes to San José (US\$2.50, two hours), with frequent departures until 5:30pm.

GUANACASTE

Like the prized, gnarled shade tree the region is named after, there is something singular and stubborn about Guanacaste. It could be the cowboy culture, which consumes cattle fairs and saddle soap like the rest of the country craves shopping centers. Call it the backwater blessing – a slow, colonial pace means that locals are laid-back and cordial, and roads still lead to nowhere. Of course, this is all poised to change.

With Liberia's expanding international airport, the city is fast in line to being crowned Costa Rica's second city, a status backed up by its easy accessibility to the Interamericana. And although Guanacaste's cities are seemingly at a standstill, mother nature looms large in the background. Volcanoes, hot springs and horse packing trips take travelers high above the cowboy plains. Rare, dry tropical forests lead into remote Pacific beaches, turtle havens with riotously sweet surf breaks. In the name of adventure, Guanacaste seems on the verge of being tamed.

CAÑAS

pop 25,200

Hot, dusty streets, custom pick-ups and machete cowboys mean you've made it to Cañas. It's typically rural Latin America, where the

gait is slow and businesses lock up for lunch. At the crossroads of the Interamericana and the eastern road to Monteverde, Cañas provides visitors with a base for organizing rafting trips on the nearby Río Corobicí or for exploring Parque Nacional Palo Verde.

Wildlife tours take gentle float trips down the Río Corobicí. Book with **Safaris Corobicí** (☎ 669 6091; www.safariscorobicí.com), whose office is on the Interamericana, 4.5km north of Cañas.

Accommodations are geared more toward truckers than tourists. At the southeastern end of town, **Cabinas Corobicí** (☎ 669 0241, cnr Av 2 & Calle 5; r per person US\$9) maintains comfortable, good-sized rooms. Ask for a standard room at **Hotel El Corral** (☎ 669 1467; s/d US\$15/25; ☎), right on the Interamericana. Optional extras include air-con, hot shower and TV. The quieter rooms are in back. With the best chow mien and views in town, **Restaurante El Primero** (US\$2-4; ☎ 11am-10pm) sits across from the church.

Getting There & Away

Terminal Cañas sits on the north end of town.

Liberia (US\$1.35, 1½hr) Eight departures daily.

Puntarenas (US\$2; 2hr) Nine departures daily.

San José (US\$3; 3½hr) At 4am, 4:50am, 6am, 9:30am, 12:30pm, 1:40pm and 5pm.

Tilarán (US\$0.75; 45min) Eight departures daily.

Upala (US\$2; 2hr) Five buses daily.

PARQUE NACIONAL PALO VERDE

Palo Verde has the greatest concentrations of waterfowl and shorebirds in Central America, with over 300 recorded bird species. Visitors

can spot large flocks of herons (including rare black-crowned night herons), storks, spoon-bills and scarlet macaws. When the dry season begins in December, birds congregate in lakes and marshes, trees lose their leaves and the flocks become easier to see.

Visitors can **camp** (US\$2) near the Palo Verde ranger station, with toilets and hot-water showers. Additional dorms at the **ranger station** (☎ 200 0125; dm US\$10) have mosquito nets and cold showers. Find good accommodations and information at the **Hacienda Palo Verde Research Station** (☎ 661 4717; www.ots.ac.cr; s/d US\$55/100, meals US\$10), run by the Organization of Tropical Studies (OTS). It also guides recommended **tours** (half-/full-day US\$15/30) and **horseback riding** (US\$6 per hr per person) excursions.

Palo Verde is 30km west of Cañas. Buses connecting Cañas and Liberia (see p587) can drop you at the ACT office on the Interamericana, opposite the turnoff to the park. If you call the office in advance, rangers may be able to drive you on the gravel road from here into the **park entrance** (☎ 200 0125; admission US\$6).

RESERVA BIOLÓGICA LOMAS BARBUDAL

The 2646-hectare Lomas de Barbudal reserve forms a cohesive unit with Palo Verde, and protects several species of endangered trees such as mahogany and rosewood as well as the common and quite spectacular *corteza amarilla*. In March all the yellow cortezas in the forest burst into bloom on the same day, creating a four-day profusion of color. Endangered birds spotted here include king vultures and scarlet macaws.

THE WATERFALL HUNT

If you're not one to hop on the Interbus and cruise into adventure with the air-con on, we've got one for you. Getting to **Volcán Tenorio** (admission US\$6), one of Costa Rica's newest parks, isn't easy. But since there is no public transportation, you're liable to have it to yourself – if you don't run into a tapir.

The hook? A chilly cascade the color of gaudy gemstones, part of the Río Celeste. Refresh yourself then follow through epiphyte forests and fumaroles to bubbling hot spots and thermal baths (which may be scalding, so your best bet is to hire a guide). Reaching the crater requires overnight camping. No trail is marked.

Take any bus headed to Upala. At Bijagua you can hire a taxi (US\$30) – some local's worn-out Caveller – or arrange in advance with local guide **Alexander Ordóñez** (☎ 359 6235 in Spanish; rieceleste2011@yahoo.com) for pick up. Alex offers a wealth of information; his father helped pioneer the area and first discovered the waterfall while tapir hunting (yes, these were the old days). His warm, family-run **Río Celeste Lodge** (campsite US\$2, r per person US\$5), modest rooms with home cooking and plenty of tales to tell.

The **information center** (entry to the park US\$6; ☎ 7am-4pm) offers maps, though you have to wade across the Río Cabuyo to access the actual reserve and a small network of hiking trails. There is no camping or public transportation. Buses can leave you at the turnoff to Lomas Barbudal at Pijije (on the Interamericana, 2km northwest of Bagaces). Walk or use a 4WD for the remaining 7km.

LIBERIA

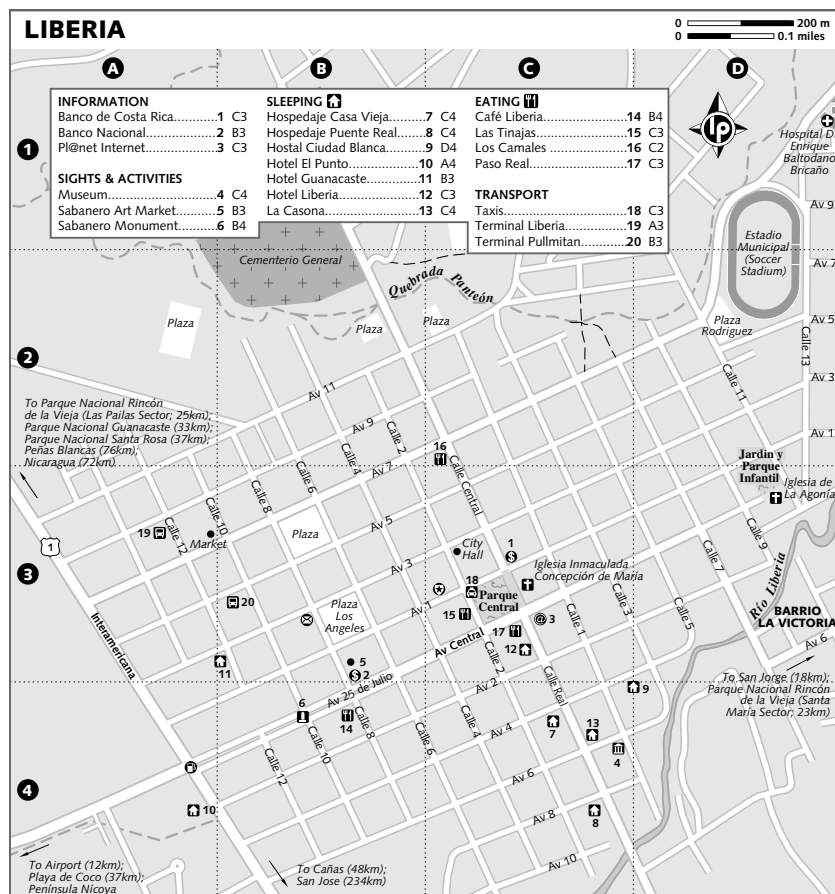
pop 45,100

This sleepy and hot provincial capital has long been a ranching and transportation center but the relatively new international airport is making it the preferred hub for foreign travelers. And why not – visitors find Liberia

manageable, dare we say, charming? It's a quick hop from here to the popular Nicoya beaches and a great regional base to explore Rincón de la Vieja and Santa Rosa national parks. Don't expect to get errands done on lunch hour, though. Some things must remain sacred.

The colonial charm of Calle Real, south of the parque central, has transformed it into backpacker central; a wander through other areas reveals a scruffier ambience.

Late July rings in the raucous festivities of **Guanacaste Day** (July 25) at the fair grounds on the west side of town. The cherry-on-top is the *tope* (horse parade) – a mix of rodeo and country fair complete with a cattle auction, dancing, drinking and bull-riding.



Information

Pl@net Internet (Calle Real btwn Avs Central & 2; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-10pm) offers travelers speedy machines in spacious, air-con cubes. Both **Banco Nacional** (Av 25 de Julio btwn Calles 6 & 8) and **Banco de Costa Rica** (cnr Calle Central & Av 1) have 24-hour ATMs.

The useful **Sabanero Art Market & Tourist Information Center** (☎ 362 6926; www.elsabanero.8k.com; Calle 8 btwn Avs Central & 1) provides bus schedules, tour information and taxi assistance. A number of area hotels provide good deals on car rentals.

Sleeping

Hotel Liberia (☎ 666 0161; Calle Real btwn Avs Central & 2; s/d US\$7/10, with bathroom US\$11/20) At the heart of this faded backpacker haven you'll find a courtyard abuzz with travelers. Rooms with worn bunks and crumbling cement walls beg for a remodel, but the staff are attentive and helpful.

Hotel Guanacaste (☎ 666 0085; www.higuanacaste.com; cnr Av 3 & Calle 12; dm/s US\$7/15) Convenient to buses but slim on charm, this cement HI-affiliate has small windowless rooms with all the ambience of a truck stop. That said, it's very clean.

Hospedaje Puente Real (☎ 666 1112; Calle Real btwn Av 8 & 10; r per person without/with air-con US\$10/14; ☎) This beautiful colonial home with sloping wood ceilings, balcony and original fixtures is a pleasant lodging run mostly by the owner's chatty teenagers. Beds are comfortable and the shared baths are squeaky clean. Breakfast is included.

Hospedaje Casa Vieja (☎ 665 5826; Av 4 btwn Calle Real & Calle 2; r per person without/with air-con US\$14/18; ☎) A romantic haven for couples with Victorian furniture, rose-colored tiles and sheer gauzy curtains. There's an attractive patch of lawn out back and a small kitchen for fixing breakfast.

La Casona (☎ 666 2971; marjuzuniga@hotmail.com; cnr Calle Real & Av 6; s/d with bathroom US\$14/28; ☎) Aside from the indifferent welcome, this pink, wooden house seeks to comfort and cheer, with rockers, bright colors and natural fibers. The TV room is perfect for lounging.

Hotel El Punto (☎ 666 8493; Interamericana btwn Avs 25 de Julio & 2; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$21/41/48/53) Once an elementary school, El Punto is now one of the chicest hotels in Liberia. Rooms here include ultra-modern loft apartments with private showers, small kitchens, minimalist accents and MOMA-worthy art.

Hostal Ciudad Blanca (☎ 666 3962; Av 4 btwn Calles 1 & 3; s/d US\$30/50; ☎) This completely refurbished colonial mansion offers attractive rooms with

cable TV and hot-water bathrooms. The attached restaurant-bar oozes charm – a perfect spot for a nightcap.

Eating

Café Liberia (Calle 8 btwn Avs 25 de Julio & 2; snacks US\$1-2; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) This hip travelers' haunt serves stiff espresso, strong tea and home-made pastries.

Los Camales (Calle Central btwn 7 & 5; plates US\$2-5) This women's collective serves traditional Guanacaste food – great pots of chicken and salsa for the masses.

Las Tinajas (Calle 2 btwn Av Central & 1; meals US\$4-7) On the west side of the parque central, this is the spot to watch the town mutts run around while sipping a cold beer.

Paso Real (☎ 666 3455; Av Central btwn Calles Real & 2; mains US\$5-10; ☎ 11am-10pm) It's worth shelling out for seafood here with deadly good mussels au gratin and snappy service. It's upstairs from Tienda la Nueva. The coveted balcony offers breezy views of the parque central.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aeropuerto Internacional Daniel Oduber Quirós (LIR) is 12km east of Liberia. International airlines currently landing here include American Airlines, Continental and Delta. NatureAir and Sansa fly daily between Liberia and San José (with connections all over the country) for about US\$80 one way, US\$160 round trip. A taxi to Liberia costs US\$10.

BUS

From **Terminal Pullmitan** (Av 5 btwn Calles 10 & 12): **La Cruz/Peñas Blancas** (US\$1.25; 2hr) Departs 5:30am, 8:30am, 9am, 11am, noon, 2pm, 4:45pm and 8pm. **Managua, Nicaragua** (US\$10; 5hr) Departs 8:30am, 9:30am and 1pm (buy ticket in advance). **Playa del Coco** (US\$0.75; 1hr) Departs 5:30am, 8am, 9am, 12:30pm, 2pm, 4pm and 6pm. **San José** (US\$5; 4hr) Departs hourly 6am to 7pm.

From **Terminal Liberia** (Av 7 btwn Calles 12 & 14): **Cañas** (US\$1; 1½hr) Departs 5:45am, 1:30pm, 4:30pm and 5:10pm.

Nicoya, via Filadelfia & Santa Cruz (US\$1.25; 2hr) Alfaró departs hourly from 4am to 8pm. **Playa Hermosa, Playa Panamá** (US\$0.75; 1¼hr) Tralapa departs 7:30am, 11:30am, 3:30pm, 5:30pm, 7pm. **Playa Tamarindo** (US\$1.25; 2hr) Departs 5:15am, 7am, 10:15am, 12:15pm, 2:30pm and 6pm. **Puntarenas** (US\$1.40; 3hr) Departs from 5am to 3:30pm.

PARQUE NACIONAL RINCÓN DE LA VIEJA

Active Volcán Rincón de la Vieja (1895m) is the steamy main attraction, but the region bubbles with fumaroles, tepid springs, and steaming, flatulent mud pits. (If this doesn't sound like fun, you never read Dr Seuss). All these can be visited on well-maintained but sometimes steep trails, and if you've never visited Yellowstone National Park, this is a good substitute.

The park is home to 300 bird species as well as morpho butterflies, tapirs, monkeys and pumas. Watch out for ticks, especially in grassy areas – wear closed shoes and trousers. About 700m west of Las Pailas ranger station, the Sendero Cangreja leads 5km to **Catarata la Cangreja**, a waterfall plunging from a high cliff into a blue lagoon ideal for swimming. Hiking the volcano **Rincón de la Vieja** is an adventurous 16km round trip. Take a guide or be extra careful to avoid stumbling into geysers (it's happened).

The park is 25km northeast of Liberia, reached by a poor road. There are two entrances with a park ranger station, each with camping areas. Most visitors enter through the **Las Pailas sector** (☎ 661 8139; admission US\$7) on its western flank. (A private road is needed to reach the park and costs US\$2 per person.) Going east from the ranger station, a circular trail (about 8km) takes you past boiling mud pools (Las Pailas), sulphurous fumaroles and a miniature volcano. Heading north, trails lead 8km one way to the summit area. There are two waterfalls to the west of the ranger station, the largest dropping from a cliff into a lagoon where you can swim.

The **Santa María ranger station** to the east is the closest to the sulphurous hot springs and also has an observation tower and a nearby waterfall.

Sleeping

Both ranger stations have **camping** (US\$2) with water, pit toilets, showers, tables and grills. No fuel is available, so bring wood, charcoal or a camping stove. Mosquito nets or insect repellent are needed in the wet season.

Just 3km from the park's Santa María sector, **Rinconcito Lodge** (☎ 200 0074; www.rinconcito.lodge.com; s/d US\$18/30, campsite US\$3; meals US\$4-6) is a recommended budget option. Cabins are attractive and rustic and the scenery whimsical and lovely. The lodge is the best

place around for inexpensive package deals. Regular shuttles provide transportation to and from Liberia.

Getting There & Away

The Las Pailas sector is accessible via a 20km gravel road beginning at a signed turnoff from the Interamericana 5km north of Liberia. To reach the park you must use a private road (US\$2 per person). Drivers must have 4WD in the rainy season. There's no public transportation, but hotels in Liberia can arrange transport from Liberia for around US\$15 per person each way. Alternately, you can hire a 4WD taxi for about US\$25 each way.

The Santa María ranger station is accessible via a rougher road beginning at Barrio la Victoria in Liberia. There is no public bus service. Taxis cost US\$45 each way.

PARQUE NACIONAL SANTA ROSA

The park is a wild space of pristine beaches, tropical dry forests and savannahs of thorn trees and swaying *jaragua* grass. For visitors it's sensory delight. The wildlife on Península Santa Elena is both varied and prolific, especially during the dry season. The rainy months of September and October are best for turtle watching. Here you'll find *arribadas* (mass-nesting) of up to 8000 olive ridley sea turtles.

The surfing at Playa Naranjo is world renowned, especially near Witch's Rock and Ollie's Point.

Buses between Liberia and the Nicaragua border of Peñas Blancas stop at the entrance; rangers can help you catch a return bus. You can also arrange private transportation from the hotels in Liberia for about US\$15 per person round trip.

Information

The **park entrance** (☎ 666 5051; admission US\$6, campsite US\$2; ☎ 8am-4pm) is on the west side of the Interamericana, 35km north of Liberia. From there, it is another 7km walk to the **park headquarters** (☎ 666 5051), where you'll find an information center, campground, museum, research station and nature trail. This is also the administrative center for the Area de Conservación Guanacaste (ACG) and has information about Parque Nacional Rincón de la Vieja and Parque Nacional Guanacaste. Reserve ahead to stay at the **research station** (dm US\$20, meals US\$3-7), with bunk rooms, cold showers and electricity.

There is a shady developed **campground** (US\$2) close to the park headquarters, with a picnic area, toilets and cold-water showers. A 12km trail leads down to the coast to Playa Naranjo. The campsites have pit toilets and showers, but no potable water – bring your own. To drive you need a high-clearance 4WD vehicle for river crossings, inquire with rangers for road conditions.

Sights & Activities

Playa Naranjo, a spectacular beach to the south, has good surfing and is close to the **Witch's Rock** break, famous for its 3m curls (not recommended for beginners). There's a campground with pit toilets, but no potable water. Call ahead regarding road conditions. Although this is a beach break, there are rocks near the river mouth, and be especially careful near the estuary as it's a rich feeding ground for crocodiles during the tide changes. The surfing is equally legendary off Playa Portero Grande at **Ollie's Point**, which boasts the best right-hander in Costa Rica.

The historic Santa Rosa Hacienda unfortunately burnt down in 2001, but has now been completely rebuilt. A small **museum** inside describes the 1856 battle fought here and has displays on Costa Rican life in the 19th century. A few antique artifacts that survived the fire are on display. Another exhibit deals with the ecological significance and wildlife of the park.

Near the museum is a 1km **nature trail**, with signs explaining the varied plant and animal life of Santa Rosa. You will see a fine selection of the park's 240 species of trees and shrubs, and 253 species of bird. Monkeys, snakes, iguanas and other animals are also seen regularly, with bats being the most common: 50 or 60 species have been identified here.

The best turtle beach is **Playa Nancite** in the south, and during September and October you may see as many as 8000 olive ridley turtles on the beach at once. Nancite is restricted, but permission can be obtained from the park service to see this spectacle. Flashlights and flash photography are prohibited, as is fishing and hunting.

PARQUE NACIONAL GUANACASTE

Parque Nacional Guanacaste is an eastern extension of the habitat of Parque Nacional Santa Rosa, with dry tropical rain forest climbing toward the humid cloud forest of Volcán Orosi (1487m) and Volcán Cacao (1659m). The protection of this ancient migratory route between the coast and highlands allows various animals to continue as they have for millennia.

Hiking trails are mostly undeveloped as the area is primarily used for scientific research. For information, contact the **ACG headquarters** (☎ 666 5051) in Parque Nacional Santa Rosa. Day tours from Liberia include a horseback ride to Volcán Cacao.

PEÑAS BLANCAS & LA CRUZ

Peñas Blancas is a busy border herding traffic through to Rivas, Nicaragua. As there is no lodging here, spend the night and change money in the hill town of **La Cruz**, 20km south.

Shoestringers and migrant workers grab their Zs at **Cabinas Santa Rita** (☎ 679 9062; s/d US\$3/6, with air-con US\$13/21; 🚽), in dark, clean doubles. Overlooking Bahía Salinas, German-run **Hotel Bella Vista** (☎ 679 8060; www.bavarian-constructions.com/hotelbv; per person with breakfast US\$15, dinner extra US\$5; 📺 🚽) offers well-furnished rooms with hot water, cable TV and terraces. Guests can relax at the pool or enjoy *casados* and beer at the attached restaurant.

GETTING TO RIVAS, NICARAGUA

Peñas Blancas–Rivas is a busy border crossing so get there early. The entry fee into Nicaragua is US\$7. There is no charge to enter Costa Rica, but leaving Nicaragua costs US\$2, payable in US dollars only (banks on either side will change local colones and córdobas for dollars).

The border posts, generally open 6am to 8pm daily, are 1km apart; you can hire a golf cart (US\$2) to make the run. Hordes of totally useless touts will offer to 'guide' you through the simple crossing. If you let them carry your luggage, they will charge you whatever they want. From the border, buses to Rivas (US\$0.75, 45 minutes) depart every 30 minutes.

Alternatively, taxis on the Nicaraguan side of the border can whisk you to Rivas (US\$6), the San Jorge ferry (US\$8), San Juan del Sur (US\$8) and Granada (US\$25).

See p502 for information on crossing the border from Nicaragua.



In La Cruz, the Transportes Deldú counter sells tickets and stores bags. Buses to Peñas Blancas (US\$1, 45 minutes) go at 5am, 7am, 7:45am, 10:45am, 1:20pm and 4:10pm. Those to Bahía Salinas (US\$1, one hour) depart at 7am, noon and 4pm. Transportes Deldú goes to Liberia (US\$1, two hours) roughly every two hours between 6:15am and 6:30pm. Buses for San José (US\$5, five hours) go at 5:45am, 8am, 10am, 11am, 12:20pm, 2pm and 4:15pm.

PENÍNSULA DE NICOYA

The Nicoya Peninsula is a sun-drenched strip of land with over 130km of stunning coastline backed by dry, tropical rain forest. As looks go, it's a beauty and the most popular tourist destination in the whole country.

Much of the Nicoya Peninsula is home to the *sabanero*, Guanacaste's cowboy. While the coastline experiences a real-estate frenzy of colonizing gringos, the interior is still the heartland of farming and ranching. Some spots do still exist where you need to order your *casado* in Spanish.

In the past, poor access kept development in check. The recently constructed Friendship Bridge and the international airport in Liberia have created fast-track access. The resort mania around Playa Panamá and Playa Tambor is quickly spreading south. With record numbers of foreigners flocking to Nicoya, it's more important than ever for visitors to be conscientious about their impact.

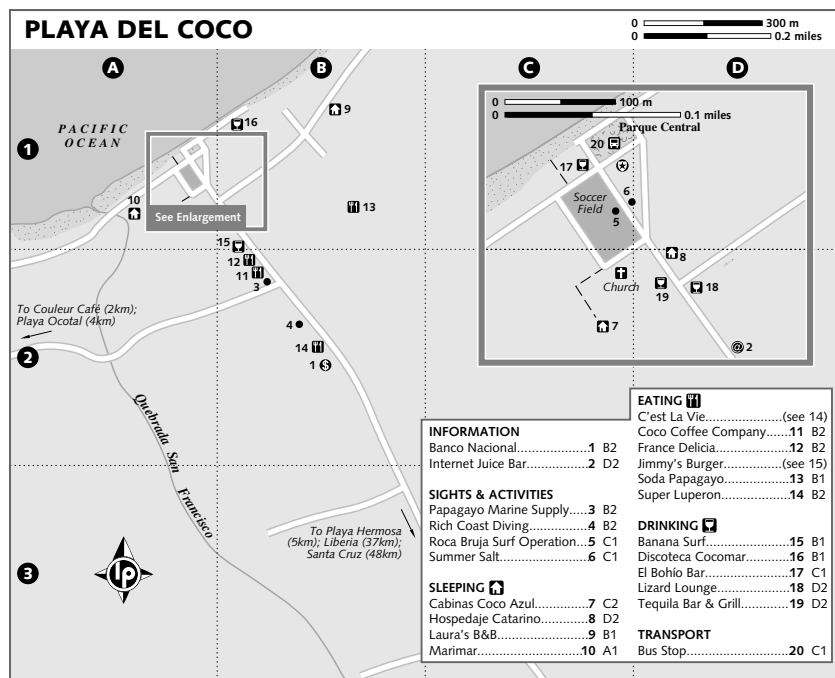
PLAYA DEL COCO

Connected by good roads to San José and just 37km west of Liberia, El Coco is the most accessible of the peninsula's beaches. There's a party atmosphere and plenty of marine activities, but the town itself is scruffy. Some might like its chaotic, unpolished feel, but a burgeoning ambience of condo villages and a littered coastline has beach connoisseurs headed elsewhere.

In mid-July, the **Fiesta de la Virgen del Mar** features a colorful boat procession in the harbor and a horse pageant.

Information

Surf the internet with a tall, cold papaya shake at **Internet Juice Bar** (☎ 8am-9pm; per hr US\$1), on the road into town. It also rents mountain bikes for US\$8 per day.



The Banco Nacional exchanges US dollars and traveler's checks and has an ATM.

Activities

A prime site to dive or snorkel, El Coco's diverse marine life includes stingrays, turtles, dolphins and whales. Recommended outfitters include **Rich Coast Diving** (☎ 670 0176; www.richcoastdiving.com) and Swiss-owned **Summer Salt** (☎ 670 0380; www.summer-salt.com; two dives US\$70).

If you want to surf, local boat charters access Witch's Rock and Ollie's Point in Parque Nacional Santa Rosa. **Roca Bruja Surf Operation** (☎ 381 9166; www.rocabruja.50g.com) is a licensed operator. An eight-hour tour to both breaks is US\$250 for five people.

Sport fishing, sailing and sea kayaking are also popular. **Papagayo Marine Supply** (☎ 670 0354; papagayo@infoweb.co.cr) offers info and supplies for anglers. The preferred beach for swimming and snorkeling is **Playa Ocotral**, 4km away.

Sleeping & Eating

If only the lodgings were half as attractive as the dining options. Budget digs have cold-water showers unless otherwise noted.

Hospedaje Catarino (☎ 670 0156; r per person US\$8; 📺) If you're shooting for cheap this place should do it, but a nearby disco might short-change your shuteye.

Marimar (☎ 670 1212; r per person US\$14; 📺) Near the water, offers ample, unglorified rooms with starchy white sheets.

Cabinas Coco Azul (☎ 670 0431; r US\$23) The rooms here are superclean, run by Ray, an affable retiree.

Laura's B&B (☎ 670 0751; www.laurashousecr.com; s/d with fan US\$25/35, r with air-con US\$35-45; 📺 📺) Laura's B&B, 250m east of Lizard Lounge, is inviting, cozy and meticulous. It offers all the perks and a terribly tempting miniature pool surrounded by deck chairs.

Coco Coffee Company (bagels US\$2; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Sat) Wake up to the cappuccinos and bacon-and-egg sandwiches here, an expat magnet if we ever saw one.

Soda Papagayo (daily special US\$3.50; ☎ 7am-4pm) The town's best *casados* are here. Dine at plastic tables under the tin roof.

France Delicia (meals US\$3-14; ☎ 10am-7:30pm Mon-Sat) This is a take-out kitchen that whips up quiche, salads and daily specials from scratch.

Super Luperon (☎ 7:30-8pm) Next to Banco Nacional this food warehouse stocks all things edible, its secret weapon is the authentic French-run bakery C'est la Vie. We dare you not to scarf your warm almond croissant or baguette while waiting in line to pay.

Couleur Cafe (☎ 670 1696; Triangulo los Mongos, road to Ocotral; mains US\$8-15; ☎ 11am-2:30pm & 6pm-10pm Tue-Sat, 6pm-10pm Sun) This is further evidence of the French invasion – a new Belgian-French-run restaurant and bar in a knockout setting. The tropical garden has thatched tables and bamboo stylings. Start with cocktails and brie pastries or eggplant with goat's cheese. Mains include big salads and roasted duck and Sunday means a huge BBQ. It's definitely worth the taxi out.

On the plaza, El Bohío Bar is a favorite watering hole. A hotspot for liver damage, Banana Surf serves perennial favorites such as Jaegermeister and Red Bull. Tequila Bar & Grill is the spot for margarita pitchers.

Cut the rug at Lizard Lounge or Discoteca Cocomar on the beach, the biggest (and sweatiest) dance-fest around. Finally, hit **Jimmy's Burger** (burgers US\$2; ☎ 3pm-3am) trailer for a post-party patty.

Getting There & Away

Taxis between Playa del Coco and Playa Hermosa or Ocotral cost between US\$5 and US\$7. Buses stop on the parque central, across from the police station.

Filadelfia, for connection to Santa Cruz (US\$0.75; 45min) At 11:30am and 4:30pm.

Liberia (US\$0.75; 1hr) Departs 5:30am, 7am, 9am, 11am, 1pm, 3pm, 5pm and 6pm.

San José (US\$5.25; 5hr) Pullmitan leaves 4am, 8am, 2pm.

PLAYA TAMARINDO

A little more than 30 years ago Tamarindo was home to 21 families. Then *Endless Summer II* was made and it burgeoned into southern

California, without adequate plumbing and roads to support it. The expats who first came to take refuge in a *pura vida* lifestyle (and create tourism) now look at their Frankenstein a bit bewildered.

The question? Sustainability. Alas, the sea turtles are long gone, and in their place are high-rise condos. A constant stream of delivery and construction trucks rip down the strip, covering the boutique eateries, souvenir stands, even the sarong-clad *turistas* from Denver and London, in a thick coat of golden dust.

To be fair, plenty of people do enjoy themselves in Tamarindo. It is one place that absolutely caters to visitors. If you came to Costa Rica to party all night long, hook up with strangers, swim and surf some great (but crowded) waves, welcome to paradise.

Information

Tourist information is available from any of the tour operators in town. A helpful website is www.tamarindobeach.org.

Bookstore **Jaime Peligro** (☎ 820 9004; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) sells new and used books, CDs and DVDs. Internet cafés are plentiful, with **@Internet** (per hr US\$4; ☎ 9am-9pm) as good as any. For laundry service, hit **Backwash** (per kg US\$1.25; ☎ Mon-Sat). There's an ATM at **San José Bank** (☎ 653 1617; ☎ 8:30am-3:30pm), which also exchanges US dollars cash and traveler's checks.

For a refreshingly frank vision of modern Tamarindo, pick up a copy of the local 'zine *Flyswatter*.

Dangers & Annoyances

The tourist invasion has left Tamarindo grappling with growing drug and prostitution problems. Vendors openly ply their wares (and their women) on the main road by the

CHARGE IT! – COSTA RICA'S TOP FIVE SURF SPOTS

Costa Rica offers some great surfing. We asked Greg Gordon of Costa Rica Surf Report to rank the country's top breaks and he came up with the following. For a daily surf report, log onto www.crsurf.com.

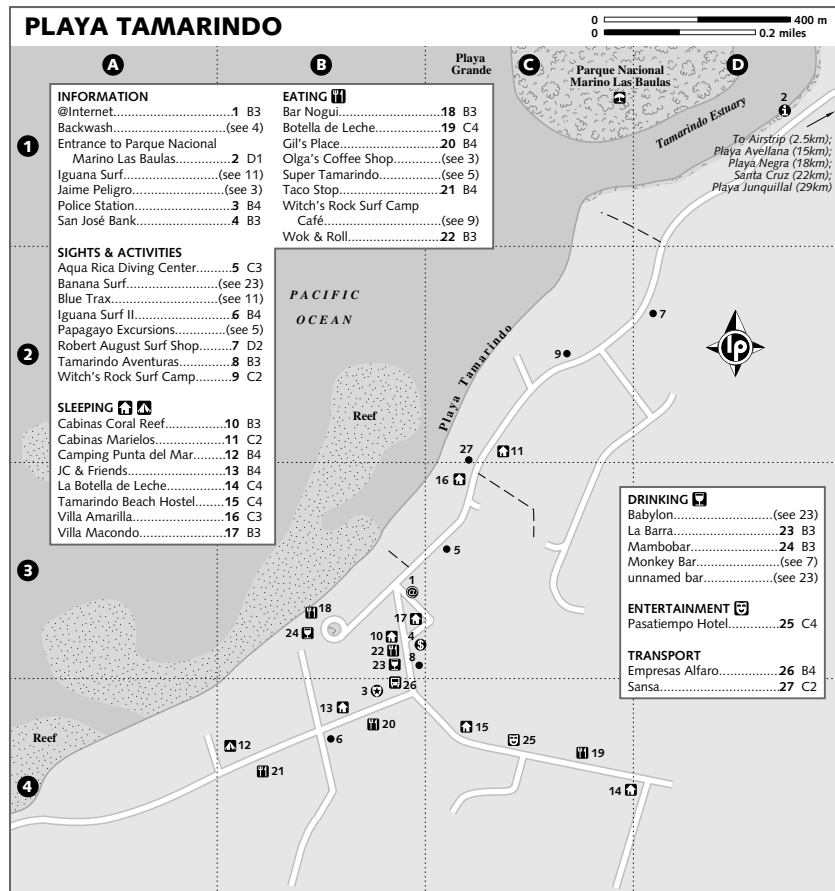
Pavones (p622) Costa Rica's legendary longest left.

Playa Hermosa (p606) Monster waves, day-in, day-out.

Playa Grande (p596) Wilderness waves in a national park.

Salsa Brava (p567) A big bruiser, thanks to the rough reef.

Witch's Rock/Ollie's Point (p589) Wild, out-of-the-way waves in Santa Rosa.



rotunda, and some bars can get rough at closing time when everyone has had a little too much of everything.

Also, be aware that theft is a problem. Leave your hotel room locked, use a safe and don't leave valuables on the beach.

Activities

SURFING

The most popular wave around Tamarindo is a medium-sized right-hander that breaks directly in front of the Diriá Hotel. The waters here are full of beginner surfers learning the ropes. There is also a good left that's fed by the river mouth, a spot also popular with crocodiles during the rising tide (coincidentally the best time to surf). Locals know a few other

spots in the area, but we're certainly not going to ruin their fun – ask around.

More advanced surfers will appreciate the bigger, faster and less-crowded waves at Avelana & Negra (p596) and Junquillal (p596) to the south and Playa Grande (p596) to the north. Note that the best months for surfing coincide with the rainy season.

Surf schools charge US\$30 for 1½ to two-hour lessons. Often a company can keep the board for a few hours beyond that to do some practice. All outfits can organize excursions to popular breaks, rent equipment and give surf lessons. If you're going to be surfing a lot, it's worth it to buy a board here or in Jacó, then sell it when the trip is over. For surfing outfitters try:

Banana Surf (☎ 653 1270; www.bananasurfclub.com) This Argentinean-run outfit has the fairest prices in town on new and used boards.

Iguana Surf (☎ 653 0148; www.iguanasurf.net) Has two locations. Surf taxi service goes to Playa Grande (US\$10 per person) and Playa Negra (US\$25 per person).

Robert August Surf Shop (☎ 653 0114; rasurfshop@yahoo.com) Based in the Best Western Tamarindo Vista Villas, this famous shop is an obligatory stop.

Witch's Rock Surf Camp (☎ 653 0239; www.witchsrocksurfcamp.com) Board rentals, surf camps, lessons and regular excursions to Witch's Rock and Ollie's Point (p588) are available, though pricey.

Tours

Local agencies offer boat trips, scuba diving, snorkeling, scooter rentals, and turtle observation. Many also rent equipment. The most reputable include the following agencies:

Agua Rica Diving Center (☎ 653 0094; www.aguarica.net)

Blue Trax (☎ 653 1705; www.bluetraxcr.com) For mountain biking.

Papagayo Excursions (☎ 653 0254; www.papagayoexcursions.com)

Tamarindo Aventuras (☎ 653 0108; www.tamarindoaventuras.net) For rentals.

Sleeping

Rates given are for high season but low season runs 25% cheaper.

Camping Punta del Mar (US\$3) Hang with the local grunge. The bathrooms are primitive; watch your stuff.

La Botella de Leche (☎ 653 0189; www.botelladeleche.com; dm US\$8, s/d US\$14/28; ☺) Chaotic in that homey way, this Argentine-run hostel is attentive and attractive. Air-con keeps even the cramped rooms as fresh as a dairy case. The common area is studded with bean-bag chairs and fuzzy (yes, real) pets.

JC & Friends (☎ 374 8246; Calle Real; campsite US\$9; dm/s/d US\$11/15/30; ☺) A great new option one block from the beach in front of Iguana Surf II, the first feature you'll notice is the cool blue pool. In addition, there are comfortable dorms, a pool table and congenial staff. Look for monkeys that visit to pig out on the fruit trees. Internet is free and there's a clean communal kitchen.

Tamarindo Beach Hostel (☎ 653 0944; dm US\$12; ☺) The flat-screen TV, wrap-around sofa and impeccable large kitchen let you know this is upmarket as hostels go. Just don't be

here when the pipes occasionally back up. The atmosphere is social and air-con ensures a comfortable night's sleep.

Cabinas Coral Reef (☎ 653 0291; s/d US\$10/15) This is a decent-enough flophouse with shared bathrooms, dark rooms and just wafer-thin mattresses.

Cabinas Marielos (☎ 653 0141; d without/with air-con US\$25/35; ☺) You can squeeze some personality out of the bougainvillea, otherwise this option is nondescript, overpriced for single travelers, but amenable.

Villa Amarilla (☎ 653 0038; carpen@racsa.co.cr; d with/without bathroom US\$45/30, extra person US\$10; ☺) A beachfront inn with a quaint atmosphere. All rooms have hot water, a fridge and safe, and share an outdoor kitchen.

Villas Macondo (☎ 653 0812; www.villasmacondo.com; s/d/tr US\$30/35/45, with air-con US\$50/55/65; ☺) A warm and personal atmosphere makes this spot a nice retreat from the hubbub (although high-rises are coming up next door). Guests enjoy an inviting pool, communal kitchen and spacious, colorful rooms.

Eating

New eateries are always popping up in Tamarindo (and shutting down), so we list the classic favorites here. Get groceries at Super Tamarindo. Visitors are challenged to find cheap eats but the sushi is divine.

Olga's Coffee Shop (dishes US\$1-3) Grab a stool at this Russian-owned café and sling back homemade pastries with organic coffee. Be nice, as Olga's not always chipper in the morning.

Taco Stop (dishes US\$3-5) A happy Santa Fé ambience permeates this shady shack serving fresh tacos, shrimp and chicken burritos. Shoestringers will revel in the generous portions and low prices.

Gil's Place (dishes US\$4-6) You can come to hear a real Queens accent but you might as well try a loaded breakfast burrito or tasty Mexican *tostada*. Gil's is simple, good food.

Witch's Rock Surf Camp Café (dishes US\$4-7) Hunker down at this seafront surfer haven for hearty breakfasts and seriously stacked snacks (see the 'nachos as big as your ass'). It's a great spot to grab a cold one and banish your munchies.

Bar Nogui (dishes US\$6-11) Upmarket *casados* feature grilled fish, mixed meats and unbelievable shrimp and lobster at this popular beachside restaurant. Come early for dinner or join the bank line out the door.

Wok & Roll (dishes US\$9-15) In an open kitchen chef Kandice chops, wraps, woks and steams noodles, sushi and stir-fries before your hungry eyes. The tantalizing pan-Asian menu raises the stakes with original offerings like spicy ginger sesame or green bean noodles. Hands down the best Asian this side of San Francisco.

Drinking & Nightlife

The wild spot in town is Mambobar, where the mood can get downright predatory. The Monkey Bar, inside the Best Western, has a more low-key ladies' night on Friday.

The Pasatiempo Hotel has a great Tuesday night live-music jam. Wednesday night means Latin dancing at La Barra and Thursday night means reggae at Babylon. Any night of the week music pumps loudly at the unnamed bar, even if no-one is there.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airstrip is 3km north of town. Sansa has 14 daily flights to and from San José (one way US\$78), while NatureAir (US\$80) has five.

BUS

Buses from San José (US\$5, six hours) depart from the Empresas Alfaro office next to the police station at 3:30am, 5:45am and 1pm.

Catch the following buses at any point on the main road:

Liberia (US\$1; 2hr) Departs 5:30am, 9am, 11:30am, 3pm and 5pm.

Santa Cruz (US\$0.75; 1¼hr) At 6am, 9am, 11am, 3:30pm and 4pm.

PARQUE NACIONAL MARINO LAS BAULAS

This seaside reserve just north of Tamarindo village includes Playa Grande. It is a major surf destination and one of the most important nesting sites for the *baula* (leatherback turtle). The world's largest turtle, leatherbacks can top 300kg. Nesting season is October to March, when more than a hundred turtles can be seen laying their eggs during the course of a night.

Visitors must watch the activities from specified areas, accompanied by a guide or ranger, and flash photography or lights are not allowed, as they disturb the laying process.

The **park office** (☎ 653 0470; admission US\$16) is by the northern entrance. Reserve a turtle tour in advance. A good way to begin your tour is

with a visit to **El Mundo de la Tortuga** (☎ 653 0471; admission US\$5; ☎ 4pm-dawn), an informative self-guided exhibit about leatherback turtles, near the northern end of the park. If you're looking for a volunteer project, the park office usually accepts volunteers to help monitor nesting.

PLAYA AVELLANA & PLAYA NEGRA

These popular surfing beaches have some of the best, most consistent waves in the area. One part of Avellana is known as 'Pequeño Hawaii' for its fast, hollow breaks. The beaches are 15km south of Tamarindo by road. The road is dismal and requires a 4WD in the wet season to cross three rivers. The difficult access keeps it refreshingly uncrowded.

Among the upmarket lodges, there are a few cheap options. **Cabinas Gregorios** (☎ 658 8319; per person US\$4, campsite US\$3) tests shoestrings with 'rooms' meaning open-air stalls with shared bathroom. Bring repellent! **Rancho Iguana Verde** (☎ 658 8310; r per person US\$10) has six dark but reasonably clean rooms. All of the *cabinas* have *sodas* that serve basic meals. In Avellana, kick back at **Lola's on the Beach** (meals US\$5-10) with pizza and a beer. In Playa Negra to the south, you'll find surfer outpost **Pablo's Picasso** (☎ 658 8158; dm US\$9, r per person US\$15, deluxe d US\$45; ☎). Dorms and standard rooms share cold-water bathrooms. If your stomach's rumbling, take on the restaurant's half-kilo 'burger as big as your head.' Before leaving the area, you'll pass the French-owned **Playa Negra Surf Camp** (☎ 658 8140; playanegrasc@hotmail.com; s/d US\$25/30), a great option for self-caterers since there's a fully equipped kitchen. The friendly owner Alan is eager to offer surf tips, and gives lessons for reasonable prices.

There is no public transport here, though surf camps in Tamarindo organize trips.

PLAYA JUNQUILLAL

Junquillal is a 2km-wide, grey-sand wilderness beach that's absolutely stunning and always deserted – probably because the surf is high and the rips are fierce. Ridley turtles nest here from July to November, but in smaller numbers than at the refuges.

You can camp on the beach provided you have your own food and water. Lodging is expensive; among the cheapest is **El Lugarcito** (☎ 658 8436; ellugarcito@racsa.co.cr; d incl breakfast US\$50), a hospitable Dutch-run B&B. Intimate and quaint, it's decorated with indigenous pottery and has stone floors and vaulted ceilings.

Buses leave from the beach for Santa Cruz at 5:45am, noon and 4pm.

SANTA CRUZ

pop 16,000

This small cowboy town, 57km southwest of Liberia, holds the dubious title of being the hottest city in Costa Rica. Most travelers' experience here consists of changing buses and buying a mango or two. A **rodeo** and **fiesta** are held during the second week in January and on July 25th for **Día de Guanacaste**. The fun festivities showcase prize bulls, fried food and ear-popping music.

An interesting excursion is to the nearby village of **Guañil**, 12km away, where you can buy pre-Columbian Chorotega-style pottery from the families who make it. Take a taxi or an infrequent local bus (ask for schedules at Plaza de los Mangos).

Sleeping & Eating

Pensión Isabel (☎ 680 0173; per person US\$6) This friendly budget place, 400m south and 50m east of the plaza, offers bare, whitewashed rooms with shared bathroom.

Hotel la Estancia (☎ 680 0476; s/d US\$20/32; ☎) Upmarket by comparison, Estancia, 100m west of the plaza, has comfortable rooms with cable TV and private bathroom set around a motor court.

Hotel la Pampa (☎ 680 4586; d with/without air-con US\$37/30; ☎) Thirty-three simple and clean modern rooms 50m west of the plaza, all with bathroom and cable TV.

La Fábrica de Tortillas (casados US\$2.50; ☎ 6am-6:30pm) Feast on *casados* here, aka Coopetortillas, 700m south of the plaza. The corrugated warehouse offers shared wooden tables in view of a wood-stove kitchen.

El Milenio (dishes US\$3-6) A Chinese restaurant, 100m west of the plaza, serving colossal portions of fried rice and decent stir-fries with a big-screen TV and blessed air-con.

Getting There & Away

Departing from the terminal on the north side of Plaza de los Mangos:

Liberia (US\$1; 1½hr) Every 30min from 5:30am to 7:30pm.

Nicoya (US\$0.50; 1hr) Every 30min from 6am to 9:30pm.

San José (US\$5.50; 4¼hr) Tralapa has nine buses from 3am to 5pm; Empresas Alfaro departs at 5:30am, 7:30am, 10am, 10:30am, 11:30am, 12:30pm, 3pm and 5pm – buy Alfaro tickets at the office 200m south of the Plaza, the bus leaves on the main road north of town.

Departing from the terminal 400m east of Plaza de los Mangos:

Playa Junquillal (US\$2; 1½hr) Departs in the afternoon.

Playa Tamarindo (US\$2; 1½hr) Every two to three hours.

NICOYA

pop 28,000

Pleasant Nicoya is a regional hub and capital, although its laid-back character and inland location lend it a dallying air. Situated 23km south of Santa Cruz, it is named after a Chorotega chief who welcomed the first Spaniards in 1523. (A gesture he no doubt regretted.) The attractive **Iglesia de San Blas** on the parque central dates from the mid-17th century.

Banks will exchange US dollars and there's a 24-hour ATM 100m east and 100m north of the parque central. For internet access, head to **Ciber Club** (per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 1-8pm Sun), 50m south of the parque central.

The **Area de Conservación Tempisque** (ACT; ☎ 685 5667; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) assists with accommodation and cave exploration at Parque Nacional Barra Honda.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Chorotega (☎ 685 5245; Calle Central btwn Aves 4 & 6; r per person US\$4) Our budget pick, where a pleasant family keeps clean bare-bones rooms.

Hotel Venecia (☎ 685 5325; Av Central btwn Calles Central & 1; r per person US\$4) On the north side of the parque central, Venecia has cramped rooms with tired mattresses, but the reception staff are friendly.

Hotel las Tinajas (☎ 685 5081; 200m east & 100m north of the parque; s/d US\$10/14) Has dated but decent rooms across from the Nicoya terminal. Management is cheerful and there's an attached café.

Hotel Jenny (☎ 685 5050; s/d US\$16/25; ☎) Hotel Jenny, 100m south of the parque central, is the best bet, but is often booked out. Spick-and-span rooms feature air-con, cable TV and private bathroom.

Café Daniela (mains US\$3) This is the best spot for grub, 100m east of the parque central. It's a bustling and bright café serving tasty *huevos rancheros* or breakfast eggs and pastries. Burgers and *casados* round out the lunch and dinner options.

Guayacan Real (US\$2-4) Grab a drink and delicious *bocas* at this consistently packed sports café serving exceptional *ceviche* and *patacones* (fried plantain with bean dip). It's west of the parque central.

Getting There & Away

Leaving from the terminal 100m north and 200m east of the parque, buses for Santa Cruz, Filadelfia and Liberia depart every 30 minutes from 3:50am to 8:30pm. The following leave from the terminal 200m east and 200m south of the parque central:

Liberia (US\$1.25; 2½hr) Departs every 30min from 3am to 8pm.

Playa Naranjo, connects with ferry (US\$1.75; 3hr) At 5am, 9am, 1pm and 5pm.

Playa Nosara (US\$1.50; 4hr) At 5am, 10am, noon, 3pm.

Puntarenas (US\$2.75; 2½hr) Departs 7:35am & 4:20pm.

Sámara (US\$1; 2hr) At 6am, 7:45am, 10am, noon, 2:30pm, 4:20pm, 3:30pm, 6:30pm and 9:45pm.

San José, via Liberia (US\$5; 5hr) Empresas Alfaró departs five times daily.

San José, via Río Tempisque bridge (US\$5.25; 4hr) Empresas Alfaró seven buses from 3am to 5:20pm; Tralapa has buses at 3:20am, 5:20am, 6:50am, 10:45am and 1:45pm.

If you need a taxi, call **Taxis Unidos de Nicoya** (☎ 686 6857).

PARQUE NACIONAL BARRA HONDA

Midway between Nicoya and the mouth of the Río Tempisque, this 2295-hectare national park protects a vast underground system of more than 40 caves. The caverns, which are composed of soft limestone, were carved by rainfall and erosion over a period of about 70 million years. The caves have stalagmites, stalactites and a host of beautiful formations with names such as fried eggs, organ, soda straws, popcorn... you get the idea.

The **ranger station** (☎ 659 1551; admission US\$6; ☎ 8am-4pm) provides information. The caves are only accessible in the dry season, though hiking is year-round. Carry water and let the rangers know where you are going.

You must explore the caves with a guide from the Asociación de Guías Ecologistas de Barra Honda. Make arrangements with a **national-park office** (☎ in Nicoya 686 6760, in Santa Cruz 680 1920, in Bagaces 671 1455). Guides charge about US\$20 for groups of four, and equipment rental is an additional US\$15 per person. Note that caves cannot be entered after 1pm.

At the park entrance you can **camp** (US\$2), with bathrooms and shower facilities, or stay in dorm-style **cabins** (per person US\$12). Reserve accommodations and meals through the ACT office in Nicoya or the rangers.

No bus goes directly to the park, but buses to Santa Ana (1km away) leave Nicoya at 8am,

12:30pm and 3:30pm. The return bus is at 6pm. A taxi from Nicoya costs US\$10.

PLAYA NOSARA

An attractive white-sand beach is backed by a pocket of luxuriant vegetation that attracts birds and wildlife. Expensive hotels clutter the shore and the closest cheap accommodations are in the town, 5km inland. **Backpacker's Bunkhouse** (☎ 682 0249; nosarabunkhouse@yahoo.com; r per person US\$10, campsite US\$6; ☐ ☒) is a recommended base for exploring the area. Open-air rooms share warm-water bathrooms, and there's a small communal kitchen and trail access.

There are a few grocery stores in town as well as a number of small *sodas*, though the best *casados* are at **Rancho Tico** (US\$4-6) at the western end of town. Try the catch of the day, which is usually farm-raised tilapia or red snapper.

Both Sansa and NatureAir have three daily flights to and from San José for about US\$80 each way.

Empresas Alfaró buses to San José (US\$5, five to six hours) depart from the pharmacy near the soccer field at 12:30pm. Traroc departs for Nicoya (US\$2.30, two hours) at 5am, 7am, 12:25pm and 3pm. For US\$0.25 any of these buses will drop you off at the beach.

REFUGIO NACIONAL DE VIDA SILVESTRE OSTIONAL

The small reserve was created in 1992 to protect the *arribadas* or mass-nesting of the olive ridley sea turtles, which arrive by the thousands from July to November with a peak from August to October.

The refuge includes the coastal village of **Ostional**, 8km northwest of Playa Nosara. In the village, both **Hospedaje Guacamaya** (☎ 682 0430; r per person US\$5) and **Cabinas Ostional** (☎ 682 0428; r per person US\$10) have decent rooms with shared bathrooms. **Camping** (US\$3) is permitted behind the centrally located Soda la Plaza, which has a portable toilet.

During the dry months, buses leave twice daily from Santa Cruz. Hitching from Nosara is reportedly easy.

PLAYA SÁMARA

Sámara's crescent beach is one of the most beloved in Costa Rica – it's safe, tranquil, reasonably developed and easily accessible. Not surprisingly, it's popular with vacationing Ticos, backpackers, wealthy tourists, snorkelers and surfers alike, and is starting to go upmarket.

Jesse's Samara Beach Gym & Surf School (☎ 656 0055; whiteagle@racsa.co.cr), 500m east of the police station on the beach, comes recommended by readers.

Information

You can change money at the **Banco Nacional** (☎ 656 0086; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) behind the church. Check your email at **Tropical Latitude** (☎ 656 0120; per hr US\$2), 100m east of the main road. The amiable American owner can provide you with information on everything there is to do in town.

A good source of information is the website www.samarabeach.com.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping los Coco (☎ 656 0496; US\$3) On the eastern edge of the beach with well-maintained facilities.

Cabinas Playa Sámara (☎ 656 0190; per person US\$7) You'll find clean lime-green rooms at this place near the soccer field and dismayingly close to a throbbing nightclub.

Cabinas Villa Kunterbunt (☎ 656 0235; www.cabinas-villa-kunterbunt.com; r per person US\$10; ☎ ☒) Located 3km outside of town on the road to Playa Carillo, this is a great choice if you have your own wheels. Tommy, the German owner, offers colorful cabins alongside a quiet section of beach with a good reef break. Guests can use the communal kitchen.

Bar Restaurant las Olas (☎ 656 0187; d US\$25, camping per person US\$3) This offers the most unique accommodation in town: one- and two-story thatched huts with private bathrooms. As the name implies, there is a very pleasant bar and restaurant.

Soda Ananas (☎ 656 0491; dishes US\$2-5) Near the entrance to town with delicious veggie burgers, fresh salads and fruit smoothies.

Pizza & Pasta a Go-Go (main road; US\$4-9) Custom thin-crust pizzas and fresh pastas with all the fixings.

Shake Joe's (☎ 656 0252; dishes US\$5-10) Flop on an outdoor couch at Shake Joe's, a hip beach-side spot awash with electronica and chilled-out travelers. The French toast starts the day right, though the sunset cocktail ambience is the main attraction.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The Sámara airport is south of town. Sansa flies daily to/from San José (one way US\$78).

BUS

Nicoya (US\$1; 2hr) Traroc departs at 5:30am, 7am, 8:45am, 11:30am, 1:30pm and 4:30pm from the *pulperia* by the soccer field.

San José (US\$5; 5hr) Empresas Alfaró departs from the main drag at 4:30am and 8:30am.

PLAYA NARANJO

This small port on the eastern side of the peninsula has neither a beach nor oranges. It serves only as the terminal for the Puntarenas car ferry. There isn't any reason to hang around, and you probably won't have to as the ferries tend to run reasonably on time.

All transportation is geared to the arrival and departure of the Puntarenas ferry. Buses from Nicoya (US\$1.75, three hours) meet incoming ferries. The **Coonatramar ferry** (☎ 661 1069; passenger/car US\$2/9; 1½hr) to Puntarenas operates daily at 7:30am, 12:30am, 5pm and 9pm. You must have your ticket before boarding.

The right side of the boat has views of Isla San Lucas, the former site of one of Latin America's most notorious prisons. A famous memoir, *La Isla de los Hombres Solos* (available in English as *God was Looking the Other Way*), by José León Sánchez, tells the a gripping tale of life inside it.

PAQUERA

There isn't much around the Puntarenas-Paquera passenger ferry terminal. Paquera village, 4km away, is reached by a very crowded bus. The town has a bank and a couple of budget lodging options though there isn't much to see.

Most travelers take the bus from the ferry terminal directly to Montezuma (US\$2.30, two hours). It's faster to take a taxi, if you can cobble a group together, for about US\$7 per person to Montezuma and to Malpaís for about US\$10.

The **Ferry Peninsular** (☎ 641 0118/515, 661 8282; passenger/car US\$2/9; 1hr) goes to Punta Arenas at 4:30am, 6:30am, 8:30am, 10:30am, 12:30pm, 2:30pm, 4:30pm and 10pm.

MONTEZUMA

The road arrives at Montezuma, plunging steeply and funneling into a circle of shops and cafés. Here clusters of locals converse, hippies hock their handmade jewelry and gypsies wiggle for a spot of change. Charming is a corny word. Let's just say Montezuma is touristy yet still small, and striving to preserve the bohemia that first brought folks here.

It remains largely worthwhile. Lovely white-sand beaches offer great beach-combing and tide-pool studying. Following the coast curving north, beaches become more isolated, more pristine. Low tide offers snorkeling in tide pools, while the rising high-tide offers surf.

Information

Librería Topsy (☎ 8am-4pm in high season) has American newspapers and magazines, mails letters and sells books on wildlife and Costa Rica.

There are no banks. Tour operators can exchange US dollars, euros or traveler's checks. Internet is available at **El Sano Banano** (per hr US\$2). Web resources include www.nicoyapeninsula.com and www.playamontezuma.net.

Activities

A 40-minute river hike leads to a waterfall with a delicious swimming hole. As you head south past Restaurant la Cascada, take the trail to the right just after the bridge. It starts left of the river, crosses and continues on the right. Do not jump the falls – it's the fast-track to a Darwin award. A smaller set of falls is further upriver.

A number of agencies in town offer snorkeling tours to Isla Tortuga (US\$40), guided hikes in Cabo Blanco (US\$25) and horseback tours along the beach and to waterfalls (US\$25). Local outfitters include **Cocozuma** (☎ 642 0911; www.cocozuma.com) and **Montezuma Eco-Tours** (☎ 642 0467; www.playamontezuma.net).

Beautiful beaches line the coast, separated by small rocky headlands. Swimming is possible but the riptides are strong. Be careful and consult locals when in doubt. You can rent a bike (US\$15) from a tour operator to explore the coastal route headed south.

Sleeping

Montezuma can get crowded (especially weekends) and most hotels don't take reservations. The best time to hunt for rooms is 10am, before the buses come. Getting digs with kitchen privileges will save you breakfasts that average US\$4.

Camping is illegal on the beaches. A **camp-site** (US\$3) with bathrooms and cold showers is only a 10-minute walk north of town.

Pensión Lucy (☎ 642 0273; s/d US\$6/12, d with bathroom US\$16) An outstanding budget option, this sturdy beachside bunkhouse is a work of varnished timber with creative use of linoleum. The rooms are simple but immaculate.

Hotel Jenny (r per person US\$6) A rambling house with cramped rooms with mushy beds and cold water out of a spigot. At least the location behind the soccer field promises a quiet night.

Luna Llena (☎ 642 0390; dm US\$9, d US\$15-20) On the hillside and decked in bright blues and mosaic designs, this friendly German-run hotel is terrific value. Rooms share clean kitchens and hot-water bathrooms. Ocean views are lovely and you might spot armadillos and monkeys rustling about.

Hotel Lys (☎ 642 0642; www.hotellysmontezuma.net; d US\$15, campsite US\$6) If you missed the '60s, check out this basic bohemian hotel with small rooms and dark shared bathrooms, amped up with cool colors and Cubist-inspired art. It is run by a group of Italians who allow long-term guests to pay their way by cooking and painting. The community vibe is best appreciated with a beer on the seafront terrace.

Pensión Tucán (☎ 642 0284; d with/without bathroom US\$20/14) A rickety two-story place attentively managed by the crotchety Doña Marta, though rooms are spotless, as are the communal showers.

Mochila Inn (☎ 642 0030; dm US\$9, d/tr cabin US\$25/30) On a forested hillside north of town, this hostel is relaxed and friendly. A rustic bunkhouse has lockers and decks, and there are also secluded wooden cabins. Get intimate with nature in the outdoor showers.

Hotel la Aurora (☎ 642 0051; www.playamontezuma.net/aurora.htm; d US\$25-50, extra person US\$5; ☺) This canary-yellow modern hotel has tile rooms that are airy and clean. Guests have kitchen privileges and laundry service (US\$3).

Hotel los Mangos (☎ 642 0076; www.hotelosmangos.com; d with shared bathroom US\$33, d/tr bungalow US\$30/65; ☺) Resembling a lake house but plopped in the tropics amidst lush, manicured grounds. Groups will dig the ultra-private thatched bungalows. But the real reason to stay here? The pool and Jacuzzi stay open all night.

Eating

Soda Naranjo (casados US\$3) This is the best place for cheap eats in town, where you can get a heaping and delicious fresh fish *casado*.

Bakery Café (meals US\$4-10; ☺; 6am-6pm) Scrumptious baked goods and inventive vegetarian cuisine.

El Sano Banano (☎ 642 0638; dishes from US\$6; ☺; 6am-6pm) El Sano Banano offers yogurt, juices and fruit salads, as well as vegetarian

and seafood meals. It also shows films nightly (US\$5 minimum consumption).

Tairona (meals US\$4-6; ☺; 5pm-10pm) Argentine-run, this place serves outstanding caprese salads, fresh pasta and bubbly thin-crust mozzarella pizzas. Try the focaccia with smoked fish and herbs.

Playa de las Artistas (meals US\$8-20; ☺; 10am-10:30pm) One worthy splurge is this outrageously romantic restaurant, with worn wooden tables set in the sand, lit by flickering candelabras. The illegible handwritten menu changes nightly, but includes delicacies such as smoked cheeses with honey and chilies or Mediterranean-style whole fish cooked to perfection. Service is excellent, as are the fruit-infused cocktails.

Drinking & Nightlife

Chico's Bar is the center of town nightlife and the place to listen to music and ogle strangers. Check in at Luz de Mono for live music; there's house music on Thursday and reggae on Saturday. Otherwise, take in the 7:30pm movie at El Sano Banano (see opposite).

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Jet boats to Jacó (US\$30, one hour) depart at about 9:30am. Make reservations at a tour agency.

BUS

Buses depart in front of Café Iguana; buy your ticket on board.

Cabo Blanco (US\$1; 30min) Departs 8:15am, 10:15am, 2:15pm and 6:15pm.

Paquera (US\$2; 1½hr) At 5:30am, 8am, 10am, noon, 2pm, 4pm and 6pm.

San José (US\$10; 9½hr) At 4:45am.

Santa Teresa (US\$1.20; 45min) At 10:30am and 2:30am.

TAXI

A 4WD taxi can carry five people. Services include Cóbano (US\$6), Cabo Blanco (US\$12), Tambor (US\$25), Malpaís (US\$30) and Paquera (US\$30).

MALPAÍS & SANTA TERESA

Situated on little more than a dirt road, these villages are sudden boomtowns for tourists hunting the next great destination. Make no mistake. Unlike other 'surf towns,' these are all about surfing. While a funky crop of new establishments make it more palatable, there is little more to do here than ride the wild

rollers. Nightlife means board waxing, beer in hand. But if it's your scene, you will adore it. A useful website is www.malpais.net.

Surf Shop Malpaís (☎ 640 0173) rents and fixes boards and also provides lessons.

Five-hundred meters south of Malpaís, **Malpaís Surf Camp & Resort** (☎ 640 0061; www.malpais-surfcamp.com; dm US\$12, d/q US\$20/45, campsite US\$7.50; ☺) has dorm beds in an open-air *ranchito*; bring the repellent.

Heading into Santa Teresa, **Tranquilo Backpackers** (☎ 640 0589; www.tranquilobackpackers.com; dm US\$10, d/tr US\$30/45, d with bathroom US\$35, loft apt US\$60; ☺) offers hip and functional dorm digs. Surfers enjoy the self-serve pancakes. Amenities include shared kitchen, shared hot-water bathrooms, and free internet, bike rental and surfboards. It's 400m north.

Asian-inspired guesthouse **Casa Zen** (☎ 640 0523; www.casazencr.com; dm US\$12, d with shared bathroom US\$22-30) emanates good vibes – it should, there's plenty of Buddhas to belly-rub. Rooms are smart and spare and shared baths are kept squeaky clean. A hopping onsite fusion restaurant (US\$3 to US\$7) cooks up everything from burgers to fresh Thai curries with aplomb. There's yoga and free movies are screened most nights. It's 500m north.

Israeli-owned café **Zula** (mains US\$4-5; ☺; 9am-10pm) serves scrumptious falafel and pita plates heaped with fresh salad and fries to a barefoot crowd hypnotized by surf videos.

The villages are reached by two daily buses from Cóbano departing at 10:30am and 2pm.

Buses depart from the new blue shopping complex at the crossroads. Transportes Cóbano goes direct to San José (US\$10, 5½ hours) at 4:30am. Buses to Cóbano depart at 6:45am and 11am.

RESERVA NATURAL ABSOLUTA CABO BLANCO

On the southwestern tip of Península de Nicoya, this is Costa Rica's oldest protected wilderness area, established by pioneering conservationists. Encompassing evergreen forests, pristine white-sand beaches and offshore islands, the reserve is 11km south of Montezuma by dirt road.

The park was originally established by a Danish-Swedish couple – the late Karen Morgenson and Olof Wessberg – who settled in Montezuma in the 1950s, and were among the first conservationists in Costa Rica. In 1960 the couple was distraught when they discovered

that sections of Cabo Blanco had been clear-cut. At the time, the Costa Rican government was primarily focused on the agricultural development of the country, and not on conservation. However, Karen and Olof were instrumental in convincing the government to establish a national-park system, which eventually led to the creation of the Cabo Blanco reserve in 1963. Although the couple continued to fight for increased conservation of ecologically rich areas, Olof was tragically murdered in 1975 during a campaign in the Osa Peninsula. Karen continued the cause until her death 1994.

Cabo Blanco is called an 'absolute' nature reserve because prior to the late 1980s, visitors were not permitted. Even though the name has remained, a limited number of trails have been opened to visitors, though the reserve remains closed on Monday and Tuesday to minimize environmental impact.

A **ranger station** (☎ 642 0093; admission US\$8; ☞ 8am-4pm Wed-Sun) offers trail maps. Camping is not permitted. From the ranger station, the **Swedish Trail** and the **Danish Trail** lead 4.5km down to a wilderness beach at the tip of the peninsula. Note that both trails intersect at various points, and it's possible to follow one down and return on the other. Be advised that the trail can get very muddy (especially in the rainy season), and fairly steep in certain parts – plan for about two hours in each direction. From the beach at the end of the trails, it's possible to follow another trail to a second beach, though you should first check with park rangers as this trail is impassable at high tide.

Bus depart from the park entrance for Montezuma at 7am, 9am, 1pm and 4pm. A 4WD taxi from Montezuma to the park costs about US\$12, prearrange for the return trip.

EXPLORE MORE OF THE PENINSULA

If you've got the time, we've got the fix:

- Rent a 4WD and map your way from **Playa Carrillo** (near Sámará) to **Malpaís** via the famous Monkey Trail.
- Grab a mountain bike to explore the isolated beaches between Malpaís and **Cabuya** – see p601.
- Watch the leatherbacks in **Playa Grande** (p596), or the thousands of olive ridley turtles arriving at full moon on **Ostional** (p598).

CENTRAL PACIFIC COAST

Once defined by fishing villages and African palm-oil plantations, the central Pacific coast is now a favored haven for vacationers seeking big fish and bigger surf. Good roads from San José paved the way for quickie vacations for *capitalinos* and foreigners alike. Here wildlife isn't crocodiles and scarlet macaws (although they're here too), as much as its raging parties and a candy-counter assortment of illegal substances and girls for hire.

Nonetheless, the savvy traveler will find great hikes and surf to suit all tastes and spots where we haven't marred what mother nature gave us – yet.

The coast has marked dry and wet (April to December) seasons. Dry (high) season rates are given throughout.

PUNTARENAS

pop 107,000

The 'Pearl of the Pacific' is a battered port city at the tip of a sandy peninsula (8km long but only 100m to 600m wide). Lively and hot, the provincial capital served as a major coffee port during the 19th century. During dry season, Tico vacationers pack the beaches. Otherwise, it's the home of rowdy dockworkers and sailors alongside elderly ladies who scrub their sidewalks and keep the bougainvilleas blooming. Most travelers come here just to catch the ferry to the Nicoya peninsula. The water is polluted but swimmers can use the south side of the point.

Information

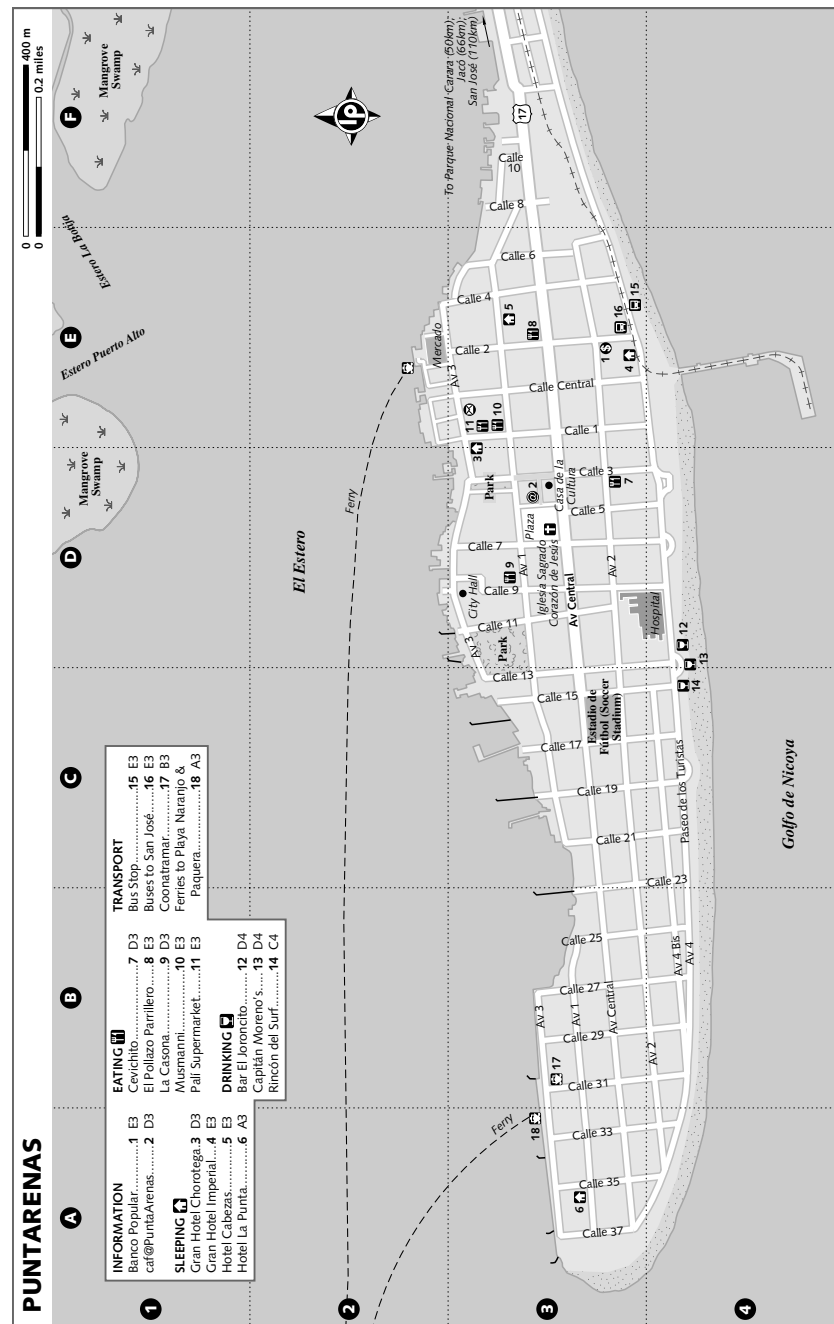
Check email at **caf@PuntaArenas** (plaza; per hr US\$1; ☞ 9:30am-8pm Mon-Sat, noon-7pm Sun). In front of the bus terminal, **Banco Popular** (cnr Calle 2 & Paseo de los Turistas) has an ATM.

Sleeping

Hotels have cold water only unless otherwise stated.

Hotel Cabezas (☎ 661 1045; Av 1 btwn Calles 2 & 4; s/d US\$7/14, with bathroom US\$10/20) Scrubbed and freshly painted, the Cabezas offers sound sleep in crisp white sheets and melon-bright rooms – quiet hours (after 10pm) are respected.

Gran Hotel Chorotega (☎ 661 0998; cnr Av 3 & Calle 1; s/d US\$14/20, with bathroom US\$22/30) Sparkling and tidy, this is modern in that boxy way,



INFORMATION	TRANSPORT
Banco Popular.....1 E3	Bus Stop.....7 D3
caf@PuntaArenas.....2 D3	Buses to San José.....8 E3
	Coanatramar.....17 B3
EATING	Ferries to Playa Naranjo & Paquera.....18 A3
El Pollozo Parrillero.....8 E3	
La Casaña.....9 D3	
Musmanni.....10 E3	
Pali Supermarket.....11 E3	
SLEEPING	
Gran Hotel Chorotega.....3 D3	
Gran Hotel Imperial.....4 E3	
Hotel Cabezas.....5 E3	
Hotel La Purita.....6 A3	
DRINKING	
Bar El Joroncito.....12 D4	
Capitán Moreno's.....13 D4	
Rincón del Surf.....14 C4	

with paper-thin walls. Weekday discounts are given.

Gran Hotel Imperial (☎ 661 0579; Paseo de los Turistas btwn Calles Central & 2; s/d US\$16/27) Looking like it's straight off the Coney Island boardwalk, the Imperial offers clean but worn clapboard rooms, aging mattresses and wooden rocking chairs.

Hotel la Punta (☎ 661 1900; cnr Av 1 & Calle 35; d with fan/air-con US\$30/40; 🍴 🚿) Large, pleasant rooms with hot water and balconies. The bar and swimming pool fall short on ambience but it's convenient to the ferry.

Eating

The Paseo de los Turistas caters to tourists. If you don't want to cough up the dough that implies, you'll find cheaper fare on its east end.

Musmanni (Av 1 btwn Calle Central & 1) This is the place for baked goods.

Palí Supermarket (Calle 1 btwn Av 1 & 3) Stock up at this supermarket.

La Casona (cnr Av 1 & Calle 9; casados US\$2) La Casona packs out at lunchtime. The cool atmosphere includes carved wooden doors, onion *ristras* and hefty tables topped with pickle jars of spicy vegetables. Enjoy a US\$2 breakfast, hearty *casados* or *bocas* (tacos or *ceviches*). Servings are whopping.

Cevichito (cnr Calle 3 & Av 2; US\$2-5) This non-descript place is the spot for quality *ceviches*.

El Pollazo Parrillero (cnr Av Central & Calle 2; dishes US\$3.50; 🍴 11am-10pm) Grills up chicken 'but-terflied' over coals.

Drinking

Bars line the Paseo de los Turistas. To shake some booty **Capitán Moreno's** (Paseo de los Turistas at Calle 13) is popular. Nearby, popular waterfront bars Bar El Joroncito and Rincón del Surf serve up cheap beer and blaring tunes.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Car and passenger ferries bound for Paquera and Playa Naranjo depart from the **northwestern dock** (Av 3 btwn Calles 31 & 33). Purchase tickets before boarding.

To Playa Naranjo (for transfer to Nicoya and points west) **Coonatramar** (☎ 661 1069; passenger/car US\$2/9; 2hr) departs at 6am, 10am, 2:20pm and 7pm.

To Paquera (for transfer to Montezuma and Malpaís) **Ferry Peninsular** (☎ 641 0118, 641

FIVE AGAINST THE SEA

In January 1988 five fishermen from Puntarenas set out on a trip that was meant to last seven days. Five days into the voyage, their small vessel was facing 10m waves triggered by northerly winds known as El Norte. Adrift for 142 days, they would face sharks, inclement weather, acute hunger and parching thirsts. They were finally rescued – 7200km away – by a Japanese fishing boat. *Five Against the Sea*, by American reporter Ron Arias, recounts in gripping detail the adversities they faced and how they survived.

0515; passenger/car US\$2/9; 1½hr) departs at 4:30am, 6:30am, 8:30am, 10:30am, 12:30pm, 2:30pm, 4:30pm, 6:30pm and 8:30pm.

BUS

Buses for San José depart from the navy-blue building on the corner of Calle 2 and Paseo de los Turistas. Book ahead for holidays and weekends.

For buses to other destinations, cross the street to the beach side.

Cañas & Tilarán (US\$2.50; 1½hr) Departs 11:45am and 4:30pm.

Jacó/Quepos (US\$1.50/3; 1½/3½hr) At 5am & 11am, 2:30pm and 4:30pm.

Liberia (US\$1.50; 2½hr) At 4:40am, 5:30am, 7am, 8:30am, 9:30am, 11am, 2:30pm and 3pm.

Nicoya, Santa Cruz & Filadelfia (US\$2.75; 3-5hr) At 6am and 3:45pm

San José (US\$2.50; 2½hr) Departs every hour from 4am to 9pm.

Santa Elena, Monteverde (US\$2; 3hr) Departs 1:15pm and 2:15pm

PARQUE NACIONAL CARARA

Situated at the mouth of the Río Tárcoles, this 5242-hectare park is a green haven during the dry season and an important oasis for wildlife. The northernmost tropical wet forest on the Pacific coast, its diverse wildlife includes the increasingly rare scarlet macaw, sloths, squirrels and crocodiles. Dry season (December to April) is the best time to go. Visitors can walk the **Sendero Laguna Meándrica**, which penetrates deep into the reserve. From the Río Tárcoles bridge, it is 3km south to the **Carara ranger station** (admission US\$8; 🍴 7am-4pm) where you can get information. Don't travel

alone or carry valuables as occasional muggings are reported.

At the mouth of Río Tárcoles, Carara is 50km southeast of Puntarenas. You can get off at Carara from any bus bound for Jacó or Quepos, though avoid weekends when buses are jam-packed.

JACÓ

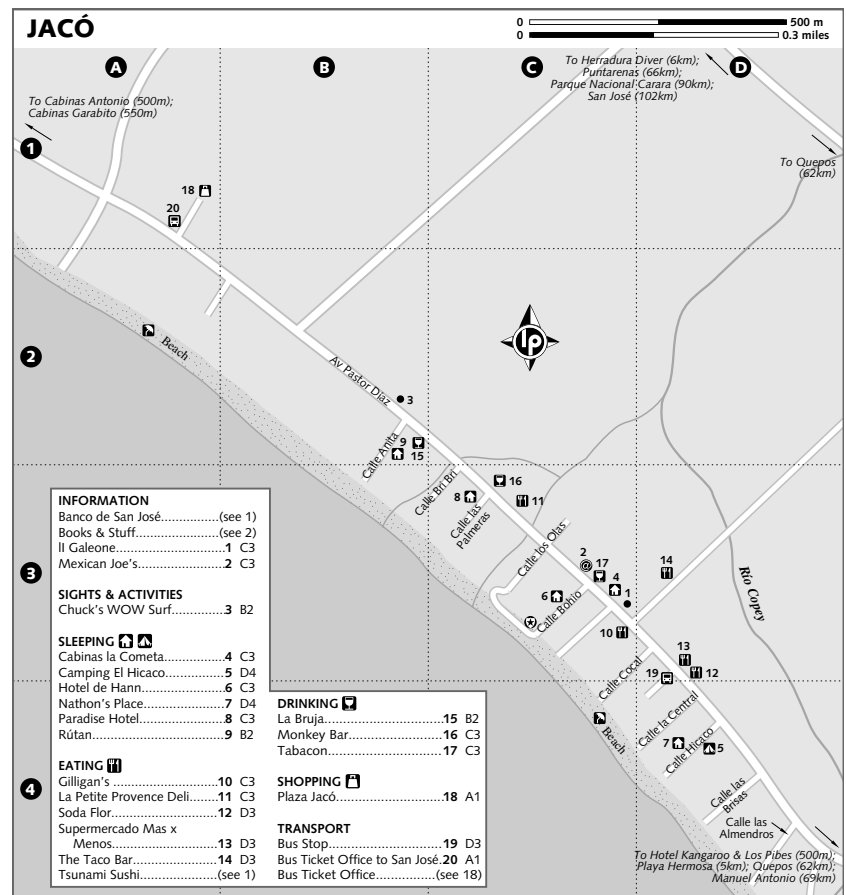
Jacó (pronounced ha-ko) plays party central to *capitalinos* itching for a quick hit of sea and surf. Ten years ago it had it all – warm water, great year-round surf and world-class fishing; now, in addition, there's rampant prostitution and a little drug problem. Yet, this surf town continues to be a magnet for all kinds – backpackers, Tico tourists and

that slimy old gringo looking to score a gal. Rapid growth might mean all the trimmings of a tourist trap, but the atmosphere can be congenial, the surfing addictive and the fun contagious.

Nearby Playa Hermosa, 5km south, hosts an annual **surfing tournament**. Note that rip-tides are common. The cleanest and safest city beaches are on the fringes. Avoid the estuaries.

Information

Banco de San José (Av Pastor Díaz at Calle Cocal) has a Cirrus ATM on the 2nd floor of the Il Galeone shopping center. Internet center **Mexican Joe's** (Av Pastor Díaz btwn Calles las Olas & Bohío; per hr US\$0.75) has air-con.



BOARDING SCHOOL

If you didn't bring a surfboard from home and want to get in plenty of water time, it may be worth your while investing in a board and selling it before you leave. The best place to do this is Jacó or Playa Tamarindo.

Since board materials have gotten all fancy, and the old standby went bankrupt, new toughlite ones (that last three times longer) now run around US\$900. Oh, did you want to still eat too? That's the rub. Your other alternative is to go used. Those of a decent quality will run about half that price. Make sure the board is in no way noodly but solid and stiff (not patched together).

Budding longboarders beware – buses don't allow boards 2.4m (8 ft) and up. You'll have to downsize.

Books & Stuff (Av Pastor Díaz btwn Calles las Olas & Bohío) sells foreign newspapers. **Aquatic Coin Laundry** (☎ 7:30am-12:30pm & 1-5pm) offers do-it-yourself and drop-off service.

Dangers & Annoyances

Drug dealers have set up their candy shop in the street and it's not unusual to be offered a little of this or that before you've hit your hotel. Be aware that Costa Rica is getting tough on drugs (see p565).

Prostitution is also a lucrative business, marketed heavily in bars and dance clubs. If you're suddenly the hottest guy in the room, you might guess why. In addition, some of these girls are definitely not 18.

Partiers should never walk home at night – grab a taxi. Lone walkers have been robbed, particularly on the bridges (on the outskirts of town). Better to play it safe and have your adventure in the waves.

Activities

Jacó is blessed with consistent year-round breaks. The waves are strong, steady and lots of fun. Those at **Playa Hermosa**, 5km south, are world-class thrashers. You can reach them via taxi (with surf rack). For surf lessons or to buy a board, check out **Chuck's WOW Surf** (☎ 643 3844; www.wowsurf.net; Av Pastor Díaz at Calle Ancha), owned and managed by Chuck Herwig, one of Jacó's original surf gurus.

A few kilometers north, Playa Herradura has tranquil waters for swimming and is popular with Tico travelers. For dives, check out the reader-recommended **Herradura Divers** (☎ 637 7123, 846 4649; www.herraduradivers.com). This multilingual outfitter can organize a variety of dive tours as well certification classes and snorkeling trips.

A popular local pastime is following the trail up Miros Mountain, which winds

through primary and secondary rain forest, and offers spectacular views of Jacó and Playa Hermosa. The trail actually leads as far as the Central Valley, though you only need to hike for a few kilometers to reach the viewpoint. Note that the trailhead is located near the entrance to the canopy tour though it's unmarked, so it's a good idea to ask a local to point it out to you.

Any number of places along the main street rent boards, bikes and mopeds. Tours around the area include visits to Parque Nacional Carara (US\$40) and canopy tours (US\$55).

Sleeping

The town center pulses with noise until late, so those who want to sleep soundly should head to the outskirts. Reservations are recommended during dry-season weekends. The following have cold showers unless otherwise stated.

Camping El Hicaco (☎ 643 3004; Calle Hicaco; US\$3) A shady lawn (watch the falling coconuts!) with good facilities; use the lockup for your gear.

Rútan (☎ 643 3328; Calle Anita alley; dm/d US\$9/15) Formerly Chuck's Cabinas, this Californian-owned surfer crash-pad has clean concrete bunkrooms centered around a patch of yard with rockers and a giant BBQ. It also rents boards.

Hotel Kangaroo (☎ 643 3351; www.hotel-kangaroo.com; 300m south of Hotel Jacó Fiesta; dm/d US\$10/30; ☎ ☎ ☎) A pair of French surfers run this superfriendly backpacker crash-pad, steps from a peaceful beach. Guests groove on the pool and impromptu backyard dinners. Kangaroo will pay your taxi from Jacó center (a 15-minute walk).

Hotel de Haan (☎ 643 1795; www.hoteldehaan.com; Calle Bohío; dm US\$10; ☎ ☎) Backpackers flock to this Dutch-Tico outpost with clean but cramped dorms with hot-water showers. Ask about long-term rates.

Nathon's Place (☎ 355 4359; Calle Hicaco; dm/d US\$10/25; ☎ ☎) While the rooms have the charm of a cell, the gregarious Texas owners make up for it. Perks include hot-water bathrooms, air-con and free bike rentals.

Cabinas Antonio (☎ 643 3043; cnr Av Pastor Díaz & Boulevard; d US\$15; ☎) Uninspired but clean cabins come with private showers and cable TV, close to a quiet beach.

Cabinas Garabito (☎ 643 3321; d US\$20) The plain cabins at this place are well kept but nothing special – the real plus is the friendly Tico owners.

Cabinas La Cometa (☎ 643 3615; Av Pastor Díaz, south of Calle Bohío; d with/without bathroom US\$32/20) Snoozy and sweet, this peaceful hotel has ample tidy rooms with red-tile floors and soft ambient lighting. Private bathrooms have hot water and there's a spotless shared kitchen.

Paradise Hotel (☎ 643 2563; www.paradisehoteljaco.com; Av Pastor Díaz; d US\$35; ☎ ☎) Recently renovated, the Paradise has well-maintained rooms equipped with full amenities. Guests can catch ultraviolet rays by the swimming pool or shoot pool in the comfy lounge.

Eating

Los Pibes (South Av Pastor Díaz; meals US\$2) Don't miss this place for cheap and tasty pizza, straight from Argentina. It serves authentic *empanadas* (US\$1) too.

La Petite Provence Deli (Centro Pacifica, North Av Pastor Díaz; sandwich US\$3.50) This is the best take-out in town where chef Jean Marie bakes baguettes and tarts. The fresh sandwiches are tops.

Soda Flor (Av Pastor Díaz btwn Calles Cocal & La Central; casados US\$3) In the center, this is a perennial favorite for heaping *casados*.

Gilligan's (Av Pastor Díaz, north of Calle Cocal; breakfast US\$3-5, mains US\$8-12) Gilligan's serves up deluxe pancake breakfasts and hearty meatloaf.

The Taco Bar (US\$6-8) Mexico meets Japan meets LA, a sleek outdoor *palapa* bar with huge smoothies, salads, fresh sashimi and, um, tacos.

Tsunami Sushi (Av Pastor Díaz, north of Calle Cocal; sushi & rolls US\$3-11) This is a sexy restaurant if we ever saw one, serving an exquisite assortment of sushi, sashimi and rolls.

Drinking

Jacó may be a cultural wasteland, but it sure knows how to have a good time. That said, a good portion of the nightlife revolves around prostitution.

The sleek bar at **Tabacon** (Calle Bohío) has the most respectable nightlife around. There's live calypso and reggae, a slew of pool tables, and – drum roll – Men's night on Wednesday (yes, guys you drink free). We love equal opportunity.

A relaxed watering hole, **La Bruja** (south of Calle Anita) is an old standby that locals like. But if

LOCAL VOICES: SURFER EXPATS

French surfers Stefan and Nico came to Jacó four years ago and opened a hostel. They now split their days between mopping the floor and riding the mighty rollers. Stefan did most of the talking:

What brought you here? Just luck. We wanted a different world, a different everything.

What advice do you have for travelers? Do not make plans because they are meant to change. People plan two nights in this place, two nights in that. They are stuck in a schedule. Just come.

What's Costa Rica like? Very slow and really, really friendly. The country is perfect.

What's your favorite local spot? Hermosa is a nice beach break, pretty huge and steep.

How far are you from the beach? Eighty-five meters and 23 centimeters.

A lot of travelers have a fantasy to move somewhere and start a hostel. What are some of the unexpected difficulties? Plumbing. If it rains too much, *everything* overflows. Or there is no power, no water, no internet...

Tico lifestyle, *Nico says*.

Pura vida! *says Stefan*.

So? One day with, one day without. You just have to get used to it, *Nico says*. And be relaxed. Don't wait for people to do things your way, *Stefan says*.

Any other advice? Just shake it up.

As told to Carolyn McCarthy

you want to get in the thick of it, hit meat-market **Monkey Bar** (Calle Las Palmeras), but don't say we didn't warn you.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Jet boats to Montezuma (US\$35, one hour) leave several times daily. Reserve with a tour operator in town.

BUS

Buses for San José (US\$2.50, three hours) stop at the Plaza Jacó mall, north of the center. Buy tickets well in advance at **Transportes Jacó** (☎ 7am-noon & 1-5pm). Buses depart at 5am, 7:30am, 11am, 3pm and 5pm.

Other buses stop in front of the Más X Menos supermarket. (Stand here for destinations north; wait across the street for destinations south.) Buses to Puntarenas (US\$1.50, 1½ hours) depart at 6am, 9am, noon and 4:30pm.

Buses to Quepos (US\$2, 1½ hours) depart at 6am, noon, 4:30pm and 6pm. These are approximate departure times since buses originate in Puntarenas or Quepos. Get to the stop early!

QUEPOS

pop 13,300

Quepos feels like the accidental destination, a port with neither the Ritz of resorts in Manuel Antonio nor the grinding fervor of Jacó's fiestas. A major sport fishing center and gateway to Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio, it attracts plenty of backpackers as well as the fussier 'dry-socks' crowd, but manages to stay unperturbed. Crickets and frogs bleat under the African palms, while the polluted coastline is largely ignored. Locals keep about their business, whether it's waiting in bank lines during the day or filling the bars and soccer bleachers at night.

Banco de San José and Coepealianza both have 24-hour ATMs on the Cirrus and Plus systems. Check email at **Internet Quepos.com** (per hr US\$2; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat).

Activities & Tours

Sport fishers come here to nab the big one. If you're one of them, try **Costa Mar Dream Catcher** (☎ 777 0725; www.costamarsportfishing.com), next to Cafe Milagró. Sailfish season peaks from December to April. Readers recommend **Manuel Antonio Divers** (☎ 777 3483; www.manuelantoniodivers

.com) for diving. Adventure outfitter **Iguana Tours** (☎ 777 1262; www.iguanatours.com) offers rafting, sea kayaking, horseback rides, mangrove tours and dolphin-watching excursions.

The beaches are polluted and not recommended for swimming.

Sleeping

All hotels have cold-water showers unless otherwise stated.

Wide-Mouth Frog Backpackers (☎ 777 2798; dm US\$7, d with/without bathroom US\$30/20; ☎ ☎) This is a welcoming bunkhouse with spacious dorms with lockers and a basic outdoor kitchen. Rooms wrap around a pool area enclosed in leafy gardens. Shared bathrooms have bright checkered tiles and stalls. The hostel recycles and its British-Kiwi owners are fine hosts.

Cabinas Mary (☎ 777 0128; s/d US\$10/16) South of the soccer field, these freshly painted units have private bathrooms looking a bit dated. Beds are narrow and threadbare.

Hostal Vista Serena (☎ 777 5162; www.vistaserena.com; dm/d US\$12/50; ☎) Perched on a hillside, this hostel offers spectacular sunsets from a hammock-strewn terrace, with a trail leading to a remote beach. Dorms decked out in white tiles are spotless and have hot-water bathrooms. The owners are fully bilingual and great hosts. It's on the road between Quepos and Manuel Antonio; ask the driver to drop you off.

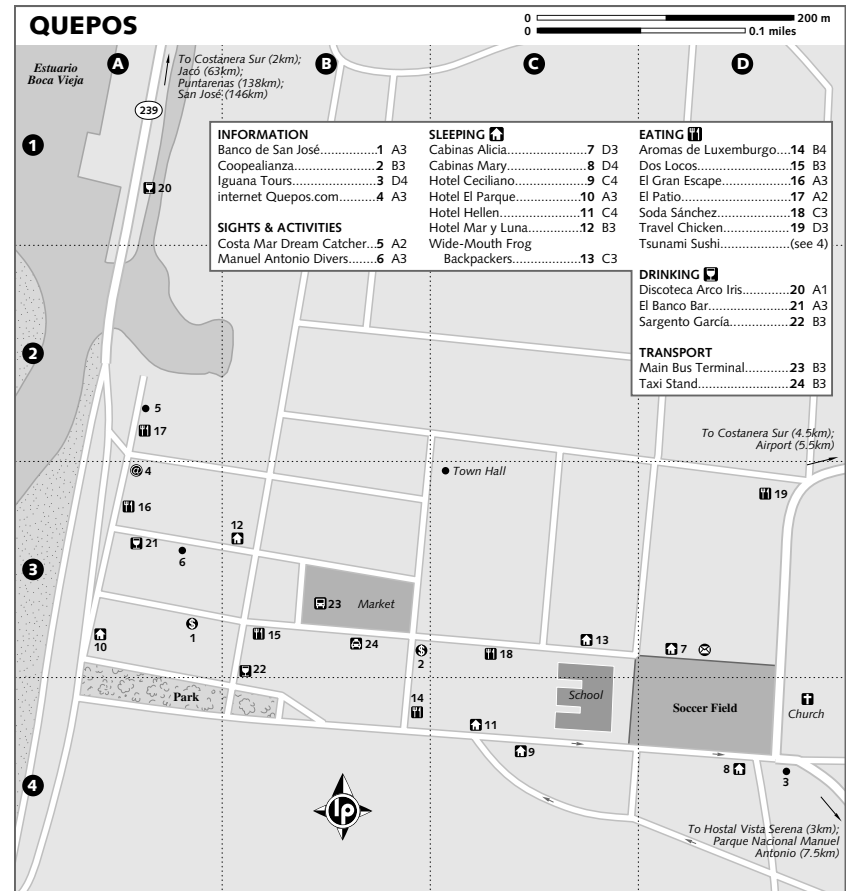
Hotel Mar y Luna (☎ 777 0394; s/d US\$12/16) The Tico owner Alvaro runs a smooth operation as all room are well-maintained, supercheap and have private bathrooms with a hot shower.

Hotel El Parque (☎ 777 0063; s/d US\$12/16) A throwback to yesterday with garish turquoise paint and scratched dressers. Still, it's friendly and central.

Hotel Hellen (☎ 777 0504; d US\$30) Nothing remarkable, but the waddling duck statues and gingham frills remind you that it's family run and well-looked after.

Hotel Ceciliano (☎ 777 0192; d with/without bathroom US\$24/16) The doubles with hot showers prove comfortable and the outdoor garden and living area is an agreeable retreat. It may change ownership.

Cabinas Alicia (☎ 777 0419; www.cabinasalicia.com; d US\$25; ☎) The Alicia is a canary-yellow complex with large rooms with sparkling surfaces. Guests have the option of fan or air-con and hot water.



Eating

Soda Sánchez (meals US\$2-3; ☎ 6am-10pm) Fresh, friendly and always packed. No wonder – it's cheap and clean, with great service and the occasional seafood specialty.

Travel Chicken (US\$2-4) Grab a drumstick for the road (we've seen stranger things) at this roadside venue where locals line up.

Aromas de Luxemburgo (snacks US\$2-4; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat, 3-6pm Sun; ☎) This air-conditioned Euro-style café serves organic teas, crêpes and desserts at sleek metal tables or a bright patio.

Dos Locos (dishes US\$4-14; ☎ 7am-11pm Mon-Sat, 11am-10pm Sun) Mariachis and expats frequent this festive eatery serving Mexican fare and the tenderest steaks in town.

Tsunami Sushi (8 pieces US\$5-15; ☎ dinner) If you're itching to splurge, the sashimi at Tsunami Sushi is practically a religious experience. Don't miss creative combinations such as the crunch roll in this ultra-chic setting.

El Patio (breakfast US\$3-4, dinner mains US\$8-15; ☎ 6am-10pm) This popular bistro sexes up Latin cuisine (who knew it needed it?) with options such as roasted tomato gazpacho, and shrimp in tamarind coconut sauce. A stone fountain and birds of paradise make it very romantic, but daytime it's ideal for a cup of joe and dessert.

Drinking

The town's funky favorite is Sargento García, with twinkling lights and MIA flags. Lounge nights are Tuesday and Thursday.

To swap fish tales, hit the bar at El Gran Escape restaurant. It's the one with the varnished marlin. Sports fans can holler and booze at **El Banco Bar** (☎ noon-midnight) around the corner. Those with more sophisticated taste might try Sushi Tsunami's lounge atmosphere and eclectic turntable. The industrial-sized Discoteca Arco Iris brings out the locals with thumping dance beats.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Sansa has six daily flights between San José and Quepos (US\$44 one way) and NatureAir has four flights a day (US\$50). The airport is 5km from town, and taxis to Quepos are US\$3.

BUS

The bus terminal serves all destinations. Buy tickets to San José in advance.

Jacó (US\$1.50; 1½hr) At 4:30am, 7:30am, 10:30am, 3pm.

Puntarenas (US\$3; 3½hr) Leave 8am, 10:30am, 3:30pm.

San Isidro, via Dominical (US\$2; 4hr) At 5am & 1:30pm.

San José (US\$4; 4hr) Transportes Morales departs 5am, 8am, 10am, noon, 2pm, 4pm & 7:30pm.

Uvita, via Dominical (US\$2.50; 3hr) At 10am and 7pm.

Buses to Manuel Antonio (US\$0.20) depart every half-hour between 6am and 7:30pm and with less frequency until 10pm. Shared taxis headed to Quepos take passengers for about US\$0.50.

MANUEL ANTONIO

This adorable village at the national park entrance may have too much of a good thing. It's at the end of a winding road from Quepos. Day-long buses bomb in and feed tourist hordes into its souvenir fly-trap. Yet, despite

BOMBS AWAY!

On the Quepos-Manuel Antonio road, you'll find **El Avión** (☎ 777 3378), a bar constructed from the body of a 1954 Fairchild C-123. Affectionately referred to as 'Ollie's Folly,' the plane had been purchased by the USA in the '80s for the Nicaraguan Contras, but stayed grounded due to the Iran-Contra scandal. It's found a permanent home on the side of the main road, and serves up meals (not of the airplane variety) and live music. It's a great spot for a beer, guacamole and a Pacific sunset.

the increase of high-rises and keepsake clutter, the natural setting remains beautiful. There is a lovely stretch of beach, but beware the rip currents and consider any belongings left unattended as donations.

The stretch between Manuel Antonio and Quepos is regarded as Costa Rica's premier gay destination. The action centers around local beach **La Playita** and upmarket bars and clubs.

La Buena Nota (☎ 777 1002; buennota@racsa.co.cr) provides information as well as maps and boogie boards. Grab the free English-language *Queposlandia*, on local activities and events.

Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio

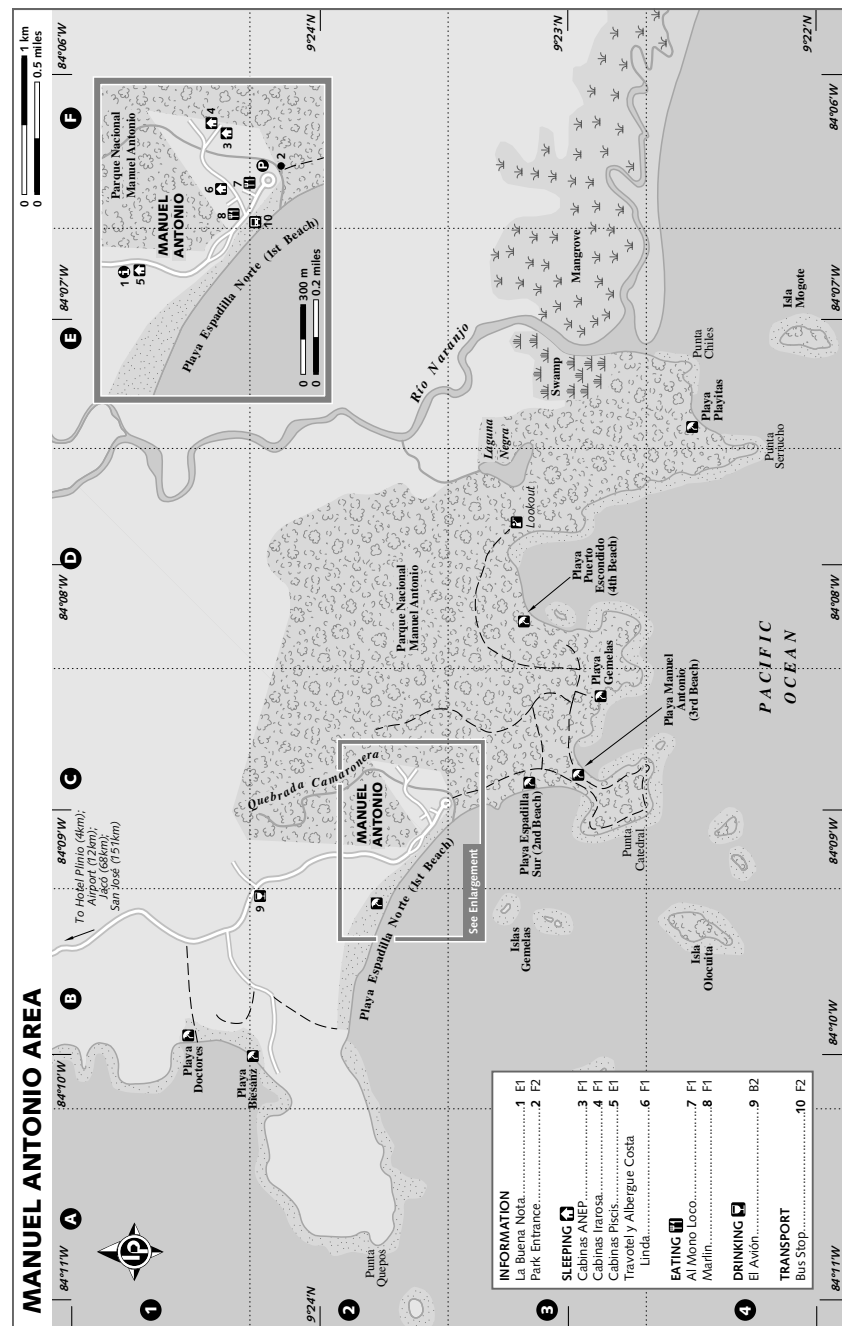
Declared a national park in 1972, Manuel Antonio was spared from being razed and turned into an all-inclusive resort and beachside condos. At 1625 hectares, it is the country's second-smallest national park. Unfortunately, the volume of visitors that descend on Manuel Antonio can sometimes make it feel like an amusement park.

Yet, it is absolutely stunning and teeming with wildlife – a coconut-filled paradise. To avoid the crowds, go early in the morning, midweek or in the rainy season. Taking along snorkeling gear is not a bad idea.

A narrow estuary separates the park entrance from the village. You can wade through it or ferry across for US\$1. The entrepreneurial ferrymen will tell you it's full of crocs. Look for yourself, the water is clear. The **park entrance** (US\$7; ☎ 7am-4pm Tue-Sun) is a near the rotunda. Here you can hire naturalist guides (US\$20 per person) with telescoping binoculars.

Clearly marked trails wind through rain forest-backed tropical beaches and rocky headlands. With an early start you can see all the sights in a day. Most visitors who spend the day hiking will see monkeys and sometimes sloths, agoutis, armadillos, coatis and lizards. From the park entrance, it's a 30-minute walk to **Playa Espadilla Sur** where there are mangroves and the isthmus widens into a rocky, forested peninsula. A trail leads around the peninsula to **Punta Catedral**, with great views of the Pacific and rocky islets inhabited by brown boobies and pelicans.

You can continue around the peninsula to **Playa Manuel Antonio**, or you can cut across the isthmus on a direct trail to this beach. A nearby **visitors center** has drinking water, toilets and beach showers. Beyond Playa Manuel Antonio, the trail divides. The steep lower trail



LOVE 'EM BUT DON'T FEED 'EM

Sharing your banana with a monkey isn't the innocent act you might imagine. It is prohibited and has the side effect of making wild animals aggressive and susceptible to human illnesses. This has gotten out of hand in Manuel Antonio, where critters move in on unattended bags and snatch sandwiches from picnickers. It's not a pretty picture. Since the park is understaffed, it's unlikely you will be fined or even scolded, but consider the stinky karma that will plague your next 17 lives.

descends to the quiet Playa Puerto Escondido. The upper trail climbs to a stunning **lookout** on a bluff. Rangers limit the number of hikers on this trail.

Camping is not allowed.

Sleeping

With most options overpriced, consider lodging in Quepos or on the road into town (especially if you want to go upmarket). The following have cold-water showers.

Travotel y Albergue Costa Linda (☎ 777 0304; r per person US\$10) A German-run establishment with tiny lime-colored rooms and shared bathrooms. Avoid top-floor rooms that cook. The café is a good spot to grab a cheap burger and uccu fries.

Cabinas Piscis (☎ 777 0046; s/d US\$15/25, with bath-room US\$35/45) The best budget option in town, these sparkling, ample rooms come in tropical shades with wire rockers. A convenient kiosk sells ice cream and smokes.

Cabinas Irrorosa (☎ 777 5085; d with/without bathroom US\$35/25) This modest motel (with immodest prices) offers clean rooms with linoleum floors and droopy beds. However, it smells a little dank.

Cabinas ANEP (☎ 777 0565; 7-person r US\$29) On sprawling and attractive grounds these bare dorm-style cabins offer seven slim beds. Perfect if you're traveling with the Brady Bunch. There's a grilling area and soccer field.

Hotel Plinio (☎ 777 0055; www.hotelplinio.com; d without/with air-con US\$65/75; ☎ ☎) On the road into Manuel Antonio and nestled on a forested slope, these lodge rooms are styled with cathedral ceilings, polished-wood decks, hot showers and hammocks. The grounds boast 10km of forest trails leading to a 17m-high

lookout tower (open to the public). The recommended restaurant serves great German and Asian fare.

Eating

Al Mono Loco (meals US\$4-10) Just north of the runda, this friendly place serves *casados*, pasta and burgers under a thatched roof.

Marlin (breakfast US\$2-5, fish dishes US\$6-8; ☎ 7am-10pm) Early risers come here for filling breakfasts. Fresh fish is your best bet for dinner. Enjoy two-for-one rum drinks between 4:30pm and 6pm.

Getting There & Away

See Quepos (p610) for details on air and bus travel. Buses leave from near the national park entrance and will stop along the road to Quepos if you flag them down.

Buses depart Manuel Antonio for San José (US\$4, four hours) at 6am, 9:30am, noon and also 5pm.

DOMINICAL

With monster waves, mellow vibes and kind bud aplenty, Dominical inhales surfers, backpackers and do-nothings. There's little to it, but that's the charm. The village roads are dusty and potholed. Its complicated access has spared it the hyper-development fate of other Pacific coast beaches. Yet gringo-radar, attuned to its 'potential,' has its glassy-eyed fans rapidly spreading the word.

Check your email at **Dominical Internet** (per hr US\$4.50; ☎ 9:30am-7pm Mon-Sat) above the San Clemente Bar & Grill and have laundry done at **Lavandería las Olas** (☎ 7am-9pm), inside the minisuper.

The free publication *Dominical Days* features local events and a handy tide chart.

Sights & Activities

Waves, currents and riptides are very strong and many people have drowned here. Dominical's lifeguards are among the country's best trained and funded by private citizen groups. Two hours before and after low tide are the most dangerous times. Enter the water between the red flags (which mark riptides).

For surf lessons (US\$50) and tours, check out **Green Iguana Surf Camp** (☎ 815 3733; www.greeniguanasurfcamp.com), on a side street leading to the beach. Surf shop El Tubo next to Tortilla Flats does rentals and repairs. San Clemente Bar & Grill rents bicycles and surfboards.

On the coastal hills 3km north of Dominical, **Hacienda Barú** (☎ 787 0003; www.haciendabaru.com; admission US\$6) is a 330-hectare private nature reserve with stunning biodiversity. You can hike the trails and visit the birding tower on your own, take a guided tour or sample the zip line. A taxi from Dominical costs about US\$5.

Dominical is emerging as a base for day trips to Parque Nacional Corcovado and Parque Nacional Marino Ballena. **Southern Expeditions** (☎ 787 0100; www.dominical.biz/expeditions/; trips from US\$55), at the entrance to the village, organizes trips. It also visits the Guayamí indigenous reserve near Boruca.

Volunteers on organic farm **Finca Ipe** (www.fincaipe.com; daily US\$15), 13km from Dominical, learn about organic tropical farming and medicinal plants. Fees include room and board.

Sleeping

All hotels have cold-water showers unless noted otherwise.

Antorchas Camping (☎ 787 0307; campsite US\$5, s/d US\$15/28) Pop your tent (or rent one for US\$1) next to lockers, showers and a communal kitchen (US\$3). There's free morning coffee. The private rooms are slouchy but livable.

San Clemente Cabinas (☎ 787 0026; dm/d US\$10/30, d with fan US\$40; ☎) While they're a twinge musty, these rooms are good value, in a lime-green cement structure. The adjoining Dominical Backpackers is not recommended since units are unlocked and unattended.

Sundancer Cabinas (☎ 787 0189; d US\$20-30; ☎) These small motel units are plain but well-kept, with sturdy mattresses and hot showers. The quiet location allows you to sleep soundly.

Tortilla Flats (☎ 787 0033; q without/with air-con US\$30/40; ☎) Make friends quickly so you can take advantage of the cheap group rate at this popular budget option. Rooms have hot-water bathrooms and a patio hammock.

Posada del Sol (☎ 787 0085; d US\$36) The rooms here are well-decorated and have spotless, private bathrooms with hot water and a patio hammock that'll satisfy all your swinging needs.

Roca Verde (☎ 787 0036; www.rocaverde.net; r US\$85; ☎ ☎) A stylish American hotel overlooking the beach, located 1km south of the village. With hardwood details and tile mosaics, each room accommodates four guests. Air-con and hot water are included.

Eating & Drinking

Start your day here with a gargantuan sandwich of bacon, egg and avocado at **Tortilla Flats** (mains from US\$3). The self-serve coffee is a lifesaver. Afternoons it becomes the spot for that post-surf margarita. **Soda Sirasa** (casados US\$2), across from the soccer field, has the best cheap eats in town.

Decorated with broken surfboards, the **San Clemente Bar & Grill** (dishes US\$4-8) serves whopping portions of Tex Mex food in a cool and cavernous setting. The best spot for cheesy pizzas and a dose of local nightlife is Thrusters Bar, also featuring a pool table. **Maracatu** (mains US\$4-8; ☎ 11am-late) dishes up great vegetarian fare and has regular live reggae and salsa after 9pm. Wednesday is ladies night.

Getting There & Away

Buses all arrive and depart at the end of the road next to Cabinas Coco.

Ciudad Cortés (US\$2.50; 2hr) Departs 4:15am and 10am. **Quepos** (US\$2; 4hr) At 7:30am, 8am, 10:30am, 1:45pm, 4pm & 5pm.

San Isidro (US\$1; 1hr) Departs 6:45am, 7:15am, 2:30pm and 3:30pm

Uvita (US\$0.75; 1hr) At 4:30am, 10:30am, noon & 6:15pm.

UVITA

A loose straggle of farms with back roads swallowed in tall grass, this hamlet 17km south of Dominical shows what coastal Costa Rica was like before the tourist boom. The highway section is known as Uvita, and the beach area is called Playa Uvita. While nightlife may be limited to stargazing, Uvita boasts fantastic stretches of flat sand that comprise Parque Nacional Marino Ballena.

A few kilometers before you get to Uvita, a signed turnoff to the left leads 3.5km to **Reserva Biológica Oro Verde** (☎ 743 8072, 843 8833). This private reserve is on the farm of the friendly Duarte family. Roughly two-thirds of their 150-hectare property is rain forest and they offer guided hikes (US\$15 per person), horseback tours (US\$25) and birding walks (US\$30).

On the way into town, **Banco Coopealianza** (☎ 743 8231) exchanges US dollars. The helpful **Ballena Tours** (☎ 743 8019; www.ballenatour.com; Playa Uvita) arranges bilingual snorkeling and whale-watching tours.

Top hostel **Hotel Toucan** (☎ 743 8140; www.tucanhotel.com; dm/d US\$8/25, campsite US\$4; ☎), 100m east of the highway, exudes a sociable, chilled-out

ambience fostered by its Tennessee owners Tra and Penny. They offer taxi service to the beach (and maybe the bar). Spotless rooms connect at an enormous hangar with communal kitchen, library, wi-fi and a happening café. Bikes and surfboards are for rent.

Local hotels are friendly, family-run enterprises. The rural **Cabinas María Jesús** (☎ 743 8121; s/d US\$20/24; 🚻), 200m before bus stop, has air-con cabins set amidst the cows and sugarcane.

About 200m from the park entrance, **Cabinas Punta Uvita** (☎ 771 2311; r per person with/without bathroom US\$8/6, campsite US\$3) offers small linoleum cabins. Up the road, friendly **Cabinas Hegalva** (☎ 743 8016; r per person US\$10, campsite US\$2) offers very clean but basic rooms with private bathroom.

Next door, the farmlike **Cabinas Dagmar** (☎ 743 8181; cabinasdagmar@hotmail.com; r per person US\$10, campsite US\$2) has raked campsites separated by sorrel hedges and tidy mint-green rooms. Even the cats, chicken and dogs seem pampered.

By the beach, **Soda El Ranchito** (mains US\$3-5) serves the freshest fish and burgers. For bohemian evenings in a thatched café, don't miss the German-run **Mistura** (🍷 until 10pm), 1.5km from the highway on the Toucan road, with candlelit ambience and cool vintage rock. Full moon means howling time with live drumming. The venue's private waterfall and swimming hole (US\$0.50) is a popular daytime excursion.

Daily buses to San José (US\$5, seven hours) via Dominical and Quepos depart at 5am, 6am and 2pm. Buses to San Isidro de El General (US\$1.50, 1½ hours) via Dominical depart at 6am and 2pm. Buses to Ciudad Cortés originate in Dominical and stop in Uvita for pickups at about 4:45am and 10:30am.

PARQUE NACIONAL MARINO BALLENA

This pristine marine park protects coral and rock reefs in more than 5300 hectares of ocean and 110 hectares of land around Isla Ballena, south of Uvita. Although the park gets few human visitors, these beautiful beaches are frequented by nesting seabirds, bottle-nosed dolphins and a variety of lizards. From May to November (peaking in September and October) both olive ridley and hawksbill turtles bury their eggs in the sand nightly. The star attraction are the pods of humpback whales that pass through from August to October and December to April.

The **ranger station** (☎ 743 8236; admission US\$3) is in Playa Bahía, the seaside extension of Uvita. Snorkelers can hit Punta Uvita at low tide. Local agencies arrange boat tours for snorkeling (US\$45) or whale-watching (US\$65).

SOUTHERN COSTA RICA & PENÍNSULA DE OSA

Few used to bother with this other, less convenient Costa Rica, but those who stumbled off the beaten path uncovered podunk charm and a muddy land of contrasts. The mist-shrouded Cordillera de Talamanca is marked with clear, turbulent rivers plunging to the lowlands. Pristine beaches are lapped by rain forest. *National Geographic* penned the Osa peninsula 'the most biologically intense place on earth.' It is certainly one of the few where nature takes *its* course and not ours.

Heading south from San José, the Interamericana reaches its 3491m-high point at the Cerro de la Muerte, the so-called mountain of death, fitted with spine-tingling turns (though it was called this before the road was built). San Isidro de El General is the gateway to Parque Nacional Chirripó, with the country's highest peaks. Southeast of San Isidro, farm towns and banana and palm-oil plantations fill the landscape. Most visitors blast through on their way to the magnificent wilderness of Parque Nacional Corcovado.

SAN ISIDRO DE EL GENERAL

pop 40,000

Called 'Pérez' by locals, this city's Latin vibe manifests in its chaotic center. The busy grid is packed with bric-a-brac shops selling platform shoes and plastic accessories, ice-cream parlors and fruit stands, all coated in a fine film of tailpipe dust. The main town on the southern Interamericana, it serves as a transportation hub and the commercial center for coffee *fincas*, cattle ranches and plant nurseries on the steep surrounding slopes. There isn't much to see in San Isidro, but locals are hospitable and it is a convenient gateway for Parque Nacional Chirripó and the Pacific coast.

In early February, the **agricultural fair** displays prize cattle and on May 15, livestock are hauled into town to be blessed in honor of San Isidro, patron saint of farmers.



Information

BTC Internet (Av 2 btwn Calles Central & 1; per hr US\$1; 🕒 8:30am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) has speedy connections. **Banco Coopealianza** (Hotel Chirripó Av 2 btwn Calles Central & 1; Av 6 Av 6, btwn Calles 2 & 4) has 24-hour ATMs on the Cirrus network.

If you're hiking Chirripó, make reservations for the mountaintop hostel at **Minæ** (☎ 771 3155; Calle 2 btwn Avs 4 & 6; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri), the park service office.

Sleeping

The following places all have cold showers unless otherwise stated.

Hotel Astoria (☎ 771 0914; Av Central btwn Calles Central & 1; r per person US\$4, d with bathroom & TV US\$20) With all the charm of a state psychiatric ward,

the Astoria wins guests with its cleanliness and rock-bottom price.

Hotel Chirripó (☎ 771 0529; Av 2 btwn Calles Central & 1; s/d US\$7/12, with bathroom US\$12/20) Dated but clean, these stark rooms have worn wooden dressers and a shower spout that barely clears the wall.

Hotel El Valle (☎ 771 0246; fax 771 0220; Calle 2 btwn Avs Central & 2; s/d US\$11/15; 📞) Quiet and spacious, rooms have decent mattresses and large windows. Some bathrooms are better kept than others – have a look.

Hotel Iguazú (☎ 771 2571; cnr Av 1 & Calle Central; s/d/tr US\$12/20/28) The best option by far are these fresh white rooms with wooden trim, closets and matching furniture. The hotel is immaculate and boasts hot water, TV and fans.

Eating

Kafe de la Casa (Av 3 btwn Calles 2 & 4; meals US\$4-6; ☎ 7am-8pm) Follow your nose to this bohemian place with great breakfasts, light lunches and coffee.

Restaurant/Bar La Cascada (☎ 771 6479; cnr Calle 2 & Av 2; dishes US\$3.50-9) A trendy bar caters to local youth with beer, burgers and music videos.

México Lindo (Av 2 btwn Calles Central & 1; dishes US\$3-5; ☎ 10am-8:30pm) Tucked inside a commercial plaza, México Lindo dishes up tasty tacos, burritos and nachos in a cheery setting.

La Reina del Valle (☎ 771 4860; cnr Calle Central & Av Central; dishes US\$3-5) Get the best views of the newly renovated plaza at this tile-and-teak restaurant with a 2nd-floor open-air bar.

El Excelente (Av Central btwn Calles Central & 1; dishes US\$4-6; ☎ 11:30am-10:30pm Thu-Tue) This clean and cool Chinese restaurant offers typical dishes spiced in hot pepper sauce, if you like.

Getting There & Away

A local bus terminal on Av 6 serves nearby villages. Long-distance buses leave around the Interamericana and are frequently packed, so arrive early.

From Tracopa Terminal

David, Panama At 10:30am.

Golfito At 10am and 6pm.

Palmar Norte/Ciudad Neily (US\$2.75/5; 3/6hr) Depart 4:45am, 7:30am 12:30pm and 3pm.

Paso Canoas (5hr) At 8:30am, 10:30am, 2:30pm, 4pm, 7:30pm & 9pm.

San José (US\$3; 3hr) Departs 7:30am, 8am, 9:30am, 10:30am, 11am, 1:30am, 4pm, 5:45pm and 7:30pm.

From Terminal Quepos

Dominical (US\$1; 2½hr) At 7am, 8am, 1:30pm and 4pm.

Palmar Norte/Puerto Jiménez (US\$2.75/5; 3/6hr) 6:30am and 3pm.

Quepos (US\$3; 3hr) At 7am and 1:30pm.

Uvita (US\$1.25; 1½hr) At 8:30am and 4pm.

From Other Bus Stops

San Gerardo de Rivas, for Parque Nacional Chirripó (US\$1; 2½hr) Departs from the parque central at 5am and from the main terminal on Av 6 at 2pm.

San José (US\$3; 3hr) Departs from Terminal Musoc on Interamericana between Calles 2 and 4 every hour from 5:30am to 5:30pm.

SAN GERARDO DE RIVAS

Fresh mountain air and a gushing river make this mountain village a pleasant stop on the way to climbing Chirripó. Buses from San

Isidro leaves hikers at the **ranger station** at the village entrance to make hiking reservations. About 2km north are **hot springs** (admission US\$3; ☎ 7am-6pm) where you can soak to your heart's content. At the cement bridge, take the turnoff to the left and follow the signs uphill.

Sleeping & Eating

Albergue Urán (☎ 388 2333, 771 1669; www.hoteluran.com; dm US\$9) By the entrance to the national park, Albergue Urán has bright, clean rooms and an affable owner who guests rave about. It's convenient for an early-morning start.

El Pelicano (☎ 382 3000; www.hotelespelicano.net; r per person US\$10, d/tr US\$30/60; ☎ ☎) Before the ranger station is this gorgeous retreat run by a wood sculptor and his family. Spotless, simple lodge rooms sprout off a balcony with fine valley views. You'll want to linger.

El Descanso (☎ 369 0067; campsite US\$4, r per person with/without bathroom US\$15/10) This quiet homestead offers spacious, well-furnished rooms, some with a view. The accommodating Elizondo family also rents mountain gear and cooks dinner to order.

Hotel y Restaurant La Roca Dura (☎ 771 1866; campsite US\$5, d/tr US\$16/30) Right on the soccer field is this funky lodge with rustic charm. Murals brighten up the stone rooms and showers have hot water. The camping area (summer only) is a wooded garden by the river. The restaurant serves fresh trout and veggie burgers.

Getting There & Away

Buses to San Isidro depart from the soccer field at 7am and 4pm (US\$1, two hours). Any of the hotels can call a taxi for you.

PARQUE NACIONAL CHIRRIPO

At 3820m Cerro Chirripó is Costa Rica's highest peak and the centerpiece of a gorgeous national park set in the rugged Cordillera de Talamanca. Lush cloud forest, high alpine lakes and bare *paramó* define the landscape. A well-marked hiking trail leads to the top where trekkers can sleep over in a mountain hostel. It's a two-day climb.

Get ready for mud. The steep 16km ascent goes through constantly changing scenery with abundant vegetation. Wildlife includes the harpy eagle and resplendent quetzal (visible March to May). Start early and allow six to eight hours to reach the hostel. Take plenty of water and all provisions. The grind to the hostel is the hardest part. From there, the

terrain flattens and it's a two-hour hike to the summit.

Crestones Base Lodge (dm US\$10) houses up to 60 people in dorm-style bunks. A solar panel provides light from 6pm to 8pm and sporadic heat for showers. The lodge rents sleeping bags (US\$1.60), blankets (US\$0.80), cooking equipment and gas. Spaces fill up quickly, so reserve in advance with **Minae** (☎ 771 3155) in San Isidro (see p615) or the **Chirripó ranger station** (Sinac; ☎ 200 5348; ☎ 6:30am-4:30pm) in San Gerardo de Rivas. All hikers must register at the ranger station and pay the park entry fee (US\$15 for two days, plus US\$10 for each additional day). Decent trail maps are for sale. You can also make arrangements here to hire a porter (US\$22 for 14kg) or to store your luggage while you hike.

It's possible to camp in the designated area near Cerro Urán. For serious trekkers there's a guided three-day loop offered by hotels in San Gerardo.

From San Gerardo de Rivas there is free transportation to the trailhead at 5am from opposite the ranger station, in front of Cabinas El Bosque. Also, several hotels offer early-morning trailhead transportation for their guests.

PALMAR NORTE & PALMAR SUR

pop 6100

This hot and dusty banana-belt town is split into two by the Rio Grande de Térraba. For travelers it is the northern gateway to Parque Nacional Corcovado. Facilities such as banks, buses and hotels center in Palmar Norte, while Palmar Sur has the airport.

Lack of allure aside, Palmar is the place to admire **granite spheres** left by pre-Columbian cultures. Some exceed 2m in diameter. They are scattered all over town, including at the airstrip; the most impressive sit in front of the peach-colored school (*el colegio*) on the Interamericana.

Banks include the Banco Coopealianza on the Interamericana, with an ATM. An internet café next door charges US\$2 an hour.

Sleeping & Eating

Few linger in Palmar, but those who miss a connection can find the best-value places on the Interamericana.

Cabinas & Restaurante Wah Lok (☎ 786 6262; s/d US\$6/8) This roadside motel offers clean rooms and Chinese food at the restaurant.

Brunka Lodge (☎ 786 7944; brunkalodge@costarricense.cr; s/d/tr US\$15/20/25, with air-con US\$25/35/40; ☎ ☎) More inviting is Brunka Lodge, with bright and scrubbed bungalows with hot-water bathrooms and cable TV. Rooms are clustered around a swimming pool and there's a popular open-air restaurant.

Bar/Restaurante El Puente (dishes US\$3-5) Off the main road into town serving palatable Tico favorites.

Supermercado Térraba (Transportes Térraba bus stop) Self-caterers can stock up here before heading to Osa peninsula.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Sansa has two daily flights to and from San José (US\$72 one way), while NatureAir has one (US\$80). Taxis from the airport go to Palmar Norte (US\$3).

BUS

Tracopa buses to San José and San Isidro stop on the east side of the Interamericana. Others leave from Panadería Palenquito or Supermercado Térraba, a block apart on main street.

Ciudad Cortés Transportes Térraba departs from 6:30am to 6:30pm, six times daily.

Dominical At 8am.

Neily Transportes Térraba departs 5am, 6am, 7am, 9:30am, noon, 1pm, 2:20pm and 4:50pm.

Puerto Jiménez Departs from in front of Banco Coopealianza at 8am, 11am and 5pm (times are approximate).

San Isidro (US\$3.50; 3hr) Departs 8:30am, 11:30am, 2:30pm and 4:30pm.

San José (US\$6.50; 5hr) At 5:25am, 6:15am, 7:45am, 10am, 1pm, 3pm and 4:45pm.

Sierpe (US\$0.60; 1hr) Departs 4:30am, 7am, 9:30am, 11:30am, 2:30pm and 5:30pm.

Uvita (US\$1.25; 1½hr) At 12:30pm.

SIERPE

This sleepy village on the Río Sierpe sees bursts of activity as packs of travelers pass through to Bahía Drake by boat. Boats depart from the dock in front of Hotel Oleaje Sereno daily at 10:30am (US\$20, 1½ hours). **Hotel Margarita** (☎ 786 7574; d US\$10-12), west side of the soccer field, offers bare, basic lodgings. The rooms with private bathrooms and fans provide a comfortable upgrade.

Buses to Palmar Norte (US\$0.50, 30 minutes) depart from in front of the Pulpería Fenix at 5:30am, 8:30am, 10:30am, 12:30pm, 3:30pm and 6pm.

BAHÍA DRAKE

This scenic village sits between the great green tangle of Parque Nacional Corcovado and the shimmering Drake Bay. It is not only next to Corcovado, but feels like the park's extra appendage, as sightings of macaws, monkeys and other wildlife form part of everyday routine. Traditionally this has been a remote and expensive destination but with the improvement of transportation and hotels, shoestringers can definitely still enjoy it.

Most hotels offer guided tours to the park, snorkeling trips to Isla del Caño and dolphin-and-whale-watching trips at varying prices. The highly recommended **Corcovado Expeditions** (☎ 833 2384; www.corcovadoexpeditions.net) does it all at a highly professional level with bilingual guides. It also offers internet (US\$3 per hour), rents kayaks (US\$10) and leads mountain-bike tours. Join the Bug Lady for **The Night Tour** (www.thenighttour.com; US\$35; ☎ 7:45-10pm), a highly recommended after-hours jungle hike featuring night-vision scopes.

Excellent volunteer opportunities can be found at **Fundación Corcovado** (☎ 297 3013; www.fundacioncorcovado.org), a nonprofit institute working with the community and park system for environmental education and preservation. It also provides insurance and housing (two-week minimum commitment).

Sleeping & Eating

While upmarket resorts dominate the village, budget offerings are expanding and improving. Most include meals in the price.

B&B Bambú Sol (r US\$7) This no-frills place offers screened singles with fan in a muggy spot that truly requires it.

El Mirador Lodge (☎ 214 2711, 387 9138; www.mirador.co.cr; per person with 3 meals US\$40; per person in rancho US\$10) With a harpy eagle's view of Drake Bay, El Mirador feels like a total retreat and the hospitality is outstanding. On a wooded hillside, screened wooden cabins are flanked by decks and hammocks. The family is building a *rancho* (basic refuge), where campers can bring a sleeping bag and cook independently, near the organic garden. Just before the village, take a marked left up a short, steep hill to the hotel.

Cabinas Manolo (s/tr US\$15/30) The friendly Cabinas Manolo offers simple, brightly painted rooms with shared cold-water bathrooms. Meals are not included but the laundry service is free.

Getting There & Away

Boat transfers between Sierpe and Bahía Drake are exhilarating and scenic. Arrange a transfer with your hotel or take the collective water taxi (US\$15, 1½ hours), which departs at 10am from the dock in front of Hotel Oleaje Sereno in Sierpe.

NatureAir and Sansa each have a daily flight between San José and Bahía Drake.

Bus service connects Drake to La Palma (US\$3, two hours), leaving at 4am. From La Palma frequent buses go to nearby Puerto Jiménez. This service is sometimes suspended because of road conditions. Confirm times and availability with your hotel.

PARQUE NACIONAL CORCOVADO

This unspoiled national park is the last great tract of original moist tropical forest of Pacific Central America. Remote and wild, it covers the southwest corner of the Península de Osa. Costa Rica's largest population of scarlet macaws call it home, as do countless plant and animal species, including jaguars, coatis, toucans and snakes. The fantastic biodiversity, long the focus of tropical ecologists, is attracting a growing stream of adventurers who pour in from Puerto Jiménez and Bahía Drake.

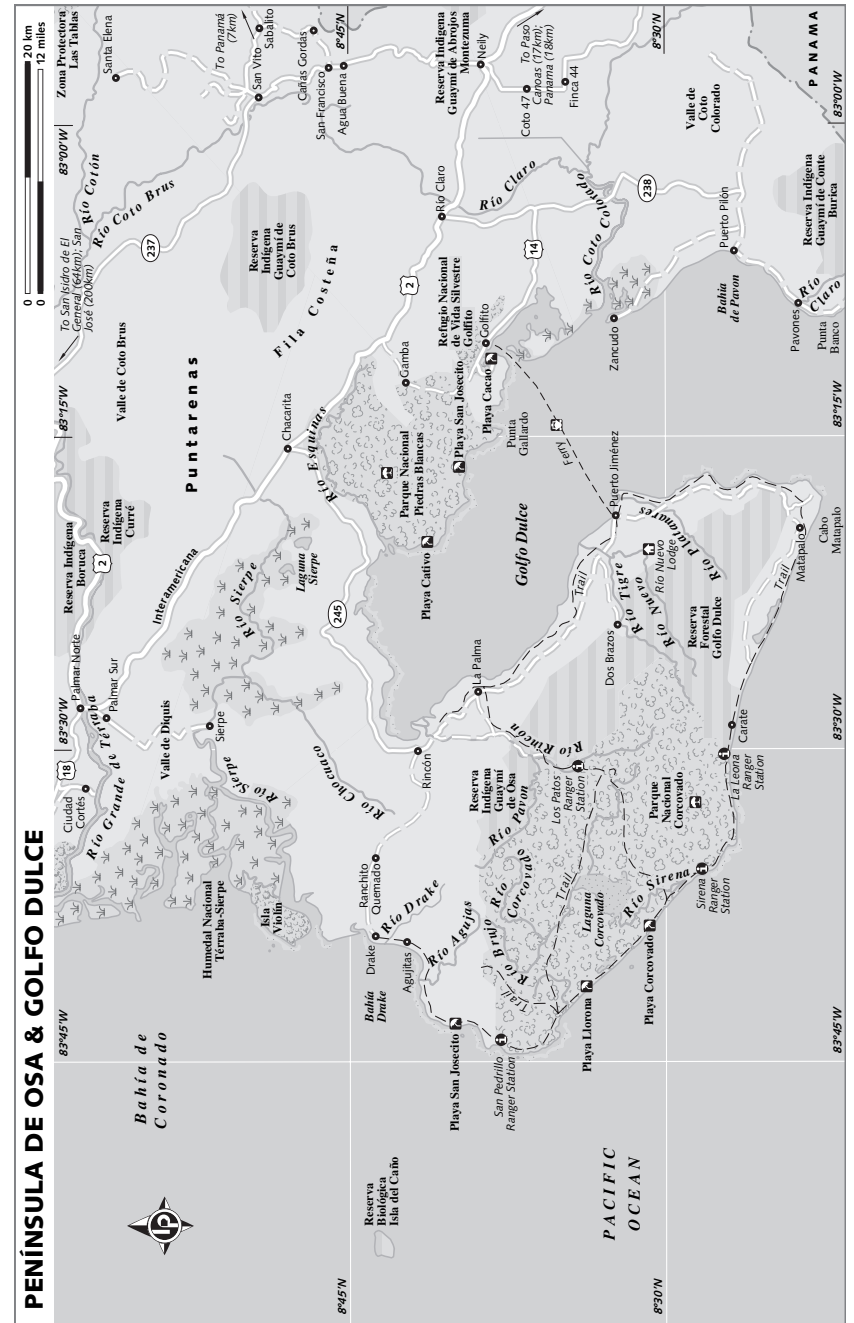
Information

Information and maps are available at the **Área de Conservación Osa office** (☎ 735 5036, 735 5580; park fee per person per day US\$10; ☎ 8am-4pm) in Puerto Jiménez.

Hiking

Paths are primitive and the hiking is hot, humid and insect-ridden, but the challenge of the trek and the interaction with wildlife at Corcovado are thrilling. The main routes across Parque Nacional Corcovado are well marked, making this journey easy enough to complete independently, although guides will provide a much more thorough understanding of the environment. Dry season (January to April) is the best for hiking. Trails lead to all four ranger stations – three border the park boundaries, and Sirena station, the headquarters, is in the middle of the park.

The most popular route traverses the park from Los Patos to Sirena, then exits the park at La Leona (or vice versa). This allows hikers to begin and end their journey in or near Puerto Jiménez, which offers easy access to both La Leona and Los Patos. From Carate, it's a



90-minute walk to La Leona ranger station. From there it's a seven-hour hike to Sirena on a coastal trail. From Sirena, hike inland for six hours to Los Patos ranger station and another four hours to La Palma. From there buses travel to Puerto Jiménez.

During the dry season, you can continue along the coast from Sirena to the ranger station at San Pedrillo (eight to 10 hours), then hike out to Drake (five to seven hours). The beach trail between Sirena and San Pedrillo is closed from April to November when the estuaries flood. The coastal trails often involve wading and may have loose sand and no shade – be prepared. Ask the helpful rangers about tide tables and don't get cut off.

Camping is only permitted in stations and costs US\$5 per person per day. Facilities include potable water and latrines. Dorms (US\$10) and meals (breakfast US\$8, lunch or dinner US\$11) are only available at Sirena. Campers must bring all of their own food and pack out their trash.

Reserve 15 to 30 days in advance through the park office in Puerto Jiménez. Don't travel without a compass, flashlight, camping equipment and insect repellent.

Getting there & Away

The park can be accessed via Bahía Drake (see p618), La Palma or Carate (reached from Puerto Jiménez, opposite).

The La Palma route takes visitors into Los Patos. A taxi may take you partway but the road is only sometimes passable to 4WD vehicles, so be prepared to hike the 14km to the ranger station. Return buses from La Palma go to Puerto Jiménez at 8:30am, 10am, 11:30am, 1:30pm, 7pm and 8:30pm.

PUERTO JIMÉNEZ

pop 7000

Once a gold-mining center, Puerto Jiménez retains the air of a flat-out frontier post. A shuffle of low buildings on the edge of a swamp, Port Jim's main virtue is its close proximity to Parque Nacional Corcovado. The occasional rustling of scarlet macaws and swamp caimans remind you, despite the tourist traps and souvenir shops, wilderness is not far off.

Check your email at **Cafenet El Sol** (US\$3 per hr; ☎ 7am-10pm), with wi-fi access. Banco Nacional de Costa Rica has a Plus-system ATM. **Oficina de Área de Conservación Osa** (☎ 735 5036; ☎ Mon-Fri)

provides information about Parque Nacional Corcovado and takes camping reservations.

Call **Osa Aventura** (☎ 735 5670, 830 9832; www.osaaventura.com; Puerto Jiménez) well in advance to book multiday tours in Corcovado.

Sleeping

Hotels fill fast so try booking ahead.

The Corner (☎ 735 5328; dm/r per person US\$5/7) Run by a friendly expat who probably met your boat at the dock, this small, secure hostel, west of the main drag, screams bargain. Of course, the quirky open-air dorm with iron bars feels suspiciously like jail, but it's tidy and airy, with mosquito nets. Shared baths have hot water.

Cabinas Bosque Mar (☎ 735 5681; www.bosquema.com; per person US\$10, d & tr with air-con US\$30; ☎) A popular bargain with superclean rooms featuring hot showers and cable TV in this pink motel one block east of the main drag.

Cabinas Oro Verde (☎ 735 5241; r per person US\$10) With helpful staff, this budget lodging on the main drag offers well-kept rooms that are just a bit frayed.

Cabinas Carolina (☎ 735 5696; r per person US\$10-12, d with air-con US\$35; ☎) In the heart of the action on the main drag, these enormous tile rooms are drab but clean, with spigot shower heads.

Cabinas Marcelina (☎ 735 5286; cabmarce@hotmail.com; s US\$18, d without/with air-con US\$30/40; ☎) The town's oldest hotel feels a lot like grandma's: tiles sparkle and flower gardens provide pleasant respite. Rooms are small but fresh, with hot-water showers.

Cabinas Jiménez (☎ 735 5090; www.cabinasjimenez.com; s/d US\$25/40, with air-con US\$35/50; ☎) By the pier and away from the hubbub, these softly lit rooms are spare and classic, with wood details and woven bed covers. Some overlook the lagoon.

Eating

Soda Deya (meals US\$3-6) A friendly spot, 200m south of the bus terminal. Grab a slushy fruit drink and dribble hot sauce on your *casado*. Convenient for those departing on the jeep-taxi to Carate, which stops in front.

Restaurant Carolina (dishes US\$3-8) A tourist hub where the food is decent and the service indifferent but made palatable by a varied menu and ice-cold beers.

Il Giardino (meals US\$10-12; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-10pm) A shady garden sets the scene to splurge on homemade pasta, pizza and fresh seafood with Italian wines.

Juanita's (☎ 5am-2am) Juanita's, east of the main drag, serves Mexican fare but it's far better known as the place to hob-nob at the low-lit cocktail hour. Happy hour is between 4pm and 6pm.

Getting There & Away

AIR

To and from San José, **Sansa** (☎ 735 5017; one way US\$78) has three flights daily and **NatureAir** (☎ 735 5062, 735 5722; at Osa Tropical; US\$87) has four flights daily.

BOAT

The **passenger ferry** (US\$2) leaves at 6am for Golfito. **Taboga Aquatic Tours** (☎ 735 5265) runs water taxis to Zancudo for US\$35.

BUS

Buses leave from the terminal. The following all pass La Palma (23km away) for the eastern entry into Corcovado. Buy tickets to San José in advance.

La Palma (US\$1.50; 1½hr) At 5am & 5:30am – connect to Bahía Drake in La Palma at 11am.

Neily (US\$3; 3hr) Departs 5:30am and 2pm.

San Isidro (US\$4.25; 4hr) At 1pm.

San José, via San Isidro (US\$6.50; 9hr) At 5am, 11am.

SHARED TAXI

Colectivo Transportation (☎ 837 3120, 832 8680; Soda Deya), 200m south of the bus terminal, runs a collective jeep-taxi service to Matapalo (US\$3) and Carate (US\$6) on the southern tip of the national park. Departures are from the Soda Deya at 6am and 1:30pm, returning at 8:30am and 4pm.

AROUND PUERTO JIMÉNEZ

A popular mountain tent lodge run by former gold-miners, **Río Nuevo Lodge** (☎ 735 5411, 365 8982; www.rionuevolodge.com; s/d US\$65/100) is 2km west of Río Nuevo. Rough it in comfortable, furnished tents on covered platforms, with access to shared cold-water facilities and some solar-power electricity. The included meals are served family style in a thatched *rancho*. Rates include transportation from Puerto Jiménez.

In the Guayamí Indigenous Reserve, **Aguas Ricas Lodge** (messages ☎ 214 0769, in San Jose, 775 0433 in reserve; albergueaguatica@costarricense.cr; campsite US\$5, r per person US\$10, meals US\$5), 8km from La Palma, offers guests a unique opportunity to learn about the culture with a warm and personable

Guayamí family. Horseback tours go to Corcovado. English lessons may be exchanged for room and board. Contact Mariano Marquinez in the reserve or Klaus, who speaks English, in San José to arrange a visit.

GOLFITO

pop 14,000

Formerly a bustling banana port, Golfito is now being slowly reclaimed by the jungle behind it. Ticos enthusiastically duty-free shop here but for backpackers it's a mere springboard to the Osa Peninsula or Pavones. Bars and businesses, including a seedy red-light district, flank the south side of town.

Covering the steep surrounding slopes, **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Golfito** is home to exotic plant species and animals. Access it behind the north end of the landing strip. Entry is free and trails lead to waterfalls and scenic overlooks of the gulf. Hikers should not go alone.

Check your email at air-con **Golfito On-line** (per hr US\$1.20) below Hotel Golfito. **Banco Cooperación** on the north end has a 24-hour ATM on the Cirrus network.

Sleeping & Eating

Tico shoppers descend on the duty-free area on weekends, particularly in December, when cheaper hotels fill up.

Cabinas El Tucán (☎ 775 0553; r per person without/with air-con US\$6/12; ☎) This family-run place offers spacious rooms clustered around a shady courtyard and a welcoming atmosphere.

Cabinas Marisquera (☎ 775 0442; s/d US\$10/30; ☎) In a rambling house, Cabinas Marisquera has very clean renovated doubles with air-con and TV, luxurious next to the concrete singles.

Hotel Golfito (☎ 775 0047; s/d US\$12/20; ☎) Big, yellow and offering plain rooms that are dated but well scrubbed.

Cheap *sodas* are everywhere.

Restaurante Buenos Días (☎ 775 1124; meals US\$4-6; ☎ 6am-10pm) One great eating option is this bustling restaurant, opposite the Muelceto, where you can get a stack of hotcakes, scrambled eggs or a cheeseburger served in a shiny booth.

Getting There & Around

AIR

The airport is 4km north of the town center. Sansa flies five times a day to/from San José (US\$78 one way).

BOAT

Ferries to Puerto Jiménez (US\$2, 1½ hours) depart at 11:30am and 1:30pm daily from the Muellecito. The water taxi to Zancudo (US\$4, 45 minutes) departs at noon, Monday to Saturday, from the dock at Samoa del Sur. It returns at 7:30am the next day (except Sunday).

BUS

Buses (US\$0.25) and collective taxis (US\$0.75) travel up and down the main road. Tracopa buses to San José (US\$8.50, seven hours) via San Isidro leave at 5am and 1:30pm from the terminal by the loading dock. Buses to Neily (US\$1, 1½ hours) leave hourly from the main road, as do buses to Pavones (US\$1.20, three hours), leaving at 10am and 3pm.

AROUND GOLFITO**Zancudo**

With mangroves on one side and a picture-perfect swimming beach on the other, Zancudo makes a great lazy getaway. Only 15km south of Golfito, this one-road, one-horse town packs out with Ticos in the holiday season.

Cabinas Tío Froylan (☎ 776 0128; r per person US\$7) has whitewashed rooms with private bathrooms and fan; there is an attached disco. About a 15-minute walk from the dock, **Bar/Cabinas Sussy** (☎ 776 0107; s/d US\$5/10) has clean rooms with a restaurant and a popular pool bar. Set back from the road, **Macondo** (☎ 776 0157; d/tr US\$35/45; ☎ ☎) has groomed grounds, spacious rooms and a sparkling pool. The **Italian restaurant** (dishes US\$5-10) serves homemade pastas, fresh pastries and espresso.

Boat taxis to and from Puerto Jiménez (US\$15) and Golfito (US\$12.50) are arranged through **Zancudo Boat Tours** (☎ 776 0012; www.loscocos.com) at Cabinas Los Cocos.

A bus to Neily leaves from the *pulpería* near the dock at 5:30am (US\$1.50, three hours). The bus for Golfito leaves at 5am for the three-hour trip, with a ferry transfer at the Río Coto Colorado. Service is erratic during the wet season, so inquire before setting out.

Pavones

Narrow gravel lanes and breezy palm-frosted beaches welcome you to Pavones, an end-of-the-road destination a skip away from Panama. The world-class surf, bands of scarlet macaws, and rogue children on evening bike patrol make it feel something like paradise. In light of a budding expat community, the word is out.

Pavones is legendary amongst surfers for its wicked long left-hander, lasting up to three minutes. When big, the wave schools surfers on the sharp rocks at the end of the bay. The surf can also flatten out for weeks at a time – contact a local business before going. Conditions are best with a southern swell, usually between April and October. **Sea Kings** (☎ 393 6982; www.surfpavones.com) rents surfboards and bodyboards and offers lessons (US\$50 per hour).

The town has two areas. Buses arrive first at Pavones, then head further south to Punta Banco where the road ends and jungle stretches to Panama. Punta Banco has volunteer programs caring for turtles (p631). Transportation between the two areas is scant, but it is a pleasant long walk.

The only public phone is at **Doña Dora's** (☎ 770 8221) by the soccer field.

SLEEPING & EATING

Listings are in order of appearance in the town. Punto Banco is a 20-minute walk south of town, reached also by the Golfito bus. Showers are cold.

Hotel Maureen (☎ 880 1561, 732 1655; per person US\$10) A large ramblar with friendly management and large, dark rooms featuring bunk beds or twins.

Cabinas Carol (☎ 827 3394; r per person US\$10; P) Rooms are spare and simple, with some mosquito nets and shared outdoor baths in tile and bamboo. The best features are the shady hammock-strewn garden and the outdoor kitchen. It's 50m east of the soccer field.

Rancho Burica (www.ranchoburica.com; r per person US\$8-22) Backpacker heaven, this Dutch-run complex of beachfront cabins offers sun, surf and friendly service. Room size and features vary but all have sparkling bathrooms and mosquito nets. Group dinners are assembled nightly and the grounds, dotted with lounges and hammocks, were made for repose. Reservations are not accepted: 'just show up like everyone else.' It's in Punto Banco where the road ends.

The Yoga Farm (www.yogafarmcostarica.org; r per person US\$20) If your idea of vacation is chowing organic carrots and practicing your warrior pose, this retreat and conservation center is for you. Simple clean rooms have wooden bunks and shared bathrooms. Rates include three vegetarian meals, prepared with the garden harvest. It's a 15-minute walk from Rancho Burica – take the road uphill to the left, enter the first gate on the left and keep walking uphill.

Café de la Suerte (meals US\$6; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat)

This Israeli café, opposite the soccer field, dishes up scrumptious breakfasts of eggs with avocado and fruit salad or heaping muesli bowls. Fresh smoothies and daily specials fill the blackboard.

La Plaza (meals US\$3-6) Locals and surfers pack this open-air spot to down cold frosty ones with *casados* or grilled fish.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses to Golfito (US\$1.20, three hours) leave at 5:30am from the end of the road at Rancho Burica in Punta Banco and at 12:30pm from the Esquina del Mar Cantina.

NEILY

This steamy agricultural center serves as a transportation hub 17km from Panama. Dubbed 'Villa Neily' by locals, it's a more pleasant spot to overnight than Paso Canoas. Banco Coopealianza, southwest of the mercado, has a 24-hour Cirrus ATM.

Motel-style **Cabinas Heileen** (☎ 783 3080; s/d US\$10/14) is tidy and secure, with old-fashioned rooms, locked gates and barred windows. Also straight out of the '50s, superhospitable **Cabinas Helga** (☎ 783 3146; s/d US\$16/21) offers immaculate rooms and tight security. Rooms have cable TV. Aspiring Roman villa **Hotel Andrea** (☎ 783 3784; s/d/tr US\$19/20/24, s/d/tr/q with air-con US\$23/24/26/28; ☎ ☎) sparkles with white-tiled units featuring hot showers and cable TV. The attached restaurant serves quality breakfasts and Tico staples.

One block east of the park, **Restaurant la Moderna** (meals US\$2-6) runs the gamut from hot dogs to pepper steaks. It's also the only restaurant in this book with a swing set inside!

Sansa has a daily flight between San José and Coto 47 (US\$78/156 one way/round trip), the airport located 7km southwest of Neily. Buses leave from the main terminal on the east side of town:

Dominical Departs 6am and 2:30pm.

Golfito (US\$0.50; 1½hr) Departs 13 times daily from 6am to 7:30pm

Palmar departs 4:45am, 9:15am, noon, 12:30pm, 2:30pm, 4:30pm and 5:45pm

Paso Canoas (30min) Departs 19 times daily from 6am to 6pm.

Puerto Jiménez At 7am and 2pm.

San Isidro (US\$5; 5hr) Tracopa departs 7am, 10am, 1pm and 3pm.

San José (US\$8.50; 7hr) Tracopa departs at 4:30am, 5am, 8:30am, 11:30am and 3:30pm.

PASO CANOAS

This small border town is the main port of entry between Costa Rica and Panama. Hotels are often full of Tico bargain hunters looking for duty-free specials, especially on weekends and holidays.

Báncredito (☎ 8am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) near Costa Rican *migración* changes traveler's checks and there is a Tico on the Visa Plus system near the border. Money changers have acceptable rates for converting US dollars into colones. The **Instituto Panameño de Turismo** (☎ 727 6524; ☎ 6am-11pm) has information on travel to Panama.

Good-value **Hotel Real Victoria** (☎ 732 2586; r per person US\$6; P ☎ ☎) has clean, cool rooms lacking windows. The pleasant **Cabinas Romy** (☎ 732 2873; s/d US\$8/12) has spotless pastel rooms set around a courtyard. This bright yellow building is the best-value option in Paso Canoas, but a few other decent options are found along this strip. There is no shortage of cheap *sodas*.

Tracopa (☎ 732 2201) is north of the border post, on the east side of the main road. Sunday afternoon buses fill up, so buy tickets in advance. Buses for San José (US\$12.50, nine hours) leave at 4am, 7:30am, 9am and 3pm. Buses for Neily (US\$0.50, 30 minutes) leave from in front of the post office every hour from 6am to 6pm. Taxis to Neily cost about US\$6.

GETTING TO DAVID, PANAMA

On the Carr Interamericana, the 24-hour **Paso Canoas-David** border crossing is crowded and confusing, especially during holiday periods when shoppers pass through.

Costa Rican *migración* is on the eastern side of the highway, north of the Tracopa bus terminal. After securing an exit visa, walk 400m east to the Panamanian immigration post, in a yellow building, to purchase a tourist card (US\$5 for US citizens) to enter Panama. You might be asked for an onward ticket and evidence of financial solvency (present a credit card). From here dozens of minivans go to David, 1½ hours away (US\$2 per person).

See p669 for information on crossing the border from Panama.

COSTA RICA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

The hotel situation in Costa Rica ranges from luxurious and sparkling all-inclusive resorts to dingy, overpriced quarters. The sheer number of hotels means that it's rare to arrive in a town and find nowhere to sleep.

In tourist towns, you'll find plenty of *cabanas*, a loose term for cheap to midrange lodging. High-season (December to April) prices are provided throughout this book, though many lodges lower their prices during the low season. Some beach towns will also charge high-season prices in June and July, when travelers from the northern hemisphere arrive in droves. During Semana Santa (Easter Week) and the week between Christmas and New Year, hotels raise their rates beyond what's listed in this book. During this time, advance reservations are completely necessary. During school-vacation weekends in January and February it's advisable to book in advance.

There are numerous independently run hostels around the country, which are considerably cheaper than the Hostelling International (HI) ones. San José has several places, as does Manuel Antonio, Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, Monteverde and Tamarindo. The least expensive private rooms in budget hotels are often as cheap as hostels.

Most destinations have at least one campground, which usually includes toilets and cold showers, and are crowded, noisy affairs. Campsites are available at many national parks as well; take insect repellent, food and supplies. Camping prices in this book are listed per person, per night.

If you're traveling in from another part of Central America, note that prices in Costa Rica are much higher than in the rest of the region. Sleeping options are listed in order of budget, unless otherwise specified.

TO TAKE OR NOT TO TAKE HIKING BOOTS

With its ample supply of mud, streams and army ants, hiking through Costa Rica's parks can be quite an adventure – particularly for your shoes. If you come during the rainy season, or to the rainiest destinations, boots are required. A US\$6 pair of rubber boots (found at any Costa Rican shoe or farm supply store) can save you from that nasty fatal viper bite *and* keeps you in style with the local *campesinos*. If traveling in dry season, you can risk using an old pair of running shoes (and something else for when those are drying out, which will be often).

ACTIVITIES

Bungee Jumping

No vacation appears to be complete without a head-first, screaming plunge off a bridge. **Tropical Bungee** (☎ 248 2212; www.bungee.co.cr; 1st/2nd jump US\$60/30), in San José, has been organizing jumps off the Río Colorado bridge since 1992.

Canopy Tours

There's nothing quite like sailing through the rain forest at high speeds in Tarzan-fashion. Operators sell it as a great way to see nature, though all you see are blurry brocolized trees as you whiz by at full throttle. This is a damn fine adrenaline rush and it seems that nearly every town in Costa Rica has one.

Zip-line adventures are not without risk. Travelers have been injured, and in a couple of cases killed. Go with well-recommended tour operators. Minimal gear is a secure harness with two straps that attach to the cable (one is a safety strap), a hard hat and gloves.

Diving & Snorkeling

Costa Rica's water is body temperature and packed with marine life. As a general rule, water visibility is not good during the rainy months, when rivers swell and their outflow clouds the ocean. At this time, boats to locations offshore offer better viewing opportunities.

Hiking

For long-distance hiking and trekking, it's best to travel in the dry season. One of the best trips is the multiday hike across Parque Nacional Corcovado (p618). Parque Nacional Santa Rosa (p588) offers extensive trails in tropical dry forest and Chirripó (p616) is the best choice for mountain trekking. Assaults and robberies have been reported in some national parks, namely Carara, Braulio Carrillo, Gandoca-Manzanillo and on the road between La Palma and Los Patos near Corcovado. For maximum safety, go in a group or with a guide.

Horseback Riding

Whether on mountain trails or the beach, horseback riding is a popular offering. Rates vary from US\$25 for an hour or two, to US\$100 for a full day. Overnight trips can also be arranged.

Not all outfitters are created equally. Some overwork and mistreat horses so ask to see the condition of the horses before setting out. Travelers should continue to recommend good outfitters (and give us the heads up on bad ones) by writing in to Lonely Planet.

White-Water Rafting & Kayaking

The months between June and October are considered the wildest months for rafting, but some rivers offer good runs all year. Bring sunblock, a spare change of clothes, a waterproof bag for your camera and river sandals. The regulation of outfitters is poor, so make sure that your guide is well-versed in safety and has had emergency medical training.

River kayaking can be organized in conjunction with rafting trips if you are experienced; sea kayaking is popular year-round.

Surfing

Most international airlines accept surfboards (properly packed in a padded board bag) as checked luggage. Domestic airlines accept surfboards (for an extra charge), but the board must be under 2.1m (6.9 ft) in length. If the plane is full, there's a chance your board won't make it on because of weight restrictions. It's also possible to buy a board (new or used) in Costa Rica, and then sell it before you leave. Outfitters in many of the popular surf towns rent short and long boards, fix dings, give classes and organize excursions.

Wildlife-Watching

Costa Rica is the easiest country in Central America to spot wildlife; it will often find you. Birding is world class and most visitors regularly see monkeys, sloths, leaf-cutter ants, morpho butterflies, poison arrow frogs, turtles, crocodiles and iguanas, to name but a few. There are ample whale- and dolphin-watching opportunities on both coasts.

The national parks are good places for observation, as are the many private reserves. Early morning and late afternoon are the best times to watch for wildlife, and a pair of binoculars will improve your observations tremendously.

Have realistic expectations, this isn't a zoo. Thick rain forest vegetation can make it hard to see wildlife. Walk slowly and quietly, listen as well as look. Hiring a guide vastly improves your chances.

BOOKS

English-language guidebooks can be found in San José bookstores (p539) and in tourist centers. To try out the local lingo pick up Lonely Planet's *Costa Rica Spanish Phrasebook*.

For a broad and well-written review of Costa Rican history, culture and economy, read *The Ticos: Culture and Social Change in Costa Rica*, by Mavis, Richard and Karen Biesanz.

Costa Rica: A Traveler's Literary Companion, edited by Barbara Ras, compiles 26 short stories by modern Costa Rican writers. Wildlife enthusiasts check out the following guides:

Butterflies of Costa Rica and Their Natural History

by Philip J DeVries – everything you ever wanted to know about butterflies.

Costa Rica: The Ecotourists' Wildlife Guide by Les Beletsky – a thorough introduction to Central American wildlife that is never boring.

A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica by F Gary Stiles and Alexander F Skutch – the source for everything avian.

Neotropical Rainforest Mammals: A Field Guide by Louise H Emmons – a color-illustrated field guide to the more than 200 mammal species.

Tropical Nature by Adrian Forsyth – a well-written introduction to the rain forest that will undoubtedly get you excited about your journey.

BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices open 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday, closing between 11:30am and 1pm for lunch. Stores operate from 8am to 7pm Monday to Saturday, with two-hour lunch breaks common in small towns. Banks open Monday through Friday from 8am to 4pm, and some have Saturday hours.

CLIMATE

For a small country, Costa Rica's got an awful lot of weather going on. The highlands are cold, the cloud forest is misty and cool, San José and the Central Valley get an 'eternal spring' and both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts are pretty much sweltering year-round. (Get ready for some bad-hair days when you're here.)

For climate charts see p723.

CUSTOMS

All travelers over the age of 18 are allowed to enter the country with 5L of wine or spirits and 500g of processed tobacco (400 cigarettes or 50 cigars). Camera gear and binoculars, and camping, snorkeling and other sporting equipment, are readily allowed into the country. Officially, you are limited to six rolls of film, but this is rarely enforced.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The biggest danger that most travelers face is theft, primarily from pickpockets who ply their trade at bus stations, on buses and in crowded areas. Theft is ridiculously commonplace. Don't wear nice jewelry or hang your camera around your neck. Keep your passport and money in the hotel safe and carry a photocopy. Never leave belongings in the overhead compartment on a bus or unattended on a beach.

Of greater concern is the growing rate of armed robberies in San José as well as tourist-heavy areas. In downtown San José, avoid walking around at night – take taxis instead. In the countryside, don't walk around isolated areas at night by yourself. It is always safest to travel in groups. If you are robbed, police reports (for insurance claims) should be filed with the **Organismo de Investigación Judicial** (OIJ; ☎ 222 1365; Av 6 btwn Calles 17 & 19, San José) in the Corte Suprema de Justicia (Supreme Court).

Both coasts have dangerous riptides – strong currents that pull the swimmer out to sea. Additionally, few beaches have lifeguards but some areas flag swimming areas (green) or danger spots (red). River-rafting expeditions may be risky during periods of heavy rain when flash floods can capsize rafts. Use reputable tour operators.

If you are caught in an earthquake, the best shelter in a building is in a doorframe or under a sturdy table. In the open, don't stand near anything that could collapse on you.

The **general emergency number** (☎ 911) is available in the central provinces and is expanding. **Police** (☎ 117) and **fire brigade** (☎ 118) are reachable throughout the country. The main tourist office in San José (p542) publishes a helpful brochure with an up-to-date list of emergency numbers around the country.

DISABLED TRAVELERS

Although Costa Rica has laws on equal opportunity for disabled people, the law ap-

plies only to new or newly remodeled businesses and is loosely enforced. Buses don't have provisions for wheelchairs and few hotels, restaurants or parks have features specifically suited to wheelchair use. One exception is Parque Nacional Volcán Poás (p554).

Outfitter **Vaya con Silla de Ruedas** (☎ 454 2810; www.gowithwheelchairs.com) offers specialty trips for the wheelchair-bound traveler.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in Costa Rica

Mornings are the best time to go. Australia and New Zealand do not have consular representation in Costa Rica – the closest embassies are in Mexico City. All of the following are in San José. For visa information see p631.

Canada (☎ 242 4400; Oficentro Ejecutivo, 3rd fl, behind La Contraloría, Sabana Sur)

El Salvador (☎ 257 7855; 500m north & 25m west of Toyota dealership on Paseo Colón)

France (☎ 253 5010; road to Curridabat, 200m south & 50m west of Indoor Club)

Germany (☎ 232 5533; 200m north and 75m east of ex-president Oscar Arias' residence, Rohmrose)

Guatemala (☎ 283 2557; Carr a Curridabat, 500m south and 30m east of Pops)

Honduras (☎ 291 5143; 250m east, 200m north then another 100m east from Universidad Las Veritas)

Israel (☎ 221 6011; Edificio Centro Colón, 11th fl, Paseo Colón)

Italy (☎ 234 2326; Calle 33, btwn Aves 8 & 10, 50m west of Restaurant Río, Los Yoses)

Mexico (☎ 280 5690; 250m south of the Subaru dealership, Los Yoses)

Netherlands (☎ 296 1490; Oficentro Ejecutivo La Sabana, Edificio 3, 3rd fl, behind La Contraloría, Sabana Sur)

Nicaragua (☎ 283 8222; Av Central 2540 btwn Calles 25 & 27, Barrio La California)

Panama (☎ 281 2442; 200m south and 25m east from the antiguo higuero, San Pedro)

Spain (☎ 222 1933; Calle 32 btwn Paseo Colón & Av 2)

UK (☎ 258 2025; Edificio Centro Colón, 11th fl, Paseo Colón btwn Calles 38 & 40)

USA (☎ 220 3939; Carr a Pavas opposite Centro Commercial del Oeste)

Costa Rican Embassies & Consulates Abroad

For a full list of embassies in Spanish, log on to the **Foreign Ministry website** (www.rree.go.cr) and click on 'Viajando al Exterior.'

The following are the principal Costa Rican embassies and consulates abroad:

Australia (☎ 02-9261 1177; 11th fl, 30 Clarence St, Sydney, NSW 2000)

Canada (☎ 613-562 2855; 325 Dailhouse St, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7G2)

France (☎ 01 45 78 9696; 78 av Emile Zola, Paris 75015)

Germany (☎ 030-2639 8990; Dessauerstrasse 28-29 D-10963, Berlin)

Israel (☎ 02-2566 6197; Rehov Diskin 13, No 1, Jerusalem 92473)

Italy (☎ 06-84 242 853; Viali Liegi 2, Int 8 Rome)

Japan (☎ 03-3486 1812; Kowa Bldg No 38, fl 12-24, Nishi-Asabu 4, Chome Minato-Ku, Tokyo, 106-0031)

Netherlands (☎ 070-354 0780; Laan Copes Van Catteburg 46, The Hague 2585 GB)

Spain (☎ 91 345 9622; Paseo de la Castellana 164, No 17A, Madrid 28046)

UK (☎ 020-7706 8844; Flat 1, 14 Lancaster Gate, London W2 3LH)

USA (☎ 202-234 2945; www.costarica-embassy.org; 2112 S St NW, Washington, DC 20008)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The following events are listed from January to December:

Las Fiestas de Palmares (mid-January) Ten days of beer drinking, horse shows and other carnival events in the tiny town of Palmares.

Fiesta de los Diablos (December 31-January 2 in Reserva Indígena Boruca; February 5-8 in Curré) During the fiesta men wear carved-wooden devil masks and burlap masks to re-enact the fight between the Indians and the Spanish. In this version, the Spanish lose.

Día de San José (St Joseph's Day; March 19th) Honors the capital's patron saint.

Fiesta de La Virgen del Mar (Festival of the Virgin of the Sea; Mid-July) Held in Puntarenas (p602) and Playa del Coco (p591), it involves colorful regattas and boat parades.

Día de Guanacaste (July 25) Celebrates the annexation of Guanacaste from Nicaragua. There's a rodeo in Santa Cruz (p597) on this day.

Virgen de Los Angeles (August 2) The patron saint is celebrated with a particularly important religious procession from San José to Cartago (p556).

El Día de la Raza (Columbus Day; October 12) Puerto Limón (p560) celebrates with gusto the explorer's landing at nearby Isla Uvita. The four-day carnival is full of colorful street parades and dancing, music, singing, drinking.

Día de los Muertos (All Souls' Day; November 2nd) Families visit graveyards and have religious parades in honor of the deceased.

Las Fiestas de Zapote (December 25 – January 1) A week-long celebration of all things Costa Rican (namely rodeos, cowboys, carnival rides, fried food and a whole lot of drinking) in Zapote, southeast of San José.

FOOD & DRINK

Costa Rican food, for the most part, is basic and fairly bland. The best food is on the Caribbean coast where coconut and chili peppers spice stews. Rice and beans (or beans and rice) are gussied up with *curtido*, pickled hot peppers and vegetables; Tabasco sauce; and *salsa lizano*, the Tico version of Worcestershire sauce.

Breakfast largely consists of *gallo pinto*, a stir-fry of rice and beans, served with eggs, cheese or *natilla* (sour cream). These are generally cheap (US\$2) and filling. Restaurants offer a set meal at lunch and dinner called a *casado*. It usually includes meat, beans, rice and cabbage salad. Veggie *casados* can be made on request.

Sodas are cheap lunch counters serving *casados* as well as sandwiches or burgers. Other cheapies include the countless fried and rotisserie chicken stands. (Ticos love fried chicken.) Reasonably priced Chinese restaurants and pizza parlors are found in most towns. Better restaurants add a 13% tax plus 10% service to the bill.

Costa Rican specialties include:

agua dulce – sugarcane water

arreglados – puff pastries stuffed with beef, chicken or cheese

cajeta – a thick caramel fudge

chan – the black seeds of the chan plant, soaked and served in *agua dulce* or with tamarind juice; served primarily in the Guanacaste region

chorreada – a pan-fried cornmeal cake served with sour cream

gallos – tortilla sandwiches containing meat, beans or cheese

mazamorra – a pudding made from cornstarch

palmitos – hearts of palm, usually served in a salad

pejibaye – a rather starchy-tasting palm fruit also eaten as a salad

queque seco – pound cake

rondón – thick seafood based soup blended with coconut milk, found on the Caribbean side

tortillas – either Mexican-style corn pancakes or Spanish omelets

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

The situation facing gay and lesbian travelers is better than in most Central American countries. Homosexual acts between two consenting adults (aged 18 and over) are legal, but most Costa Ricans are tolerant only at a 'Don't ask, don't tell' level. Outside of gay spots, public displays of affection are not recommended.

San José offers a good selection of night-clubs ranging from cruising joints to pounding dance clubs to more intimate places (see p548). The Pacific resort town of Manuel Antonio (p610) is a popular gay vacation center.

The monthly newspaper *Gayness* and the magazine *Gente 10* (in Spanish) are both available at gay bars in San José. Other resources include:

Agua Buena Human Rights Association (☎ 280 3548; www.aguabuena.org in Spanish) This noteworthy nonprofit organization has campaigned steadily for fairness in medical treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS in Costa Rica.

Gay Costa Rica (www.gaycostarica.com in Spanish) Provides up-to-the-minute information on nightlife, travel and many links.

INTERNET ACCESS

Finding cheap and speedy internet access at cybercafés or hotels is easy. Rates run US\$1 to US\$2 per hour in San José and up to US\$5 per hour in more remote places. Wi-fi spots are up-and-coming (the few around are listed in this chapter).

INTERNET RESOURCES

Costa Rica Guide (www.costa-rica-guide.com) Nicely organized website with detailed maps and regional travel information.

Costa Rica Link (www.1costaricalink.com) Provides a great deal of information on transport, hotels, activities and more.

Guías Costa Rica (www.guiascostarica.com) Has informative links.

Lanic (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/cr>) An exceptional collection of links to sites of many Costa Rican organizations (mostly in Spanish).

Tico Times (www.ticotimes.net) The online edition of Costa Rica's English-language weekly.

LANGUAGE

Spanish is the official language but English is widely understood and spoken exclusively along much of the Caribbean coast. Some Costa Rican slang:

jadiós! – hello; used as a salutation in remote rural areas; also means 'farewell'

buena nota – OK, excellent; literally 'good grade'

chunche – thing; can refer to almost anything

cien metros – one city block; literally 100m

listo pa' la foto – drunk; literally, ready for the picture

pulpería – corner grocery store

pura vida – super, right on; literally 'pure life,' an expression of approval or greeting

sabanero – Costa Rican cowboy from the province of Guanacaste

salado – too bad, tough luck

tuanis – cool

una roja – a red one, literally a 1000-colón note; '*Me costó dos rojas*' means 'It cost me two red ones.'

¿jupe? – anybody home? pronounced oo-pay; used in the countryside at people's homes instead of knocking

LEGAL MATTERS

If you get into legal trouble and are jailed, your embassy can offer only limited assistance. Embassy officials will not bail you out and you are subject to Costa Rican laws, not those of your own country.

In many beach towns, police tend to turn a blind eye on marijuana use. However, penalties in Costa Rica for possession of even small amounts of illegal drugs are much stricter than in the USA or Europe. Defendants often spend many months in jail before they are brought to trial and, if convicted, can expect sentences of several years in jail.

Drivers should carry their passport and a valid driver's license. In the event of an accident, leave the vehicles in place until the police arrive and make a report. This is essential for all insurance claims. If the accident results in injury or death, you may be prevented from leaving the country until all legalities are handled.

Prostitution is legal for women over 18. Prostitutes carry cards showing how recently they have had a medical check-up, though these are quite unreliable. Sex with a minor under the age of 18 is illegal in Costa Rica and penalties are severe.

MAPS

Detailed maps are hard to come by. An excellent option is the waterproof 1:330,000 *Costa Rica* sheet produced by **International Travel Map** (ITMB; www.itmb.com; 530 W Broadway, Vancouver, BC, V5Z 1E, Canada) with a San José inset.

Available in San José bookstores, **Fundación Neotropica** (www.neotropica.org) has published a 1:500,000 map showing national parks and other protected areas.

The Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT; see p542) publishes a free 1:700,000 Costa Rica map with a 1:12,500 Central San José map on the reverse.

Online, **Maptak** (www.maptak.com) has maps of Costa Rica's seven provinces and their capitals.

WHAT'S THAT ADDRESS?

Though some larger cities have streets that have been dutifully named, signage is rare and finding a Tico who knows what street they are standing on is even rarer. Everybody uses landmarks when providing directions; an address may be given as 200m south and 150m east of a church. (A city block is *cien metros* – literally 100m – so '250 metros al sur' means 2½ blocks south, regardless of the distance.) Churches, parks, office buildings, fast-food joints and car dealerships are the most common landmarks used – but these are often meaningless to the foreign traveler who will have no idea where the Subaru dealership is to begin with. Better yet, Ticos frequently refer to landmarks that no longer exist. In San Pedro, outside of San José, locals still use the sight of an old fig tree (*el antiguo higuierón*) to provide directions.

Confused? Get used to it...

MEDIA

The **Tico Times** (www.ticotimes.net) is the weekly English-language newspaper and hits the streets every Friday. The most widely distributed paper is **La Nación** (www.nacion.co.cr), which has conservative coverage of national and international news. For a liberal perspective, pick up **La Prensa Libre** (www.prensalibre.co.cr), the afternoon daily.

Cable and satellite TV are widely available. There are more than 100 local radio stations. Radio 107.5 FM is a popular English-language station, playing current hits and providing a regular BBC news feed.

MONEY

The Costa Rican currency is the colón (plural colones), normally written as ₡. Bills come in 500, 1000, 5000 and 10,000 colones; coins come in denominations of 5, 10, 20, 25, 50 and 100 colones. US dollars are increasingly common, used to pay for tours, park fees, hotel rooms and large-ticket items. Meals, bus fares and the like should all be paid with colones.

ATMs

It's increasingly easy to find ATMs (*cajeros automáticos* in Spanish). The Visa Plus network is the standard, but machines on the Cirrus network, which accept most foreign ATM cards, can be found in San José and in larger towns. Some ATM machines will dispense US dollars. Note that some machines (eg at Banco Nacional) will only accept cards held by their own customers.

Bargaining

A high standard of living along with a steady stream of international tourist traffic means that haggling is fast dying out here. Beach

communities, especially, have fixed prices on hotels that cannot be negotiated. (Expect some business owners to be offended if you try). Some smaller hotels in the interior still accept the practice.

Negotiating prices at outdoor markets is acceptable and some bargaining is accepted when hiring long-distance taxis.

Credit Cards

Holders of credit and debit cards can buy colones and sometimes US dollars in some banks. Better hotels and restaurants, car-rental agencies and some travel agencies take plastic. Visa is the most widely accepted, MasterCard less so and American Express (Amex) rarely. Some hotels might charge a 7% fee, in addition to government and service taxes.

Exchange Rates

The table shows currency exchange rates at the time this book went to press.

Country	Unit	Colones (C₡)
Australia	A\$1	450
Canada	C\$1	490
Euro Zone	€1	720
Japan	¥100	430
New Zealand	NZ\$1	410
UK	UK£1	1060
USA	US\$1	520

Exchanging Money

All banks will exchange US dollars, and some will exchange euros; other currencies are more difficult. State-run institutions (Banco Nacional, Banco de Costa Rica and Banco Popular) may have long lines but they don't charge commissions on cash exchanges. Make sure your dollar bills are in good condition or they may be refused.

Hotels and travel agencies efficiently change money but many charge hefty commissions. Changing money on the streets is not recommended, except possibly at land borders. Street changers don't give better rates, and scammers abound.

Carry your passport when exchanging currency. The airport has two ATM machines to get dollars or colones as soon as you arrive.

Traveler's Checks

Most banks and exchange houses will cash traveler's checks at a commission of between 1% to 3%.

POST

Airmail letters abroad cost about US\$0.35 for the first 20g. Parcels can be shipped at the rate of US\$7 per kilo.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

The ubiquitous buzzword 'ecotourism' boils down to marketing claims that are almost never substantiated. Real responsible travel depends on the behavior of your service provider as well as your own. Ecotourism providers accredited by outside institutions can be found at the **ICT sustainable tourism accreditation service** (www.turismo-sostenible.co.cr/EN/home.shtml) as well as planeta.com. Otherwise, businesses may be evaluated in terms of disposal of wastewater, recycling, energy efficiency, contributions to the local community and living wages for employees.

Visitors should follow the cardinal rules of never littering, never feeding the wildlife, staying on marked trails and not buying endangered products (turtles, shells, skins, coral, and exotic hardwoods). An active approach means using mass transportation instead of driving or taking a taxi (if alone), volunteering (opposite), informing yourself on the local issues and promoting goodwill by respecting local cultures and engaging with locals. For more information, see p533.

SHOPPING

Coffee is the most popular souvenir, and deservedly so. Boozers can fill up on Ron Centenario, the coffee liqueur Café Rica and also *guano*, the local firewater.

Uniquely Costa Rican, colorfully painted replicas of traditional oxcarts (*carretas*) are produced in Sarchí. Ceramics and tropical hardwood items are also popular. Check to see

if wood products are made of endangered hardwoods. Avoid purchasing animal products, including turtles, shells, animal skulls and anything made with feathers, coral and shells.

STUDYING

There is no shortage of language academies ready and willing to teach you Spanish around Costa Rica. Many operate in San José, the Central Valley as well as popular beach towns such as Jacó, Tamarindo and Puerto Viejo de Talamanca.

TELEPHONE

Public phones are found all over Costa Rica and Chip or Colibrí phonecards are available in 1000, 2000 and 3000 colón denominations. Chip cards are inserted into the phone and scanned. Colibrí cards (the most common) require dialing a toll-free number (☎ 199) and entering an access code. Instructions are provided in English or Spanish. These are the preferred card of travelers since they can be used from any phone. Purchase cards in supermarkets, pharmacies and *pulperías*.

The cheapest international calls are direct-dialed using a phonecard. Costs of calls from Costa Rica per minute are approximately US\$0.55 to North America and US\$0.80 to Europe and Australia. Dial '00' followed by the country code and number.

To call Costa Rica from abroad, use the international code (☎ 506) before the seven-digit number.

TOILETS

Public restrooms are rare. Restaurants and cafés usually loan their facilities at a small charge – between US\$0.25 to US\$0.50. Bus terminals and other major public buildings have lavatories, also at a charge.

If you're particularly fond of using toilet paper, carry it with you at all times as it is not always available. Just don't flush it down! Costa Rican plumbing is poor and has very low pressure with few exceptions. Dispose of toilet paper in the rubbish bin inside every bathroom.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The government-run tourism board, the Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT) has two offices in the capital (see p542). Travel advice may be overly positive – it's their job to paint it pretty. Staff speak English.

The ICT is a good resource for free maps, a master bus schedule and information on road conditions in the hinterlands. Consult the ICT's flashy English-language website (www.visitcostarica.com) for information, or call the **ICT's toll-free number** (in the USA ☎ 800 343 6332) for brochures and information.

TOURS

Some well-established companies:

Birding Costa Rica (☎ 229 5922; www.birdscostarica.com) Custom birding trips.

Eco Travel (☎ 223 2240; www.ecotravel.com)

Offers a variety of tours.

Euphoria Expeditions (☎ 849 1271; www.euforiaexpeditions.com) Specializes in cultural travel and expedition-style adventure trips.

Swiss Travel Service (☎ 282 4898; www.swisstravelcr.com) Tour agency.

VISAS & DOCUMENTS

Passport-carrying nationals of the following countries are allowed 90 days' stay with no visa: most western European countries, Argentina, Canada, Israel, Japan, Panama and the USA.

Citizens of Australia, Iceland, Ireland, Mexico, Russia, New Zealand, South Africa and Venezuela are allowed to stay for 30 days with no visa. Others require a visa from a Costa Rican embassy or consulate. A list of some embassies is on p626. For the latest info, check the websites of the **ICT** (www.visitcostarica.com) or the **Costa Rican embassy** (www.costarica-embassy.org) in Washington DC.

Onward Ticket

Travelers officially need a ticket out of Costa Rica before they are allowed to enter, but rules are enforced erratically. Overland travelers can meet this requirement by purchasing a

round-trip ticket from Tica Bus, with offices in Managua and Panama City.

Visa Extensions

Extending your stay beyond the authorized 30 or 90 days is a time-consuming hassle. It is far easier to leave the country for 72 hours and re-enter. Otherwise go to the office of **migración** (Immigration; ☎ 220 0355; ☎ 8am-4pm) in San José, opposite Channel 6 about 4km north of Parque La Sabana. Requirements for stay extensions change so allow several working days.

VOLUNTEERING

In addition to these listings there are volunteer opportunities within the chapter.

Amistad Institute (☎ 269 0000; www.amistadinstiute.net) Joint volunteer programs and Spanish instruction; participants practice language skills in local community organizations, schools and parks.

Asociación de Voluntarios para el Servicio en las Áreas Protegidas de Costa Rica (ASVO;

☎ 233 4989; www.asvocr.com) Has 30-day work programs in the national parks; volunteers pay US\$14 per day for meal costs. A 15-day commitment is required.

Habitat for Humanity (☎ 447 2330; www.habitatcostarica.org) Has community building projects around the country. Construction volunteers pay a US\$100 registration fee, US\$15 per day for accommodations, and must commit for one week.

International Student Volunteers (☎ in the USA 714-779 7392; www.isvonline.com) This excellent organization offers four-week programs with two weeks of volunteer work in local conservation or community development programs, and two weeks of fun and travel.

Volunteer Latin America (☎ 020-7193 9163; www.volunteerlatinamerica.com) Offers diverse opportunities, from working in an orphanage to gardening and trail maintenance to doing research on animal species. Some programs require special skills and/or minimum time commitments.

DOING TIME FOR THE TURTLES

Want to give back before heading back? Since 1998, **Pretoma** or **Programa Restauración de Tortugas Marinas** (Marine Turtle Restoration Program) has collaborated with locals to monitor the nesting activity and the operation of hatcheries in order to guarantee the efficient protection of nesting sea turtles and the production of hatchlings. Members of the community are hired as field assistants and environmental education activities are held with local kids. The project also involves tagging, measuring and protecting nesting turtles, which has resulted in a drastic reduction in poaching levels

Pretoma has projects in Playa San Miguel, Playa Caletas (7km south of San Miguel) and Punta Banco near the border with Panama. For more information on volunteering, visit the website at www.tortugamarina.org or contact the organization at tortugas@tortugamarina.org.

World Teach (☎ in the USA 800 483 2240; www.worldteach.org) Volunteers receive a stipend of US\$75 per month teaching English in public elementary schools. One-year commitment; lodging and transportation are included.

WOMEN TRAVELERS

A whispered *mi amor* or appreciative hiss will remind you you're south of the border, but even solo female travelers have few problems here. Be aware the norms are different.

Scant clothing is OK for the dance floor and the beach, but keep your top on (this isn't the Riviera) and cover up in town (especially the highlands). Shorts make you stick out.

Overall, men are usually gentlemen. But Costa Rican men do consider foreign women to have looser morals than Ticas and some may try to prove that theory. The best way to deal with this is obtaining a black belt in karate. Alternatively, try what Ticas do – ignore it. After passing this 'test' you usually get some respect.

Use normal caution: avoid walking alone in isolated places or through city streets late at night and skip the hitchhiking. Do not take unlicensed 'pirate' cabs (licensed cabs are red and have medallions) as reports of assaults by unlicensed drivers against women have been reported.

Most pharmacies sell birth-control pills without prescription. Tampons are scarce outside of major cities.

WORKING

Getting a bona fide job necessitates obtaining a work permit, a time-consuming and difficult process. The most likely source of paid employment is as an English teacher at one of the language institutes, or waiting tables or tending bar in a resort town. Naturalists or river guides may be able to find work with private lodges or adventure-travel operators. Don't expect to make more than survival wages from these jobs.