

El Salvador

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Ruta de las Flores** Charge the western highlands: hiking *cafétales*, stepping in hot springs and chowing at the weekend food fairs (p301)
- **Playa El Tunco** Ride four great breaks, string a hammock under the palms and soak up the lax atmosphere (p293)
- **Parque Nacional Imposible** Steal stunning ridge-top views and splash in river pools hiking from the park's remote backdoor (p300)
- **Alegría** Immerse yourself in the idyllic tiny-town life of El Salvador's mountain-top flower capital (p306)
- **Punta Roca** Nail the longest break in Central America, or at least buy a real surfer a beer to hear about it (p290)
- **Off the beaten track** Put your trust in an ex-guerrilla guide while exploring the rugged territory of the former FMLN stronghold of Perquín (p315)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 21,040 sq km (smallest in Central America)
- **ATMs** Plentiful, using Cirrus & Plus systems
- **Budget** US\$25-30 per day
- **Capital** San Salvador
- **Costs** Budget hotel US\$10, bottle of beer US\$1.50, 3-hr bus ride US\$1.60, bean & cheese *pupusa* US\$0.35, surfboard rental US\$10 per day
- **Country Code** ☎ 503
- **Electricity** 110V AC at 60 Hz (same as USA)
- **Famous for** Guns, ex-guerrillas, surf spots
- **Head of State** President Antonio Elias Saca
- **Languages** Spanish, Náhua
- **Money** US dollar
- **Phrases** *Que chivo* (how cool!); *un cachete* (a favor); *guaro* (alcohol)
- **Population** 6.7 million (most populated in Central America)
- **Time** GMT minus 6 hours, no daylight savings time
- **Traveler's Checks** Cashed at banks; show passport and original receipts
- **Visas** Tourist cards at border or airport US\$10



TRAVEL HINTS

If you want to blend in with locals, travel with a duffel bag and wear neat clothes and long pants. A simple, *'Buenos días/buenas tardes'* and *'¿Como va?'* (Good morning/afternoon. How's it going?) launches any encounter (in the market, a hotel or elsewhere) the right way. It might open doors.

OVERLAND ROUTES

From Guatemala, enter through Anguiatú, San Cristóbal or La Hachadura. From Honduras, El Poy or El Amatillo are best; you can exit El Salvador via Perquín, but you cannot enter there.

Resilient, real and sometimes raw, El Salvador is caffeine for the senses. It's hard to digest it all: the frank talk of war survivors next to whimsical folk art; and the rickety Rhode Island school buses recast as psychedelic chariots, tossing passengers to the pavement without hitting one full stop.

For a traveler El Salvador is something of a puzzle. It needs time for you to absorb and unravel. You have to be careful. But there is no reconciling the homicide statistics and the not-so-distant war with such, well, friendliness. It is too tempting to invent some explanation. Here, like in most industrialized countries, you won't find abundant wildlife or primary forest. Yet, tromping a landscape of countless volcanoes, mountains, swimming holes and a wild Pacific coast offers real off-the-brochure adventure.

El Salvador emerged from a decade-long civil war and various natural disasters doggedly pursuing stability. Many residents found it abroad – where nearly a third of El Salvador's nationals now live and work, sending home monthly contributions known as *remesas*. Other *Guanacos* (as they call themselves) stood their ground. One local said, 'We have the war. We keep going. We have Hurricane Mitch. We have Hurricane Stan. Then we have some earthquakes, but Salvadorans, we keep on going.'

Resilience. It should be the mantra of every traveler.

CURRENT EVENTS

Remittances from abroad are soaring, creating a boom in everything from commerce to construction. The new thing is custom resorts for *hermanos lejanos* (distant brothers and sisters) sweating it out for Uncle Sam, who prefer hemocoming to include a chaise lounge and air-con. It shows confidence that the Hilton has set up shop in Zona Rosa, San Salvador's swankest barrio.

Yet violence continues to permeate El Salvador. The crime tally rose for 2006, including an increase in murders (3596) and extortion. The dialogue on how to fight crime is heating up. Clergy and activists aren't so sure that President Antonio Saca's aggressive Super Mano Dura (Super Hard Hand) plan is effective against prolific *maras* or gangs. Law enforcement has gotten so desperate that the police will pick up suspects wearing baggy hip-hop styles solely on their fashion election. Gangs tend to hang out in the tough neighborhoods and police control most of the tourist areas, so it's unlikely that visitors will encounter gang members.

HISTORY Traders & Raiders

Paleo-Indian peoples populated El Salvador as early as 10,000 years ago, literally leaving their mark with cave paintings in modern Morazán. Around 2000 BC the Olmecs followed, leaving as their legacy the Olmec Boulder, a giant head sculpture similar to those from Mexico, found near Casa Blanca.

El Salvador was once a key regional trading center. Archaeological remains reveal diverse

influences, from Pipil, Teotihuacan and Maya in the west to Lenca, Chorti and Pok'omama in the east. The step pyramid ruins at Tazumal, San Andrés and Casa Blanca show 3000 years of nearly constant pre-Hispanic habitation.

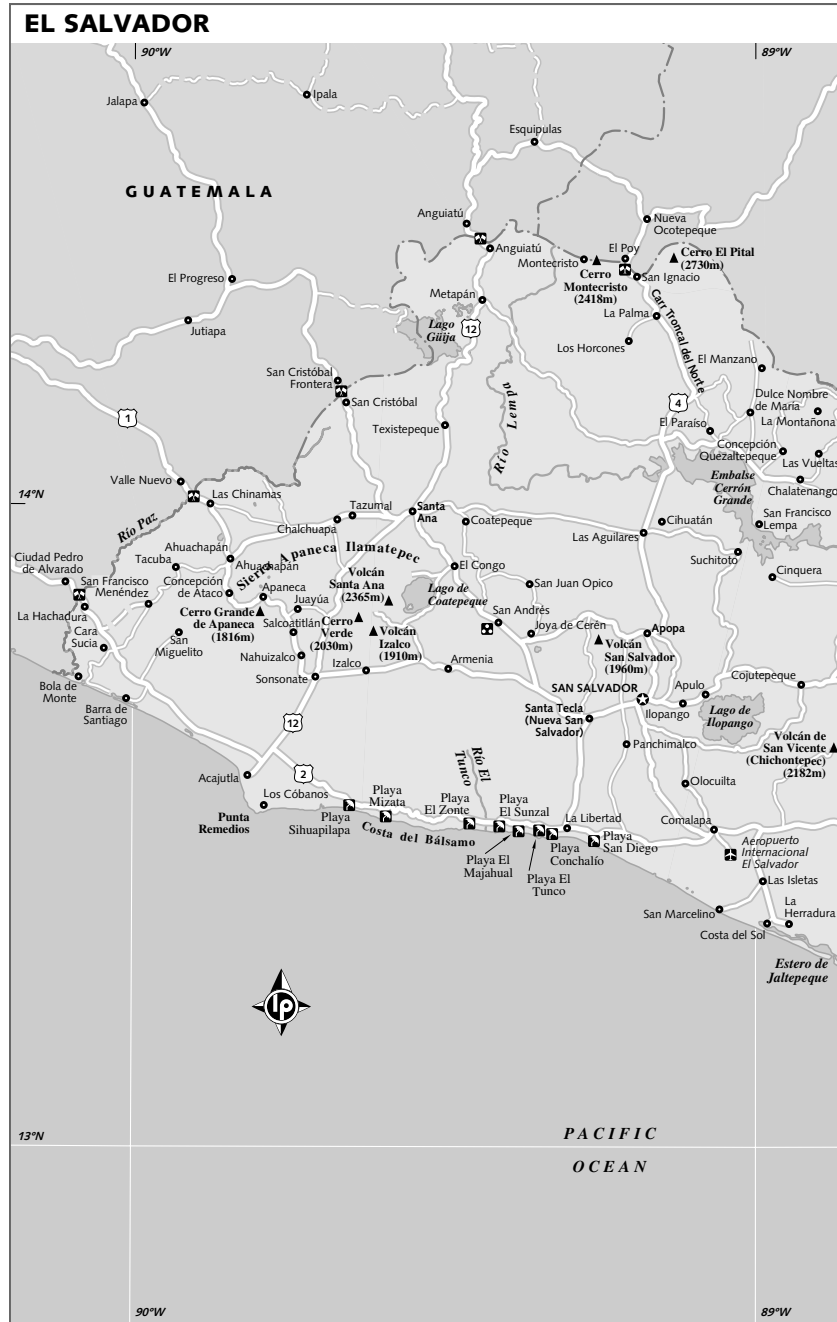
When Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado arrived in 1524, he saw a country dominated by Pipils, descendants of Toltecs and Aztecs. These northern peoples (from modern-day Mexico) dubbed their home Cuscatlán, 'Land of Jewels.' Their maize-based farming economy flourished enough to support several cities and a sophisticated culture with pursuits that included hieroglyphics, astronomy and mathematics. Their dialect is related to modern Náhua.

From Indigo to Independence

Spanish rule started with a year-long struggle against the Pipil. The Spaniards prevailed and laid claim to the land, transforming it into plantations of cotton, balsam and indigo. Agriculture boomed throughout the 1700s, with indigo the number one export. A small group of Europeans, known as the 'fourteen families,' controlled virtually all of the colony's wealth and agriculture, enslaving indigenous peoples and Africans to work the land.

Conflict simmered under this gross imbalance of power. A revolt against Spain in 1811 was led by Padre (Father) José Delgado. While it failed, it had planted a seed of discontent. Independence was gained 10 years later, on September 15, 1821, when El Salvador became part of the Central American Federation.

Though governments came and went, the wealthy held tight to their fortunes and



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THE SEARCH GOES ON

When government forces razed villages during the civil war, they didn't always kill everyone. Some children, taken from their mothers' arms or found helpless on the killing field, were spared. Those survivors were either divvied up as prizes among military officers or exported for adoption in the USA and Europe.

Many of these children grew up not knowing who their families were or even that they were adopted. Even surviving family members were at first reluctant to request an official search right after the war, fearing for their own safety.

In light of governmental indifference, the organization Pro-Búsqueda formed to find displaced children and reconnect them to their original families. Through a combination of DNA tests, family accounts, adoption files and newspaper reports, Pro-Búsqueda has managed to solve 317 cases. An estimated 5000 children were displaced by the war, Pro-Búsqueda has many cases still pending.

For more information, contact **Pro-Búsqueda** (☎ 2235 1039; www.probusqueda.org).

control. The same clique continued to comprise the ruling elite and, though slavery was abolished, many indigenous became landless and poverty-stricken. Pushing for land reform, Anastasio Aquino led an indigenous rebellion in 1883. Though it was subdued and Aquino executed, he became a national hero. El Salvador withdrew from the Central American Federation in 1841, but Independence Day continues to be celebrated on September 15.

In Comes Coffee

In the late 19th century, synthetic dyes undermined the indigo market and coffee took the main stage. A handful of wealthy landowners expanded their properties, displacing more indigenous people. Coffee became the most important cash crop and *cafétales* (coffee growers) earned purses full of money that was neither taxed nor redistributed at reasonable wages to the workers. By the 20th century, 95% of El Salvador's income derived from coffee exports, but only 2% of Salvadorans controlled that wealth.

The 20th Century

Intermittent efforts by the poor majority to redress El Salvador's social and economic injustices were met with severe repression. The vindictive government vigorously eradicated union activity in the coffee industry during the 1920s.

In January 1932, Augustín Farabundo Martí, a founder of the Central American Socialist Party, led an uprising of peasants and indigenous people. The military responded brutally by systematically killing anyone who looked indigenous or supported the uprising.

La Matanza (the Massacre) exterminated 30,000 individuals, including Martí who was killed by firing squad. The FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional) revolutionary army would later take up his name in his honor.

Over the course of the 1970s, landlessness, poverty, unemployment and overpopulation became serious problems. In government, the polarized left and right tangled for power through coups and electoral fraud. In 1972, José Napoleon Duarte, cofounder of the Christian Democrat Party (Partido Democrático Cristiano; PDC), ran for president supported by a broad coalition of reform groups. When his victory was denied amid allegations of fraud, protests followed. The military averted an attempted coup, and the right responded to increasing guerrilla activity by creating 'death squads.' Thousands of Salvadorans were kidnapped, tortured and murdered.

In 1979 a junta of military and civilians overthrew President Carlos Humberto Romero and promised reforms. When promises were not met, opposition parties banded together as the Frente Democrático Revolucionario (FDR) and allied with the FMLN, a revolutionary army composed of five guerrilla groups for whom armed struggle appeared as the only means of change. The successful revolution in Nicaragua in 1979 had encouraged many Salvadorans to demand reforms. One of them was Monsignor Oscar A Romero, a formerly conservative priest who took up the cause of the people.

On March 24, 1980, outspoken Archbishop Romero was assassinated while saying Mass in

the chapel of the San Salvador Divine Providence Cancer Hospital. His murder ignited an armed insurrection that same year that was to turn into a civil war.

Civil War

El Salvador became enmeshed in violence. The rape and murder in late 1980 of four US nuns performing relief work in El Salvador prompted the Carter administration to suspend military aid. But in 1981, the newly elected Reagan administration, bristling from the threat of Nicaragua's socialist revolution, pumped huge sums into the moribund Salvadoran military (over US\$500 million in 1985 alone). Uncle Sam's support would effectively prolong the conflict. When guerrillas gained control of areas in the north and east, the military retaliated by decimating villages. In 1981, the US-trained elite Atlacatl Battalion exterminated 757 men, women and children in El Mozote

(p317), Morazán. As many as 300,000 citizens fled the country.

In 1982, Major Roberto D'Aubisson, founder of the extreme-right Arena party, became president of the legislative assembly and enacted a law granting the legislative body power over the president. D'Aubisson created death squads targeting trade unionists and agrarian reform supporters. In response, the FMLN offensive blew up bridges, cut power lines and destroyed coffee plantations and livestock – anything to stifle the economy. When the government ignored an FMLN peace proposal, the rebels refused to participate in the 1984 presidential elections, in which Duarte won over D'Aubisson. For the next few years the PDC and FMLN engaged in peace talks unsuccessfully. Death squads continued pillaging, and the guerrillas continued to undermine the military powers and jeopardize municipal elections.

MARA SALVATRUCHA

The front-page of El Salvador's dailies is plastered with gang busts or grisly reports of the newly fallen. Usually the credit is given to Mara Salvatrucha, considered one of the most dangerous criminal gangs in the Americas. Known for gruesome beheadings, machete murders and tattooed members, the group actually has its roots in the USA.

In the 1980s, Salvadoran refugees new on the block in the slums of Los Angeles were getting regularly beaten up and victimized by Mexican gangs. In response they formed Mara Salvatrucha. *Mara* is slang for gang, *salva* for Salvadoreño and *trucha* means the clever trout. The gang is also known as M5-13. The opposing 18th street gang eventually became known as Mara 18 or M-18. Today these gangs have an estimated 100,000 members between them, mostly in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Mexico and the USA.

Maras started by dabbling in petty crime and theft. Between 2000 and 2004, the US government attempted to eliminate the gang problem by exporting some 20,000 illegal immigrants, felons and known gang members to Central America. Without family, education, jobs or even Spanish, it didn't take long for *maras* to return to gangs and upping the stakes. Over time they have expanded into the Colombian and Mexican drug cartels, the sex trade and the traffic of illegal immigrants.

In Central America, gangs had a reputation for warring between opposing groups, with little consequence to the public. The Salvadoran government's first plan *Mano Dura* ('operation hard hand') sought to curb gang activities by giving police broad powers. On Christmas Eve 2004, Mara Salvatrucha responded with the brutal murder of 28 passengers in a Honduras bus assault, leaving a note that slammed antimara laws.

The current president Antonio Saca campaigned and won on plan *Super Mano Dura* ('operation Super Hard Hand'), which expanded already broad police powers. Now having tattoos and looking homey is reason enough for arrest. Yet, with an average of 10 murders per day, El Salvador remains one of the most violent countries in the world.

What gives? While the public continues to clamor for crackdowns, a lack of funding for forensics training and a lack of willingness of neighbors to testify means that even a slew of zealot arrests won't add up to convictions. Judges are reluctant to hold suspects with no evidence beyond the tattoos on their arms and face. The same gang members are captured hundreds of times and let out hundreds of times, in what has become a way of life.

The Price of Peace

Hope for peace neared in 1989, when the FMLN offered to participate in elections if the government agreed to a postponement to ensure democratic polls. Their calls were ignored and Alfredo Cristiani, a wealthy Arena businessman, was elected president. The FMLN's response was a major attack on the capital. In retaliation, the military killed an estimated 4000 'leftist sympathizers.' Among these enemies of the state were six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter, shot to death at the Universidad Centroamericana on November 16.

UN-mediated negotiations began between the government and FMLN in April 1990. Among the first agreements was a human-rights accord signed by both parties. Yet, violent deaths actually increased in 1991 when a UN mission arrived to monitor human rights.

On January 16, 1992, a compromise was finally signed. The FMLN became an opposition party, and the government agreed to various reforms, including dismantling paramilitary groups and death squads, replacing them with a national civil police force. Land was to be distributed to citizens and human-rights violations to be investigated. But instead, the government gave amnesty to human-rights abusers.

During the course of the 12-year war, an estimated 75,000 people were killed, and the US government gave a staggering US\$6 billion to the Salvadoran government's war effort.

Modern Currents

The FMLN has mostly proven to be a model example of a former guerrilla organization transitioning to mainstream politics. The left-wing party scored large victories in the 2000 and 2003 congressional elections, although it didn't gain a majority. On the presidential level, Salvadorans continue to prefer conservatives, electing Antonio Elías Saca in 2004.

This may have something to do with the current national obsession: gangs and crime. Saca's campaign hinged on the anti-gang plan 'Super Mano Dura' (a tougher follow-up to the last administration's blockbuster, 'Mano Dura'). While cracking down has impacted murder rates, some deplore the human-rights violations of aggressive arrests and detentions.

Natural disasters continue to plague El Salvador. In 2005, Hurricane Stan left thousands

homeless and killed 69, only days after Volcán Santa Ana erupted, triggering landslides and ruining coffee and other crops. Much of the damage from these disasters remains, even as occasional tremors persist.

Slow economic growth has had its impacts. Many wonder if the remittances sent back from Salvadorans living abroad may be changing the famous Salvadoran work ethic. Temporary foreign workers (about 10,000 Nicaraguans and Hondurans) work the coffee and sugarcane harvests for low wages that can't compare to family contributions pouring in from abroad.

THE CULTURE The National Psyche

Most travelers who have been to El Salvador rate its people as the best part. Straight-talking, strong-minded and hard-working, Salvadorans are also extremely helpful and almost universally friendly (even gangbangers can rustle up charm when interviewed). Salvadorans have a powerful sense of justice and freely express their opinion. The civil war still looms large in the national psyche, as it must – not only are the memories too searing to forget, but many wartime leaders (and their disciples) remain in positions of power. At the same time, Salvadorans are genuinely dismayed to learn that many foreigners know little about El Salvador beyond the war. They will eagerly volunteer information and assistance.

Lifestyle

With a strong work ethic, Salvadorans have quickly raised their country from the wreckage of civil war to nearly the top of Central America's economic ladder. Remittances sent home from Salvadorans living abroad, which annually total three billion dollars (16% of national GDP), provide a significant boost and are changing the way Salvadorans live and work. Poverty and unemployment persist, with 30% of the population below the poverty line, mostly in rural areas. That said, El Salvador enjoys the highest minimum wage in Central America (about US\$150 per week) and is notably more prosperous than neighboring countries.

People

Salvadorans show more European physical traits than other Central Americans, due largely to the brutal repression of indigenous

BEHIND THE SCENES OF NAÏVE ART

Holy scenes, strange birds, unabashed rainbow colors: the childlike images of Fernando Llort Choussy have come to symbolize hope in a war-torn Central America. Compared to Miro and Picasso, Llort differs with earnest iconography and flat tropical hues in a style dubbed as primitive modern.

Ironically, this strong Latin American identity was forged when he went to France to study architecture and then theology. Religious symbols are recurring motifs in his artwork. He prefers the rough and everyday to the exalted, saying, 'The hands in developed societies are not worth anything anymore.'

When Llort returned to El Salvador in the early 1970s, he arrived to the tensions and violence leading up to the civil war. Llort moved to La Palma, a distant mountain town in the north, to take refuge. The apparent simplicity of a life in harmony with nature further informed his style. He started La Semilla de Dios (God's seed), a workshop to teach others his craft and professionalize local artisans.

Llort has since lived in San Salvador and abroad, but the workshop is still going strong in his former studio. You can find his work on the face of the Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador as well as in the White House, MoMA and the Vatican.

people and minor Afro-Caribbean influence. Roughly 94% of the population is *mestizo* (a mixture of Spanish and indigenous) but fair features are not uncommon. Indigenous people are descended from the Pipils, with Toltec and Aztec roots. Government brutality against them has taken its toll, and they now represent only 1% to 5% of the population. Few speak Náhua or wear traditional dress.

ARTS

While less prolific or varied as the crafts in neighboring Guatemala or Honduras, El Salvador's artisan products can be innovative and high quality. Fernando Llort's Naïve Art inspired an industry of brightly painted crafts in childlike motifs in the community of La Palma. Guatujagua in Morazán produces unique black pottery with a Lenca influence and Ilobasco is known for its *sorpresas*, intricate miniatures hidden in ceramic shells (see p307). Regional museums and galleries can point the way for those wishing to visit artists' workshops.

Poetry is beloved in El Salvador. Iconoclast poet Roque Dalton was exiled for radical politics. He eventually returned home to aid the guerrilla cause but was executed by his own side under suspicion that he was a CIA operative. Notable works include *Taberna y Otros Lugares* (1969), a political vision in verse, and *Miguel Marmol*. Progressive poet Claudia Lars wrote spare, bold erotic poetry and is considered one of the country's foremost writers.

Using the pen name Salarrué, lauded writer Salvador Efraín Salazar Arrué's *Cuentos de Barro* (Tales of Mud), published in 1933, marks the beginning of Central America's modern short-story genre. For further information about these and other modern writers, see **Concultura** (www.dpi.gob.sv), the country's official arts and culture board, which has a bibliography of Salvadoran authors.

Films *Romero*, produced by Ellwood Kieser in 1988, and *Salvador*, directed by Oliver Stone, offer Hollywood versions of the civil war.

RELIGION

El Salvador, like the rest of Latin America, is experiencing an explosive growth of evangelical churches. Their fiery services seem to have brought fresh energy to faith. Town square services with booming speakers are becoming an all-too-typical way of spreading 'the word.' Yet, the country remains over 80% Catholic, and has a long tradition of liberation theology. Before and during the war, priests and missionaries were often outspoken critics of government repression – many, such as Archbishop Óscar Romero, were killed for their stands.

ENVIRONMENT The Land

The Land of Volcanoes, El Salvador has two volcanic ranges spanning east to west, spicing the views, as well as daily life, with a little drama. Much of the land is deforested but

mountains in the far north are blanketed in pine and oak, jagged rock formations and cloud forests. The Río Lempa bisects the country with a fertile swath of land. While El Salvador is the only Central American country not to have a Caribbean coast, there is over 300km of Pacific coastline bordering mangroves, estuaries and tropical dry forest. Lakes and freshwater lagoons provide drinking water and recreation.

Wildlife

El Salvador was drastically deforested over the 20th century, as a result, many species of plants and animals ceased to exist in the country. However, national parks and protected lands still maintain good biodiversity.

The country has over 800 animal species. Almost half are butterflies, with bird species second in number, with about 330 resident species (and 170 migratory) including quetzals, toucans, herons, kingfishers, brown pelicans, egrets, parakeets and sandpipers. The remaining mammal species number around 200 and can be seen mostly in reserves. They include opossums, anteaters, porcupines, agoutis, ocelots, spider monkeys and white-tailed deers. In all, about 90 species are in danger of extinction, including marine turtles, armadillos and over 15 types of hummingbird.

With so much of the land cultivated, few original plants still exist. Small stands of balsam trees survive along the western Pacific coast (dubbed the Costa del Bálsamo) and mangroves line many estuaries. Bosque Montecristo and El Imposible offer the widest variety of indigenous plants, and Parque Nacional los Volcanes offers good vegetation. Plants in these areas include mountain pines, oaks, figs, magueys, ferns and orchids.

National Parks & Reserves

El Salvador has only four official national parks, but there are a number of locally or privately administered reserves.

Barra de Santiago A remote bar of mangrove-fringed estuaries and beaches on the Pacific Coast. (See p304.)

Cerro El Pital El Salvador's highest peak. *Torogoz* (blue-crowned motmots) and quetzals can be observed on its piney slopes. (See p321.)

La Laguna de Alegría An emerald-green lake fed by hot springs, in the crater of dormant Volcán de Tecapa. Ocelots and coatis are among wildlife inhabiting primary growth forest surrounding the lake. (See p307.)

Laguna El Jocotal This freshwater lagoon east of Usulután is an important sanctuary for migratory birds from October to March. (See p307.)

Parque Nacional El Imposible Near El Salvador's western limit; one of the last remnants of original tropical forest with waterfalls, views and numerous endangered plant and animal species. (See p304.)

Parque Nacional los Volcanes (Cerro Verde) A volcano crater forest with amazing views of nearby Izalco and Santa Ana volcanoes. Highlights include emerald toucanets, motmots and hummingbirds. (See p294.)

Parque Nacional Montecristo-El Trifinio A mountainous cloud forest reserve at the borders of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. Wildlife includes pumas, spider monkeys and agoutis. Giant ferns, orchids and bromeliads are abundant. (See p298.)

Parque Nacional Walter T Deininger This dry tropical forest on the Pacific Coast is the habitat for 87 bird species, deer, pacas and motmots. (See p291.)

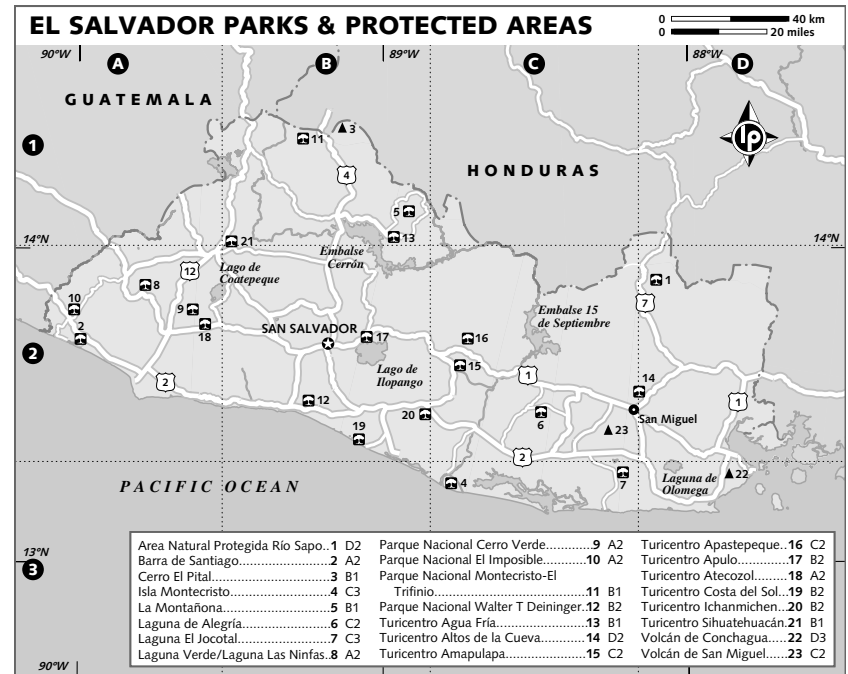
Environmental Issues

Overpopulation and the exploitation of the land for export crops (such as coffee, sugar and cotton) continue to propel El Salvador's massive deforestation. High population density remains the principal obstacle to the

SHAKE, RATTLE & ROLL

In 2001 a massive earthquake centered off the Salvadoran coast rocked Central America. Measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale, it killed 800 Salvadorans and leveled entire towns and many historical buildings. In the upmarket suburb of Santa Tecla in San Salvador, the quakes triggered a landslide which crushed homes and trapped all in its path. Its deforestation had made the hillside unstable. In all, more than 100,000 were left homeless.

Though much of the damage has been repaired, travelers will notice lingering effects. Churches remain in rubble and walls sport tell-tale cracks. During the research of this edition, tremors near Ahuachapán toppled over 200 meager dwellings, leaving inhabitants homeless. Residents dragged their mattresses out on the street so they could sleep soundly (while others didn't sleep at all). In all this excitement, you have to remember that El Salvador is the land of volcanoes, with shifting plate tectonics. Though it's hard to detect bitterness among stalwart Salvadorans, these rumbles and shiftings can still worry a traveler.



regeneration of ecosystems. Today, 17% of the country is forested, with only 2% to 5% of that primary forest. As a result, many native species have become endangered or extinct.

Deforestation and unplanned urban sprawl intensify the effects of natural disasters. In recent years El Salvador has been repeatedly pummeled by Mother Nature, producing a laundry list of disasters. In 1998, floods caused by Hurricane Mitch produced 200 fatalities and 70,000 homeless, acutely damaging the lower Río Lempa. Earthquakes in 2001 brought on landslides and destroyed buildings, killing 1159 people and destroying or damaging almost 300,000 homes.

Before the earthquakes, environmental groups had issued increasingly dire warnings about those very issues for a house-filled hillside in the wealthy neighborhood of Santa Tecla. When the earthquake hit, the slope collapsed, burying dozens of houses and untold numbers of people in a suffocating wall of mud.

Most recently, the eruption of Santa Ana volcano in October, 2005, coupled with Hurricane Stan's torrential rains, unleashed

scores of landslides, with the largest loss of life in poor areas built on steep slopes or riverbeds.

Río Lempa, a crucial watershed, suffers from pollution, as do many other rivers and lakes. Meanwhile, uncontrolled vehicle emissions challenge urbanites' respiratory functions in any metropolitan area. In 2006, the government vowed to take on the most visible problem – trash. The lack of proper disposal sites means gangs of vultures circling roadside dumps are a common sight.

Turicentros

The Instituto Salvadoreño de Turismo (ISTU) created *turicentros* (recreational complexes) between the late 1950s and 1970s, most near lakes and natural springs or in forests. Most have swimming pools, restaurants and no-frills cabins. As most are close to a main town, they attract crowds on weekends. The price is the same for all: US\$0.80 admission, US\$0.70 parking and US\$4 cabin rental (day use only). All are open 8am to 4pm. Contact the Ministerio de Trabajo in San Salvador (see p279) for reservations.

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

El Salvador's discerning immigration officials scrutinize entry and exit stamps, so avoid cutting corners. Request a 90-day visa in advance if you'd like one, otherwise you may be given less time.

Air

The **Aeropuerto Internacional Comalpa** (☎ 2339 8264) is located 44km south of San Salvador. A major Central and Latin American hub, it is also a gateway to North American cities.

TACA (☎ 2267 8222), **American Airlines** (☎ 2298 0777), **United Airlines** (☎ 2279 3900), **Continental** (☎ 2207 2040), **Delta Air Lines** (☎ 2275 9292) and **Copa Airlines** (☎ 2209 2672) are among others providing services to El Salvador.

Boat

El Salvador shares the Golfo de Fonseca with Honduras and Nicaragua. Boats occasionally ferry passengers between La Unión (El Salvador), Coyolito, Amapala or San Lorenzo (Honduras), and Potosí (Nicaragua). Going by sea does not save time since there are no scheduled passenger boats and land crossings are relatively close.

Bus

In San Salvador most international buses leave from **Terminal Puerto Bus** (Map p281; Alameda Juan Pablo II at 19a Av Norte). Take city bus 29, 101D, 7C or 52 to get there. Other departure points are indicated below. Santa Ana and San Miguel also have international bus services.

For private transfers, contact **Suchitoto Tours** (☎ 2513 1667; suchitoto.tours@gmail.com). The owner Miguel takes travelers direct to destinations

ENTRY & DEPARTURE TAXES

US citizens and some other nationalities may be required to pay for a US\$10 tourist card upon arrival to El Salvador's airport. There's a US\$32 departure tax to fly out of the airport, often already included in the cost of your plane ticket. The new Central America-4 agreement allows for travel between the borders of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua with one entry fee, for details see p327.

in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras and provides a wealth of information.

GUATEMALA & MEXICO

The Tica Bus that runs to Guatemala City continues to the Mexican border at Tapachula, Chiapas. From San Salvador, the trip takes 12 hours and costs US\$23 one way.

Border crossings to Guatemala are La Hachadura, Las Chinamas, San Cristóbal and Anguiatú. Ordinary buses go just to the border, international buses continue to Guatemala City.

From the Terminal Puerto Bus in San Salvador second-class bus lines provide daily service to Guatemala. Departures are hourly from 4am to 3pm daily (US\$10, five hours). **King Quality** (☎ in San Salvador 2271 1361) offers deluxe service to Guatemala City from the same terminal, featuring air-con, movies and a meal (one way/round-trip US\$26/33), departing at 6am and 3:30pm; Comfort Lines has similar service (one way US\$22), departing at 7:30am and 1:30pm.

Tica Bus (☎ 222 4808; www.ticabus.com; ☎ 8am-4:30pm) has service to Guatemala City at 6am (US\$11, five hours) from the **Hotel San Carlos** (Map p281; ☎ 2222 8975; Calle Concepción btwn 10a & 12a Avs Norte). Reserve one to two days in advance and arrive at the San Carlos a half-hour early. Tica Bus is inside the hotel.

Pullmantur (Map p278; ☎ 2243 1300; www.pullmantur.com in Spanish; Hotel Sheraton Presidente; Av La Revolución, Zona Rosa) also serves Guatemala City. Departures are Monday through Saturday at 7am and 3pm, and Sunday at 7am and 3pm (US\$26/41 for executive/1st class, 4½ hours). Purchase tickets at the Pullmantur office in the hotel.

Ordinary buses to the borders leave San Salvador from the Terminal de Occidente, usually connecting through Sonsonate, Santa Ana, Ahuachapán or Metapán.

For La Hachadura, take bus 205 to Sonsonate (US\$0.70, 1½ hours) and transfer to bus 259 (US\$0.80, 1½ hours) to the border.

For Las Chinamas, take bus 202 to Ahuachapán (from Santa Ana, use bus 210) and transfer to bus 263.

For San Cristóbal, bus 498 leaves from the Terminal del Occidente five times daily. Alternatively, take bus 201 to Santa Ana, where bus 236 leaves every half-hour for the border. Either way, the trip takes about three hours and costs US\$2.50.

To Anguiatú, take bus 201 to Santa Ana and transfer to bus 235 via Metapán.

HONDURAS

Border crossings to Honduras include El Poy, El Amatillo and Sabanetas/Perquín. Note that there is no Salvadoran immigration post at Sabanetas/Perquín. It is OK to leave the country here only if you don't plan on returning.

International buses to Honduras leave from Terminal Puerto Bus in San Salvador. (International buses can also be picked up in Santa Ana and San Miguel; see p297 and p311.) Air-conditioned King Quality buses leave every day for Tegucigalpa at 6am and 1:30pm (US\$28, six hours) and San Pedro Sula at 5am and 12:30pm (one way/round-trip US\$28/41, six hours).

Ordinary buses to the border leave from the Terminal de Oriente. For El Poy, bus 119 leaves the Terminal de Oriente via La Palma (US\$1.60, three hours), departing every half-hour from the terminal. At the border, you can pick up a bus or colectivo (shared taxi) to Nueva Ocotepeque and continue by bus from there.

For El Amatillo take bus 306 or 346 from San Salvador via San Miguel (US\$3, four hours; express service also available). After crossing the border, you can catch a bus to Tegucigalpa or Choluteca. Microbuses also go from El Amatillo to the Nicaraguan border at Guasaule (US\$5, two hours).

NICARAGUA, COSTA RICA & PANAMA

Tica Bus leaves the Hotel San Carlos at 5am and arrives in Managua, Nicaragua, between 5pm and 6pm (US\$25 one way). If continuing on, spend the night and leave the following morning at 5am. The bus arrives in San José, Costa Rica, between 3pm and 4pm (US\$42 one way from San Salvador). It then leaves at 10pm for Panama (US\$61 one way from San Salvador), where you arrive between 3pm and 4pm the following day, making for a grand total of three days of bus travel.

King Quality has daily services to San José, Costa Rica (US\$48, 18 hours) leaving at 3:30am from the Terminal Puerto Bus.

Car & Motorcycle

If you drive into El Salvador, you must show a driver's license (an international driving permit is accepted) and proof that you own the vehicle. You must also fill out extensive

forms. Car insurance is available and advisable but not required. Vehicles may remain in El Salvador for 30 days. If you wish to stay longer, it's best to leave the country and drive back in rather than attempt to deal with the Transport Ministry.

GETTING AROUND

Boat

You'll need to use a boat to get around the Bahía de Jiquilisco in eastern El Salvador for any trips in the Golfo de Fonseca, near La Unión. Otherwise, water transportation is rare.

Bus

Intercity buses are retired American school buses, scrubbed and painted wild colors. Most bus terminals are as chaotic and dirty as the area around them. Information is rarely posted, but other passengers can point you in the right direction. It can be hard to determine which bus on a given route is leaving first – engine revving and false starts play for passengers. Try following the crowd. There are no ticket offices; purchase your ticket on the bus once you're seated.

Buses run frequently to points throughout the country and are very cheap (US\$0.40 to US\$4). Some weekend fares increase up to 25%. Routes to some eastern destinations have different categories: *ordinario*, *especial* and *super especial*. The latter two options cost more, but they are faster and more comfortable. Most intercity bus services begin between 4am and 5am and end between 6pm and 7pm.

Car & Motorcycle

Most roads in El Salvador are paved and a pleasure to drive. By driving around the country you can see more in less time. The downside is searching for unmarked roads and turnoffs. Gas is not cheap either. A gallon of regular unleaded is about US\$3.30.

Get in the habit of lightly honking, especially when passing or before turning a curve. Also watch for signals from other cars, usually a hand waving for you to pass them or for them to cut you off. Police set up checkpoints, especially on roads to border crossings. Carjacking is a problem, as is getting parts stolen off your parked car. Don't drive alone in areas of ill repute and park in safe places. Car insurance is a good idea, but not required.

Rental cars are available in San Salvador and San Miguel. In San Salvador they include:

Alamo Uno Rent a Car (Map p278; ☎ 2211 2111; Blvd del Hipódromo 426)

Avis (Map p278; ☎ 2261 1212, airport 2339 9268; www.avis.com.sv in Spanish; 43a Av Sur 127)

Budget (Map p278; ☎ 2260 4333; www.budget.com.sv in Spanish; 1a Calle Poniente 2765; US\$35 daily)

Quick Rent a Car (☎ 2229 6959; www.quickrentacar.com.sv in Spanish) Offers hotel or airport pick up/drop off.

Hitchhiking

Buses or collective pick-ups go just about anywhere you could want to go, so hitching isn't usually necessary. If you do get a ride somewhere, it's customary to give (or at least offer) a small payment. Both men or women usually hop in the back of pickup trucks, but women might think twice before climbing into a car of only men.

SAN SALVADOR

pop 1.8 million (metropolitan area)

The cosmopolitan center of El Salvador is a city cranking with energy. Witness the buses stuffed with limbs akimbo, bountiful bars and downtown, where vendors overtake the pavement, allowing traffic a cool inch on each side. Commerce, from street to swanky mall, thrives. It is partly about consumption, partly about curiosity – San Salvador's appetite for the new is voracious.

It's easy for the first impression of the city to be daunting. Crime, after all, looms large. Travelers may see headlines of gang violence, meet survivors of the war or bump into the rifleman guarding the neighborhood ice-cream parlor. As San Salvador may be a city of impressions, however, it's also one of encounters. People are unusually eager to greet visitors and offer a hand. This confident, lefty metropolis has great music and museums on offer, as well as hipster bars and coffee shops. There's enough going on here to extend a trip a day or two, or even a week, in order to explore.

Travelers should visit the parks and *centro* during daytime only, and take taxis after dark. The gang area of Soyopango (east of town) should be avoided. If you're at all intimidated, exploring the city on a Sunday offers a slow start.

HISTORY

San Salvador was founded in 1525 by the Spanish conqueror Pedro de Alvarado, about 30km northeast of where it now stands, near Suchitoto. It was moved to its present site three years later, and declared a city in 1546. It was here in San Salvador in 1811 that Father José Matías Delgado first called for Central American independence. Once this was achieved, San Salvador became the capital of the united Provinces of Central America from 1834 to 1839 when El Salvador gained its own independence. It has since been the capital of El Salvador.

Natural disasters have beleaguered the city, including more than a dozen major earthquakes (and hundreds of smaller ones). San Salvador was destroyed by tremors in 1854 and 1873, by the eruption of Volcán San Salvador in 1917 and yet again by floods in 1934. The earthquake of October 10, 1986 caused considerable damage, and the most recent on January 13, 2001, contributed its share.

From assassinations to student protests, San Salvador served as a flashpoint in El Salvador's long civil war. In November 1989, the FMLN's 'final offensive' brought bitter fighting into the city streets. To quell the attack, government forces bombed neighborhoods thought to harbor guerrillas and their supporters. Hundreds of civilians and soldiers on both sides died. The attack and counter-attack left parts of the city in shambles, and proved that neither the government nor the guerrillas would win the war militarily. After a 26-month stalemate, peace accords were signed in 1992.

The declining economy during the war sparked an internal migration from the countryside to the city of mostly poor families and laborers; today over a quarter of the population of El Salvador inhabits the metropolitan area of the capital. Though San Salvador produces nearly 65% of the national GDP, unemployment is high and people do whatever they can to get by – vendors of all ages ply the streets and major intersections, selling everything from candy to cell phone chargers. On buses, vitamins and other supplements are marketed with vigor and creativity.

ORIENTATION

San Salvador follows the same grid pattern as most Central American cities. Unfortunately, signage is sparse in the central area (check for

names on the street curbs). From the zero point at the cathedral, Av España goes north and Av Cuscatlán south; Calle Arce runs to the west and Calle Delgado to the east.

Avenidas (avenues) run north–south, and change from 'Sur' (South) to 'Norte' (North) when they cross the major east–west artery (Calles Arce and Delgado). Likewise, avenues are odd- or even-numbered depending on whether they are east or west of the north–south artery (Avs Cuscatlán and España). So, 5a Av Sur is south of Calle Arce and west of Av Cuscatlán (because it's odd-numbered). Calles (streets) are similarly ordered, only using 'Oriente' (East; abbreviated 'Ote') and 'Poniente' (West; abbreviated 'Pun' or 'Pte'). It's confusing to the visitor at first, but you'll quickly learn the orderliness of it. The odd-even thing can be tricky, ie 25a Av is one block from 27a Av, but it is more than 25 blocks from 26a Av!

Av España leads up to 29a Calle Poniente, which heads west to the Universidad Nacional de El Salvador at the intersection of Blvd de los Héroes and Calle San Antonio Abad. Av Cuscatlán crosses Blvd Venezuela, which links the east and west bus terminals, and continues south to Parque Balboa and Puerta del Diablo, crossing the airport highway along the way.

From the city center, 1a Calle Poniente and Calle Rubén Darío, to the north and south of Arce respectively, are the main roads to the wealthier west.

INFORMATION

Bookstores

Bookmarks (Map p278; www.bookmarks.com.sv; Centro Comercial Basilea, Col San Benito) A good source for English magazines, paperback bestsellers in English, and travel books (including Lonely Planet).

Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad (CIS; Map p278; Colonia Libertad, Av Bolívar No 103) This center for peace and social justice has a good library for students and volunteers.

La Ceiba Libros (Map p283; Metrocentro, 1st fl, Blvd de los Héroes) Stock up on Salvadoran history and literature in Spanish here.

Emergency

Police (Map p283; ☎ 2261 0630; Calle Berlin; ☎ 24hr)

Immigration

Immigration Office (Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería; Paseo General Escalón Map p281; ☎ 2202 9650, 2221 2111; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat) For visa renewal and other immigration matters.

Internet Access

Internet cafés are plentiful along Calle Arce, near the Universidad Tecnológica. Around Blvd de los Héroes check out the following: **Cybercafé Genus** (Map p283; Av Izalco 102-A; per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am–11pm Mon–Fri, 10am–8pm Sat & Sun) **PC Station** (MetroSur, Blvd de los Héroes; per hr US\$1; ☎ 7am–10pm Mon–Sat, 9am–7pm Sun) Offers web-based international calling.

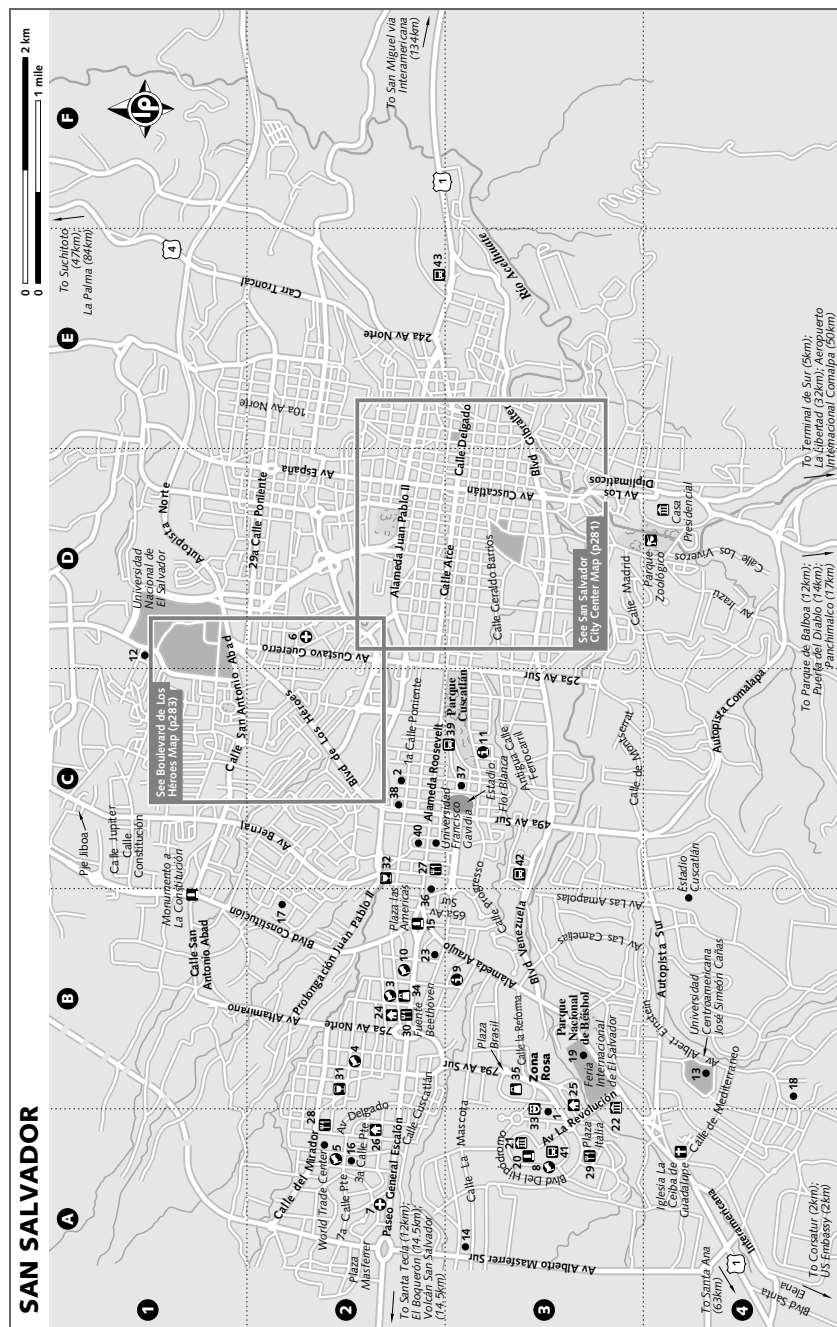
GETTING INTO TOWN FROM THE AIRPORT

Shuttles operated by **Taxis Acacya** (Map p281; airport ☎ 2339 9282, in town ☎ 2271 4937; cnr 19a Av Norte & 3a Calle Poniente) offer the best way to/from the airport. The trip costs US\$4 and takes 45 minutes. In **San Salvador**, shuttles leave from Taxis Acacya behind the Puerto Bas Terminal, at 6am, 7am, 10am and 2pm. From the airport, they depart at 9am, 1pm and 5:30pm.

Microbus 138 (US\$0.60, 45 to 60 minutes, every 10 minutes) passes the airport traveling to and from the city center. Pick it up just south of Plaza Barrios in town. The bus doesn't enter the terminal area and the stop is easy to miss. Politely pester the driver and his assistant to stop at the airport. If heading into town, cut through the parking lot to reach the highway (a 75m walk) and a bus shelter. Once downtown, a taxi costs US\$4 to US\$7. Bus 30 goes to Metrocentro and Blvd de los Héroes (from Plaza Barrios walk two blocks north, turn right one block to Parque Libertad).

You can also go directly from the airport to **La Libertad** – it's about the same distance as San Salvador. Take bus 133 to the *punte a Comalapa* (Comalapa overpass) a few minutes away. A path leads up onto the intersecting road; from there it's 100m to the town of Comalapa, where bus 187 or 495 goes every 20 minutes to La Libertad (US\$0.35).

A taxi between San Salvador or La Libertad and the airport costs US\$20 – don't bother trying to bargain.



EL SALVADOR

SAN SALVADOR

EL SALVADOR

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| Bookmarks.....1 A3 | Mérida Ananya Montes.....(see 12) | |
| Centro Nacional de Registros (IGN).....2 C2 | Mercado de Artesanías.....19 B3 | ENTERTAINMENT 📺 |
| French Embassy.....3 B2 | Monumento a la Revolución.....20 A3 | Cinépolis.....(see 34) |
| German Embassy.....4 B2 | Museo de Arte de El Salvador (MARTE).....21 A3 | Jala La Jarra.....33 A3 |
| Honduran Embassy.....5 A2 | Museo Nacional de Antropología David J Guzmán.....22 B3 | Multicinemmas.....(see 34) |
| Hospital de Diagnóstico.....6 D2 | Rio Aventuras.....23 B2 | SHOPPING 🛍️ |
| Hospital Diagnóstico Escalón.....7 A2 | Ministerio de Trabajo's Auxiliary Office.....9 B3 | Galerías Escalón.....34 B2 |
| Hospital de Diagnóstico Escalón.....7 A2 | Nicaraguan Embassy.....10 B2 | Pacific Surf & Sport.....35 B3 |
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| El Arbol de Dios.....14 A3 | La Posada del Rey I.....26 A2 | Budget.....38 C2 |
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| Hospital la Divina Providencia (El Hospitalito).....17 B2 | Las Cofradías.....28 A2 | Delta Airlines.....(see 40) |
| | Las Vacas Gordas.....29 A3 | Grupo TACA.....(see 34) |
| | Le Croissant.....30 B2 | Pullmantur Buses.....41 A3 |
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Near the center:

Ciber Snack (Map p281; cnr 2a Av Sur & 4a Calle Ote; per hr US\$1; ☎️ 7:30am-6:30pm Mon-Sat)

Infocentros (Map p281; 19a Av Norte; per hr US\$1; ☎️ 7am-8:30pm Mon-Fri, 7am-6pm Sat) International calls available.

Laundry

Lavapronto (Map p283; Calle Los Sisimiles 2949; ☎️ 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, 7am-5pm Sat) Charges US\$4 per load. Many hotels do laundry as well.

Medical Services

Hospital Bloom (Map p283; ☎️ 2225 4114; Blvd de los Héroes at Av Gustavo Guerrero/25a Av Norte) Public hospital with long lines. Specializes in children's treatment.

Hospital de Diagnóstico (Map p278; ☎️ 2226 8878; Calle 21 Pte at 2a Diagonal) Considered one of the country's best hospitals, relatively inexpensive.

Hospital Diagnóstico Escalón Map p278; ☎️ 2264 4422; 3a Calle Pte) Recommended by the US embassy.

Money

Banks and 24-hour ATMs are found throughout the capital, issuing US dollars.

Banco Credomatic (Map p283 & p281) Branches located in the centro and next to the Super Selectos supermarket, in the Centro Comercial San Luis, off Calle San Antonio Abad. Changes traveler's checks or gives cash advances on MasterCard.

Banco Cuscatlán (Map p283 & p281) ATMs that accept all cards are located in Metrocentro Mall and Galerías Mall, where you may be charged a fee. Branches change

traveler's checks and can give cash advances on Visa cards.

Casas de Cambio (Map p281) Changes foreign currency. **Dispensa de Don Juan** (Map p281) Near Plaza Barrios, has several ATMs and is probably the most secure place to withdraw money in the centro.

Post

Correos Central (Map p281; Centro Gobierno; ☎️ 7:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) A smaller branch is in Metrocentro by the Blvd de los Héroes entrance (Map p283).

Tourist Information

Corsatur (☎️ 2243 7835; corsatur@salnet.net; ☎️ 8am-12:30pm, 1:30-5:30pm) Inconveniently located outside the city; offers maps, brochures and a sometimes-handly magazine. Its airport branch is usually unmanned.

ISTU (Map p281; ☎️ 2222 8000; istu@mh.gov.sv; Calle Rubén Darío 619; ☎️ 8:30am-noon, 1-4pm Mon-Sat) General information about El Salvador's national parks and turicentros.

Ministerio de Trabajo's Auxiliary Office (Map p278; ☎️ 2298 8739; Calle Nueva Dos 19; ☎️ 8am-12:30pm, 1:30-4pm Mon-Fri) Issues permits to stay at the four government-run workers' vacation centers in Lago de Coatepeque, El Tamarindo, La Palma and La Libertad. Apply here in person with your passport and the number of people in your group. Plan your stay between Wednesday and Saturday (the centers are closed other days), and workers get weekend preference. Calling ahead may help expedite paperwork, or it may take a few days. Centers don't provide linen.

Peace Corps (☎️ 2207 6000; www.peacecorps.gov) These days this US volunteer organization is dedicating

PEOPLE PACKING HEAT

Enter El Salvador and you'll wonder if you've stumbled onto an NRA convention. Banks, hotels and even bikini boutiques are patrolled by clean-shaven guards packing M16s and 9mm pistols. While the war is long over, this security-obsessed country employs over 18,000 security guards. In addition, there are countless private citizens accessorizing with arms, easily purchased in gun shops at the mall among the boutiques.

Yet the tide might be turning. In an effort to curb violence, the legislature passed a series of measures banning guns in public areas in December, 2006. Will it affect availability? Maybe not. Of the estimated 500,000 firearms in El Salvador, 60% are illegal. A 10-month period in 2006 saw 3000 murders in the country. The stricter measures of President Anthony Saca's Super Mano Dura (Super Hard Hand) policy create more arrests but few convictions. To combat violence, law enforcement will have to somehow quell that old culture of combat and the conditions that lead to crime.

more efforts to creating sustainable tourism in rural areas. If you want to get off the beaten track, they may be a good resource, although the office is not equipped for public visits. Volunteers are certainly receptive to visitors to tourism projects. At the time of research the office was being moved so call for further information.

SalvaNatur (Map p278; ☎ 2279 1515; www.salvanatur.org in Spanish; 33 Av Sur 640; ☎ 8am-12:30pm, 2-5:30pm Mon-Fri) Friendly and helpful staff manage Parque Nacional El Imposible and Parque Nacional los Volcanes. Call before visiting either park.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Travelers may not experience it first-hand, but crime is a serious problem in San Salvador. Pick-pocketing occurs in broad daylight. Travel light, skip flashy jewelry and watches, and stay aware of your belongings, especially on buses, in market areas and street crowds. If you are robbed, just hand over the goods. Locals recommend taking taxis after 8pm. The center is off-limits for walking around at night, along with Parque Cuscatlán. Ample nightlife lines Calle San Antonio Abad and Blvd de los Héroes, but take a cab to get to your hotel. Don't use the shortcut from Blvd de los Héroes to Ximena's Guest House and La Estancia at night.

Pollution is a consistent pest, rankled in place by the surrounding mountains. Thick vehicle exhaust, especially from buses, can leave you with runny eyes and a sore throat. Prevent the inevitable cold by eating right and being careful about germs.

Accidents between cars and pedestrians are frequent and frightening. Be extra-careful crossing the street. Pedestrians don't have the right of way and no car will chivalrously cede it to you.

SIGHTS City Center

El centro overloads the senses with blaring beats, sputtering traffic and crowds squeezing through the artery of busy markets. It is far more interesting than the sterile suburbs, and long-term makeovers are finally starting to bear fruit. The main plaza is **Plaza Barrios**, where local protests usually begin or end. Two blocks east is **Parque Libertad**, where a winged statue of Liberty holds court.

CATEDRAL METROPOLITANA

Fernando Llort painted the colorful *campesino* motif façade of this beige stucco building (Map p281). Its blue and yellow checked dome faces Plaza Barrios and marks the center of the city's street grid. Completed in 1999 after years of renovation, the cathedral stands on the site of an earlier version that burned in 1956. Archbishop Oscar A Romero's tomb is underneath, visited by Pope John Paul II in March 1993.

IGLESIA EL ROSARIO

In spite of appearances, which show a dilapidated hangar, this austere construction (Map p281) is one of the more interesting churches in the country. A soaring arched roof with stained-glass panels covers a unique interior adorned with scrap-metal figures. More stone and metal statues stand on the side across from the entrance. The father of Central American independence, Padre Delgado, is buried here.

OTHER HISTORICAL BUILDINGS

Government headquarters before the devastating 1986 earthquake, the ornate **Palacio Nacional** (Map p281) occupies the west side of the plaza. Built in the early 20th century of Italian marble, the palace displays the classical

style fashionable at the time. The imposing **Biblioteca Nacional** (Map p281) is on the plaza's south end. The **Teatro Nacional** (Map p281) east from the cathedral along Delgado, was erected in 1917 and functioned as a movie house for 50-odd years before an opulent renovation added ornate gilt boxes, sensuous ceiling mural and red velvet galore. West down 6a Calle Poniente, you'll see the Gothic towers of the decaying **Iglesia El Calvario** (Map p281).

West of the Center

Calle Rubén Darío heads west from the center, changing names a couple of times along the way. Bus 52 rumbles down the entire length of this road. When the street is Alameda Roosevelt, it passes pleasant **Parque Cuscatlán** (Map

p278), where women sell *pupusas* and kids kick soccer balls. Further along, it passes **Estadio Flor Blanca** (Map p278), the national stadium, where soccer matches and the occasional rock concert are held. At 65a Av, you come to **Plaza las Américas** (Map p278), with the statue **El Salvador del Mundo** (Map p278). Symbolic of the country, it depicts Jesus on top of the world. Continuing west the road becomes Paseo Gral Escalón, going through the fashionable Colonia Escalón. Further west you hit Plaza Masferrer.

MUSEO NACIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGÍA DAVID J GUZMÁN

This outstanding anthropology museum (Map p278; Av La Revolución; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) has two floors of well-presented exhibits

SAN SALVADOR CITY CENTER

0 400 m
0 0.2 miles

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| <p>INFORMATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Banco Credomatic.....1 C2 Banco Cuscatlán.....2 C3 Banco Cuscatlán.....3 B2 Casas de Cambio.....4 B1 Centro Gobierno.....5 B1 Ciber Snack.....6 C2 Correos Central.....7 B1 Dispensa de Don Juan.....8 C2 Guatemalan Embassy.....9 A2 Immigration Office.....(see 5) Infocentros.....10 A1 ISTU.....11 B2 | <p>SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Biblioteca Nacional.....12 C2 Catedral Metropolitana.....13 C2 Iglesia El Calvario.....14 B3 Iglesia El Rosario.....15 D2 Palacio Nacional.....16 C2 Teatro Nacional.....17 C2 | <p>EATING 🍴</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Café Miquilishuat.....24 B2 sidewalk comedores.....25 C2 <p>ENTERTAINMENT 🎪</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multicinemmas Majestic.....26 C1 <p>TRANSPORT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Airport Shuttle.....(see 28) Buses to Airport.....27 C3 Taxis Aéreo.....28 A1 Terminal Puerto Bus.....29 A1 Tica Buses.....(see 22) |
|--|---|---|

Hotel San Carlos.....22 D2
 Hotel Villa Florencia.....23 A1

on the Maya, Salvadoran history, arts, religion and economy. Prehistoric rock carvings occupy an adjacent garden. All explanations are in Spanish; so it's well worth bringing a dictionary.

MUSEO DE ARTE DE EL SALVADOR (MARTE)

The modern-art museum (Map p278; adult/student US\$1.50/0.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) opened in May 2003, and houses a permanent collection of top Salvadoran painters. Rotating exhibits are topical and highly politicized, featuring mostly Latin American artists. Getting here is an uphill walk from the anthropology museum, just behind the large Monumento a la Revolución.

CENTRO MONSEÑOR ROMERO

At Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas ('La UCA'), the **Centro Monseñor Romero** (Map p278; Calle de Mediterraneo; admission free; ☎ 8am-noon, 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8-11:30am Sat) is a well-organized museum that pays homage to the martyred archbishop. The center is housed in the former quarters of six Jesuits, who, along with their maid and her daughter, were slain in their sleep by military forces in 1989. The Jesuits are buried in the chapel just a few meters away. UCA students give tours. While you're there, walk over to **Iglesia la Ceiba de Guadalupe** (Map p278), a pretty church on the highway, where you can catch a bus.

HOSPITAL LA DIVINA PROVEDENCIA

Also known as **El Hospitalito** (Map p278; Av 'B' at Calle Toluca; admission free; ☎ usually 8am-noon & 2-5pm) Monseñor Romero was assassinated by government agents while giving mass in this chapel on March 24, 1980. The chapel is still in use. Romero lived his last years in this public hospital, eschewing more prominent assignments and bodyguards. You can tour his modest quarters, where his blood-soaked shirt and robes are displayed, as well as the typewriter he used to type his famously stirring homilies.

JARDÍN BOTÁNICO LA LAGUNA

Also called **Plan de la Laguna** (Map p278; admission US\$0.50; ☎ 9am-5:30pm Tue-Sun), this cool botanical garden sits at the bottom of a volcanic crater. Take bus 44 from the center, and ask the driver to let you off at the right spot, from where it's a 1km downhill walk to the garden.

Boulevard de los Héroes

MUSEO DE LA PALABRA Y LA IMAGEN

Formed 'against the chaos of amnesia,' the **Museum of the Word & Image** (Map p283; 27 Av Norte 1140; www.museo.com.sv; admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) documents El Salvador's culture and history. Exhibits are incredible if searing, including modern-art installations and black-and-white war photos. Content includes the revolutionary movement of the 1970s and '80s and portraits of indigenous groups and women in history. Director Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, a Venezuelan-born journalist, was the founder and front voice for Radio Venceremos, a radio station crucial to the pro-guerrilla cause. There's a reconstructed radio station and an interesting library with DVDs in English.

MUSEO DE ARTE POPULAR

A little gem of a **museum** (Map p283; Av San José 125; admission US\$1; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) dedicated to El Salvador's quirky folk art. The curator personally guides guests around four small rooms, explaining everything from weaving techniques to the history of *sorpresas*, miniature scenes of life hidden under carved forms of eggs or fruit (see p307). *Cuadros* (paintings) depict village life, more recently including humorous takes on illegal immigration or marriage and sex. To get more up close, ask for the names and addresses of known artists who receive visitors to their village workshops.

ACTIVITIES

Friendly and bilingual Julio and Gabi Vega of **Akwaterra** (☎ 2263 2211; www.akwaterra.com) offer tailor-made land- and water-based ecotours, including horseback riding and mountain biking, and surfing and kayaking.

El Salvador Divers (Map p278; ☎ 2264 0961; www.elsalvadordivers.com; 3A Calle Pte; ☎ 9am-6:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) is a professional dive shop offering dives in Lago Ilopango, Lago Coatepeque and in the Pacific near Los Cóbano. Open-water courses cost US\$300, two-tank fun dives cost US\$65.

El Salvador's only rafting outfit **Ríos Aventuras** (Map p278; ☎ 2298 0335; www.riosaventuras.com.sv in Spanish; Av Olímpica 3597) offers white-water rafting down the Río Lempa, Río Paz, along the Guatemalan border and Río Banderas. Rapids range from easy class II-III to class III-IV in winter. Trips include three hours

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of rafting, plus breakfast, lunch, snacks and transportation from San Salvador. Cost per person US\$60.

COURSES

Mélida Anaya Montes Spanish Language School (CIS; Map p278; ☎ 2235 1330; www.cis-elsalvador.org; Colonia Libertad, Av Bolívar 103) Named after a promi-

ent educator who became an FMLN commander amid growing government repression, this language school incorporates social and political themes. Language classes meet for four hours daily and cost US\$100 per week, plus a one-time US\$25 application fee and a weekly US\$12.50 administration fee. Homestays for US\$70 a week, including two meals per day, are available.

VOLUNTEERING

Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad (CIS; ☎ 2235 1330; www.cis-elsalvador.org; Colonia Libertad, Av Bolívar 103) There are opportunities for volunteers to help teach English to low-income Salvadorians (see p327) or observe elections (with conversational Spanish). There's a 10-week minimum commitment and teachers get half-price Spanish classes in return.

SLEEPING

Upmarket lodgings are concentrated in Zona Rosa and Colonia Escalón, also close to some hotspots for dancing and drinking. Safe and convenient, the Blvd de los Héroes area offers reasonable lodgings close to the Universidad Nacional and lively bohemian bars, restaurants and nightlife. The working-class area around the Universidad Tecnológica (south of the Puerto Bus terminal) offers shady streets and easy access to the airport shuttle and international buses. The city center has few charms, parts are downright tattered and dangerous after dark.

City Center

With most rooms let by the hour and the sketch-factor high at night, the *centro* (Map p281) is the preference of few travelers. Here's a few options if you can't resist its gritty vitality.

Hotel Internacional Custodio (☎ 221 5810; 10a Av Sur 109; r per person with/without bathroom US\$9/6) The friendly Bible-reading owner hopes to remodel this worn behemoth, but the rumor is longstanding. At least rooms are spacious and the sheets bright white though ridden with holes. Avoid the musty 1st floor.

Hotel San Carlos (☎ 2222 1664; Calle Concepción 121; r per person US\$12) Conveniently located at the Tica bus terminal, this dive sports pancake-thin mattresses in cramped rooms. At least they're decently clean with private bathroom.

Hotel Nuevo Panamericano (☎ 2221 1199; 8a Av Sur 113; US\$15; [P] [2]) Not a deal for singles, these 26 tidy tile rooms show some wear. Some are stuffed with beds. The clients here seem to love stilettos – you decide why that is.

Boulevard de los Héroes

You can easily walk to bars and restaurants on Calle San Antonio Abad or Blvd Universitario, or down to Metrocentro mall. Buses to the bus terminals, Zona Rosa and the center (and from there, the airport) all pass here. All are on Map p283.

Ximena's Guest House (☎ 260 2481; www.ximenasguesthouse.com; Calle San Salvador 202; dm US\$6-8, d US\$25; [Q]) San Salvador's pioneer guesthouse is still lovely and bohemian but starting to show wear and tear. Beware of the extras – window screens cost US\$2, as does hourly internet access, and the food (varied and vegetarian-friendly) ain't cheap. It's still a good place to meet other travelers.

La Almohada (☎ 2211 8021; almohadajosep@yahoo.com; Calle Berlin 220; dm US\$7; [Q]) 'The Pillow' is popular with visiting non-profit groups. Atmosphere is coaxed out of tie-dyed curtains, a hand-painted mural and hammock patio. The dorm has metal bunks, worn tiles and threadbare sheets but bathrooms are clean and spacious. It's across from the police station and two doors down from the great nightlife at La Luna.

La Estancia (☎ 2275 3381; Av Cortés 216, dm/d US\$7/17; [Q]) Doña Ana runs this homey spot (an unmarked lilac-trim house) catering to Peace Corps volunteers since its inception. While dorms feel stuffy, the patios, TV room, free coffee and common kitchen are great features. Private rooms have TV, bathrooms and faux-wood paneling.

Casa de Huespedes Tazumal (☎ 2235 0156; www.hotel tazumalhouse.com; 35a Av Norte 3, s/d US\$18/25, with air-con US\$20/28; s/d with bathroom US\$20/25, with bathroom & air-con US\$25/35; [Q]) Basking in familial warmth, this guesthouse is the best value in town. The rooms are bright and spotless, with fresh white linens, towels and clean, hot showers. Guests get a half-hour of free internet, breakfast and ample assistance in English.

International Guest's House (☎ 2226 7343; [Q] guesthouse@hotmail.com; 35a Av Norte 9 Bis; s/d US\$18/35; [Q]) A large guesthouse with secure, low-lit rooms showing worn tile and mismatched fixtures. The pluses include a large, covered patio out back, friendly service and free internet. It's popular with groups.

El Torogoz (☎ 2235 4172; 35a Av Norte 7B; eltorogoz@telsal.net; s/d with breakfast US\$24/37; [Q] [2]) Prices have climbed at this pleasant family hotel and the shared bathrooms and slow service might make you wonder why. But nice features include a brick courtyard with plants, cable TV and a small swimming pool.

Hotel Florida (☎ 2260 2540; www.hotelfloridasofia.com; Pasaje los Almendros 115; s/d with fan US\$24/30, s/d with air-con US\$35/60; [2]) Modern and sunny, this friendly hotel might not be the bargain it once was, but it is still reliable and clean.

The best features are the bouncy mattresses and rooftop terrace with views. Showers are solar-powered. There's no sign but you'll find it behind El Soplón Típico.

Near Universidad Tecnológica

This area west of *el centro* (Map p278) is safer and more relaxed than downtown. It's near the Universidad Tecnológica, where there's a bunch of cheap eats and internet cafés. It's convenient to the Terminal Puerto Bus for international buses. Take taxis at night.

Hotel American Guest House (☎ 271 0224; 17 Av Norte 119; s/d US\$12/14, with bathroom US\$15/20) An old-fashioned home where large, dark rooms have hardwood furniture and bubbling wallpaper. It's entertaining to browse the mix of tacky and truly compelling antiques. There's an on-site *cafetería*.

Hotel Pasadena II (☎ 2221 4786; 3a Calle Poniente 1037; s/d with fan US\$12/17) Good value with attentive staff, but not as charming as the Villa Florencia next door. Bathrooms lack shower curtains and the décor is plain. Rooms in the back are quieter.

Hotel Villa Florencia (☎ 2221 1706; www.hotel villaflorencia.com in Spanish; 3a Calle Poniente 1023; s/d/t US\$13/19/21) A lovely colonial place in top shape, with remodeled rooms with terracotta tiles and fresh linens. Enjoy the sunny fern-lined courtyard and new upstairs rooms with great light. It's next to a quiet funeral home.

Zona Rosa & Colonia Escalón

Casa Australia (Map p278; ☎ 223 7905; Blvd Venezuela 3093; s US\$15, s/d with air-con US\$25/30; [P] [Q]) This relaxing, bright home is run by the energetic María Lidia. Singles are small but cheery and immaculately kept, doubles are average size. In a convenient, safe and quiet location. Breakfast is US\$2 extra.

Hotel Villa Florencia Zona Rosa (Map p278; ☎ 2257 0236; www.hotelvillaflorencia.com in Spanish; Av La Revolución; s/d/t US\$41/53/73; [2] [Q] [P]) Ritzzy and reasonably priced, this small hotel offers impeccable service and luxuriant touches (think gold tones and chandeliers). Loaner computers with wi-fi are available. There's a lovely stone courtyard and sleek café serving breakfast.

La Posada del Rey I (Map p278; ☎ 2264 5245; www.laposadadelreyprimero.com in Spanish; Pasaje Dordelly, Colonia Escalón; s/tw US\$44/70; [Q] [2]) On the swanky side of town you'll find this fortress-like hotel with a placid atmosphere and top service. Carved colonial furniture and bucolic paintings of

the countryside set the scene for a real retreat. Rooms are well-appointed and sunny and there's free wireless and an upmarket onsite restaurant. Prices may be negotiable at slow times.

EATING

City Center & Around

The center has plenty of eateries but few standouts. For a quick bite check out the **sidewalk comedores** (mains US\$1-3) a block west of Plaza Barrios dishing up *panes de pollo* (big chicken sandwiches) and *bistec encebollada* (onion grilled beef).

Le Croissant (Map p278; 1a Calle Pte 3883; Colonia Escalón; pastries US\$1-3; ☎ 7:30am-6:30pm) Crusty, fresh baguettes and a gorgeous selection of pastries will tempt even the not-hungry traveler. There's no seating, so grab it to go.

Cafetería Arco Iris (Map p278; 59a Av Sur; mains US\$2-3; ☎ breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat) Come early for a wide selection of *comida a la vista* (meal served buffet-style), which includes vegetables and rice as well as a few meat choices.

Café Maquilishuat (Map p281; Simáu Centro, 1st fl; mains US\$2-6; ☎ 7:30am-7pm) Upmarket for a *cafetería* (with hand-painted ceramics and flatscreen TV), this super-sparkling eatery offers a welcome escape from the hubbub. Grab a pastry or dine on *típica*, usually meat, crepes or rice, washing it down with *atole* (cinnamon rice milk).

La Ventana (Map p278; ☎ 2264 4885; 83 Av Norte 510 at 9a Calle Poniente; mains US\$4-9; ☎ 8-1am Tue-Sat, 10-12:30am Sun) A hip and hot eatery where the food falls second to atmosphere. Enjoy the deck seating and bohemian backdrop. The menu offers German sausages, pastas, pizzas and Mexican fare. Service can be pitifully slow and indifferent.

Las Cofradías (Map p278; ☎ 2264 6148; Calle de Mirador, Colonia Escalón; buffet US\$7; ☎ dinner) A lesson in everything Salvadoran. Bring your hunger (it's all you can eat) and stack a hand-made pottery plate with *tamales de elote* (corn tamales), *riguras* (tortillas in a corn husk), *gallina* (hen) and *nuegados* (plantains and yucca with honey and cinnamon).

Las Vacas Gordas (Map p278; ☎ 2243 3939; Blvd Hipódromo, Zona Rosa; mains US\$8-22; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Sat, noon-6pm Sun) Feast on quality meats ranging from filet mignon to rib-eye at this upmarket eatery. Check out regular two-for-one specials. Seating in the shady courtyard is especially posh.

Boulevard de los Héroes

Calle San Antonio Abad has the best dining options but the many spots in and around the Metrocentro mall are clean and convenient. All are on Map p283.

Pupusería la Ceiba (Calle San Antonio Abad; mains US\$1-3; ☎ dosed Sun) Whether you're grabbing a dollar breakfast of tamales, coffee and eggs or downing a few hot *pupusas*, this corner café is a bargain.

Casablanca Café (Calle San Antonio Abad; mains US\$2-3; ☎ 7:30am-5pm Mon-Sat) What this cement cafeteria lacks in ambience it makes up for with tasty *comida a la vista* ranging from coconut chicken to beef mains and salads.

Mister Donut (MetroSur; mains US\$2-4; ☎ 6am-8pm) There's a surprising retro appeal to this updated donut shop in the mall, upgraded to serve sandwiches and tamales in leatherette booths.

Sol y Luna (cnr Blvd Universitario & Av C; mains US\$2-4; ☎ 8am-5:30pm) Enjoy rare vegetarian fare served in hearty cafeteria-style. Loaves of cashew-almond bread, salads and fruit shakes round out the options.

La Luna Casa y Arte (☎ 2260 2921; www.lalunacasayarte.com; Calle Berlín 228; mains US\$2-7; ☎ noon-2am Mon-Fri, 4:30pm-2am Sat) It's an arts venue (right) that happens to have outstanding grilled sandwiches, home-made soups and salads. The coffee bar and desserts prove worthy too.

Las Fajitas (Blvd Universitario; mains US\$3-6; ☎ lunch & dinner) Tex-Mex goes festive with paper cut-outs and wooden benches. The *pinchos* (beef-kebabs) are juicy and gigantic, and the tacos come with a range of salsas to sample.

Salvatore's (35a Av Norte; mains US\$3-6; ☎ lunch & dinner) Come to this convenient neighborhood joint for cheap personal pizzas or whopping plates of pasta.

El Sopón Típico (Pasajes las Palmeras & los Almendros; mains US\$5; ☎ 10:30am-9pm) Whet your appetite for roasted chicken, fresh corn tortillas and home-made *curtido* (spicy pickled cabbage). The adventurous can go for rabbit, rooster or roasted goat. Fresh and tart *arrayan* juice complements nicely. There's open-air ambience with heaps of wooden tables and benches, and friendly staff manning the crackling grill.

La Hola Beto's (Calle Lamatepec; mains US\$5-12; ☎ noon-10:30pm) Great service and seafood are Beto's forte, but the Zona Real offers a wide selection of restaurant-bars.

El Establo (☎ 2226 9754; Blvd Universitario; mains US\$6-10; ☎ lunch & dinner) Locals pack 'the stable'

for hefty portions of grilled meat, Argentine chorizo sausage and chicken, served alongside refried beans and *tostones* (fried plantains).

DRINKING Bars & Clubs

La Luna Casa y Arte (Map p283; ☎ 2260 2921; www.lalunacasayarte.com; Calle Berlín 228; ☎ noon-2am Mon-Fri, 4:30pm-2am Sat) Hands-down El Salvador's best nightlife, with a mantra, '*No importa como llegues, la onda es llegar*' (who cares how you get here, the vibe is to arrive). Check out the website for the weekly rotation of live jazz, rock and salsa (usually Friday), as well as free films and live poetry. The food (see left) is good too.

Les 3 Diablos (Map p283; Calle San Antonio Abad at Av Izalco; ☎ 7pm-2am Mon-Sat) Weekday drink specials and rowdy crowds keep this spot spinning. Who cares if there's no dancefloor? The aisles fill with young professionals, Peace Corps volunteers and students grooving to alt rock and pop.

Bar-bar-o (Map p283; www.bar-bar-o.com; ☎ 6pm-2:30am) A sleek spot with cheap eats, DJ (world and African rhythms) and free live music on weekends. Check out the website for listings.

Café la 'T' (Map p283; Calle San Antonio Abad 2233; ☎ 10am-9:30pm Mon-Wed, 10am-11pm Thu-Sat) This is a little lefty café with live music (jazz or folk) on some Fridays (US\$2) and free films on Wednesday and Thursday at 7:30pm. There's light food, beer and wine but the coffee is mighty fine.

El Arpa Irlandés (Map p283; Av A across from Parque San José; ☎ 3pm-2am, closed Sun) With Guinness on tap and a pot of stew on the stovetop, this pub is a friendly spot to grab a pint or shoot some pool.

La Ventana (Map p278; ☎ 2264 4885; 83 Av Norte 510 at 9a Calle Poniente; mains US\$4-9; ☎ 8-1am Tue-Sat, 10-12:30am Sun) Lively and upmarket, this social hive continues to be a perennial local favorite with cheap Belgian ales and German beers.

Jala la Jarra (Map p278; Av las Magnolias 206; ☎ 9:30pm-2am Wed-Sat; cover US\$5) This is a groovy bar and disco. Dress well to fit in with the rich, young somebodies. This is one of a row of popular clubs and pubs in the swishy Zona Rosa neighborhood on Av Las Magnolias.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

Yascuas & Milenio (Map p278; Condominios Juan Pablo II on Prolongación Juan Pablo II; ☎ 9:30pm-1am Thu-Sat) Two gay bar-discos in the same building.

LOCAL MUSIC PICKS: CESAR'S SEVEN

If music is the universal language, get fluent in Salvadoran beats. With the music scene in San Salvador thriving, it's worth checking out a band or two (you can later say you knew them back when). To start you off, Cesar, a budding musician from Juayúa, offers his top picks:

Anastacio y los del Monte Reggae

Hermanos Flores Cumbia

Talticpac Pre-Hispanic fusion

La Pepa Traditional rock

Adhesivo New wave ska

El Atico Progressive rock

Armando Solorzano Latin pop

If you don't come upon these bands playing live in your travels, find them online or at the CD store. The best pulse on local music is www.musica.com.sv.

ENTERTAINMENT

Look for *Diario de Hoy's* Thursday pullout section *Planeta Alternativa* for weekly concert and event listings.

Cinemas

Hollywood films with Spanish subtitles dominate the theater while some bars listed earlier have alternative movie nights. Major newspapers have schedules. Wednesday is half price.

Cine Reforma (Map p283; ☎ 2225 9588; Blvd Universitario) Discounts on random Tuesdays.

CineMark (Map p283; ☎ 2261 2001; Metrocentro, 3rd fl, Blvd de los Héroes; admission US\$3)

Cinépolis (Map p278; Galerías Escalón) A new 11-screen megaplex.

La Luna Casa y Arte (Map p283; ☎ 2260 2921; www.lalunacasayarte.com in Spanish; Calle Berlín 228; admission free) Screenings at 8pm Wednesday.

Multicinemas Majestic (Map p281; ☎ 2222 5965; Av España; admission US\$1.75)

Theater

Teatro Luis Poma (Map p283; ☎ 2261 1029; Metrocentro; admission US\$5) A modern playhouse with great offerings, strangely set at the mall.

SHOPPING

The gallery of La Palma artist Fernando Lloret is four long blocks south of Plaza Masferrer. **El Arbol de Dios** (Map p278; Calle la Mascota; admission free; ☎ 9am-9:30pm Mon-Sat) houses an extensive

collection of his work, including sophisticated pieces unlike his simpler and better-known wood paintings.

A garden array of Che and Romero T-shirts, cheap shoes and *artesanía* can be found in this army barracks turned public market **Mercado Ex-Cuartel** (Map p281; Calle Delgado; ☎ 7:30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 7:30am-2pm Sun). Swag includes hammocks on hooks and brightly embroidered cotton. Scrutinize crafts since quality varies widely.

New boards and accessories, as well as unlimited beta on surf breaks, are available at **Pacific Surf & Sport** (Map p278; ☎ 2245 1584; Blvd El Hipodromo 14, Zona Rosa; 11am-8pm Mon-Sat).

GETTING THERE & AWAY Air

Aeropuerto Internacional Comalpa, 50km south-east of San Salvador, is a major Central American hub. Airline offices in San Salvador include:

American Airlines (Map p278; ☎ 2298 0777; Edificio La Centroamericana, Alameda Roosevelt)

Continental (Map p283; ☎ 2207 2040; Metrocentro Mall, 2nd fl)

Copa Airlines (Map p278; ☎ 2209 2672; World Trade Center I, cnr 89a Av Norte & Calle del Mirador)

Delta Air Lines (Map p278; ☎ 2275 9292; World Trade Center I, cnr 89a Av Norte & Calle del Mirador)

TACA (Map p278; ☎ 2267 8222; Galerías Escalón, street level)

United Airlines (Map p278; ☎ 2279 3900; Galerías Escalón, street level)

Bus

San Salvador has three main terminals for national long-distance buses. Buses serving all points east and a few northern destinations arrive and depart from the **Terminal de Oriente** (Map p278; Alameda Juan Pablo II), on the eastern side of the city. Buses serving all points west, including the Guatemalan border, arrive and depart from the **Terminal de Occidente** (Map p278; Blvd Venezuela near 49a Av Sur). In the south of the city **Terminal de Sur** (Map p278; Autopista a Comalapa), also called Terminal San Marcos, serves destinations to the south and southeast.

See p274 for information on international buses leaving from the hotels and Terminal Puerto Bus.

TERMINAL DE ORIENTE

To get to the terminal, take bus 9, 29 or 34 from the city center; bus 29 or 52 from Blvd de los Héroes; bus 7C or 34 from Terminal

Occidente; or bus 21 from Terminal de Sur. Frequent departures include:

Chalatenango Bus 125 (US\$0.90; 2hr)

El Poy (Honduran border) Bus 119 (US\$1.60; 3hr)

Ilobasco Bus 111 (US\$0.70; 1½hr)

La Palma Bus 119 (US\$1.50; 2¼hr)

La Unión Bus 304 (US\$3; 4hr) faster *especial* service available

San Miguel Bus 301 (US\$1.15-2.40; 3hr) faster *especial* service available

San Sebastián Bus 110 (US\$0.70; 1½hr)

San Vicente Bus 116 (US\$0.85; 1½hr)

Suchitoto Bus 129 (US\$0.80; 1½hr)

Usulután Bus 302 (US\$1.50; 2¼hr) departs at 7am & 8am only, or use Terminal de Sur

TERMINAL DE OCCIDENTE

To get here, take bus 34 from the city center; bus 44 from Blvd de los Héroes (get off at Blvd Venezuela and walk a few blocks west to the terminal); or bus 7C or 34 from Terminal Oriente. Frequent departures include:

Ahuachapán Bus 202 (US\$1; 2¼hr)

Cerro Verde Santa Ana Bus to El Congo (US\$0.80; 40min), then Bus 248

Joya de Cerén Bus 108 to San Juan Opico (US\$0.55; 1¾hr)

La Hachadura Bus 205 to Sonsonate (US\$1.45; 3½hr), then Bus 259

La Libertad Bus 102 (US\$0.55; 1hr), catch it at its terminal near Parque Cuscatlán or in front of (not inside) Terminal Oriente

Lago de Coatepeque Santa Ana bus to El Congo (US\$0.80; 40min), then Bus 248

Las Chinamas Bus 202 to Ahuachapán (US\$1.50; 2½hr), then Bus 263

Los Cóbano Bus 205 to Sonsonate (US\$1.30; 2½hr), then Bus 257

Metapán Bus 201A (US\$2.50; 1¾hr)

Ruinas de San Andrés Bus 201 (US\$0.80; 40min) Santa Ana Bus to the turnoff to ruins.

San Cristóbal Bus 498 (US\$1.25; 3hr)

Santa Ana Bus 201 (US\$0.80; 1¾hr)

Sonsonate Bus 205 (US\$0.70 *directo*, US\$1 *especial*; 1¾hr)

TERMINAL DE SUR (TERMINAL SAN MARCOS)

To get here take bus 26 or microbus 11B from the city center; or bus 21 from Terminal Oriente. Departures:

Costa del Sol Bus 495 (US\$1.10; 2½hr)

Puerto El Triunfo Bus 185 (US\$1.50; 2hr)

Usulután Bus 302 (US\$1.50; 2½hr) Faster *especial* service available.

Zacatecoluca Bus 133 (US\$0.70; 1½hr)

GETTING AROUND Bus

San Salvador's extensive bus network, from large smoke-spewing monsters to zippy microbuses, can get you just about anywhere. Fares are US\$0.17 to US\$0.23.

Buses run frequently from 5am to 7:30pm daily; fewer buses run on Sunday. Services stop between 7:30pm and 8:30pm; microbuses run later, until around 9pm. After 9pm you'll have to take a taxi.

In the center, it is fastest to walk a few blocks away from Plaza Barrios to catch your bus, as the traffic is hopelessly snarled most of the time. But if you have bags, it's safer and easier to get on a bus as soon as possible. Key routes include:

Bus 9 Goes down 29a Av Norte alongside the Universidad de El Salvador. Then it turns east toward the city center, heading past the cathedral and up Independencia past Terminal de Oriente.

Bus 26 Passes Plaza Barrios and Parque Zoológico on its way to Terminal del Sur.

Bus 29 Goes to Terminal de Oriente via the center. Buses stop between Metrocentro and MetroSur.

Bus 30 Heads downtown and is the best way to get to and from bus 138 to the airport. Pick it up on behind Metrocentro or at Parque Libertad in the center.

Bus 30B A very useful route, especially from Blvd de los Héroes. The bus goes east on Blvd Universitario, by Universidad Nacional, then southwest down Blvd de los Héroes to Metrocentro. From there, it goes west along Alameda Roosevelt, past the El Salvador del Mundo monument and continues west along Paseo Gral Escalón past Galerías mall. It then turns south at 79a Av and continues along Blvd del Hipódromo to Av Revolución, passing through the Zona Rosa and near the art and anthropology museums, then returns on Alameda Araujo, Roosevelt, and 49a Av Sur back to Metrocentro.

Bus 34 Runs from Terminal de Oriente to Metrocentro then down to the Zona Rosa, turning around right in front of Marte art museum. Passes Terminal de Occidente on return.

Bus 42 Takes you to the anthropology museum and La Ceiba de Guadalupe. The bus goes west along Calle Arce from the cathedral and continues along Alameda Roosevelt. At El Salvador del Mundo, it heads southwest along Alameda Araujo, passing the Mercado de Artesanías and Museo Nacional de Antropología David J Guzmán, and continues down the Carr Interamericana, passing La Ceiba de Guadalupe.

Bus 44 The bus to take to the Terminal de Occidente and UCA. The route heads southwest down Blvd de los Héroes past Metrocentro and down 49a Av. For the Terminal de Occidente get off at Av Venezuela and walk a few blocks

west. The bus passes lower and upper entrances to UCA, and La Ceiba de Guadalupe, heading up Alameda Araujo, past Metrocentro to downtown.

Bus 101 Goes from Plaza Barrios in the center, past MetroSur, past the anthropology museum, past La Ceiba de Guadalupe and on to Santa Tecla.

Car & Motorcycle

Avoid driving through the city center. The traffic gets snarled in daytime and the area is unsafe at night. It's quickest to take major thoroughfares. One-way streets have an arrow painted on the pavement or signage. For details on car hire, see p275.

Taxi

Taxis are plentiful but unmetered so negotiate a price in advance. A ride in town should cost about US\$4 to US\$6 during daytime. Rates go up a few dollars late at night. License plates beginning with 'A' indicate a registered taxi, in theory they can be held accountable for problems. If you don't spot a passing taxi, call **Taxis Acacya** (Map p281; ☎ 2271 4937) or **Acontaxis** (☎ 2270 1176).

AROUND SAN SALVADOR

On San Salvador's outskirts, old melds with new in the oddest of ways. If you could climb the pyramids, the panorama would be obstructed by live wires and Pollo Campero. Ruins stride up to the highway (or vice-versa), as if no one ever considered separating the sacred from the here and now.

The roughneck port of La Libertad acts as the gateway to dozens of fast, powerful and fun surf breaks that incite wide grins. With some of the world's best waves, the Western Pacific coast is perhaps the only region with a consistent stream of foreign visitors, mostly surfers. The rural coast is often knocked hard by storms and other natural disasters as the steep coastal bluffs can be unstable.

CIHUATÁN

The modest ruins of **Cihuatán** (admission US\$3; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun) were once an immense urban area alongside the Río Guazapa, possibly the largest pre-Columbian city between Guatemala and Peru. The city thrived for 100 years before being sacked and burned by unknown invaders in the 10th century AD. It was likely occupied by Maya, Lenca

and other groups joined together for commerce during an unstable period. A partial excavation shows evidence of two separate ceremonial centers and hundreds of buildings, a pair of ball courts and a large mound where a pyramid once stood, all surrounded by a low defensive wall.

From the Terminal de Oriente, take bus 119 toward Chalatenango and get off about 4km beyond Las Aguilares; ask the driver to let you off at Las Ruinas. It's a 900m walk to the site.

EL BOQUERÓN

Quezaltepeque (Volcán San Salvador) has two peaks. The higher peak, at 1960m, is called Picacho. The other, Boquerón (Big Mouth), is 1893m high and has a second cone within its crater – 45m high and perfectly symmetrical – formed in 1917. A paved road to the top affords an easy climb with unbelievable views as your reward. Bring a bag to pick up litter if you're so inspired.

Get an early start as busing from San Salvador takes a couple of hours. From Parque Cuscatlán, take bus 101A or B to Santa Tecla. From there, bus 103 departs from 6a Av Sur to the village of Boquerón. The bus comes sporadically, but pick-ups depart from the same place. The summit is 1km beyond the village.

RUINAS DE SAN ANDRÉS

In 1977 a step pyramid and a large courtyard with a subterranean section were unearthed in this **site** (admission US\$3; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), inhabited by Maya between AD 600-900. Experts believe that up to 12,000 people lived here. The city once dominated the Valle de Zapotitán and possibly the neighboring Valle de las Hamacas where San Salvador is now situated.

The ruins are interesting and peaceful, if not terribly impressive. Recently, cement walls protecting the original structures were restored back to the original stone and mortar. The main pyramid is called the Campana San Andrés for its bell shape. A trench in front of Estructura 3 shows how the platform was built with hundreds of thousands of adobe bricks. Another 15 mounds are yet to be unearthed.

The ruins are 300m north of the highway and 33km west of San Salvador in the Valle Zapotitán. Take the Santa Ana bus 201 from San Salvador's Terminal de Occidente and

get off at km 33, at a small black sign for the ruins. If combining this with a visit to Joya de Cerén, visit Joya de Cerén first, then catch any bus on the highway for the short distance to San Andrés.

JOYA DE CERÉN

Called the Pompeii of America, UN World Heritage Site **Joya de Cerén** (www.cihuatan.org; admission US\$3; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) was a small Maya settlement buried under volcanic ash when the Laguna Caldera Volcano erupted in AD 595. Fleeing residents left behind a wealth of everyday items that provide clues into ancient planting, homebuilding and food storage.

The main compound consists of five small structures – for the layperson it's somewhat underwhelming. The remodeled museum offers a good collection of artifacts and models of the villages. One compelling piece is a small dish showing fingerprints smeared in the remains of an interrupted meal.

The site is 36km west of San Salvador – take bus 108 from Terminal de Occidente and get off after crossing the bridge over the Río Sucio.

LOS PLANES DE RENDEROS

Within this district you will find the popular **Parque Balboa** (admission US\$0.80), a 28-hectare park preserved for family fun. There are trails for short walks, a skating rink, playgrounds and pre-Columbian-style sculptures. It is 12km from the city center.

Two kilometers past Parque Balboa is **Puerta del Diablo** (Devil's Door). Two towering boulders, reputedly once a single stone split in two, form a lookout with fantastic views, minus those of garbage strewn about. During the war this place was an execution point, the cliffs offering easy disposal of the bodies.

Take bus 12 'Mil Cumbres' from the east side of the Mercado Central, at 12a Calle Poniente. If you're driving, head down Av Cuscatlán until you see the signs.

Panchimalco

Toltec immigrants founded this tranquil town in a lush valley. The baroque church, completed in 1725 by indigenous craftsmen, features interesting woodwork; check out the indigenous Christ. Local cultural pride is evident in two cultural centers along 1a Av displaying ceramics and dance costumes. Both host cultural events open to the public.

Panchimalco is renowned for its religious festivals, particularly Palm Sunday, when residents march through the streets bearing decorated palm fronds. Early May's **Feria de Cultura de las Flores y las Palmas** features palm artistry, folk dancing and fireworks.

Bus 17 departs for Panchimalco from Av 29 de Agosto on the south side of the Mercado Central in San Salvador.

LA LIBERTAD

pop 20,100

This run-down port cranks to life early, with hardcore surfers toting their boards, lone fishermen casting at the rocky shore and women working market stalls. This is La Libertad at its most compelling. If you don't surf and aren't terribly interested in learning how, you may not find much of interest here. Though El Salvador is promoting it heavily as a tourist destination, this grit-worn city cries out for an extreme makeover, and why not, the surfing's world class. Shiny additions of a well-lit skate park in the center, new pick-ups emblazoned with 'Bendición de Dios' (God's blessing) and a new, ahem, mall at the east end of town at least show some effort.

Information

Banco Agrícola (Barrios east of the market or El Faro mall) Changes traveler's checks; there's a new 24-hour ATM at El Faro mall.

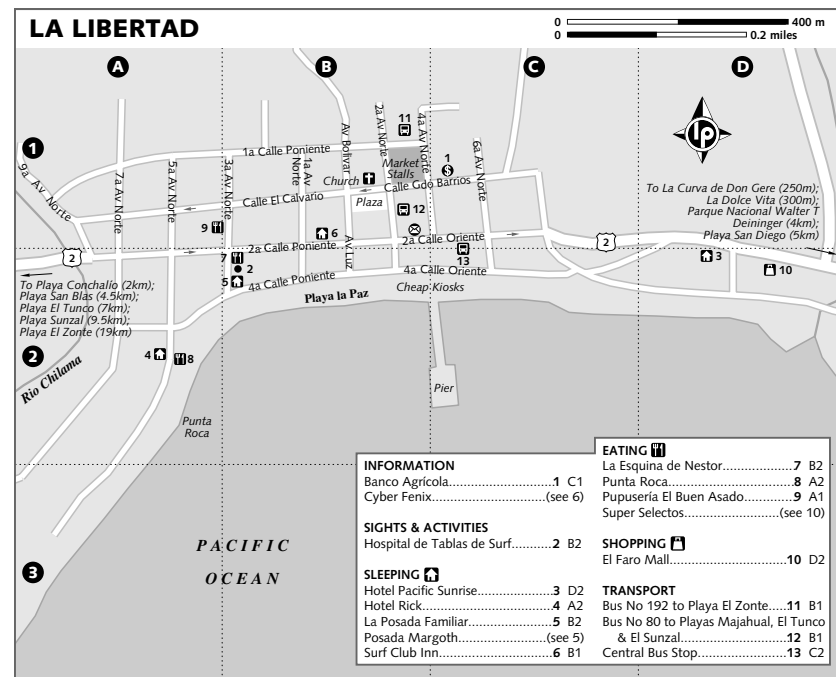
Cyber Fenix (2a Calle Pte; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-8pm) Below the Surf Club Inn.

Post office (2a Calle Oriente) Near 2a Av Norte.

Dangers & Annoyances

La Libertad has become increasingly unsafe thanks to gang activity and a long-standing drug trade. Pick-pocketing and assaults are on the rise. Avoid the area southeast of the plaza at night (there's better nightlife at the restaurants east of the Lighthouse mall). A local surfer warns about frequent assaults and aggressive dogs by the cemetery on the walk to the point at Punta Roca. Surfers should go accompanied and not bring valuables. Dogs can be deterred by throwing rocks (near them, not at them).

Strong rip currents proliferate throughout the coast. Lifeguards only work weekends in La Libertad and Playa San Diego. Black clams raised in the estuary hold a high concentration of toxins; avoid eating them if you want to keep catching waves.



Activities

BEACHES

The closest beach to the capital, La Libertad fills up with city dwellers on weekends. In the rainy season (March to October), the beach is rocky, covered with large black boulders, and the riptide, along with sewage, makes the water uninviting. In the dry season, the rocks get covered in sand, but the boulders are still whipped by the waves. If you just want to frolic in waves, hit the Costa del Bálsamo or go 4km east to sandy Playa San Diego.

SURFING

You'll find world-class surfing at Punta Roca, a lively right-hand break smack in front of town. Beginners launch at Playa La Paz (November to February), El Zonte or El Sunzal. Top surf spots with accommodations are found on the Costa Bálsamo (p293). For surfboard rental and repair, try: **Hospital de Tablas de Surf** (☎ 2335 3214; 3a Av Norte 28-7) Not for broken femurs, Saul's hospital repairs, buys and sells boards, in addition to offering surfing lessons. Just knock if it appears closed.

HIKING

About 4km east of La Libertad along the Comalapa road, **Parque Nacional Walter T Deinger** (admission US\$0.80, guide US\$12; ☎ 7am-noon-1pm & 1-5pm) is named for the German settler who donated the land. It includes two types of forest: *caducifolio*, which sheds its leaves in summer, and *galería*, which retains its foliage year-round. A well-maintained 18km trail skirts the park; you must be accompanied by a ranger. Signs mark trails to Río Amayo, 'the Mystery Cave' and a lookout showing the forest cascading to the sea. Deer, raccoon and the endangered *tepezcuimtle* (paca) can be spotted, in addition to many bird species, including the *torogoz* (blue-crowned motmot), El Salvador's national bird.

To visit Parque Deinger, you supposedly must obtain a permit from **ISTU** (☎ 2222 8000) in San Salvador (p279) five days prior to arrival. You might just try showing up and talking with the guard. It's a 15-minute ride from La Libertad – catch bus 187.

Sleeping

Since strolling around at night is inadvisable, choose your lodgings carefully.

EL SALVADOR'S TOP FIVE SURF SPOTS

With 16 right-point breaks and 82° water swarming with sea turtles, what's not to love? Our favorites:

Punta Roca Yes, Central America's best wave, oft compared to South Africa's J Bay. A rocky bottom makes it fast and strong. Bring just your board – theft is common on the walk to the point (see p291)

Las Flores A fast sandy point break best at low tide. Picture a hollow take-off ending on a black sand beach. A 300m ride is possible – welcome to the Wild East.

Punta Mango Short, strong and vertical, this aggressive Indo-men Hawaiian-style break is best reached by boat from Las Flores beach or via bus from El Cuco.

Playa El Sunzal Enjoy these consistently big waves alongside a sea of brethren surfers and even kayakers (see opposite)

Playa Mizata A sharp, reefy right point break alongside a fun beach break. There's easy road access but check it out from the cliff (see p294)

Posada Margoth (3a Av Sur btwn 2a & 4a Calles Poniente; s with shared bathroom US\$5) The Margoth is a shambly but not unclean accommodations options. Expect to see corrugated tin walls and ripped screens. Definitely bring your own toilet paper.

La Posada Familiar (☎ 2335 3552; 3a Av Sur at 4a Calle Poniente; s/d US\$10/12, s/d with bathroom US\$12/15) Clean but cave-like rooms around a raked dirt courtyard. The plain singles are sad cells, check your fan before settling in.

Surf Club Inn (☎ 2346 1104; 2a Calle Pte; s/d US\$12/15) If you can get over the tinted windows and mismatched velveteen furniture, these large cement rooms with sturdy mattresses are good value. Use the air-con to combat slight smells of mildew. It's inside a commercial plaza with a handy laundromat downstairs.

Hotel Rick (☎ 2335 3542; 5a Av Sur; d US\$25; 🚿) These basic lodgings are kept in tip-top shape, though the bathrooms are just open stalls. The 2nd floor is brighter and airier.

Hotel Pacific Sunrise (☎ 2346 2000; www.hotelesalvador.com; Calle El Obispo at Carr Litoral; s/d US\$45/57) It sure feels like the Best Western but it's the finest digs in town, with spotless rooms and a pool overlooking the parking lot.

Eating

Pupusería El Buen Asado (3a Av Norte btwn El Calvario & 2a Calle Pte; mains US\$3-4; 🕒 7am-9:30pm) If *pupuserías* could be fashionable, this place, serving big bean breakfasts, quick tacos and *pupusas*, would fit the bill.

La Esquina de Nestor (cnr 2a Calle Pte & 3a Av Norte; mains US\$3-4; 🕒 10am-10pm) This tiny *taquería* (*taco café*) dishes up authentic Mexican tacos stuffed with shrimp or beef or *al pastor* (with roasted pork).

Punta Roca (5a Av Sur at 4a Calle Poniente; mains US\$4-10; 🕒 8am-8pm, later on weekends) This is a local institution, with a surfer-family at the helm. The cook serves up superb *mariscadas* (seafood soup) and shrimp cocktails on the beachfront.

La Curva de Don Jere (☎ 2335 3436; Calle San Diego; mains US\$8-10; 🕒 9am-10pm) For fine dining facing the crashing surf, try this place, 200m south of Shell, featuring occasional mariachi bands and live music on weekends.

La Dolce Vita (☎ 2335 3592; Calle San Diego; mains US\$11; 🕒 9am-10pm) La Dolce Vita, 225m south of Shell, also has a great beachfront location where Chef Carmine serves up enormous seafood platters and pasta plates.

Super Selectos (Mall El Faro; 🕒 7:30am-8pm) For self-caterers.

Getting There & Away

There is no bus terminal. Bus 102 goes to and from San Salvador (US\$0.55, one hour). In San Salvador, catch it at its terminal near Parque Cuscatlán or in front of – not inside – Terminal Oriente. In La Libertad, buses leave from the corner of 4a Av Norte and Calle Gerardo Barros.

See p277 for details of how to get to La Libertad from the airport.

To Sonsonate, take bus 287 (US\$1.25, 2½ hours, 1:45pm only) from the bus stop at 2a Calle Poniente or bus 192 to Playa Mizata (see following) and change.

Getting Around

Surfers can take boards on all buses. Bus 80 goes west from La Libertad to Playa El Tunco and Playa El Sunzal (US\$0.25; every 15 minutes from 4:30am to 6pm) or east to Playa

San Diego (US\$0.30, every 15 minutes from 5:40am to 6pm). Buses leave from 4a Av Norte at 2a Calle Oriente.

For Playa El Zonte or Playa Mizata take bus 192 (US\$0.50, every 30 minutes from 7am to 5:30pm).

LA COSTA DEL BÁLSAMO

The Balsam Coast stretches from La Libertad westward to Sihuapilapa. Once there was a whole industry here surrounding the valuable aromatic oil extracted by burning the bark of live balsams. Today only a handful of trees remain and cotton has become the main cash crop.

From La Libertad, the road west twists around rocky headlands, giving glimpses of sheltered coves and sandy beaches (mostly private). Weekend hordes head for Playas Conchalío and El Majahual, the latter a wide swath of black sand bordered by endless seafood shacks and parking lots. Wait and you will find better options further on, a whole 50km of uninterrupted beaches.

Bus 80 goes as far as Playa El Sunzal. Beyond that, take the less frequent bus 192.

Sleeping & Eating

PLAYA COCHALÍO

Centro Obrero Dr Humberto Romero Alvergue (Ruta 2; free with permit) This worker's center has plain rooms and flimsy cots, fronting a rocky beach. Shacks by the beach gate serve food. Guests must obtain prior written permission from the Ministerio de Trabajo in San Salvador (p279).

PLAYA EL TUNCO

With a broad beach, narrow sandy streets and colorful matchbox homes, cool little El Tunco offers guests the most dining and lodging options of all the surf villages.

La Sombra (☎ 7729 5628; www.surflibre.com; dm/d US\$5/10; dm/d/tr with bathroom US\$7/14/21) Surfer José has crafted a great budget option with this new narrow two-story featuring wooden decks and cathedral ceiling rooms. The extras alone – cheap surf lessons/rentals (US\$10), weekday kitchen use and free Zona Rosa bus pick-up in San Salvador – make it worthwhile.

Papaya's Lodge (☎ 2389 6231; www.papayasurfing.com; s/d US\$8/14) A chill guesthouse run by local surf legend Jaime Delgado, aka Papaya. Small, clean rooms with shared bathroom have cement block walls and step out onto a shady

river deck backed by mangroves. The surf shop offers repairs and lessons.

Tortuga Surf Lodge (☎ 2389 6125; www.tortugasurflodge.net; campsites US\$6, d with/without bathroom US\$27/22) Steps from the surf, Tortuga's red-tile rooms are spacious and spotless. Bamboo railings, hand-carved furniture and cold beers (US\$1.25) are nice touches.

Tekuani Kal (☎ 2389 6388; www.tekuanikal.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$50/65; 🚿 🚿) Stone garden pathways traipse through manicured tropical gardens with rock fountains to six ultraprivate rooms. Each has an appealing earthy décor of Latin textiles and masks, but the grabber is the bamboo deck facing the surf. The restaurant offers a cool ambience and reasonably priced grilled chicken or pasta (US\$6).

La Guitarra (🕒 3pm-3am Thu-Sun) Live shows (reggae, rock, jazz and funk) spice up this local bar, and there's a pool table. It's open sporadically.

Side-by-side seafood restaurants La Bocana and Erica's vie for customers. La Bocana's beachfront claim means it's slightly pricier.

PLAYA EL SUNZAL

Surfer's Inn (☎ 2389 6266; Carr Litoral Km 44; camp sites US\$3, s/d US\$5/8, with bathroom US\$8/12) This is a basic family-run lodging with concrete rooms that are passably clean, set in a sandy yard with chickens. Guests can cook here (but not the chickens!)

San Patricio (☎ 2389 6107; Carr Litoral Km 44; s/d US\$7/10, s/d with bathroom US\$10/12 🚿) Run by a sweet family, this more modern hotel offers a shady cement porch and runty pool, but the rooms could stand a real good scrubbing.

PLAYA EL ZONTE & BEYOND

El Zonte is less developed than El Tunco but more ambient than Playa Sunzal. Show patience and courtesy – sometimes the surf gets a little crowded here.

Esencia Nativa (☎ 2302 6258; esencianativa@yahoo.com; s/d/t with fan US\$10/15/20, r with bathroom & air-con US\$30; 🚿 🚿 🚿) A cheerful boho atmosphere with ample (though sandy) lounge spaces. Big rooms have snug single beds and extras include a ping-pong table, surf classes and open-air café serving burgers and seafood.

Horizonte Surf Resort (☎ 2323 0099; saburosurfcamp@hotmail.com; s/d/t with air-con US\$30/35/45; 🚿 🚿 🚿) No longer a budget paradise, the Horizonte still offers a clean, kick-back retreat. Perks include the manicured pool area,

outdoor bar/common area, cheap surf lessons and board rentals (US\$10 per day).

Playa Mizata sits 35km beyond El Zonte, home to some lovely and lesser-known right and left breaks (see p292). There are a few food shacks but no accommodations. The next spot of interest is Los Cóbano, a series of small coves with El Salvador's best beaches and diving. To get here take the half-hourly bus 257 from Sonsonate (US\$0.50, 40 minutes).

WESTERN EL SALVADOR

Western El Salvador is a stunning must for travelers. Start with Santa Ana – the country's seat of old money is a colonial city with dusty, sprawling markets and a dapper gentleman's air. Coffee plantations surround the region where some of the country's poorest live and work. On these twisty back roads bent *campesinos* haul bursting sacks, sorting ripe red berries. The Ruta de las Flores travels the sunny climes of flower farms, where cobblestone villages offer the pleasant illusion of time stopped. But adventures do await; volcano ascents, waterfall descents, hot springs and crater lakes make this the destination for active travelers.

PARQUE NACIONAL LOS VOLCANES

This park (admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-5pm) is a natural treasure, encompassing three major volcanoes (Cerro Verde, Volcán Santa Ana and Volcán Izcalco) and thousands of hectares. It's a major bird sanctuary, with many migratory species passing through, including emerald toucanets, jays, woodpeckers, motmots and 17 species of hummingbird.

Active Volcán Izcalco is the youngest in the group. Its cone began forming in 1770 from a belching hole of sulfuric smoke and today stands 1910m high. Izcalco erupted throughout the 20th century, spewing smoke, boulders and flames and earning its reputation as 'the lighthouse of the Pacific.' Today, this bare, perfect cone stands devoid of life in an otherwise fertile land.

Without Izcalco's stark drama but 400m higher, Santa Ana (also known as Ilamatepec) is El Salvador's third highest point. Its eruption in October, 2005 triggered landslides that killed two coffee pickers and forced the evacuation of thousands. The barren and windy summit affords spectacular views of a steep

drop into the crater on one side and Lago Coatepeque on the other.

Assaults used to be a major problem, but the park service has instituted a mandatory guide service. Tourist police are posted along the trails and at the summits. Crime has dropped dramatically, but you should not hike solo.

Four-hour guided hikes to either volcano (Izcalco US\$1; Santa Ana US\$1.80) begin at 11am *only* so don't arrive late! This also means you can't do both in one day. Wear sturdy shoes. A short alternative is a 40-minute nature trail which offers views of the lake and Volcán Santa Ana. It starts in the parking lot.

Sleeping & Eating

San Blas has two camping complexes in the shadow of Volcán Santa Ana. **Campo Bello** (☎ 2271 0853) offers round cement dwellings that sleep four. **Casa de Cristal** (☎ 2483 4713) has rustic cabañas. Call ahead for prices, camping possibilities and availability.

A local cooperative manages a rustic **campground** (☎ 2483 4713/4679, 2 adults US\$35), 13km from San Blas heading towards Los Andes. Los Andes has a ranger who can also guide Santa Ana hikes. For information, contact **Salvanatura** (☎ 2279 1515; www.salvanatura.org, in Spanish) in San Salvador (see p280). More useful park information is at www.complejolosvolcanes.com.

Getting There & Away

Arrive by 11am since the guided hikes leave just once a day. The easiest, surest route is to come from Santa Ana, where bus 248 goes all the way to the entrance (see p297). The last bus leaves the park at 5pm but verify times with the driver who drops you off.

Leave early from San Salvador to make connections. Take any bus to Santa Ana and disembark at El Congo on the Carr Panamericana; walk uphill to the overpass and catch bus 248. Ask to be sure you're in the right place.

If you're driving, Parque Nacional Los Volcanes is 67km from San Salvador via Sonsonate or 77km by the more scenic route toward Santa Ana.

LAGO DE COATEPEQUE

Coatepeque is a sparkling blue crater lake under the looming peaks of Cerro Verde, Izcalco and Santa Ana. It's 6km wide and 120m deep, surrounded by green slopes. The lake is a popular weekend retreat for San Salvador's

OOH OOH WITCHY WOMAN

The Siguanaba is a mythical hottie who seduces men, then upon further inspection, turns out to be grotesque and whorish. But the revelation comes too late to warn her man-victims – they directly drop dead or go batty. Siguanaba travels with her mischievous little boy Cipitío, who approaches women washing at rivers to hurl rocks at them. He never grows up, but here too appearances deceive. Those who've spied Cipitío up close report he's actually a tiny man.

The Siguanaba story comes from the era of coffee plantations when landowners threw luxurious parties that spanned days. To keep the nosy neighboring *campesinos* (farmers) away the landowners invented terrific tales. And who knows? Perhaps they helped explain away the lovely ladies traveling to and from the fete.

These days, you'll hear '*Te has jugado la Siguanaba*' (Has the Siguanaba played with you?) if you're totally dazed or distracted.

elite. But there are a few cheap hotels here, and during the week it is peaceful. The bus enters the northeast side of the lake to an area with hotels and public access. For around US\$4 or the price of a meal, you can relax and enjoy lake access at one of the hotels listed here.

Sleeping & Eating

Centro de Obreros Constitución (free with permit; ☎ Wed-Sun) This large government workers' complex offers 53 basic bungalows, each with three cots and a bathroom. Rooms are musty and the grounds are unkempt, but it's free. Bring linens and a mosquito net. (For a permit, visit the Ministerio de Trabajo in San Salvador; p279.)

Amacuilco Guest House (☎ 2441 6239; tent bed US\$7, tr US\$25) A backpacker haunt gone haunted. Rooms are wretched and ramshackle, the tent (out of a 1940s circus) is strange and not secure. Travelers have complained about thefts here, to boot you're charged US\$2 to walk in the door.

Hotel Torremolinos (☎ 2441 6037; hoteltorremolinos@gmail.com; r per person US\$7-10; mains US\$4-20; ☎ 7am-9pm) Nothing beats the rustic setting of the lake pier for a leisurely lunch. There's live music on Sunday afternoon. While the hotel boasts the area's finest dining, the rooms are just small and standard, the cheaper ones in the adjacent annex have mildewed bathrooms.

Nantal Hostal (☎ 7888 0223; Carr al Cerro Verde Km 53.5) This charming garden house perched high above the lake was closed for remodeling at the last update. Check for new rates. There are four rooms with bathrooms (some with lake view). To get here take the Parque Nacional de los Volcanes bus from Santa Ana.

Comedor Patricar (mains US\$2-5; ☎ 7:30am-8pm) Enjoy the no-frills *típica* and seafood. It's around the curve past Hotel Torremolinos with no lake view.

Getting There & Away

Buses 220 and 242 depart Santa Ana for the lake every half-hour. They pass El Congo and descend to shoreline, passing the Centro de Obreros, Amacuilco and Hotel Torremolinos in that order. The last return bus to Santa Ana leaves at 6pm.

SANTA ANA

pop 178,600

The colonial seat of old money in El Salvador, Santa Ana maintains its social conservatism and gentleman ways. The country's second-largest city has moved from coffee plantations to bustling commerce. Travelers will likely enjoy the leafy plaza and the lively food and bar scene. Its proximity to natural attractions and frequent buses make a worthwhile base for exploring the western reaches of the country.

Information

Ciberworld (Av Independencia Sur btwn 9a & 11a Calle Poniente; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-7:30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-6pm Sun) Friendly service.

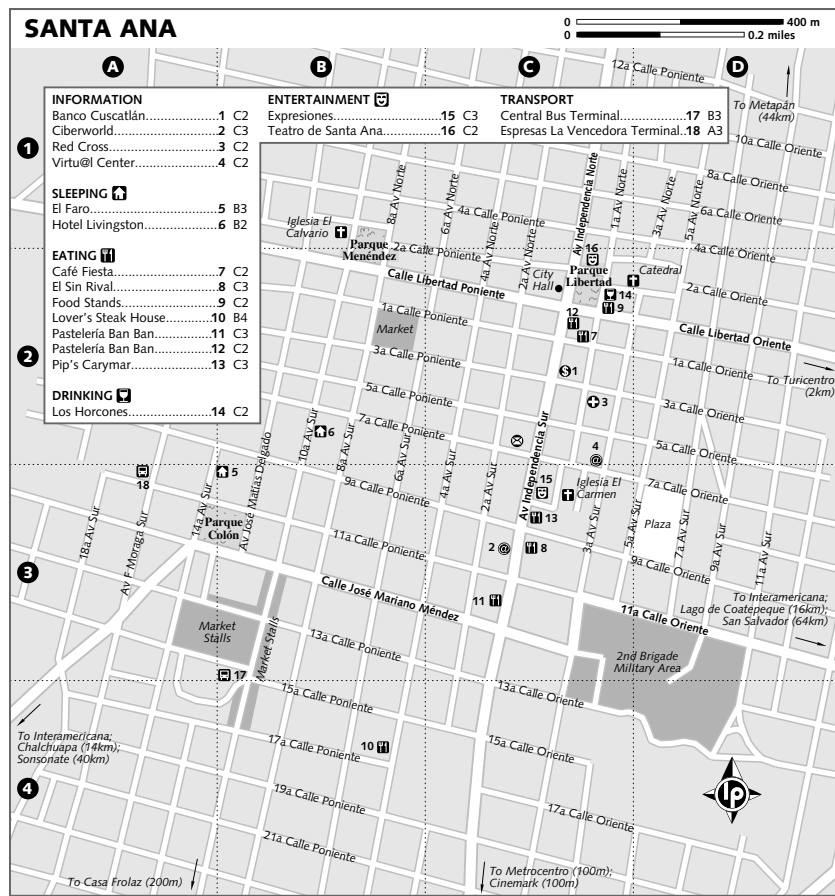
Banco Cuscatlán (Independencia Sur & 3a Calle Oriente) Has an ATM.

Red Cross (☎ 441 2645, 447 7213; cnr 1a Av Sur & 3a Calle Oriente; ☎ 24hr)

Virtu@l Center (3a Av Sur & 7a Calle Oriente; per hr US\$0.60; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-6pm Sat, 9am-1pm Sun)

Sights & Activities

Santa Ana's biggest attraction is its large neo-Gothic **cathedral**. Ornate moldings cover the front, and interior archways and pillars are painted slate and pink stripes (consider it preppy-neo-Gothic). The city's patron saint is feted in late July with parades and live music.



On the square west of the cathedral is the **Teatro de Santa Ana**, with an impressive, ornate interior. Other fine buildings ring Parque Libertad.

Sleeping

Casa Frolaz (☎ 2440 5302; www.casafrolaz.com; 29 Calle Pte; dm US\$7) The best bet for travelers is this elegant home with a sunlit kitchen, cozy living area and garden. Spacious rooms have sturdy single beds, spotless bathrooms and laundry access. The hospitable owner Javier takes guests on day trips and provides transportation downtown.

El Faro (☎ 2447 7787; 14a Av Sur; s with/without bath-room US\$11/8) El Faro has small, clean rooms centered around a tile courtyard filled with plants. Attractive landscape murals cover the

walls. The only downside is the seedy neighborhood – those ladies parked outside aren't selling *pupusas*.

Hotel Livingston (☎ 2441 1801; 10a Av Sur; d with/without cable TV US\$10/15; ☒) A cement block complex off the street, Livingston offers well-kept if cavernous rooms. Beds have mirrored headboards and the hodge-podge of sofas and chairs pass for décor. A good choice for quick access to the bus terminals.

Eating

Hit the row of **food stands** (1a Av Norte; US\$1-2) on the plaza for enormous chicken sandwiches in soft bread, burgers and greasy fries. Everybody eats dribbling sandwiches on park benches while watching the world go by.

El Sin Rival (Calle Libertad Ote; cones US\$0.50-1; ☎ 9am-9pm) Makes homemade natural sorbets so good it's outrageous. Try the tart *arrayán* or *mora* (blackberry).

Pasterlería Ban Ban (Av Independencia Sur; pastries US\$0.50-2.50; ☎ 8am-7pm) One of Santa Ana's charms is that the whole population breaks for coffee and cake mid-afternoon. It's likely that you'll find them here enjoying simple sandwiches and pastries in an air conditioned setting.

Café Fiesta (1a Calle Ote; mains US\$1.50-3; ☎ closed Sun) The Fiesta is an enormous cafeteria festooned with Pope memorabilia and a disco ball. Come here for no-nonsense Salvadoran fare from *pupusas* to *carne asada* (grilled steak).

Pip's Carymar (Av Independencia at 9a Calle Oriente; mains US\$2-10; ☎ 8am-9:30pm) Locals seem to love this *cafetería*-style diner serving everything from pizza to pasta to sandwiches. Indoor and outdoor seating.

Lover's Steak House (☎ 2484 7511; 4a Av Sur at 17 Calle Pte; mains US\$8-20; ☎ lunch & dinner) When you can't consume one more *pupusa*, treat yourself to a generous dinner here. Options include a range of *bocadillos* (appetizers), whole roast rabbit or ample rice and seafood salads. The tiki-torch ambience might egg you on to romance.

Drinking & Entertainment

Los Horcones (☎ 2484 7511; 1a Av Norte; ☎ 10am-2am) For the perfect place to tinkle a beer, consider this offbeat open-air spot overlooking the cathedral. Tree trunk pillars and hand-hewn benches provide a rustic setting. Ask about the curious display of old phones and abused typewriters.

Teatro de Santa Ana (☎ 2447 6268; 2a Calle Pte) Stop by for the current program of concerts, plays and dance performances.

Cinemark (Av Independencia at 35a Av Pte; admission US\$3) For Hollywood action flicks and the occasional tear-jerker.

Getting There & Away

Santa Ana's bus terminal abuts the market on 10a Av Sur. Buses take at least 15 minutes to leave the terminal since they crawl through market stalls. Destinations include:

Ahuachapán Bus 210 (US\$0.45; 1½hr)

Lago de Coatepeque Buses 220, 242 (US\$0.40; 1½hr)

Las Chinamas (Guatemalan border) Take any Ahuachapán bus and transfer.

San Cristóbal (Guatemalan border) Bus 236 (US\$0.50; 1hr)

San Salvador Bus 201 (*directo* US\$0.80, 1½hr; *especial* US\$1.25, 1½hr) All buses also stop at Metrocentro in San Salvador.

Sonsonate Buses 209, 216 (US\$0.55; 1½hr; 40km) Bus 216 departs from La Vencedora terminal (one block west of Parque Colón).

Tazumal, Chalchuapa Bus 218 (US\$0.25; 30mins)

Buses departing from other locations in town include:

Anguiatú (Guatemalan border) Bus 235 (US\$1.10) to Metapán and transfer.

Parque Nacional los Volcanes (Cerro Verde) Bus 248 (US\$0.85; 1½hr, departs from La Vencedora Terminal one block west of Parque Colón at 7am, 8am, 10:15am, 11:20am, 12:20pm, 1:40pm, and 3:30pm. Last bus returns at 5pm. Confirm departure times.

Metapán Bus 235 (US\$0.85; 1½hr) Departs from the corner of Av F Moraga Sur and 13a Calle Pte.

METAPÁN

pop 18,500

This medium-sized mountain town near the Guatemalan border is the nearest access to Parque Nacional Montecristo-El Trifinio, one of the country's most inaccessible (but beautiful) parks. It is closed from May to November to let the wildlife breed in peace. When it is open you need a 4WD vehicle to get there. Grubby around the edges, Metapán might not merit a visit if you're not headed for hiking.

Information

Fusión Ciber Café (2 Av Sur at 15 de Septiembre; per hr US\$0.60)

Scotiabank (Av Igancio Gómez) Exchanges traveler's checks and has a 24 hour ATM.

Lago de Güijja

On the El Salvador-Guatemala border, undeveloped and little-known **Lago de Güijja** is stunning. Take advantage of the peace to swim and picnic. In dry season you can hike to archaeological sites and find rock carvings along the shore. It's several kilometers south of Metapán and 30km north of Santa Ana along CA12. To get there, take a Santa Ana-bound bus and get dropped off at the junction to the lake. It is a 2km walk from there.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel California (☎ 2442 0561; s/d US\$8/10) Convenient if you're headed to Guatemala, this hotel

GETTING TO GUATEMALA

To El Progreso

The **San Cristóbal-El Progreso** border is open 24 hours but cross during daylight hours. From Santa Ana, take bus 236 to San Cristóbal (US\$0.50, one hour, every 20 minutes from 5:30am to 9pm). Buses on the other side of the border go to El Progreso. The last bus back from San Cristóbal is at 6pm.

To Guatemala City via Las Chinamas

Agencia Puerto Bus (☎ 2440 1608; 25a Calle Pte) offers ordinary and *especial* service to Guatemala City via **Las Chinamas-Valle Nuevo**. Ordinary buses (US\$9, four hours) leave hourly from 5am to 4pm, except 7am. *Especial* buses (a well-spent US\$11.50, 3½ hours) leave at 7am and 5:30pm. Another option is to catch a 1st-class bus at Las Chinamas.

To Chiquimula

From Metapán, minibuses run every half-hour to the **Anguiatú-Chiquimula** border (open 24 hours but more reliably from 6am to 7pm). On the Guatemalan side, buses run frequently to Chiquimula (one hour, last bus at 5:30pm) and onward to Guatemala City (three hours, last bus from Chiquimula at 3:30pm). This is the quickest route to Nuevo Ocotopeque or Copán Ruínas, Honduras. In El Salvador, the last bus from the border to Metapán is at 6:30pm.

See p171 for information on crossing the border from Guatemala.

on the roadside has plain, decent-sized rooms, some with views of El Trifinio. It's a five-minute walk out of town, 500m north of the terminal. Nearby eating options are scant.

Hotel Christina (☎ 2442 0044; 4a Av Sur btwn Calle 15 de Septiembre & 2a Calle; s/d US\$12/15, with air-con US\$18/23; ♿) Convenient to the bus terminal, shops and the internet café, this modern hotel offers clean but somewhat airless rooms. Those upstairs share a wide terrace with tables and hammocks overlooking a bustling street. It's three blocks downhill from the terminal.

Pollo Sheriff (Carr a la Frontera; mains US\$1.50-5; ☎ 6am-10pm) A law-abiding fried chicken restaurant located in front of the bus terminal. Ask about the daily specials.

Getting There & Away

The bus terminal sits on the highway facing the entrance to town. For Santa Ana, take bus 235 (US\$0.85, 1½ hours) or a *directo* (US\$2.50, one hour). San Salvador bus 201A (US\$2.50, 1¾ hours) departs seven times daily. Bus 235 and minibuses go to the Guatemalan border of Anguiatú (US\$0.50, 30 minutes); the last leaves at 6:30pm. Bus 463 departs 5:30am and noon daily for the gorgeous and also hair-raising haul over the mountains to Citalá (US\$2, three hours), close to the Honduran border crossing at El Poy.

PARQUE NACIONAL MONTECRISTO-EL TRIFINIO

Isolated and pristine, this borderland park boasts thick cloud forest canopy, exotic orchids and abundant wildlife. The borders of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala converge at the highest point (2418m), referred to as El Trifinio. Oak and laurel trees grow to 30m, and leaves intertwine to form a canopy impenetrable to sunlight. The forest floor provides a habitat for abundant exotic plant life including mushrooms, lichens and mosses, and tree ferns up to 8m tall. The temperature averages between 10°C and 15°C. This is the most humid region in the country, with 2000mm annual precipitation and 100% average relative humidity.

Animals seen (albeit rarely) include spider monkeys, two-fingered anteaters, porcupines, spotted and hooded skunks, pumas, red and gray squirrels, wild pigs, opossums, coyotes and agoutis. The forest is also home to at least 87 bird species, including quetzals, green toucans, woodpeckers, hummingbirds, nightingales, white-faced quail and striped owls.

There is no place to stay here – you must camp. Ask trail directions from the owner of the main shop here. You have a few options but none of the trails is well marked. Several hiking trails begin from Los Planes (about 1900m), a grassy clearing and in a bowl at

the foot of Cerro Montecristo. Two trails lead about 1km each to wooden observation towers with views of the park and surrounding area. The trail you are probably looking for is the one to the top. The park highlight, it is a tough 7km climb through dense, misty cloud forest. At the summit a plaque marks the borders of the three countries. The views and the photo opportunities are outstanding.

Information

The area above Los Planes is closed from May to November, the breeding season of the local fauna. The remainder of the park is open the rest of the year, but you can only venture a few kilometers up the road.

To take full advantage of the park, you'll need to spend the night. Camping is free at Los Planes – bring all your own equipment, food and water. Get advance permission from the National Parks and Wildlife Service at the **Ministerio de Medio Ambiente** (☎ 2267 6259/6276; www.mam.gov.sv in Spanish; Alameda Araujo/Carr a Santa Teda Km 5.5; ☎ 7:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) in San Salvador. Admission is US\$6 per day for foreigners plus US\$1.15 per vehicle, required for taxis as well.

Getting There & Away

Unfortunately, getting to Los Planes is a challenge, and not a cheap one. If you have a 4WD, you can drive there (22km from Metapán). **Francisco Monterrosa** (☎ 2402 2805) charges US\$45 for day trips or US\$85 to drop you off and return a day or two later. If he isn't available, look for other drivers in Metapán near the park turnoff.

If you wait at the road in early morning, you may be able to catch a ride with the rangers or residents of a small village in the park; but there are no guarantees and the trip back remains unresolved. You can walk to the gate (5km), but you can't walk beyond that without a private vehicle – that's the rule.

RUINAS DE TAZUMAL

The Maya ruins of **Tazumal** (admission US\$3; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), the most important and impressive in El Salvador, are in **Chalchuapa**, 13km west of Santa Ana on the way to Ahuachapán. In the Quiché language Tazumal means 'pyramid where the victims were burned.'

Archaeologists estimate that the area was first settled around 5000 BC. Part of a 10-sq-km zone, much is still buried under Chalchuapa. The excavated ruins span a period of

over 1000 years. While these ruins are very important for El Salvador, they pale in comparison to those in neighboring countries. A previous restoration that 'protected' the pyramids by covering them in concrete was severely damaged by Hurricane Stan. The new restoration, inaugurated in December 2006, restored the original stone-and-mortar construction in much of the ruins. Don't expect to get too close – a chain-link enclosure prevents visitors walking on the pyramids.

The **museum** displays artifacts showing active trade as far away as Panama and Mexico, with explanations in detailed English. Other finds, including the Estela de Tazumal, a 2.65m-high basalt monolith inscribed with hieroglyphics, are at the Museo Nacional David J Guzmán in San Salvador (see p281).

Bus 218 comes from Santa Ana, 14km (45 minutes) away. A sign on the main road through Chalchuapa points toward the ruins, about a five-minute walk from the highway. If driving from Santa Ana, stay right at the fork in the road, continuing toward Ahuachapán, then turn left at the Texaco station in Chalchuapa. The ruins are at the end of the road.

AHUACHAPÁN

pop 38,630

Ahuachapán is a pleasant colonial city in the highland hills, just 16km from Guatemala. Its bubbly mud pits and secret hot springs are the product of active geothermals that also drive the city power plant which supplies over 15% of the country's electrical power. It's also the start or endpoint of Ruta de las Flores, a series of beautiful villages strung through the coffee-rich mountains to the south.

The hubs of Plaza Concordia and Parque Menéndez are five blocks apart, connected by the busy commercial street Av Menéndez, which runs north-south.

Information

Most services and restaurants are nearer Plaza Concordia.

Ciber Café Cetcomp (2a Av Sur at 1a Calle Pte; per hr US\$5.60; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9:30am-8:30pm Sat, 10am-9pm Sun)

Scotiabank (Av Menéndez at 4 Calle Pte) Changes Amex and Visa traveler's checks.

Tours & Aventuras (☎ 2442 0016; www.elsalvadorvacations.com.sv; 2 Av Norte 2-4; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 2-5pm Sat & Sun) Travel agency offering friendly tours of the area's sights.

Sights & Activities

Green gardens and palms make **Plaza Concor dia** an agreeable stop to catch a breeze. The kiosk occasionally holds concerts and free events. East of the plaza is Nuestra Señora de Asunción, with pretty *azuelo* floors and a stained-glass Virgin.

Ahuachapán bubbles with geothermic activity, evidenced in the steaming mud pits found about. To visit **Los Ausoles**, aka *los infernillos* (the little hells), contact Tours & Aventuras or guide **Carlos Alvarado Martínez** (☎ 2413 3360).

Sleeping, Eating & Drinking

Hotel San José (☎ 2413 0033; 6a Calle Ote 1; r per person US\$8; 🏠) Clean but cheerless, the hotel has ample cement rooms with high ceilings and private bathroom. Located right on Parque Menéndez and near the buses.

Hotel Casa Blanca (☎ 2443 1505; 2a Av Norte & Calle Barrios; s/d with fan US\$20/30, with air-con US\$35/59; 🏠 🚰 🚿 🚰) An elegant colonial home with all the creature comforts, so much so that it's a popular spot for gents and their lady friends. The spotless and spacious rooms all have TV and private hot-water bathrooms.

Restaurant Mixta 'S' (2a Av Sur at 1a Calle Pte; mains US\$2-3; 🍷 8am-9pm) Friendly, fast and popular, the house specialty are *mixtas* – pitas stuffed with pickled veggies, salsa and meat or cheese, but it whips up a mean fruit shake too.

La Estancia (1a Av Sur btwn Calle Barrios & 1a Calle Oriente; mains US\$2-4; 🍷 7am-6pm Mon-Sat) This airy mansion-turned-restaurant is ideal for breakfast or lunch, serving buffet-style *tipica*.

Brisas de Santa Monica (☎ 2443 1471; Carr a las Chinamas km 101; cover US\$4; 🍷 9pm-3am Fri & Sat) Cosmopolitan for Ahuachapán, this club on the Laguna del Lago offers free transportation for patrons, and employees speak English. Simply call for a hotel pick-up.

Getting There & Away

Buses line the market-choked Av Menéndez at 10a Calle Ote, one block north of the parque central. Microbuses to Apaneca leave from the highway turnoff, but the regular buses tend to be faster and more frequent. Buses for the Guatemalan border at Las Chinamas leave from 8a Calle Poniente, at the northwest corner of Parque Menéndez. The following buses travel to and from Ahuachapán:

Las Chinamas Bus 263 or Ruta 11 (US\$0.50; 40min, 5am-7:30pm)

San Salvador Bus 202 (US\$1; 2½hr; especial US\$2; 1¼hr)

GETTING TO GUATEMALA CITY

The **Las Chinamas-Valle Nuevo** border is open 24 hours but it's best to cross in daylight. Buses leave Ahuachapán from Parque Menéndez every 15 minutes (US\$0.50, 5am to 7:30pm) for the Guatemala border. Cross the border 300m to the bus stop for service to Guatemala City via Cuilapa. Tica bus (US\$3) passes every half-hour and is safer than 2nd-class service. The last bus from the border to Ahuachapán is at 5:45pm.

Santa Ana Bus 210 (US\$0.45; 1hr) Alternatively, take the faster San Salvador bus, get off at Metrocentro and catch a local bus into town.

Sonsonate (via Apaneca & Juayúa) Bus 249 (US\$0.85; 2hr)

Tacuba Bus 264 or Ruta 15 (US\$0.60; 40min; 5:30am-7pm)

TACUBA

A mountain nook flanked by coffee crops and lush forests, Tacuba is one of the poorest regions in the country but a rewarding outdoor destination. It's on the north side of Parque Nacional El Imposible along Guatemala's rolling hills and a fast 14km to Ahuachapán on a newly paved road. While travelers' options are still few, watch as Tacuba's promising potential for ecotourism gets tapped.

Activities

Tropical mountain forest **Parque Nacional El Imposible** (p304) offers primary forest thick with rivers and vegetation. The area conserves a boggling array of plant and animal life, including pumas and black-crested eagles. Hiking can be strenuous but trekkers are rewarded by grand vistas of misty peaks and the gleaming Pacific Ocean.

The park is run by **Salvanatura** (☎ 2279 1515; www.salvanatura.org in Spanish; admission US\$6). In theory you need to visit the San Salvador office to pay the entry fee and arrange for guide service (the guide service has no fee but a US\$5 tip is customary). If you call, the park will radio a guide to collect your fee. Those just showing up will have better luck on weekends when there is more activity.

An excellent trip is a moderately strenuous downhill transect of the park. Enter from the north, cross dense forest with some spectacular vistas, skirt Cerro Leon and end at the main visitors center.

Should you have a mountain bike, a great ride is the 40km road between the park and Tacuba – mostly downhill from the Tacuba side. **Impossible Tours** (☎ 2417 4268; www.impossible-tours.com; Hostal de Mamá y Papá; tours US\$15), run by the energetic, amiable and borderline kooky Manolo González, offers a range of guided activities. His established hikes are popular but the canyoning might involve some risk. It is definitely not for those with acrophobia or without insurance. His new trips to the private **Termas Santa Teresa** (US\$10), with seven hot and hotter pools, offers a welcome respite from all that sweaty activity.

Sleeping & Eating

Hostal Mamá and Papá (☎ 2417 4268; www.impossible-tours.com; dm/d US\$6/12, meals extra US\$3) There's fantastic hospitality at this family home and surely nothing beats Mama's cooking. The rooms are rustic but well-kept brick and cement, each with an adjoining bathroom with a hot shower. Enjoy the rooftop views. For directions call ahead.

Sol de Media Noche (mains US\$1.50-4; 🍷 6:30am-5pm Mon-Sat) Run by a Salvadoran Hindu sect, this vegetarian café offers tasty carrot *tortas* and brown rice. It's two blocks past the plaza.

Getting There & Away

Bus 264 and Ruta 15 (US\$0.60, 40 minutes, 5:30am to 7pm) go to Ahuachapán from the main plaza.

RUTA DE LAS FLORES

A winding ride through the heart of coffee country, this 36km stretch linking Sonsonate and Ahuachapán is named for the explosion of wildflowers found between October and February. Wander the colonial-style villages where chatty locals are quick to smile and coo over the novelty of blue eyes and backpackers. While locals consider the region perfect for lazy Sunday excursions, the adventure-minded can discover great hiking, horseback riding and mountain biking.

Bus 249 runs frequently between Sonsonate and Ahuachapán, stopping in all the towns along the way, including Juayúa, Apaneca and Ataco.

Juayúa

pop 10,100

Relaxed, colonial Juayúa is a hip-yet-quiet village flanked by coffee farms and volcanoes.

Travelers soak up its sunny, sleepy vibe, occasionally stirring to find the nearby waterfalls and hot springs. Religious pilgrims seek out the 'Cristo Negro,' carved by Quirio Cataño in the late 16th century, housed in the church, on the plaza which serves as the town's buzzing nucleus.

Weekends hum with festivity, thanks to a wildly popular **feria gastronómica** (food fair) where hordes of *capitalinos* and international visitors sample the region's best cuisine on the plaza with live bands. If you've never tried grilled frog or marinated rabbit, here's your chance (there's also sweet tarts and marzipan).

Juayúa has had a tumultuous past. Indigenous uprisings in the region ignited the revolutionary movement of 1932. Backed by the coffee elite, government forces brutally quelled the ill-organized insurrection. Today's indigenous people eschew traditional clothing and language for fear of standing out.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Ideal for wandering, Juayúa is small and its streets follow a standard grid. The church is on the west side of the plaza and behind it the market.

Cyber & Equipment (1a Av Norte; per hr US\$0.75; 🍷 8:30am-9pm)

Juayutur (🍷 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) Juayúa's tourist agency dispenses information about the town and area excursions at its kiosk on the east side of the plaza.

Scotiabank (Calle Monseñor Óscar Romero) Exchanges traveler's checks, gives Visa advances and is adding an ATM.

ACTIVITIES

A recommended hike and swim is to **Los Chorros de Calera**, a series of falls spewing from fractured cliffs to form large, cold pools. The **Ruta de las Seis Cascadas** follows the Río Bebedero over seven scenic drops. Consult Juayutur or Hotel Anáhuac for directions. Occasional thefts mean that certain activities are better undertaken with guides. Other guided excursions include lake visits, coffee tours and waterfall rappels.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Anáhuac (☎ 2469 2401; www.tikal.dk/elsalvador; dm/s/d US\$7/12.50/25; 🏠) Young owners César and Jenne have worked hard to make their home a backpacker haven, and it doesn't disappoint. The red-tile colonial building offers large, airy rooms and a grassy courtyard. Guests enjoy cooking and internet privileges.

César's hikes to hot springs and horseback riding tours are well worthwhile, and could stretch your stay a lot. Both Danish and English are spoken.

Hotel El Mirador (☎ 2452 2432; www.elmiradorjuayua.org; 4a Calle Poniente 4-4; s/d/tr US\$15/25/40) Behind the church, this serene colonial hotel has cool tiles and a myriad dark, uncluttered rooms. Hot water is US\$2 extra. Sneak up to the rooftop room for a panorama of town and volcanoes.

Casa de Huespedes Doña Mercedes (☎ 2452 2287; 2a Av Sur & 6a Calle Oriente; d with/without bathroom US\$25/23) A quiet home with large, quality rooms featuring firm beds and spanking-clean shared bathrooms. It's two blocks east and one block south of the plaza.

Laura's Comida a la Vista (Calle Merceditas Cáceres; mains US\$2-4; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Sat, 7am-3pm Sun) Enjoy the everyman atmosphere with options like veggie fritters, salads, meat, rice and salsa. It's four blocks from the park.

Taquería la Guadalupeana (2a Calle Ote; mains US\$2-5; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Irresistible Mexican – evidenced by the chicken in *mole poblano* and *nopal* (cactus) salads, served at cozy benches or in a shaded courtyard.

Tienda San José (main plaza; mains US\$2-8; ☎ 8:30am-11pm) A mini-mart hides a surprisingly hip dining area, great for the late-night munchies.

RR (Calle Mercedes Cáceres 1-4 Pte; mains US\$6-16; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Where travelers repeat eat, you know you've found a hit. The friendly chef Carlos cooks El Salvadoran fare with international influence from stints in North America and Australia. Fresh salads and garlic stir-fry veggies set the scene, but meat's the star, including herbed sausages and steaks with tortillas and melted cheese.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus 249 has services northwest to Apaneca (US\$0.35, 20 minutes), Ataco (US\$0.45, 30 minutes) and Ahuachapán (US\$0.70, one hour) as also south to Sonsonate (US\$0.50, 45 minutes) during daylight. Buses leave every 15 minutes from the park, or from four blocks west on weekends. For Santa Ana, bus 238 (US\$0.50, 40 minutes) goes direct, leaving a few blocks west of parque central six times daily.

Apaneca

pop 8600

High in the Sierra Apaneca Ilamatepec, cool, cobblestone Apaneca (1450m) is the town that time forgot. Strolling is a major pastime here,

and while doing so you'll encounter some easy hikes and friendly locals. Other attractions include locally produced furniture made from cypress and coffee wood, and visiting the myriad flower and plant nurseries. The beautiful Iglesia San Andres was one of the oldest churches in the country until the January 2001 earthquake reduced it to rubble.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The market is west of the park and the church is to the south. Buses drop off and pick up on the main street, right in front of the market. A tourist information booth operates on the plaza on weekends.

You can check email at **Cybercafé Apaneca** (3a Av Sur; per hr US\$0.75; ☎ 8am-11pm), behind the former church. There are no banks.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The crater lakes **Laguna de las Ninfas** and **Laguna Verde**, north and northeast of town, are within hiking distance. The former is swampy, reedy and rife with lily pads; the latter is deep and cold. You can camp at **Chichicastepeque** (aka Cerro Grande), which at 1816m affords outstanding views of the region, although the antennae make it look a lot less wild. For directions or a guide stop by the tourist kiosk.

Vivero (nursery) tours make for a relaxed afternoon. **Vivero Alejandra** (☎ 7am-4pm Wed-Sun) is a short walk from the center (toward Juayúa). Come for the flowers and rare plants, but stay for the great little café, serving coffee, *quesadillas* and strawberries and cream. Other **viveros** include **Vivero Santa Clara**, across from Alejandra, and **Las Flores de Eloisa** (☎ 2433 0415), a small café 2km toward Ahuachapán.

Finca Santa Leticia, a hotel, restaurant and coffee farm just south of Apaneca, has a small **archaeological park** (admission US\$5) in a coffee field. The highlight is two pot-bellied figures carved from huge basalt boulders, weighing between 6350kg and 11,000kg. Experts speculate that these 2000-year-old chubbies were created by early Maya in deference to their rulers. Catch any bus headed toward Juayúa and Sonsonate and ask for the Finca Santa Leticia.

SLEEPING & EATING

The best restaurants only open weekends when San Salvadorans come day-tripping.

Hostal Rural las Orquídeas (☎ 2433 0061; 4a Calle Poniente; s/d US\$10/17) A cute red-roofed colonial place with décor by Granny. Rooms are small-

ish but clean, behind a courtyard with hammocks and rockers. To get here follow the signs two blocks north of the park and turn left.

Hostal la Magaña (☎ 2433 0268; Av Central btwn 4 & 6 Calles Sur; s/d US\$10/20) Quiet and hospitable, this home has two large rooms steeped in burgundy and varnish, as well impeccable bathrooms. Guests can cook, or relax on the billowy living-room sofas.

Mercado Saludable (mains US\$1.50-3; ☎ 6:30am-8pm) Cheap eats deluxe, this market facing the park offers good little eateries serving ham, eggs and beans, and *atole* as well as afternoon meals and *pupusas*.

La Cocina de Mi Abuela (☎ 2433 0100; cnr 1a Av Norte & 4a Calle Ote; mains US\$7-11; ☎ 11am-7pm Sat & Sun) Considered one of El Salvador's best restaurants, serving high-quality meats and national fare. The desserts are magnificent.

For more options, check out resort lodges near Apaneca on the highway. Their upmarket restaurants offer the inevitable *buena vista* and a relaxed atmosphere to dally in.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus 249 plies the route between Ahuachapán and Sonsonate, stopping in Apaneca every half-hour. The last bus runs between 7pm and 8pm. Ask a local to be sure.

Ataco

In this part of El Salvador, each town seems to be more picturesque and pleasing than the last. Ataco offers more cobblestone streets and melon-and-sky-colored homes. Fairly isolated from all three of El Salvador's largest cities, it remains off the map for most. This partly indigenous village can be reticent toward strangers, but a fledgling guide service and information kiosk have thrown out the welcome mat. Still, be extra courteous to locals, who are not used to tourism à la Antigua.

The **Tourist Information Kiosk** (☎ 7am-7pm Sat & Sun) is located at the entrance to town. You can pick up a handy street map here. Ask about guide services (US\$3 to US\$7 per person). Options to explore include **Salto de Chacala**, a 50m waterfall on the Río Matala, and **Chorros del Limo**, a spring which forms a broad pool ideal for a dip.

Lodgers can stay at **El Mesón de San Fernando** (☎ 2413 0169; 1a Calle Pte; r per person US\$10, with bathroom US\$25) with low, clean, cinder block rooms. Its redeemers include the garden and good restaurant serving a classic version of *gallo en chicha* (rooster in corn liquor).

The squat rooms at **Casa de Bambú** (☎ 2450 5175; 8a Av Sur at 2a Calle Ote; r without bathroom US\$15; ☎) sit above the Salvadoran-Mexican restaurant – a meal of your choice is included in the rate.

For a quick cappuccino and pastry, stop by **Diconte-Axul** (2a Av Sur at Calle Central; ☎ 8am-6pm) for a treat in the lush garden. The shop also sells homemade textiles, tie-dyes and hand-painted objects. The rambling **market** (2a Av Sur) makes for a fascinating walkabout.

Bus 249 stops on the corner of 2a Calle Ote and 4a Av Sur. One heads north to Ahuachapán (US\$0.35, 15 minutes), and south to Apaneca (US\$0.25, 10 minutes), Juayúa (US\$0.45, 30 minutes) and Sonsonate (US\$0.70, one hour). Frequency is every 15 minutes.

SONSONATE

pop 65,100

Hot and menacing, Sonsonate offers little for the traveler other than the way to Ruta de las Flores, El Imposible or the Guatemalan border. Gang problems mar city life, yet the city's vivid **Semana Santa** celebration is a highlight.

The surrounding area does warrant exploration. The village of **Izalco**, 8km northeast at the foot of Volcán Izalco, was the site of a major indigenous revolt in 1932. Nearby is

EXPLORE MORE OF WESTERN EL SALVADOR

If you've a sense of adventure and an interest in how indigenous forms have transformed through time, check out the following:

- View local artisans crafting basketry and furniture in **Nahuizalco**, but the real trip is to the night market, with indigenous treats such as grilled *garrobo* (lizard) and snake. There's no lodging – day-trip it from Sonsonate. Take bus 249 from Juayúa (to the highway turnoff, 500m away) or bus 53D from Sonsonate.
- The ancient Nahuatl community of **Izalco** has famed religious wood carvings parading in both Catholic and indigenous rites. Access via Sonsonate bus 53A.

Atecozol, a *turicentro* with swimming holes, kiosks and gardens. The grounds feature stone sculptures by Agustín Estrada – one commemorates Atonatl, a feisty indigenous warrior who pegged conquistador Pedro de Alvarado with an arrow in 1524.

You can access the coastal points of **Los Cóbano**, a prime diving destination, and **Barra de Santiago**, a protected mangrove forest reserve, from here. At Barra de Santiago you can rent canoes for estuary tours.

Orientation & Information

You'll find a lovely new bus terminal 2km east of the city center. The main north-south street is Av Morazán/Av Rafael Campos. To orient yourself in town, the church is on the east side of the parque central.

Banco Cuscatlán (Calle Marroquín at 4a Av Norte) Has a 24-hour ATM.

Infocentros (3 Calle Pte at Av Morazán; per hr US\$1;

☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat; ☎)

Post Office (1a Av Norte btwn 1 & 3 Calles Pte)

Sleeping & Eating

Dirt-cheap hotels are in the rough area by the old bus terminal – 'dirt' being the operative word here. Better options are in town.

Hotel Orbe (☎ 2451 1517; 4a Calle Ote at 2a Av Flaviano Muchi; s/d with bathroom US\$12/16; s/d with air-con US\$16/20; ☎) Well-worn from 35 years of business, the upshot of this place is it's well-scrubbed, friendly and convenient. You might get a cheaper rate if you can forfeit TV.

Hotel Plaza (☎ 2451 6626; 9a Calle Ote at 8a Av Norte; s/d US\$35/45; ☎ ☎ ☎) So what if it's stuck in the '80s? The Plaza's rooms are Alaska-cool with firm beds and cable TV. You can rest your traveling bones by the pool and the restaurant is worth trying too.

La Casona (3 Calle Pte btwn 1 & 3 Av Norte; mains US\$1.50-4; ☎ breakfast & lunch, closed Sun) *Comida a la vista* is dished up fresh and *pupusas* sizzle and steam in the city's best bargain restaurant, located in an antiquated building.

Jugos, Licuados y Más (1a Av Norte btwn 1 & 3 Calles Pte; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat) Is a blender bar with delectable fresh squeezed juices and *licuados*.

For junk-food feasting, try the **food stands** (7a Calle Ote at 10a Av Norte; ☎ 5-10pm) where you can grab burgers, sandwiches, fries and *pupusas*.

Getting There & Away

Take a taxi or bus 53C from the central park to the bus station. Destinations include:

GETTING TO GUATEMALA CITY

The **La Hachadura-Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado** border is open 24 hours, but it's best to cross in daylight. Bus 259 from Sonsonate drops you right at the border; Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigration posts are at the far side of the complex. In Guatemala, the bus stop is 1km away. Bicycle taxis cost US\$0.50. Buses for Guatemala City (US\$5, four hours) leave every half-hour via Chiquimulilla and Escuintla. The last bus from La Hachadura to Sonsonate is at 6pm.

Ahuachapán (via Juayúa, Apaneca & Ataco) Bus 249 (US\$0.95; 2hr)

Barra de Santiago Bus 285 (US\$1; 1¼hr; 10:30am & 4:30pm); or take bus 259 to turnoff and catch a pick-up.

La Hachadura Bus 259 (US\$0.85; 1¼hr)

La Libertad Bus 287 (US\$1.25; 2½hr)

La Perla Bus 261 (US\$0.80; 1½hr)

Los Cóbano Bus 257 (US\$0.50; 40min)

Parque Nacional El Imposible Any La Hachadura bus to Puente Ahuachapio or Cara Sucia (US\$0.45; 30min)

San Salvador Bus 205 (*directo* US\$0.70; 1½ hr; *especial* US\$1-1.25; 1½hr)

Santa Ana Bus 216 (US\$0.65; 1¼hr)

The terminal also serves Izalco (bus 53A), Nahuizalco (bus 53D) and Acajutla (bus 252).

PARQUE NACIONAL EL IMPOSIBLE

Tropical mountain forest Parque Nacional El Imposible was named for the perilous gorge which used to claimed the lives of farmers and pack mules transporting coffee to the Pacific port. Decreed a national park in 1989, it sits in the Apaneca Ilimatepec mountain range between 300m and 1450m above sea level, and includes eight rivers which feed the watershed for Barra de Santiago and the mangrove forests along the coast.

This original forest – the remains of a threatened ecosystem – is still home to an extraordinary variety of plant and animal life, including pumas, tigrillos, wild boars, king hawks and black-crested eagles. Hiking can get muddy and steep but offers grand vistas of misty peaks and the gleaming Pacific Ocean.

Information

The main San Benito entrance is on the south-east side, beyond the hamlet of San Miguelito.

The park is run by **Salvanatura** (☎ 2279 1515; www.salvanatura.org in Spanish; entry US\$6); in theory you need to visit the San Salvador office to pay the entry fee and arrange for guide service (there is no guide fee but a US\$5 tip is customary). If instead you call the park, they can radio a guide to collect your fee. If you are just showing up you'll have better luck on weekends when there is more activity. The best time to visit is October to February, as the rainy season hinders travel.

The solar-powered visitors center has a modest museum and lookout tower with ocean views.

Major hikes:

Los Enganches An ideal picnic spot, this big swimming hole is reached by a trail (3.5km one way), which passes Mirador El Mulo and descends steeply. Along the way you'll pass Mirador Madre Cacao, with views of the southeastern part of the park. Look for agoutis and coatis.

Piedra Sellada A 4km trail to a swimming spot and a stone etched with Maya writings. Experts believe it dates to the Post Classic period, around AD 1500. To get here you'll take the Los Enganches trail; just before the end another trail cuts upriver 1km to Piedra Sellada.

Cerro El Leon A tough 8km circuit topping out on one of the park's highest peaks (1113m), starting in a lush, humid gorge and climbing through dense forest. This trail offers terrific panoramic views. From the visitors center the trail descends steeply 1km to the Río Ixcanal. Crossing the river you climb the other side, known as Montaña de los Águilares, to the summit. Return by a different route, along the narrow ridge between the Ixcanal and Guyapa river valleys. Allow several hours and bring plenty of water.

Sleeping & Eating

Hostal El Imposible (☎ 2411 5484; d midweek/weekend US\$34/46, extra person US\$6; ☎) This is a cluster of ecofriendly A-frame cabins with composting and solar power. Cabins have two bunks, a double bed, bathroom, patio and free drinking water. The restaurant takes a stab at originality by serving gachapcho and rabbit.

Three large camping areas with toilets and grills are within walking distance of the visitors center; the furthest one (20-minute walk) is the least crowded. Camp free with your entrance fee, the visitors center rents gear (tents US\$5 to US\$7, bring bedding). Small fires are allowed and potable water is available.

Getting There & Away

From Sonsonate catch bus 259 toward La Hachadura and get off at Cara Sucia. From there, a bus leaves at 11am and a pick-up at

2pm (both US\$2, one hour) for the main entrance. The trucks return to Cara Sucia every morning at 5:30am and 7:30am. If you think you might miss the pick-ups in Cara Sucia, you may be able to cut them off at Puente Ahuachapio (bridge), a few kilometers short of Cara Sucia. If the pick-ups have already passed, you may be able to hitch a ride (13.5km).

You can also visit the park from the northern side via Tacuba (p300).

EASTERN EL SALVADOR

El Salvador's east and northeast were poor areas populated by subsistence farmers before the war. The guerrillas' call for land reforms resonated strongly and the area became a wartime rebel stronghold. Much of the combat and atrocities took place here. Even communities that had remained neutral suffered terrible persecution and destruction.

Refugees who whiled away the war in Honduras have returned. The infrastructure destroyed during the war – bombed-out bridges and defunct ports – has largely been rebuilt. It's impossible not to notice the huge impact from the remittances sent from relatives working abroad (see p314). Boxy new gringo-style homes and booming commerce give a somewhat false impression of prosperity. But as eastern El Salvador 'comes back,' travelers will find that, among the forgotten beaches and quiet hill towns, there is a lot worth exploring.

There are two ways to travel east – along the Carr Interamericana or along the Carr del Litoral (CA2); the latter accesses the beaches, and the former the northern reaches.

EAST ALONG THE INTERAMERICANA

The Carr Interamericana goes east from San Salvador to San Miguel, on to La Unión and up again to the El Salvador-Honduras border at El Amatillo.

A few towns of interest lie between San Salvador and San Vicente on the Interamericana. **Cojutepeque**, 32km east of San Salvador, is a small town best known for the Cerro las Pavas (Hill of the Turkeys), featuring an outdoor shrine to the Virgen de Fátima, brought here from Portugal in 1949. Religious pilgrims come on Sunday and on May 13, **El Día de la Virgen**. In San Salvador, catch bus 113 from the Reloj de Flores, just west of the Terminal de Oriente; it's about a 45-minute ride.

Further along the highway (54km from San Salvador or 22km from Cojutepeque) is the turnoff to **Ilobasco**, a town known for ceramics known as *sorpresas* (see the boxed text, opposite). Upon entering the town a string of *artesanía* shops line Av Carlo Bonilla. The annual **crafts fair** runs September 24 to 29. Take bus 111 or 142 from the Terminal de Oriente or from Cojutepeque.

Another 8.5km heading east along the Interamericana is the road to **San Sebastián**, known for woven hammocks and textiles, and unique as most of the weavers are male. The fair takes place at the end of January. Take bus 111 or catch a bus in Cojutepeque.

SAN VICENTE

pop 34,600

Set under the horn-topped Volcán Chichontepec in the Jiboa Valley, San Vicente is a relaxed little city worth a peek. Lots of musicians live here and it has a reputation for being gay-friendly. Approaching town you'll see the landmark clock tower – a cartoonish Eiffel Tower – sprouting up from green hills and farmland. The tower is closed from damage by the January 2001 earthquake. It also damaged El Pilar, a beautiful colonial church built in the 1760s. With any luck, both will reopen soon.

Orientation & Information

The cathedral sits on the east side of the park. A large army barracks takes up the entire block southwest of the park. The main drag, 1a Av, runs north–south, passing a block west of the park.

Banco Cuscatlán (2a Av Sur) Cashes traveler's checks and has a 24-hour ATM.

Fast Line Ciber Café (2a Calle Ote; per hr US\$0.85; ☎ 9am–9pm)

Police (☎ 2303 7300; 1a Av Norte at 3a Calle Pte) Can arrange for an escort up the volcano.

Activities

The double-peaked **Chichontepec** (also known as Volcán San Vicente) offers a moderate climb through coffee plantations. Views are fantastic, though somewhat marred by the summit's helicopter pad and communications antenna. This eight-hour round-trip is relatively safe but it's best to go in a group or get a **police escort** (☎/fax 2396 3353) from Nuevo Tepeitán or San Vicente. Wear sturdy boots and bring a sweatshirt, lots of water and food for

you and your escorts. Take bus 191 (US\$0.25, 20 minutes) to Nuevo Tepeitán, where the trail begins. Buses leave from the corner of Calle Alvaro Quiñonez de Osorio and 9a Av every half-hour from 6:30am; last return bus is at 7:15pm.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Central Park (☎ 2393 0383; s with fan/air-con US\$10/15; 🍷) Location is everything, so enjoy the 2nd-floor terrace and small gay-friendly bar, since the actual accommodations are mediocre. Cement rooms smell slightly of mildew but the sheets are fresh and beds firm. The restaurant (open 6:30am to 10pm) below the hotel serves decent *típica*.

Casa de Huespedes El Turista (☎ 2393 0323; 4a Calle Pte 15 at 1 Av Sur; d US\$10–15) San Vicente's best bargain offers ultratidy rooms (early arrivals pay more) which are a bit dated and small. Enjoy the hammock, leafy courtyard and roof with a view.

Comedor Rivoli (1 Av Sur; mains US\$2–4; ☎ 7am–8:30pm) The most popular place in town, and justly so – check out the baked chicken, salads and roasted veggies, all fresh and homemade. This *comida a la vista* is served in a spotless dining room alongside rose gardens. Don't miss the delicious dollar *licuados*.

Getting There & Away

All buses pass by the parque central after leaving the bus terminal up the hill on 6a Calle and 15 Av. Beat the crowds at the park without hoofing it to the terminal by catching buses at 6a Calle and 2a Av. Departures include:

Alegria Catch an eastward bus from the Carr Interamericana and transfer at Villa El Triunfo.

Ilobasco Bus 530 (US\$0.60; 1hr) Departures at 6:50am, 11am and 4pm.

San Miguel Bus 301 from the turnoff at the highway (US\$1.50; 1½hr). Last bus at 6pm.

San Salvador Bus 116 (US\$0.85; 1½hr) Last bus at 6pm.

Zacatecoluca Bus 177 (US\$0.60; 50min)

ALEGRÍA

High in the mountains, Alegría is an unsung gem and one of El Salvador's most picturesque towns. At 1593m above sea level it's El Salvador's highest town. Young artists and new businesses are infusing energy into the quaint village of philosopher Alberto Masferrer. That's not to say it's bohemian – on certain nights rousing fire-and-brimstone sermons rock the plaza. Once coffee country, Alegría

TÍPICA OR PÍCARA?

Sorpresas (surprises) are little scenes and figures hidden in egg-sized shells, pioneered by folk artist Dominga Herrera of Ilobasco. Underneath a bulbous papaya or white chapel you'll find a charming micro-sized scene of village life – usually. One local artist got sassy and sculpted a couple in the giddy throes of sex. The illicit art was condemned by the town priest and briefly removed from stores. But prosperity may have beat out piety. '*Pícara*' (sinful) *sorpresas*, now available as matchbox copulation scenes, continue selling strong. Expect yours to come discreetly wrapped.

is now the nation's flower-growing capital, evidenced by some 230 *viveros* which fill porches, fields and backyards, leaving sweet smells in the air.

The friendly **tourist agency** (☎ 2628 1087; 1a Av Norte at 1a Calle Pte) can offer information about sights, nurseries and accommodations. Look for the kiosk or ask in the municipal office, both on the parque central. It also offers some worthy guided hikes (US\$10 to US\$15 per half-day) to coffee plantations, geothermal plants and sites related to philosopher and native-Alegrian Alberto Masferrer. The scenic crater lake **La Laguna de Alegría** (admission US\$0.25) is a 2km downhill walk from town. Its icy waters are said to be medicinal. Don't miss the beautiful view from the **Mirador de las Cien Grados** – a vista point at the top of one hundred steps. Take the road toward Berlín to the steps.

Sleeping & Eating

Casa Alegre (☎ 7201 8641; www.lacasaalegre.zoomblog.com; Av Camilo Campos; d/tw US\$10/20) Artists Memo and Paola have created a great shared space – just a few clean rooms with a shared mosaic-tile bath, but with relaxed warmth and style. The 1st floor is a gallery with modern works and recycled art. The couple offers free art classes to local kids. Volunteers are welcome to help.

Casa de Huéspedes la Palma (☎ 2628 1131; 1a Av Norte near Calle Alberto Masferrer; dm US\$10; 🍷) Big rickety rooms with worn tiles and firm beds characterize this family guesthouse which also has a curious clutter of photos, carvings and religious dioramas. A plus is the onsite internet café serving coffee on the plaza.

Merendero Mi Puelito (mains US\$1–5; ☎ 7am–7pm) Alegría's best meal value is this worn café where beans simmer in cast-iron pots over an open flame and the whole family chips in. It's south of the park.

Getting There & Away

Alegría sits between the Interamericana and Litoral highways and is accessible from either side. From Carr Interamericana, catch a minibus from Villa El Triunfo to Santiago de María (US\$0.30, 15 minutes), where buses leave hourly for Alegría (US\$0.60, 45 minutes). See Usulután (p308) for transportation from the Carr del Litoral side.

CARR DEL LITORAL

The Carr del Litoral (Hwy CA2) runs from San Salvador southeast through Zacatecoluca and Usulután, eventually coming to a crossroads with routes heading north to San Miguel and south to the Pacific coast.

The first town of any size southeast of San Salvador is **Zacatecoluca** (57km), near *turicentro* Ichanmichen. From there, the Litoral is a well-marked four-lane highway with shoulders, until you get to the Río Lempa. Beyond the bridge, the road narrows but maintains decent shape. Another 27km to the east is the departmental capital of Usulután.

The highway then skirts a rugged range to the south. The turnoff for what is arguably El Salvador's best beach, **Playa El Espino**, is just past El Tránsito, 10km east of Usulután. You'll need a 4WD to navigate the bumpy, windy road. It takes close to two hours to get there, but you are rewarded with your very own beach. Further east, **Laguna El Jocotál** is an important migratory bird sanctuary, sadly littered with trash. Your best bet is to tour the lagoon via canoe with a local.

The road then winds up into lava hills until the roundabout at El Delirio. From there, it's a straight shot north to San Miguel or south to Playa El Cuco and the eastern beaches.

ISLA MONTECRISTO

A steamy, pristine sanctuary for hundreds of pelicans and egrets, this island and estuary sit where the Río Lempa meets the Pacific Ocean. During the war, the island and its cashew plantation were abandoned and taken over by the FMLN. After 1992, it was resettled by local farmers taking advantage of the postwar land transfer program. In 1998 Hurricane

Mitch caused the evacuation of the island and flooded the lower Lempa. These days there are about 25 families growing organic cashews as an export crop.

Guests can stay at **Hostal Lempa Mar** (☎ 2310 9901; www.gbjolempa.net; La Pita; r US\$15; ☹ Wed-Sun), operated by a local development group. Simple cabins offer basic rooms with shared bathrooms and a comfortable terrace, and there are meals available in the restaurant. **Boat tours** travel through narrow corridors in the mangroves; some visit the cashew plantations as well. A fishing cooperative in Estero Jaltepeque can arrange **fishing trips** or the rental of traditional **canoes**.

La Pita and Montecristo are at the end of a 22km road which connects the Carr Litoral to the coast. The road can be rough in rainy season. Take bus 155 (US\$0.70, 40 minutes) or a pick-up from the Texaco in San Nicolas Lempa, with departures between 6am and 5:30pm.

From La Pita, *lanchas* (small motorboats; US\$14 round-trip) or canoes (US\$2.50 one way) can take you out to the island.

USULUTÁN

pop 45,300

Tented market stands choke the streets of this chaotic departmental capital at the foot of 1450m Volcán de Usulután. Middle Eastern immigrants exert a strong influence over the town's commerce. But for travelers Usulután will probably serve as a way-station to Bahía de Jiquilisco and the lovely Playa El Espino. You can also reach the mountain hamlet of Alegría from here (p306).

Information

Banco Cuscatlán (2a Calle Ote near Av Dr Guandiquil) On the parque central, it cashes traveler's checks and has a 24-hour ATM.

Cyber Planet (4a Calle Ote btwn 2a & 4a Avs Norte; per hr US\$0.50; ☹ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-noon Sun; ☹)

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Florida (☎ 662 0540; 4a Calle Oriente 26; s/d with bathroom US\$9/14, with air-con US\$12/24; ☹) With worn cement rooms and ratty bedspreads, this dated hotel by the market begs for remodeling. Still, guests will enjoy the shady balcony and meals from the kitchen.

Pastelería Trigo Puro (Calle Dr Penado; mains US\$2-3; ☹ 7am-5pm Mon-Sat) Fat cinnamon rolls, donuts and coconut cookies beckon from the glass case

of this popular bakery, also serving *cafeteria*-style *tipico*. It's one block west of the park.

Tortas Lito's (Calle Dr Federico Penado at 1a Av Norte; mains US\$2-3; ☹ 10am-8pm) Feast on tacos, *enchiladas* and *tortas* in this popular Mexican restaurant filled with picnic benches and the blaring sounds of salsa.

Adventurous eaters should follow the sniffing dogs to the **Mercado Central** (4a Av Norte btwn 2a & 4a), where a whole village of women are cooking up grilled chicken, pork stew and beans.

Getting There & Away

Usulután's main bus terminal is 1.5km east of the parque central (taxi US\$2). The San Miguel terminal is west of town, but passengers can board along 1a Calle Ote, a block south of the parque central. Buses to Alegría, Puerto Triunfo and San Salvador all take 4a Calle west through town. Since most buses pass through town you don't have to go to the terminal (unless you want a seat).

Alegría; Bus 348 to Berlín (US\$1; 1hr)

Playa El Cuco Bus 373 to El Delirio (US\$0.70; 2hr)

Playa El Espino Buses 351, 358 (US\$1.10; 1½hr) Catch them from a small lot 100m west of main terminal, across from a supermarket.

Puerto El Triunfo Bus 363 (US\$0.50; 1hr) Leaves from a lot along the highway.

San Miguel Bus 373 (US\$0.70; 1½hr) Take this bus to connect to La Unión.

San Salvador Bus 302 (*directo* US\$1.50; 2½hr; *especial* US\$2; 1½hr)

Zacatecoluca Bus 302 (US\$0.70; 1½hr)

BAHÍA DE JIQUILISCO

With kilometer after kilometer of white sand pounded by surf, and inland mangroves facing the volcanoes, the Península San Juan del Gozo beckons with promise. The inland sector is a habitat for gray egrets, pelicans and other water birds. Fishing towns include **Corral de Mulas** and **Isla Méndez**. Other less-accessible beaches are at **Punta San Juan** on the peninsula's east end and **Isla Madre Sal**. Also called Isla Jobal, **Isla Espíritu Santo** has endless coconut groves and a coconut-oil processing plant, but the beaches are no big deal. The Pacific side has strong and powerful surf, so be careful.

The gateway to Bahía de Jiquilisco, seedy Puerto El Triunfo is best sped through. Redefining grim, the only lodging, Hotel El Jardín, has doubles for US\$12 or charges hourly (at least the sheets are clean). The pier eateries

overlooking the bay offer fresh fish, *pupusas* and *licuados*.

Corral de Mulas & Isla Méndez

Passenger boats to **Corral de Mulas** (US\$2) leave in the early morning from the dock at the end of the main road. Be sure to ask for *El Icaco*, which is a better option to *Corral II*. Once there, cut through town on sandy – sometimes flooded – roads to the beach (30 minutes). The last boat back is at 4pm; if you miss it, ask for a lodging recommendation at the *alcaldía*.

Isla Méndez offers a bay beach with calm, shallow waters and a palm-frosted ocean beach with crashing surf. Due to bus schedules, travelers are obliged to stay the night. It could be interesting, however. Local community development group **Adesco** (☎ 7727 3453) can arrange US\$10 overnight family homestays. It also arranges boat trips around the bay (US\$35 per group) that travel through mangroves and Palacio de las Aves, home to hundreds of waterfowl. Bus 368 (US\$1, 1¼ hours) goes to Isla Méndez from San Marcos Lempa (30km away on the Carr Litoral) at 1pm and 2pm, returning at 5:30am and 6:30am. From San Marcos Lempa buses go to Puerto El Triunfo (11km) frequently.

See Usulután (opposite) for bus information; the last bus to Puerto El Triunfo is at 4:40pm, the last one back to Usulután is at 5:30pm. From the highway turnoff, take bus 377 to San Miguel (US\$1.35, 2½ hours, last bus 2:50pm) or bus 185 to San Salvador (US\$1.55, two hours, every 30 minutes, last bus 2:50pm).

SAN MIGUEL

pop 183,200

Stewing in smog and heat with a brash-but-sentimental reputation, San Miguel feels more tropical and vigorous than the capital. Just witness its hectic market spilling out in all directions. One of El Salvador's largest cities, it's also the main hub for the eastern half of the country. Yet this city, founded in 1530, has faced its share of problems. Gangs have been a plague, battled by vigilante groups, and now strong-armed by Super Mano Dura. Sky-high unemployment makes effectively cleaning up the city a true challenge. It's the remittances sent from family members living abroad that keep the commerce moving. The energy of this place means that more urban-oriented travelers can have an interesting time in the thick of it.

Orientation

Parque David J Guzmán is parque central, with the cathedral to the east. The area is choked with traffic by day and dodgy by night, but it's unavoidable since the bus terminal and hotels are nearby. The area west of central park is quieter and more secure. Av Roosevelt (Carr Interamericana) skirts the southwestern edge of town, where you'll find the majority of nightclubs and a large Metrocentro mall.

Information

Banco Cuscatlán (4a Calle Oriente & Av Barrios) Exchanges traveler's checks and foreign currency and has a 24-hour ATM.

Banco Salvadoreño (Av Barrios & 6a Calle Pte) Cashes traveler's checks, does Visa cash advances and has a 24-hour ATM.

Immigration Office (Migración; ☎ 2660 0957; cnr 15a Calle Ote & 8a Av Sur; ☹ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Infocentros (6a Calle Pte; per hr US\$1; ☹ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun)

Post Office (4a Av Sur at 3a Calle Ote)

Dangers & Annoyances

Although gang violence has quietened with new security measures, the city center is still the wrong place to be once the sun sets. Make sure your hotel feels safe and secure at check in.

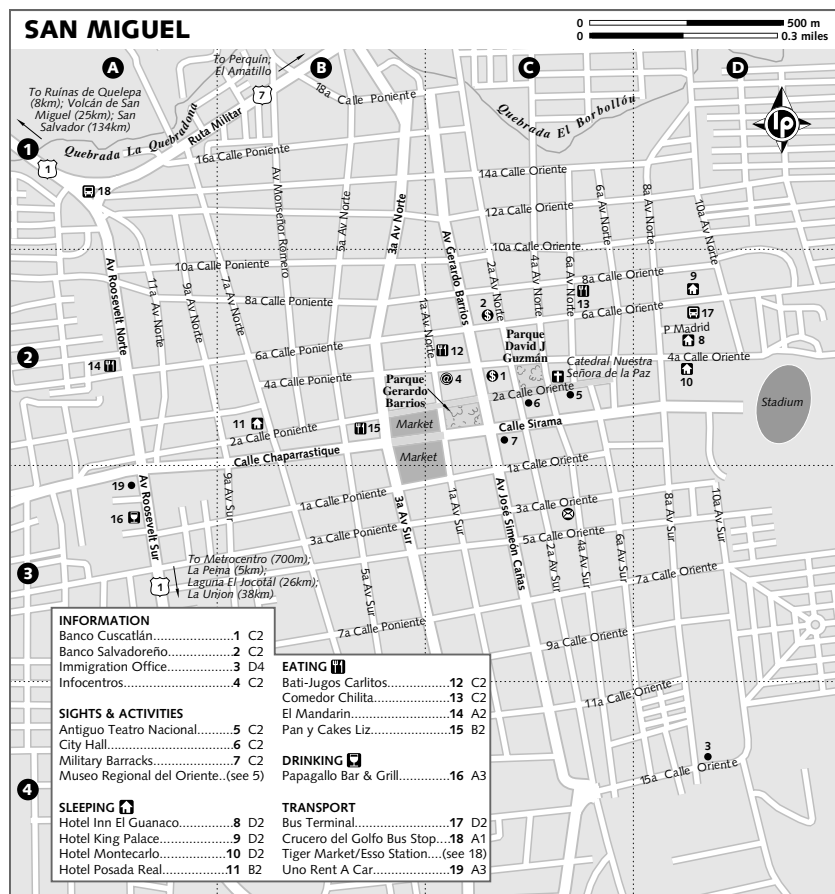
Sights & Activities

CENTRO

Facing Parque David J Guzmán, San Miguel's cathedral, **Catedral Nuestra Señora de la Paz**, dates from the 18th century. Around the corner, on 2a Calle Oriente, is the **Antiguo Teatro Nacional**, a neoclassical gem which functioned as a cinema during the silent-film era and later as the Telecom headquarters and a public hospital. The **Museo Regional del Oriente** is in the same building on the 2nd floor. The collection of pottery and photos is meager but it's free.

AROUND TOWN

Archaeology buffs will appreciate the **Ruinas de Quelepa**, grassy mounds covering 40 terraced ceremonial platforms, largely unexcavated. Lenca inhabited the site between the 2nd and 7th centuries AD, trading with Copán in Honduras as well as Mexico. Stone sculptures uncovered here are on display in the Museo Regional del Oriente. The ruins are 8km west of San Miguel off the Interamericana. From the cathedral, bus 90 to Moncagua (US\$35, 30 minutes) passes them.



If you're game for a steep nine-hour slog, consider climbing 2130m **Volcano Chaparrastique**, aka Volcán de San Miguel, a towering cone southwest of San Miguel. Arrange police escorts through the **Chinameca Police Station** (☎ 2665 0074; fax 2665 1014). Request with two weeks' notice, if possible. The top affords gaping views of the coast and a patchwork of rolling farmland. The crater is hundreds of meters deep, with a jumble of boulders and virgins at the bottom. Weather can be windy; bring a sweatshirt and sunglasses as well as lots of water and food. Keep in mind you'll be providing lunch for your armed escorts (*pupusas*). Get there with a rental car or take the Placitas bus from San Miguel at the corner of Calle Chaparrastique and 7a Av Sur and then arrange a taxi.

Festivals

Every November San Miguel honors the Virgen de la Paz with **Fiestas Patronales**, marking the occasion with holy processions and enormous, colorful sawdust carpets. Save yourself for its blowout finale, **Carnaval**, a citywide party held the last Saturday of November.

Sleeping

The cheapest places to stay are by the bus terminal, a gritty area unsafe after dark. If you stay out late take a cab.

Hotel Montecarlo (☎ 661 4113; 6a Calle Oriente; s/d with bathroom US\$8/12, d with fan/air-con US\$8/15; **P** **☎**) Like in the real Monte Carlo, you'll find high security (a surveillance camera) and gold trimmings (well, spray-on) spicing up

this cheap motel. The best of the cheapies, it offers good beds and cable TV. Don't even think about swiping the remote control – it's bolted down.

Hotel Inn El Guanaco (☎ 2261 5029; 8a Av Norte at Pasaje Madrid; s/d US\$20/30; **☎**) Small and welcoming, El Guanaco has enormous spotless rooms with hot-water bathrooms and cable TV. For something quiet and removed, choose the 3rd floor. There's a pool table and promising smells wafting up from its ground-level restaurant.

Hotel King Palace (☎ 2661 1086; www.hotelkingpalace.com in Spanish; 6a Calle Ote 609; s US\$22-28, deluxe d US\$28-35; **☎** **☎** **☎**) Right across from the bus station, this business hotel's greatest asset is the helpful and professional staff. Spacious renovated rooms have flat-screen TVs; the cheapies are small but fine. All have blissful air-con. Take advantage of the little-used courtyard – it has a tiny pool that's, unfortunately, in view of the street vendors.

Hotel Posada Real (☎ 2261 7174; 7a Av & 2a Calle Poniente; s/d US\$23/30; **☎**) In the safer and subdued neighborhood west of the market, this well-kept pink two-story hotel offers bland but amenable rooms, with good beds, air-con and TV. Take an upstairs room; those downstairs smell of mildew.

Eating

The best value is *comida a la vista* for breakfast and lunch at a *comedor*; show up early when the trays are full and the food is fresh.

Pan y Cakes Liz (2a Calle Pte; mains US\$1-3) Stack your tray with eggs, tamales, plantains, beans and coffee on the cheap at this friendly spot by the market.

Bati-Jugos Carlitos (1a Av Norte; mains US\$1-5; **☎** breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat) The country's best *batidos* might be these fishbowl-sized tropical blends. While you're at it, grab a burger or a heaping plate of roast chicken and watch the soaps.

Comedor Chilita (8a Calle Oriente & 6a Av Norte Bis; mains US\$2-3; **☎** 7am-10pm) This buzzing *cafeteria* spoons up a happy, huge variety that includes steamed veggies, spaghetti and roasted pepper chicken. After 4pm, it's all *pupusas* – use the side entrance on 8a Calle Oriente.

El Mandarin (Av Roosevelt Norte 407; mains US\$4-10; **☎** 10am-9pm) Curb your craving for shrimp chow mien with the heaping portions (one serves two) at this Chinese restaurant with the Arctic air-con.

La Pema (mains US\$5-12; **☎** 10:30am-4:30pm) It's blasphemy to come to this San Miguel institution and not order its famed *mariscada* (creamy seafood soup), served up with a mallet and thick cheese tortillas. Getting there is a trek (5km on the road to Playa El Cuco), but worth it.

Drinking

Locals love a party and you're likely to find it at *el triángulo*, the cluster of clubs at the triangle intersection of Av Roosevelt and the highway. Nightlife thrives between 10pm and 2am. Always ask the bartender to call a taxi – robberies have been committed by men posing as taxi drivers outside nightspots.

The upmarket **Papagallo Bar & Grill** (Plaza Chaparrastique, Av Roosevelt Sur; cover US\$5) is where Latin and mainstream pop rule the rowdy dance floor and there's also the occasional live concert.

Getting There & Away

BUS

San Miguel's bus terminal has clearly marked bus lanes but there's no-one but fellow travelers or kiosk workers to advise on schedule changes and departure lanes. The surrounding area is rough-edged, so take a taxi to your hotel if you arrive at night. Destinations include the following:

El Amatillo (Honduran border) Bus 330 (US\$1.75; 1½hr) At 10 minute intervals from 4am to 6pm.

El Cuco Bus 320 (US\$1; 1½hr)

El Tamarindo Bus 385 (US\$0.60; 2¼hr)

La Unión Bus 324 (US\$1; 1¼hr)

Marcala, Honduras Bus 426 (US\$3.50; 5½hr) Departs 4:40am and 11:40am.

Perquin Bus 332 (US\$1.25; 3hr) Leaves at 6:20am, 9:50am, 10:20am, 12:40pm and 3:20pm. Alternately, take 328 to San Francisco Gotera and transfer to a pick-up.

Puerto El Triunfo Bus 377 (US\$1.50; 2hr)

San Salvador Bus 301 (US\$2.10; 3hr; *especial* US\$3; 2 hr)

Usulután Bus 373 (US\$1; 1½hr)

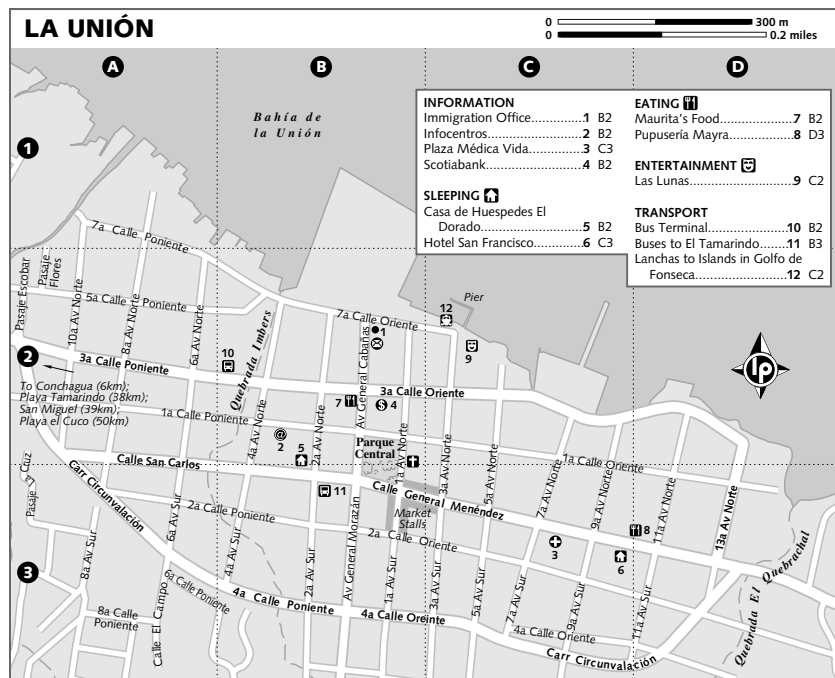
CAR

Hire a car through **Uno Rent A Car** (☎ 2661 0344; Av Roosevelt Norte)

LA UNIÓN

pop 23,600

The best thing about La Unión might be the way out. Like other ports the world over, it's seedy, drab and chaotic, but it also happens to be punishingly hot. Your shadow will simply wilt on the sidewalk. Hammocks hung from



crumbling colonial porches give some flavor of the past, and a new deep-sea port just outside town will receive cruise ships. In the meantime, the dock on the mudflats bustles with business.

Travelers come here to embark for the remote islands in the Golfo de Fonseca (opposite). Playa las Tunas and Playa Jaguey are the only good beaches on the coast west of La Unión, notwithstanding local enthusiasm for Playa El Cuco and El Tamarindo.

For some respite from the heat, and views of the gulf, head to **Conchagua**, at the base of the imposing volcano of the same name.

Information

Immigration Office (☎ 2604 4375; Av General Cabañas at 7a Calle Pte; ☎ 6am-10pm) Next door to the post office, the sign says *Central Migración*. You must stop by here if you're arriving or departing by boat from Nicaragua or Honduras.

Infocentros (1a Calle Pte btwn 2a & 4a Avs; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-5:30pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun)

Plaza Médica Vida (☎ 2604 2065; Calle Gral Menéndez btwn 7a & 9a Avs Sur; ☎ 24hr) A decent hospital near the center.

Scotiabank (2a Calle Ote btwn 1a Calle Sur & Av General Cabañas) Changes traveler's checks and has a 24-hour ATM.

Sleeping & Eating

Casa de Huespedes El Dorado (☎ 2604 4724; Calle San Carlos & 2a Av Norte; d US\$8) An old-fashioned guesthouse plunk in the middle of the market madness. Its best feature is the quiet courtyard with gardenias and mangos. Rooms are somewhat dated and damaged but the elderly owners are cool.

Hotel San Francisco (☎ 2604 4159; Calle Gral Menéndez btwn 9a & 11a Avs Sur; s/d with air-con US\$32/40; ☎) In a better area than the competition, this hotel sports a wide colonial porch and leafy courtyards. Rooms are spotless though dated, featuring hammocks and beds with pink sa-treen ruffles. Don't be put off if there are guests paying by the hour.

Pupusería Mayra (Calle Gral Menéndez; mains US\$1-2; ☎ 5-10pm) Superclean and kitschy (spot *The Last Supper* alongside the mounted elk), this is the spot for *panes de pollo* (chicken sandwiches) and fresh *pupusas*.

Maurita's Food (cnr Av Gral Cabañas & 3a Calle Poniente; meals US\$2-6; ☎ breakfast & lunch) A local mainstay

once known as Cafetín El Marinero, friendly Maurita serves up well-prepared seafood, ceviche and *típica*. In a charmed pink colonial building with a wrap-around porch.

For fine seafood dining check out the waterfront east of the center. Nearby **Las Lunas** (3a Av Norte, Playa Los Coquitos; ☎ 2pm-2am) offers nightlife in the form of karaoke and occasional Saturday concerts under a thatched bar.

Getting There & Away

The bus terminal is on 3a Calle Poniente between 4a and 6a Avs Norte. Service include the following:

Conchagua Bus 382A (US\$0.25; 15min)

El Amatillo (Honduran border) Santa Rosa de Lima bus 342 (US\$0.90; 1hr) to San Carlos, transfer to bus 330 at the turnout.

El Tamarindo Bus 383 (US\$0.90; 1¼hr)

Las Playitas Bus 418 (US\$0.80; 1hr)

San Miguel Bus 324 (US\$0.85; 1¼hr; *especial* US\$1; 1hr)

San Salvador Bus 304 (US\$3; 4 hr; *especial* US\$5; 3 hr)

Santa Rosa de Lima Bus 342 (US\$0.90; 1½hr)

BEACHES NEAR LA UNIÓN

El Salvador has some great beaches but these are not among them. Extremely popular among Salvadorans from San Miguel and La Unión, they will probably impress backpackers as drab and crowded. Neither El Cuco, the most popular, nor El Tamarindo, the closest, are worth a stop. Be aware of potential jellyfish and manta rays – shuffle while walking out.

Broad and sandy **Playa Jaguey** is the best beach between El Tamarindo and El Cuco, with moderate surf. At Jaguey, a local road descends from the highway to an access road just east of a grassy parking area that leads to the beach. Private homes front the beach but you can still use it. There are no facilities.

Playa las Tunas is also pleasant enough, with a wide, flat beach reaching 100m to an estuary. The cluster of seaside restaurants serving fresh lobster, fish and oysters is packed on weekends. Among them is the lively **Rancho Las Tunas** (mains US\$4-10; ☎ 7am-7pm), where live horn trios mingle among the relaxed crowd glugging *balde cervceros* (beer buckets on ice) and oysters by the dozen. The budget lodgings here are a disappointing lot – it's best left as a day trip.

From La Unión, bus 383 takes a circular route to El Tamarindo; it passes Las Tunas and Jaguey on the way. For a breezy shortcut, take the same bus only as far as Buenavista and catch a *lancha* across the inlet to El Tamarindo (US\$0.25) and hop on bus 383 returning to La Unión via Jaguey and Las Tunas.

ISLANDS IN GOLFO DE FONSECA

Pillaged by 17th-century pirates and abandoned, only to be repopulated in the 20th century, these lush volcanic islands remain oblivious to tourism. Visitors might have romantic notions of this gorgeous inlet, but it's more a revelation of how isolated communities really live. There are fishing villages with

CROSSING THE BORDER

Getting to Tegucigalpa, Honduras

For Tegucigalpa (US\$27, five hours), 1st-class **King Quality** (in San Salvador ☎ 2271 1361) buses stop at San Miguel's **Esso gas station** (Av Roosevelt at Ruta Militar) at around 8am and 3:30pm daily – be early just in case. Buy tickets at the gas station one day in advance.

Otherwise, bus 330 drops you 50m from El Amatillo on the Salvadoran border where a bridge crosses into Honduras. Honduran buses then go to **Choluteca** (US\$1.50, 2¼ hours) and on to **Tegucigalpa** (US\$2, 3½ hours); the last bus for both leaves at 5:30pm. The last bus from El Amatillo to San Miguel goes at 6:30pm.

See p435 for information on crossing the border from Honduras.

Getting to Nicaragua & Costa Rica

King Quality operates to **Managua** (US\$27, nine hours), continuing on to **San José, Costa Rica** (US\$47, 19 hours). It stops at San Miguel's Esso gas station at about 7:30am and 1:30pm.

From El Amatillo minibuses run from 5:30am to 5pm across the southern tip of Honduras to the Nicaraguan border town of **Guausale** (US\$5, two hours), where connections reach **León** and **Managua**.

SPREADING THE WEALTH

War and economics have scattered 2.9 million Salvadorans from Mexico City to Melbourne. These hard-working *Guanacos* go where the jobs are, mostly to the USA, where many wash dishes or work in construction crews to sustain families and communities back home. *Remesas* (remittances) are not just petty cash but make up a whopping US\$3 billion a year for the El Salvadoran economy.

Cinderella stories tell of remittances pooled by expat clubs to finance hometown improvements. The small community of El Piche in La Unión Department has had wells drilled, schools extended and clinics improved, all thanks to the town's Los Angeles cousins.

Yet the reality of remittances is that they are rarely saved and largely spent. The Inter-American Development Bank estimates that 85% of wired funds go to consumer spending – that means money for grocery bills, cell phones or designer track shoes. Consumerism in El Salvador has grown exponentially, evidenced by upmarket new malls and Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets. Banks act largely as money transfer agents, content to take a cut on transfers instead of promoting accounts, a disservice that perpetuates the perception that the poor don't save. Those who aren't saving grow increasingly dependent on that next check from abroad.

But what would happen if the USA tightened its reins on illegal workers? El Salvador's infrastructure is built for spending, not generating revenue. Farming would be out. The war scattered rural families and among returnees is a generation raised in urban refugee camps. It's little wonder that all but grandma and grandpa have turned their back on the family farm and resettled in urban areas, closer to the Western Union.

few services and black-sand beaches which are either trash-strewn or hard to get to. Take along food and water. In general, the more distant islands are more pristine.

The nearest island, **Isla Zacatillo**, has the largest community. Numerous coves with sandy beaches can be explored, but it's no tropical dreamscape. The principal village has a few stores and lodgings in a wooden shack over the bay. For solitary beaches, head for **Isla Martín Pérez**, just south of Zacatillo. More mountainous, **Isla Conchagüita** offers hiking. Fishing boats are neatly lined up under *enramadas* (arbors or protective awnings, typically made of wood or branches) along the beachfront of the main village. Locals say there are prehistoric rock carvings on the way out to Playa Brava, a black-sand beach an hour's walk from the village.

Isla Meanguera, the southernmost isle, was long the subject of territorial disputes with Honduras and Nicaragua, until an international court declared it part of El Salvador in 1992. It's the only island in the gulf with decent lodging – ask for directions at the ferry landing.

Hotel Paraíso de Meanguera (☎ 2648 0145; s/d US\$12/15) has decent hammock-strewn rooms with cable TV and bathroom. Meals are available upon request, with seafood just US\$3.

Perched over a peaceful cove, **Hotel El Mirador** (☎ 2648 0072) is a recommended hotel

and restaurant under renovation at the time of research; call before arriving. One of the island's best beaches, **Playa Majahual**, is a 45-minute walk; shuttles (US\$1) depend on availability.

La Unión has services to Zacatillo (US\$2, 20 minutes) and Meanguera (US\$2.50, 1½ hours) from the pier. Departure times vary, but are generally from 10am to 10:30am, returning at 5am the next day. Day-trippers have to arrange a private pick-up.

A private 'express' *lancha* costs US\$60 round-trip to Meanguera. Don't expect any bargains. Agree on a price before the journey starts, and pay only half up front to ensure your return trip. Ferries for the islands also depart from Las Playitas further down the coast.

Boat service from La Unión to Coyolitos, Honduras, and the port of Potosí, Nicaragua, is very infrequent. Ask a navy officer or a boatman. You could also try calling Hotel El Mirador on Isla Meanguera to see if it has a trip planned. Prices vary widely – we were quoted from US\$10 to US\$60. The wait may last days or weeks. The land route may not be too exciting, but neither is hanging out in La Unión.

There is a navy post at the pier – look for a little desk with a sailor behind it. He can be helpful.

MORAZÁN

North of San Miguel, Morazán Department was a guerrilla stronghold during the civil war. This impoverished agricultural area experienced some of the heaviest fighting. It is a fascinating place to visit, with the opportunity to speak with many whose firsthand experience of the war shaped their lives. The war museum in Perquín and a memorial in El Mozote are sobering reminders of the atrocities that befell fighters and families alike. Mountainous and cool, Morazán boasts the country's cleanest river, the Río Sapó, and plenty of hikes to waterfalls and war hideouts.

Indigenous traditions survive in villages around San Francisco Gotera, the department capital. The village of **Cacaopera** (bus 337 from San Francisco Gotera) has a small ethnographic **museum** (admission US\$1; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) with photo exhibits and artifacts from the local Kakawira indigenous community. Miguel Ayala of the museum is a good contact. Through the museum you can also arrange guided hikes in the dry season (December to April) to pre-Colombian

petroglyphs (US\$10 per group). The museum maintains a rustic **hostel** (☎ 2651 0251; dm US\$5), without electricity or running water. You can bathe in the nearby Río Torola and cook on the wood-burning stove. Sure, it's roughing it, but the experience is undoubtedly unique.

The community at **Guatajiagua** produces quality black pottery in the Lenca tradition. Visit **Cedart** (Calle Principal; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) crafts shop or ask the clerk to point you in the direction of local artist workshops.

Perquín pop 5500

Perquín, at 1117m, was the FMLN headquarters during the war – its leftover bunkers and bomb craters are evidence of the former guerrilla presence. The opposition enjoyed broad popular support here and the rugged landscape thick with trees provided cover from military patrols. The town itself isn't beautiful but the cool mountain climate and strong historical significance make a trip here the highlight of El Salvador for most visitors.

SU CASA EN CUMARO

Community-based tourism provides travelers with an opportunity that's so grass roots it's part adventure. But, hey, that's why you're here, right? The upper Río Sapó watershed offers a glimpse of rural life as well as gorgeous waterfalls, swimming holes and hiking. Peace Corps volunteer Jason Seagle, who spent two years here, suggests the following:

- Explore the upper Río Sapó watershed where you'll find beautiful and friendly communities. Ask around for Don Santos, a guide for the Río Sapó Protected Area.
- Ask any kid to show you *la pileta*, the town swimming hole, and you'll likely be joined by an additional 20 kids.
- There's a small community library in Cumaro. Talk to Don Santos for the key and for help organizing a group of kids for reading hour. They're really into it.
- Talk with a local farmer to go out and spend the day working in their corn/coffee or sugarcane field (depending on season).
- See Don Juan, Cumaro's school director, if you want to give volunteer classes. The school is always excited to work with international visitors.
- Talk with Marcos Hernandez to get involved in beekeeping. (Tip accordingly.)

For lodging in a beautiful log cabin on the property of a wonderful Salvadoran family, contact **Cabaña las Veraneras** (☎ 7733 4493; Caserio Cumaro; campsites/r per person US\$2/6; meals US\$1.50). Guests of Niña Nilda become one more member of the family. You can also contact the Prodetur office in Perquín for reservations.

To arrive from Perquín, take any pick-up (US\$0.15) to the Arambala turnoff and take bus 332C (US\$0.50) toward Joateca. Buses pass at 8am, 1:10pm, 3:10pm and 5pm. At the Caserio Cumaro turnoff start the 20-minute walk in to Las Veraneras (follow the signs for the pool). Happy adventures!

INFORMATION

Cyberspace (per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-9pm Sat-Thu, 8am-6pm Fri)

Prodetur (☎ 2680 4086; parque central; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) Perquín's helpful tour office organizes guided tours and hikes (US\$15) with a few days' notice. Early August commemorates the signing of the peace accords with various guided trips available.

SIGHTS

A few blocks north of the park, the **Museo de la Revolución Salvadoreña** (Calle Los Héroes; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Tue-Sun) charts the causes and progress of the armed struggle with photos, posters, weapons and some histories of those who died in action. Weapons range from high-tech hardware to homemade bombs and mines. It can be a bit overwhelming.

Behind the main building is a bomb crater and the remains of the downed helicopter that carried Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, head of the notorious Atlacatl Battalion, to his death. You'll see the stu-

dios of the FMLN's clandestine station **Radio Venceremos** (We Will Win Radio), part of an elaborate hoax that used a radio transmitter rigged with explosives to bring Monterrosa's helicopter down. The exhibits are somewhat rundown and in Spanish only; tours of the museum by former guerrillas are available in Spanish.

The museum is also the contact point for ex-guerrilla guides who can take visitors on fascinating **guided trips** (groups US\$15) throughout the war zone. The most popular destination is El Mozote (see opposite).

ACTIVITIES

Mountainous Perquín offers excellent hiking and river swimming. An abundance of orchids and butterflies make it a prime birding zone – 12 varieties of oriole have been spotted along with the rare chestnut-headed oropendola. The **Río Sapo** is one of three rivers cutting through the forest – you can swim or camp here after visiting El Mozote. **Quebrada de Perquín** is a smaller, craggier creek, also

good for swimming. **Cerro de Perquín** is a 10-minute hike from town, while **Cerro el Pericón** is a longer haul. Both offer gorgeous views. For guides consult Prodetur or the museum. For nearby community tourism opportunities, see p315.

SLEEPING & EATING

Eco Albergue Río Sapo (☎ 2680 4086/4087; campsites/dm per person US\$3.50/6) Access to a swimming hole and a dozen hikes is the best reason for staying at these rustic dorm-style cabins at Area Natural Protegida Río Sapo. There's no electricity and limited water; bring your own food and flashlights. You can rent a tent (US\$3) or sleeping bag (US\$1) if you don't have your own. It's operated by Prodetur.

Hostal Perquín Real (☎ 2680 4158; r per person US\$6) Large tile rooms with lumpy beds are relatively comfy, if not very private; the doors open right into the restaurant. The shared bathroom boils down to a bucket wash. Dining is convenient, with the restaurant serving fresh typical fare in an open-air setting.

La Posada de Don Manuel (☎ 2680 4037; s/d US\$6/18) In this gigantic lumber mill-gone-guesthouse you'll find a dark *comedor* and small, bright cement rooms, with sturdy mattresses and fans. The common bathrooms could be cleaner. It's 500m before town.

Hotel Perkin Lenca (☎/fax 2680 4046; www.perkinlenca.com; r per person incl breakfast US\$15, 1-4 person cabin incl breakfast US\$40-77) Perquín's finest accommodation option is this relaxed mountain lodge, with sunny oak and pine cabins that offer superb views of pine-forested slopes. The new doubles are excellent value. All accommodations have hot-water showers. Handicap access, area tours and a book exchange are in the works. The American owner, Ronald Brenneman, did relief work during the 1980s, building low-income refugee housing.

La Cocina de Ma' Anita (Hotel Perkin Lenca; mains US\$3-11) This large country kitchen prepares hearty breakfasts with fresh juice, eggs and homemade wheat bread. A good dinner choice is grilled steak with roasted veggies and warm tortillas. Blue-sky days warrant outdoor seating on the stone patio.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The CA7 north of San Miguel to the Honduran border is in good shape. Bus 332 runs from San Miguel to Perquín (US\$1.50, 2½ hours) at 6am, 7am, 9:50am and 12:40pm.

GETTING TO MARCALA, HONDURAS

Bus 426 goes from Perquín to Marcala, Honduras (US\$2.50, three hours) daily at 6:30am and 11:40am. It stops at Honduran immigration, where a 30-day tourist card is US\$2. Due to a border dispute, there is no Salvadoran immigration or customs post at **Sabanetas-Marcala**; no problem for those leaving, but travelers entering El Salvador here could be turned back or fined later for entering without being stamped.

Alternatively, there's the more frequent bus 328 to San Francisco Gotera (US\$0.70, 1½ hours) from which pick-ups go on to Perquín (US\$0.50, one hour). The last bus back to San Miguel is at 4pm; the last pick-up to Gotera leaves at 5:40pm, but you have to catch the 5pm to make the last Gotera-San Miguel bus.

El Mozote

On December 11, 1981, government soldiers terrorized and executed the residents of this northern hill village. It's estimated that 757 people died: of the 143 victims uncovered, 131 were children. El Mozote is now a destination for those paying homage to the massacre. A tribute includes bright murals painted on the church, depicting the town as it was back then and as its children hope it to someday be. There is also a plaque with the names of those who had died and a rose garden planted over the collective grave of the massacred children. This modest village has no lodgings and few services.

A visit to El Mozote is a searing and heart-wrenching experience, one that could re-order your sense of the world. A local guide might talk about how her whole family, parents and siblings, were exterminated, while touring the village to point out the bomb scars and bullet holes. For some it might seem macabre, but the tour's impetus of *'Nunca Más'* (never again) aims to end senseless violence through this horrific example.

It's important to remain sensitive to the seriousness of the site. Locals are accustomed to an international presence; they've even set up snack bars and children tag behind visitors asking for handouts. As tempting as it is to give, it's best, however, if you donate directly to the box inside the tour office.

LOCAL VOICES: THE GUERRILLA TURNED TOUR GUIDE

Efraín Pérez is a guide in Perquín's war museum. He was 11 when the Salvadoran army murdered his parents and two siblings in Jocoaitique. He joined rebel FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional) forces two years later and spent eight years traveling on foot and training with the guerrillas. He is now 35, utterly frank and serene. The war left him lame; he walks dragging one leg. We meet at the Museo de la Revolución Salvadoreña, taking a bench alongside a bomb crater.

- **What do you like about being a guide?** The most important thing is to transmit a story to those who don't know it and to the country's younger generation who should know their own history. It is important that people know that in those years we were living the consequences of a government.
- **How does your firsthand experience come in?** People come to the museum and say, 'I want to hear the history from someone who has lived it.' Because it's not the same to hear an explanation from someone who has, in theory, studied the war.
- **Are the memories difficult to confront?** Ex-guerrilla commanders have come and said, 'Look, Efraín, tell us the story of these people'... Many ex-guerrillas can't recount stories about the war. Why? Because for that one needs preparation, one needs serenity and to be able to captivate [an audience].
- **Are there moments when visitors surprise you?** Last year an American student apologized after learning about the US role in the war. 'Don't feel bad,' I said, 'These are things governments do to governments.'
- **Do you enjoy your job?** Well, yes. But if I could do another job...since I am handicapped... this is my option (he laughs).
- **But I think very few people could do this job.** Yes, very few.

As told to Carolyn McCarthy

From Perquín walk or take a pick-up 3km south to a fork in the highway, El Mozote is 10km from the paved road; Jateca-bound buses pass here at 8am. On the way you'll pass Arambala, once decimated by air raids. The same bus returns from El Mozote at 12:45pm and can drop you at the turnoff. Combine this trip with a visit to Río Sapo, a 30-minute walk from El Mozote.

Prodetur and the Museo de la Revolución Salvadoreña in Perquín (p316) can do trips here, but show respect by using local El Mozote guides once in the village.

NORTHERN EL SALVADOR

While whitewashed Suchitoto wins the hearts of local and international travelers searching for enchantment, the north has much more to offer. Here, little side trips turn into big adventures. The artisan town of Palma, with its crayon-color homes, dedicated workshops and lush mountain backdrop offers a cool borderland retreat. Bumpy bus rides run up craggy hills and pass through pine forests to take you (albeit slowly) where few outsiders venture.

Now boasting one of the country's lowest crime rates, the Chalatenango district was the scene of intense fighting between the government army and the FMLN guerrillas. Villages bore the brunt of the military's *tierra arrasada* (scorched land) tactics, which burned fields and killed livestock as a form of combat. The carnage precipitated an exodus, and it is not uncommon to run into locals who spent a dozen years in New York or Melbourne.

The main provider of water and hydroelectric power for El Salvador, Chalatenango Department faces a serious deforestation problem.

SUCHITOTO

Sure enough, tell San Salvadorans that you're Suchitoto bound and they give a nostalgic sigh. And rightly so, as this little town 47km north of the capital is everything El Salvador once was before the civil war and various natural disasters. In a setting of whitewashed colonial and cobblestone streets, it's gossipy, leftist-leaning and beaming with civic pride. A cultural capital during the indigo trade's heyday, it now has a burgeoning arts scene. A February arts-and-culture festival brings

in world-class performers and concerts, and performances or art exhibits are held almost weekly.

Suchitoto overlooks the Embalse Cerrón Grande, also known as Lago Suchitlán, a reservoir visitors can enjoy by boat. It is also a bird migration zone with over 200 species. Thousands of hawks and falcons fill the skies as the seasons change, and birds of all sorts nest in the relative safety of the islands.

It is presumed that Yaquis and Pipils settled in the area some 1000 years ago. El Salvador's capital was established near here in the early 16th century. More recently, some of the earliest fighting of the civil war began in Suchitoto, accompanied by much destruction and emigration. Today the town has rebounded to become the highland seat of national tourism.

Orientation & Information

La Iglesia Santa Lucía stands on the east side of the Parque Centenario, the town center. Signs to the lake lead you a block east of the park, left onto 3a Av Sur, then down steeply to the water (about 1km). You can also follow the street that forms the park's western edge (Av 15 de Septiembre); it merges with 3a Av Sur several blocks down. Parque San Martín is two blocks west and two blocks north of the town center.

Bring plenty of cash since there is nowhere to withdraw or change money in Suchitoto. Internet cafés abound; try **Infocentros** (Calle Francisco Morazán at Av 5 de Noviembre; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-5pm) at the park. A great local resource, **El Gringo** (☎ 2335 1770; 8a Av Norte 9; free wi-fi with your own computer, ☎), aka Californian Robert Brozmorán, can download photos and give guidance on what the area has to offer (maybe patronize his small convenience store for the favor).

Suchitoto's **Tourism Office** (☎ 2335 1782; www.suchitoto-elsalvador.com; Calle Francisco Morazán at 2a Av Norte; ☎ 8am-4pm Wed-Sun) rents bikes (per hour US\$1) and informs about hikes, activities and cultural events.

Sights & Activities

Geologic oddity **Cascada los Tercios** tumbles over a cliff of tightly packed hexagonal stone spires. The waterfall underwhelms when water is low (often), but the rock formation and the trip there are interesting enough. Take the road in front of the church south. It curves left, down and up again before intersecting with a soccer field. Turn left onto the main road and

continue for about 1.5km. After a smoking garbage dump there's a gate on your left. Enter or continue to the next house, where one of the kids can guide you (it's family property). Upon request, boat tours can stop at the trail for the *cascadas* (waterfalls); walk up to the road, turn right and walk another four to five minutes.

It's a 1½-hour hike to **Salto El Cubo**, a 15m waterfall cascading into a pair of pools. You can climb from the lower one to the upper, hemmed in by rocks with the water crashing down from above. To get there, take Calle Francisco Morazán west out of town to a rocky trailhead, a narrow path descending steeply to the falls. A local Peace Corps volunteer working in conjunction with the tourist office put up signs.

Southwest of town, the former FMLN hide-out of Volcán Guazapa is a popular **horseback riding** (6hr trip US\$18) destination operated by an independent cooperative. Visitors can check out *tatús*, clever dugout hideouts, as well as craters and bomb shells. The tours are operated by an independent local cooperative and the quality may depend greatly on who is in charge (in general fewer riders means a better pick of healthy horses). Book trips through the tourism office or La Casona, preferably a day or two in advance.

The regional tourism office arranges city tours that include some 30 historical buildings. Also, browsing the **art galleries** can make an agreeable afternoon. Check out **Casa del Escultor** (☎ 2335 1836; www.miguelmartino.com; 2a Av Sur; ☎ Sat & Sun), the studio of acclaimed Argentine sculptor Miguel Martino.

For listings of local festivals see p325.

Sleeping & Eating

More lodging options are poised to spring up; ask locally for the newest budget options.

Casa de Rubia (☎ 2335 1833; Av 5 de Noviembre 29; r per person US\$6; ☎) Great for those eking out a tight budget, this welcoming family home has basic rooms and a leafy backyard. The shared bathroom with old fixtures is somewhat rustic but clean. Breakfast available on request.

La Casona (☎ 2335 1969; www.lacasonasuchitoto.com; 4ta Calle Ote No 9; r US\$12) Part of Jerry's alternative tourism is this leftist-run lodging with large cement rooms with bathrooms. Some travelers might not love bunking in what's essentially a bar but the large spaces make it fairly quiet.

La Villa Balanza (☎ 2335 1408; Parque San Martín; s/d US\$15/20) The best value for travelers are these small bright rooms in a lovely stone courtyard. The only bummer is that the bathrooms are shared by the restaurant. Two annexes offer rooms of greatly varying quality, from spartan to somewhat swanky, most with good lake views. The restaurant serves good *típica* (mains US\$2 to US\$9) amidst art-crafted discarded bomb shells. Some come here just to check out the war memorabilia. It faces Parque San Martín.

Pupusería Niña Melita (6a Calle Ote btwn Calle al Lago & 3a Av Norte; pupusas US\$0.25) How's this for hometown flavor? Melita hits the sidewalk nightly, frying up bean, zucchini or meat-filled *pupusas*, while her 96-year-old mother (nostalgic for mud ovens) decries the modernized recipe to passersby. Don't listen – they're delicious.

La Fonda del Mirador (☎ 2335 1126; 2a Av Sur 26A; mains US\$4-10; ☎ 11am-6pm) Stunning views of the lake and river estuary make this the sunset spot in town. To boot, the food is great. The chicken sandwich with fries is an edifying value meal; for a treat try the snapper in tamarind sauce or seafood salad.

Casa del Escultor (☎ 2335 1836; www.miguelmartino.com; 2a Av Sur 26A; mains US\$8-13; ☎ Sun) It's well worth splurging at this tiny reservations-only Argentine grill. Sausages, salad and wood-fire grilled meats are served with Argentine wines in a candlelit garden amid organic wood forms.

On weekends food vendors fill the plaza selling *riguas* (sweet buttery corn tortillas wrapped in a corn husk) and *fogonazo* (sugarcane juice), spiked with the strong stuff on request.

Drinking

After dinner grab a beer at **El Necio** (4a Calle Ote No 9; ☎ 6pm-1am), a classic watering hole fitted with Che posters and lefty memorabilia, owned by Jerry, an amiable ex-guerrilla. Patrons can get a little too friendly with single *señoritas* – they might be best to befriend the bartender.

The town's go-to nightspot is **Harlequín** (☎ 7pm-1am Fri-Sun), with eclectic tunes playing in a trellised garden with twinkling lights.

Getting There & Away

From San Salvador's Terminal de Oriente take bus 129. To return, the same bus departs from the corner of 1a Calle Pte and 4a Av Sur, a

block west of Parque Centenario. By car, go toward Cojutepeque on the Interamericana. When you get to San Martín, turn left at the Texaco sign.

If you're headed north, catch Bus 163 to Las Aguilares (US\$0.70, one hour), where buses pass for Chalatenango, Las Palmas and the El Salvador–Honduras border. A slower but more scenic option is to take a boat (per person US\$5, 20 minutes) or car ferry (per person US\$1, per car US\$4) across Lago de Suchitlán to San Francisco Lempa and from there catch a bus to Chalatenango.

CHALATENANGO

pop 16,200

In the morning's first hours the market cackles to life, blocking traffic with piles of mandarins and pineapples stacked among bolts of fabric and cheap miniskirts. The north's largest city, 'Chalate' has taken a distinctly commercial route, as opposed to its sleepy neighbors. You dig it or you don't. The large military garrison on the plaza was built during wartime to rein in revolutionary activity in this FMLN stronghold. These days the only thing 'revolutionary' is the brisk business at the pay-per-hour hotels.

Orientation & Information

The parque central is divided by 3a Av, with the church on the east (uphill) side and the main park on the west (downhill) side. The market extends up the main east–west street, Calle San Martín–Calle Morazán. A huge army barracks stands north of the main park; most buses pick up and drop off on 3a Av, south of the park. One exception are the buses to Arcatao and Las Vueltas, which leave at the top of Calle Morazán, near the turnoff to the *turicentro*.

There's a 24-hour ATM at **Banco Cuscatlán** (4a Calle Pte near 6a Av Sur), and it also changes traveler's checks. Try **Cibercafé @halate Online** (1a Calle Ote at 5a Av Norte; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8am–9:30pm Mon–Sat, 9am–1pm Sun) for internet access.

Sights

The **Iglesia de Chalatenango**, with its squat bell tower and bright chalky facade, sits on the east side of the parque central, a stone's throw from the military garrison.

A 20-minute walk from the parque central, **Turicentro Agua Fria** (admission US\$0.80; ☎ 8am–5pm) has a lush park with picnic tables, but the

main draw are pools set with an artificial rock island topped by a waterslide. Dry season means water shortages – expect an overdose of chlorine. A cafeteria serves beer and meals. To get here, go up Calle Morazán (east) about 400m, and turn left at the big sign.

For panoramic views of the Cerrón Grande reservoir, climb **Cerro La Peña**, a 1½-hour hike starting at a trailhead before the *turicentro*. A number of roads and paths reach the top; ask passersby for directions.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel la Ceiba (☎ 2301 1080; d US\$12) The only cheap hotel which doesn't seem to be an all-out *bordello* (we understand the residents of Chalate have their needs) is this two-story place behind the military garrison. It offers dark rooms, sturdy mattresses and fairly new installations.

La Posada del Jefe (☎ 2335 2450; Calle el Instituto, Barrio El Calvario; s/d US\$15/20; ☎) By far, the best bet in town is this family-run hotel, which has 12 impeccable cement rooms, all painted toothpaste-white and with rusted metal shelving. It's 10 blocks east of center, straight uphill. To get here take a little red mototaxi (US\$0.70). It's kind of fun.

Comedor Carmary (3a Av; mains US\$2–3; ☎ 7am–2pm Mon–Sat) This tidy cafeteria packed with bus-stop patrons serves tasty *comida a la vista*, which might include stewed chicken in tomatoes, plantains and the ubiquitous beans and rice, alongside tall glasses of fresh juice.

The open-air **market** (☎ 5am–1pm) offers a visual feast of veggies, fruits and grains, as well as stock to replenish your toiletries. It's just east of Av Fajardo.

Getting There & Away

Bus 125 runs regularly from San Salvador (US\$0.90, two hours) and terminates on 3a Av Sur, a few blocks south of the church. To La Palma and El Poy, take bus 125 toward El Amayo (the highway intersection) and transfer to bus 119 (1½ hours) heading north.

See opposite for details on taking buses to local villages.

AROUND CHALATENANGO

The countryside around Chalate climbs into dry forest studded with toothy peaks and rugged tawny hills. The small villages in this remote area have stunning landscapes and interesting histories.

Beyond the Río Sumpul, **Arcatao** is a beautiful village in the mountains bordering Honduras. Ask in the municipal office about tours of the *tatus* (cave hideouts), which attest to Arcatao's former role as an FMLN stronghold. The local **Jesuit order** (☎ 2354 8009; bartolome2408@yahoo.com) receives guests and can set up guided tours of the area. Call ahead.

Northwest of Chalate, **Concepción Quezaltepeque** is a hammock-making center. You'll see women threading them along the side of the road. Prices range from US\$30 to US\$120, depending on size, length, thickness and material. Shops line the main street; browse a few first to compare quality.

La Montaña is a pine forest reserve at 1600m with prime views and pre-Columbian rock carvings. The civil war left several *tatus*, including one used by clandestine guerrilla radio station, Radio Farabundo, as well as an underground guerrilla hospital. You can stay in the small village: a rustic cabin has beds and shared bathroom (US\$5 per night). Teresa Avilar cooks up basic meals. Call **Cesar Alas** (☎ 7723 6283) before going; he oversees the lodging and acts as a guide to the area.

A strenuous climb passing Dulce Nombre de María travels cobbled roads through pastel villages. Enjoy views of flat valleys sprung with volcanoes and the mountainous Honduran border beyond. North is **El Manzano**, a cooperative of ex-FMLN combatants. Its trails cross forest and coffee farms, and destinations include historic war sites and waterfalls. The top of El Pílon offers more incredible views. The *tienda* in the middle of town has information on lodging, meals and guides.

Getting There & Around

The following bus departures originate in Chalatenango:

Arcatao Bus 508 (US\$1.15; 2hr) Departs hourly from 7am to 5:30pm from the top of Calle Morazán.

Concepción Quezaltepeque Bus 300B (US\$0.35; 20min) At 3a Av Sur terminal in Chalate.

El Manzano No direct service. Take 125 to the *desvío* (turnoff) for Dulce Nombre de María to pick up bus 124 from San Salvador to Dulce Nombre de María. Take a pick-up to El Manzano.

La Montaña Buses 295 or 542 (US\$1; 2hr) pass by the turnoff to Montaña, departing at 11:15am and 12:15am from 3a Av Sur between 1a and 3a Calles Pte. From the turnoff it's a steep 6km climb to the village – pick-ups often make the trip.

LA PALMA

At first glance, La Palma, at 1200m, resembles a coloring-book page zealously attended to by a seven-year-old. Its narrow streets are populated with tiny, tiled homes in garish tones of plum, mint and tangerine, some covered in fanciful murals or drawings. This artist village 84km north of San Salvador might border kitsch as well as Honduras, but it does make a cool visit. Lovers of the outdoors can enjoy the fresh air, verdant mountain views and some of the country's best hiking.

Painter Fernando Llort moved here in 1972, founding Naïve Art, a trend that still represents El Salvador around the world (p271). These bright, primitive images of mountain villages, *campesinos* or Christ images are painted on anything from seeds to church walls. He taught local residents how to create the same images and started a successful cooperative. Today 75% of the village makes a living by mass-producing these bright motifs.

Hikers often prefer lodging in the neighboring village of **San Ignacio** as it's closer to the trails.

Information

Banco Cuscatlán (Calle Barrios at 1a Calle Pte) Has a 24-hour ATM.

Ciber Pinto (Calle de Espina 83; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am–8pm)

Sights

Take some time to peruse the colorful streets of La Palma. Visitors are welcome to peek into workshops to see families painting away. Local cooperative **La Semilla de Dios** (3a Calle Pte at 5a Av Norte) crafts quality products in workshops behind the store. If you ask permission you can wander through the workshops and watch the painters and woodworkers at work.

Activities

Cerro El Pital (2730m) is the highest peak in El Salvador, but thanks to an access road, it is also one of the easiest to hike. From nearby San Ignacio, bus 509 to Las Pilas leaves you at Río Chiquito near the trail. It's about 1½ hours to the top, where spectacular views await. You will know you reached the summit when you find the cement block marking it. It is private property, so bring US\$2 to cover admission.

Once there, ask for directions to **Piedra Rajada**, a huge cloven rock a half-hour walk from

GETTING TO SAN PEDRO SULA OR COPÁN RUINAS, HONDURAS

The bus from La Palma drops you about 100m from the El Salvador–Honduras border (open 6am to 6pm), where you pay US\$2 to enter Honduras. From **El Poy**, you can take a bus or *colectivo* taxi to Nueva Ocotepeque, Honduras. From there buses leave hourly for San Pedro Sula. For Copán Ruinas, transfer at La Entrada.

The last bus to El Poy from La Palma (bus 119, US\$0.50, 30 minutes) leaves at 7pm. The last bus south from El Poy to San Salvador leaves around 4:15pm.

See p383 for information on crossing the border from Honduras.

the summit, accessed by a nerve-wracking log bridge spanning a 25m drop. Don't try this one in wet weather.

Get more awe-inspiring vistas at **Miramundo**, a small, aptly named community perched on a steep hillside. Back at Río Chiquito, follow the right-hand fork for about an hour to Miramundo. Right on the trail, the ridge-top **Hostal Miramundo** (☎ 2230 0437; www.hostalmiramundo.com; per 6 people US\$45) may have the best view of any lodging in El Salvador.

Great hikes around San Ignacio abound. For a guide, contact José Samuel Hernández, the owner of **Comedor y Artesanías El Manzana** (☎ 2305 8379; Carr La Palma-El Poy km 85), outside La Palma, or **Humberto Regalado** (☎ 2352 9138), who owns and maintains the trail to Peña Cayaguana.

Buses to Las Pilas, passing through Río Chiquito, leave San Ignacio at 7am, 9:30am, 12:30pm, 2:30pm and 4:30pm and return at the same times.

Sleeping & Eating

Five kilometers south of town, Centro Obrero Dr Mario Zamora Rivas offers 15 remodeled cabins and a couple of pools, and is free with permission from the Ministerio de Trabajo in San Salvador (p279). Trails crisscross the forested grounds.

El Pital (☎ 2335 9344; r per person with bathroom US\$10; 🏠) Well-kept but dowdy, these huge tile rooms have weary sofas and patched fixtures. The features include cable TV, mini-fridge and a fast-food eatery. It's popular with families.

Hotel La Palma (☎ 2305 9344; www.hotellapalma.com; r per person US\$13) A quiet mountain getaway bordered by the Río La Palma, its expansion makes it feel more commercial than rustic. Accommodations are mostly comfortable, with a few drafty cabin rooms. Still, there's hammocks on the shady grounds, a pool (under renovation) and restaurant.

Quechelá Bed & Breakfast (☎ 2305 9328; quechelá@navegante.com.sv; s/d with shared bathroom US\$26/39) Worth the splurge, this mountain home offers wonderful hospitality. Rooms are spare but comfortable with ceramic tiles, and crisp linens on the beds. The living spaces show an artsy bent and impeccable taste. Breakfast is included. To get here take a mototaxi (US\$0.50) from town.

Restaurante del Pueblo (mains US\$1-5; ☎ 7am-9pm) If a dollar buys you a sandwich in thick bread, going all out means a good *plato típico* with grilled meat, bananas, beans, cheese and cream. It's down the road to the Hotel La Palma.

La Estancia (Calle Barrios 35; mains US\$2-7; ☎ 7am-8pm) With a narrow balcony highly conducive to people-watching, this established restaurant mostly serves chicken or steak dinners. For snacking, US\$2 tacos heaped with fresh tomatoes and *chirimol* hit the spot.

The village of San Ignacio has additional sleeping and eating options.

Getting There & Away

Bus 119 runs every half-hour from San Salvador's Terminal de Oriente to the El Salvador–Honduras border at El Poy, stopping at La Palma (US\$1.50, three hours). Some enter San Ignacio, 3km to the north, others drop you off at the entrance.

From San Ignacio you can catch the bus to El Pital and its environs.

EL SALVADOR DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

El Salvador has a decent selection of hotels but lacks the backpacker infrastructure that neighboring countries have. Consequently, hostels are few and those on very tight budgets must plan accordingly. As usual, couples get better deals than solo travelers. The cheapest places are often in seedy areas near bus

terminals; paying a bit more is worthwhile for personal security. In many areas prostitution outranks tourism and travelers might find their only options are room-per-hour lodgings. This book attempts to include the safest and most secure options for travelers.

Camping and *eco-albergues* (eco-hostels; basic shared cabins, some with modest kitchen facilities) are appearing around popular outdoor destinations. Bring your own camping equipment, as the selection here is scant.

You can stay for free at *centros de obreros* (government workers' centers), which are huge compounds designed to give workers and their families a place to relax on the weekend. The main locations are Lago de Coatepeque, El Tamarindo, La Palma and outside La Libertad. You must reserve them advance at the appropriate office in San Salvador, see p279 for details.

Room rates are stable season to season, except during the summer holiday (first week of August), when hotels in popular towns fill up fast.

ACTIVITIES Diving

Diving in El Salvador is more expensive and admittedly inferior to nearby Honduras or Belize. That said, it does offer one of the few coral reefs on the American side of the Pacific, as well as a chance to dive in crater lakes. The best time for diving is from October to February, especially December and January. One 5-star operator is **El Salvador Divers** (Map p278; ☎ 2264 0961; www.elsalvadordivers.com; 3a Calle Pte 5020, Col Escalon, El Salvador), offering open-water and advanced certification courses for around US\$300.

Hiking

El Salvador has some excellent hiking, in spite of serious deforestation. Parque Nacional El Imposible (p304), near the border with Guatemala, offers the best combination of easy access and rewarding primary-forest hikes. The Ruta de las Flores offers waterfall and hot springs hikes; find guides for hire in Juayúa (p301). Further north, the pristinely beautiful Parque Nacional Montecristo-El Trifinio (p298) is renowned for wildlife. Access is difficult and it's closed during the May–November mating season. Parque Nacional los Volcanes (p294), with two climbable volcanoes, is a beautiful, if sometimes crowded, destina-

tion. Hikes from the northwestern towns of La Palma and San Ignacio offer stunning vistas. You can access El Salvador's highest peak (El Pital, 2730m; p321) from here. The northeastern state of Morazán, in particular Perquín, has a cool climate and fine hiking. As a longtime stronghold of the FMLN, it also has interesting and sobering sites related to the civil war.

Surfing

El Salvador is a steadily growing surf destination, with kilometer after kilometer of world-class breaks and virtually no one on them. Punta Roca, the country's finest wave, is at the scruffy port of La Libertad (p290), which is readily accessible from the capital. Several beaches west of La Libertad have excellent waves and better atmosphere, as well as all-service surf lodges. Your best bets for lessons are the Punta Roca resort or surfer Torsten Rode (he is found on Sunday in front of the Club Salvadoreño) in Playa Sunzal. Peak season is March to December.

BOOKS

Major Salvadoran authors (see p271) are available in translation. Joan Didion's *Salvador* is a moving account of the early days of the war. Nonfiction about the civil war includes *Masacre at El Mozote*, by Mark Danner, *Witness to War: An American Doctor in El Salvador*, by Charles Clements MD, and *Rebel Radio*, a fascinating, firsthand account of clandestine radio stations operated by FMLN guerrillas.

Oscar Romero: *Memories in Mosaic*, by María López Vigil, is a recommended account of the clergyman's life and political conversion told by those who knew him. *When the Dogs Ate Candles*, by Bill Hutchinson, is an anecdotal history of the conflict based on interviews with refugees. Archaeology buffs can read about Central America's Pompeii in *Before the Volcano Erupted: The Ancient Cerén Village in Central America* by Payton Sheets.

BUSINESS HOURS

Businesses generally operate 9am to 6pm weekdays, while government offices are open 8am to 4pm. Some offices and stores close at lunchtime, between noon and 2pm, but this practice is fading. Banks are open 8am to 4pm or 5pm weekdays, and most open Saturday morning as well. Restaurants serve dinner early, and 4pm is *pupusa* hour.

CLIMATE

The *invierno* (wet season) is from May to October, and the *verano* (dry season) is from November to April. During the rainy season, it usually only rains at night.

In San Salvador, the maximum temperature varies from 27°C in November to 30°C in March and April; the minimum temperatures range from 16°C in January and February to 20°C in March. The coastal lowlands are the hottest region. For climate charts see p723.

CUSTOMS

Salvadoran border officials are among the most scrutinizing in the region. They check for previous entry and exit stamps. If you're entering on an international bus, your bags may well be searched. Carry your passport with you in all border regions, regardless of whether you're leaving the country, since there are a lot of police checkpoints (mostly searching for drugs).

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Crime shouldn't deter travelers from El Salvador any more than it does from the rest of Central America. Despite the country's reputation for violence, attacks on tourists are rare.

Be aware of pickpockets on buses and crowded streets. Take common-sense precautions: carry as little as possible on day trips, and avoid toting expensive backpacks, cameras, watches and jewelry. The more your clothing and travel gear blend in with the locals, the less you will be targeted. Before traveling, make copies of your credit cards and important documents; carry a copy with you and leave one with someone at home who could fax you them in a pinch. After dark it's best to take a taxi, even if the rates can be a little steep. This is particularly important in San Salvador, San Miguel, Sonsonate, La Unión and La Libertad.

Most volcano climbs are best done with a police escort, partly for your safety and partly so you won't get lost on unmarked and intersecting trails. The service is free, but you must request it by phone or in person a day in advance (and preferably more). Officers are friendly and trustworthy.

Of course, violence does occur. El Salvador has a high murder rate: about 10 violent deaths occur daily. The vast majority of perpetrators and victims are gang-affiliated. Two major *maras* (gangs) operate in the country (see p269). Travelers are unlikely to have

encounters with a gang member as groups concentrate in neighborhoods with no outside appeal, and also because the police control most tourist areas. Still, visitors should avoid traveling at night. Weapons are widespread, so never resist a robbery – it's not worth it.

DISABLED TRAVELERS

There are many disabled people in El Salvador – most victims of war-related violence – but few services or amenities to make their lives easier. There are few well-maintained ramps and handrails or services for the visually and hearing impaired. However, disabled travelers (and all travelers) will find Salvadorans extremely friendly and eager to help.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in El Salvador

Australia, New Zealand and the UK do not have consular representation in El Salvador. Australians can get assistance at the Canadian embassy. Except for the US embassy, the following are in San Salvador.

Canada (☎ 2279 4655; Alameda Roosevelt at 63a Av Sur Torre A)

France (Map p278; ☎ 2279 4016; www.embafrancia.com.sv; 1a Calle Poniente 3718)

Germany (Map p278; ☎ 2247 0000; www.san-salvador.diplo.de; 7a Calle 3972)

Guatemala (Map p281; ☎ 2271 2225; 15a Av Norte btwn Calles Arce & 1a Calle Norte, Col Escalón)

Honduras (Map p278; ☎ 2263 2808; 89a Av Norte btwn 7a & 9a Calle Pte, Col Escalón)

México (Map p278; ☎ 2243 0445; Calle Circunvalación & Pasaje 12, Col San Benito)

Nicaragua (Map p278; ☎ 2263 8789; Calle El Mirador btwn 93a & 95a Av Norte, Col Escalón)

USA (☎ 2278 4444 ext 2628; www.sansalvador.usembassy.gov; Blvd Santa Elena Final, Antiguo Cuscatlán, La Libertad)

Salvadoran Embassies & Consulates Abroad

For a complete list, refer to www.rree.gov.sv/website/embajadas.html.

France (☎ 03314 720 4220; 12 Rue Galilée 75116, Paris)

Germany (☎ 49 30 206 4660; Joachim-Karnatz-Allee 47, 10557 Berlin)

Mexico (☎ 5281 5725; Temístocles 88, Col Polanco 11560, México DF)

UK (☎ 044 207 436 8282; Mayfair house, 3rd fl, 39 Great Portland St, London W1W7JZ)

USA (☎ 202 387 6511; 2308 California St, NW, Washington, DC 20008)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Feria Gastronómica A wonderful food fair held every weekend in Juayúa.

Festival de El Salvador (August 1-6) Celebrates El Salvador's patron saint; all cities have festivities with San Salvador's the biggest.

Festival del Invierno (August) Perquín's art and music festival popular with the boho crowd and college students.

Festival de Maíz (August) Suchitoto's corn harvest festival with religious processions and street parties.

Bolas de Fuego (August 31) To commemorate an eruption of Volcán San Salvador that destroyed the original town, Nejapa residents spar by throwing balls of fire then dance till dawn around street bonfires.

Festival de Hamacas (mid-November) Hammocks fill the streets of Concepción Quezaltepeque (p320) during this street fair.

FOOD & DRINK

A typical breakfast includes eggs, beans or *casamiento* (rice and beans mixed together), fried plantains, cheese, tortillas and coffee or juice. *Panaderías* usually offer a selection of morning cakes and coffee. Drinkable yogurt is also sold in most grocery stores. *Almuerzo* (lunch) is the largest meal of the day and often the most expensive.

El Salvador street food is all about *pupusas*, round cornmeal dough stuffed with a combination of cheese, refried beans, *chicharrón* (pork rinds), or *revuelta* (all three), and grilled. *Curtido*, a mixture of pickled cabbage and vegetables, provides the final topping. Most *pupuserías* open at around 4pm and some work the same sidewalk space for years. Also popular in the evening are *panes*, French breads sliced open and stuffed with chicken, salsa, salad and pickled vegetables.

*Licuada*s (fruit drinks made with water or milk), *gaseosas* (soft drinks) and coffee are easily had in El Salvador. Note that *refresco*, which means soft drink in many countries, here means lemonade, *horchata* and other water-based drinks. A *refresco de ensalada* is not coleslaw puree, but a mixed fruit juice served with a spoon for the fruit salad floating on top, sangria style. Water can be bought in either bottles or half-liter bags.

Local beers include Pilsener [sic], the most popular, and Suprema, a lighter brew.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Gays receive little tolerance. Some hotels refuse to rent a room with one bed to two men; women will encounter less scrutiny.

Still, it's best to avoid public displays of affection. In San Salvador, the area around Blvd de los Héroes has cultural centers and clubs that, being more bohemian, are also more gay-friendly. Gay organization **Entre Amigos** (☎ 2225 4213; entreamigos@salnet.net; Av Santa Victoria No 50, near Blvd de los Héroes) is the most established in the country, dedicated mostly to HIV/AIDS outreach.

INTERNET ACCESS

The Salvadoran government sponsors dozens of internet cafés called Infocentros, from the capital to the tiny mountain towns. Most have air-con and fast connections. Privately run internet cafés offer similar services.

INTERNET RESOURCES

www.elsalvador turismo.gov.sv Corsatur's official website is mildly better than reading a brochure.

www.lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/salvador An excellent resource of Salvadoran websites, arranged by topic.

www.laprensa.com.sv Spanish-language website for one of El Salvador's major daily newspapers.

www.puntamango.com Website of Mango's Lounge surf shop in La Libertad; it tells you where to find the best waves in El Salvador.

www.salvanatura.org For reservations or information on Parque Nacional El Imposible and Parque Nacional Los Volcanes.

www.surfer.com.sv Shows off the west Pacific surf scene; links in English.

www.search-beat.com/elsalvador.htm Topic-based lists of Salvadoran websites.

LANGUAGE

Spanish is the national language. In a few indigenous villages a handful of people still speak the Nahuatl language of the Pipil, but there is academic interest in preserving it. Many Salvadorans pick up some English working in the USA, Australia and elsewhere, and English speakers pop up in the unlikely places.

LEGAL MATTERS

Law enforcement is strict and effective, from beat cops to border officials. Police are entitled to stop buses and search people and bags, and do so with some frequency, often helped by army soldiers. Bribes are generally not expected or accepted. If arrested cooperate and call your embassy, although if you have committed a crime there's little your embassy can do. Even minor offences require jail time.

MAPS

Corsatur (see p279) and the Ministry of Tourism offer glossy maps of El Salvador and the capital, available at some hotels and tour offices. Map addicts should hit the **Centro Nacional de Registros** (IGN; Map p278; www.cnr.gob; 1a Calle Pte, San Salvador, 2nd fl; ☎ 8am-12:30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri), behind MetroSur, for high-quality city and country maps. Simple maps of hiking trails are sometimes available at respective visitors centers, but trails are usually well marked.

MEDIA

San Salvador's main newspapers are *La Prensa Gráfica* and the conservative *El Diario de Hoy*; check them for domestic and international news, plus entertainment listings. *El Mundo* and *El Latino* are thinner afternoon papers.

MONEY

In January 2001, El Salvador adopted the US dollar as official currency. The previous currency (the colón) technically still exists, but you'll probably never see one.

ATMs

ATMs are found in most cities and towns, with the exception of Suchitoto and Perquín. Banco Cuscatlán, Scotiabank and Banco Atlántida have the largest network of ATMs. It used to be that cash machines only accepted cards with the Plus/Visa symbol, but Cirrus/MasterCard cards now generally work as well. If the machine doesn't take your card you may get assistance inside the bank (this is also a sneaky way to avoid an ATM transaction fee – for a 'tarjeta de crédito' only).

Look for safer locking cabins to withdraw money and avoid taking out cash at night.

Bargaining & Tipping

Bargaining is less common here than in other Central American countries. A little back-and-forth is common with taxi drivers and market shopkeepers, but hard bargaining can seem a bit rude. Tip 10% in restaurants; it is not customary to tip taxi drivers, though rounding up the amount is appreciated.

Cash

Bring US dollars, preferably in US\$20 bills and smaller. There is no need to buy, carry or use the old currency as ATMs have dollars. Only Banco Cuscatlán exchanges non-US currency. The border crossings have moneychangers.

Credit Cards

Credit cards are accepted in modern malls, high-end hotels and upmarket stores. Smaller establishments add a 6% to 12% surcharge. Visa cards encounter the least resistance. MasterCard is becoming more widely accepted while American Express is less common.

Exchange Rates

The table shows currency exchange rates at the time this book went to press.

| Country | Unit | US Dollars (US\$) |
|-------------|-------|-------------------|
| Australia | A\$1 | 0.85 |
| Canada | C\$1 | 0.95 |
| Euro Zone | €1 | 1.40 |
| Japan | ¥100 | 0.80 |
| New Zealand | NZ\$1 | 0.80 |
| UK | UK£1 | 2.05 |

Traveler's Checks

Most Banco Cuscatlán, Scotiabank and Banco Atlántida branches change traveler's checks (passport and purchase receipt required). American Express checks are best. There are also Western Union offices in most towns.

POST

There are two rates for sending international mail: airmail and express mail. Letters sent by airmail to the USA should arrive in 10 days (US\$0.50), to Europe and Asia up to 15 days (US\$0.65). Letters sent express to the USA should take five days (US\$1), to Europe and Australia 10 days (US\$1.20). FedEx and DHL have offices in large cities.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Many travelers come to El Salvador with a notion of which 'side' they supported in the civil war (usually the FMLN). In fact, both sides committed terrible atrocities and in 12 years of war, neither came to fully represent (or betray) the ideals of the majority of Salvadorans. Visitors should not be hesitant to discuss the war, but should honor the personal experiences of everyday Salvadorans.

The country is fairly new to tourism and Salvadorans remain relatively unjaded toward backpackers. Hard bargaining, whether in taxis or in markets, is rare. Though prices are somewhat higher here than elsewhere, try not to be the ugly tourist haggling endlessly over what amounts to a few cents or dollars. It may be too late to reverse the unpleasant wheeling

and dealing of Guatemala and elsewhere, but in El Salvador, an honest price and a friendly transaction are still the norm.

STUDYING

Options are few but some English institutes offer Spanish classes. The best is the **Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad** (CIS; Map p278; ☎ 2226 2623; www.cis-elsalvador.org), which offers Spanish classes with progressive sensibilities. Homestays are available.

TELEPHONE

The country code when calling El Salvador from abroad is ☎ 503. Phone numbers usually have eight digits; there are no internal area codes. Telecom and Telefónica payphones accept their respective phonecards. Buy prepaid phonecards (in US\$3, US\$5 and US\$10 denominations) at pharmacies and corner stores. Phone booths post local and international dialing instructions in English and Spanish. Some internet cafés offer web-based calling.

TOURIST INFORMATION

El Salvador has few tourist information offices and even fewer that provide more than fluff. Offices with friendly and informed staff include those in Perquín and Suchitoto. Juayúa and Apaneca have information kiosks open on weekends. Friendly hotel owners can be very helpful resources. In the capital you'll find the office of **Corporación Salvadoreña de Turismo** (Corsatur; ☎ 2243 7835; corsatur@salnet.net; Blvd Santa Elena, San Salvador; ☎ 8am-12:30pm, & 1:30-5:30pm), offering brochures and fliers. The **Instituto Salvadoreño de Turismo** (ISTU; Map p281; ☎ 222 8000; istu@mh.gob.sv; 719 Calle Rubén Darío btwn 9a & 11a Avs Sur, San Salvador; ☎ 8:30am-12:30pm & 1:30-4pm Mon-Sat) has very general information about El Salvador's national parks and *turicentros*.

VISAS & DOCUMENTS

Citizens of the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Switzerland, Norway, Japan, Taiwan, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, other Central American countries, Israel, and EU member countries do not need a visa, but must purchase a single-entry tourist card for US\$10 when entering the country. For those who do need a prearranged visa, the cost is US\$30. The standard length of stay is 30 days, but you can request up to 90 days – do so quickly before the official stamps your passport! If you leave and

return within the allotted time, you can use the same tourist card.

The new Central America-4 agreement allows for travel between the borders of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua with one entry fee and one passport stamp (in this case, be sure you ask for the 90-day option). If you are traveling overland, please note the change; it's possible you will have to 'remind' some border guards about the agreement.

No vaccinations are required unless you are coming from an area infected by yellow fever (some are recommended, however; see p744).

VOLUNTEERING

In San Salvador's Blvd de los Héroes area, **Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad** (☎ 2235 1330; www.cis-elsalvador.org; Colonia Libertad, Av Bolívar 103) offers Spanish classes to tourists and English classes to low-income and activist Salvadorans, always with a strong emphasis on progressive politics. A friendly place to visit, the CIS has positions for volunteer English teachers (10-week minimum), and information about NGOs working on various issues, including community development, gang intervention, the environment and more. CIS cannot arrange an actual volunteer position, but can point you in the right direction. During national elections, you can volunteer with CIS's well-respected international election observer mission. CIS can also arrange 'solidarity partnerships' for groups interested in meeting with people and organizations related to a particular issue (eg labor, the civil war).

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Foreign women spark interest, there is no doubt. Men will hiss or catcall but for many it's harmless hormonal babble, as much about male bonding as the female passerby. Nearly all the men you actually meet are extremely courteous and polite. Solo women are unlikely to encounter dangerous situations if they take ordinary precautions. A good way to reduce unwanted attention is to ignore it, not make eye contact and wear clothing appropriate to the area (save shorts for the beach, the lycra leopard-skin hotpants for the club). On long bus rides, sitting next to a woman or kids avoids painful, 'Do you have a boyfriend?' conversations. At least, enjoy Latin culture's chivalric aspects while you're here.

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