

# Guatemala

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Río Dulce** Soak in a warm waterfall, go jungle hiking and take in Garífuna culture (p174)
- **Tikal** Ignore the tour groups – this is the country's number-one tourist attraction for good reason (p194)
- **Antigua, Quetzaltenango & Lago de Atitlán** Eat, drink and sleep well while studying Spanish and climbing volcanoes in Guatemala's most cosmopolitan and picturesque cities (p101 & p136) near a fabulous highland lake (p113)
- **Semuc Champey** Find out why people call this the most beautiful spot in the whole country (p167)
- **Best journey** Huehuetenango–Cobán: half-beautiful new road, half-hellish dirt track, with spectacular views from start to finish (p152)
- **Off the beaten track** Grab some time in the green room at the country's largely undiscovered surf capital, Sipacate (p157)

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 108,890 sq km (smaller than the US state of Louisiana, a bit bigger than England)
- **ATMs** Plentiful
- **Budget** US\$15-30 per day
- **Capital** Guatemala City
- **Costs** Budget hotel in Guatemala City US\$10, bottle of beer US\$2, 3hr bus ride US\$3, set lunch US\$3
- **Country Code** ☎ 502
- **Electricity** 115V to 125V, 60Hz; US-type plugs
- **Famous for** Maya sites
- **Head of State** President Oscar Berger
- **Languages** Spanish, Maya
- **Money** US\$1 = Q7.90 (quetzals); US dollars readily accepted
- **Phrases** *De huevos* (cool), *papichulo* (handsome man), Chapin (Guatemalan)
- **Population** 13.1 million
- **Time** GMT minus 6 hours, minus 5 hours in daylight savings
- **Traveler's Checks** Cashed at major banks (ATMs are easier)
- **Visas** North American and most EU citizens need only a valid passport



## TRAVEL HINTS

Pack light, and you can put your backpack inside the bus. Everything is negotiable (almost).

## OVERLAND ROUTES

From Mexico enter Guatemala at Tecún Umán–Ciudad Hidalgo or La Mesilla–Ciudad Cuahtémoc. From El Salvador enter via Anguiatú; from Honduras via Agua Caliente; and from Belize via Benque Viejo del Carmen.

Guatemala is a magical place. If you're into the Maya, the mountains, the markets or any of a million other things, you're bound to be captivated. People come and they stay. Or they leave and return. There's almost too much going on here, and even the shortest trip down the road takes you to completely different places, with new challenges and surprises. Don't be surprised if you hear yourself saying, 'we'll have to come back and do that, *next time*.'

Wanna surf in the morning and learn Spanish in the afternoon? No problem. Descend a volcano, grab a shower and hit the sushi bar for dinner? You can do that. Check out a Maya temple and be swinging in a beachside hammock by sunset? Easy.

Guatemala's got its problems, but they mainly keep to themselves (although if you go looking for trouble, who knows what you'll find). Ten years after the official end to the civil war, this isn't the scary place that your mother fears it is. Travel here, once fraught with danger and discomfort, is now characterized by ease – you can do pretty much whatever you want, and your experience will only be limited by your imagination and time.

## CURRENT EVENTS

It's hard to find the silver lining to the clouds that hang over Guatemala's political situation. Recently rated the worst democracy in Latin America (and *that's* some stiff competition right there), the country faces some seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Most worrying is the continued presence of José Efraín Ríos Montt on the landscape. Responsible for the death of at least 15,000 indigenous people during his various reigns as dictator, this US-backed evangelical Christian is also wanted by Spanish authorities for his part in the burning of the Spanish embassy and subsequent deaths of 37 people. At the time of writing, Ríos Montt was running for Congress, and if elected will be immune from prosecution.

The legal system is slow to act, and when it does it tends to favor the rich. In villages, lynchings are a near-daily occurrence as the rural population loses patience waiting for an under-resourced police force to possibly investigate rapes, robberies and murders, and maybe send perpetrators to an overburdened court from where they may get sent for a short stay in an overcrowded prison. Crime is not just a rural problem – a recent study reported that private security guards now far outnumber members of the police force.

General despair and good reason have made many lose faith in the government's ability or will to ever solve any of these problems. The hundreds of NGOs operating in the cities and countryside are a testament to international concern and local initiative. Indigenous pride is making a comeback – the Maya and other indigenous groups are beginning to organize politically, both in voter turnout and more strident calls for self-determination. Rigoberta Menchú, Nobel Prize winner and indigenous

activist looks likely to run for president, a development which already has right-wing commentators slyly sinking in the boot in the national press.

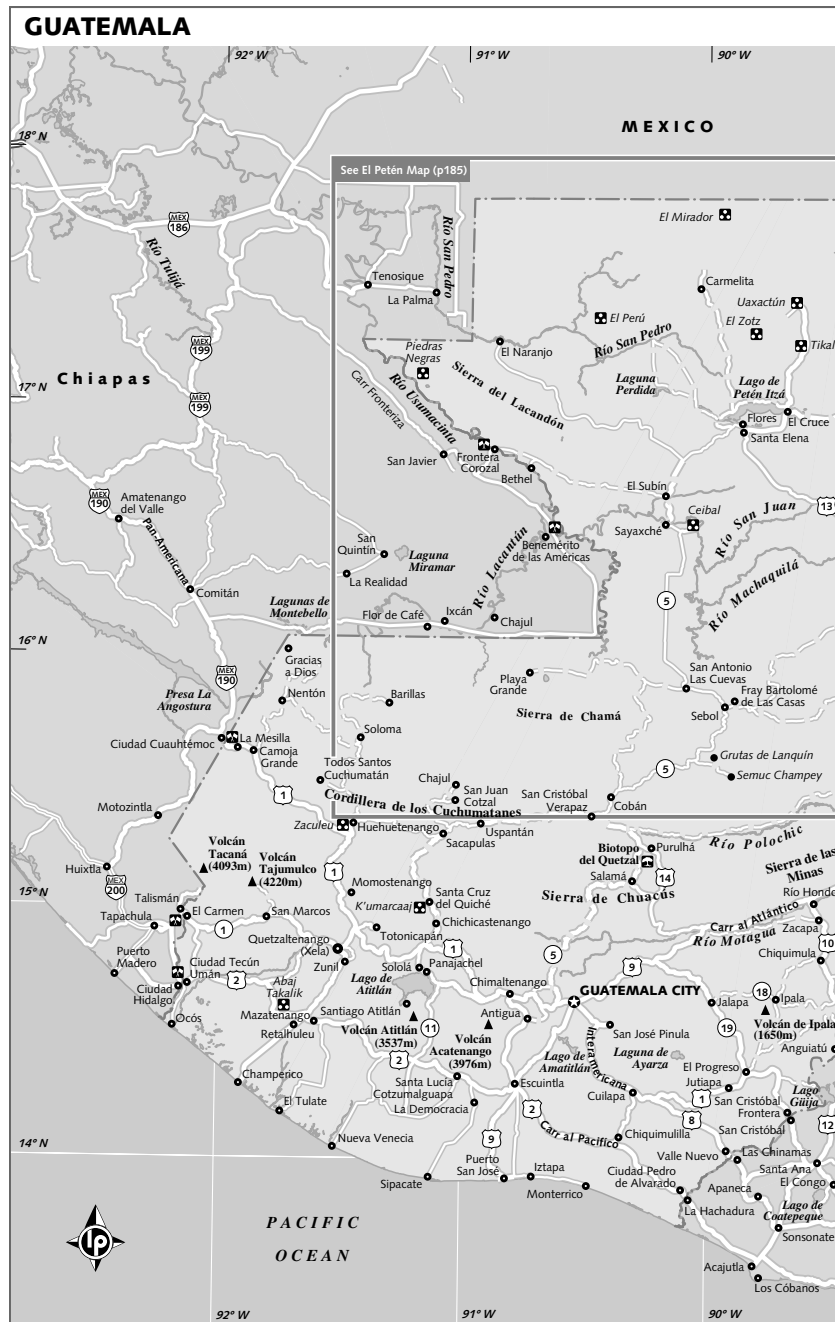
Hurricane Stan hit the country's northwest in October 2005, causing massive devastation and loss of life. The country's infrastructure, never wonderful, was torn apart as roads and villages were buried under landslides, and bridges, electricity, power and phone lines went down. An optimistic government estimate said that it would take about five years to repair the damage.

Cafta (the Central America Free Trade Agreement, or *Tratado de Libre Comercio* – TLC in Spanish) seems to be an inevitable step in the country's economic future, even though, at the time of writing, Guatemala was dragging its feet in ratifying it. The Agreement has few supporters outside of government and big business, and most people see promises of resulting employment and economic development as hollow at best.

Mining is another hot topic. Multinational companies (using the same employment and development arguments) are moving in to exploit the country's mineral wealth in regions such as San Marcos and El Estor, despite massive protests from community and environmental groups. Police have responded to peaceful occupations with the use of violent evictions.

The country was left effectively bankrupt when, at the end of his term, ex-President Alfonso Portillo of the FRG looted the social security fund and fled to Mexico, where he is today, no doubt chuckling at unsuccessful extradition attempts.

The year 2006 was a bad one for money all around – two large banks went under amid a storm of accusations of dodgy deals and



unsecured loans and then, just as the Christmas season was approaching, the Central Bank withdrew huge amounts of old Q100 bills from circulation, with the idea of replacing them. Problem was, the new bills hadn't even been printed yet. Banks were left literally without money, as were thousands of people who were unable to withdraw more than the equivalent of US\$80 per day.

Current President Oscar Berger, of the Gran Alianza Nacional coalition, has managed to stay relatively untouched by political scandal since he took office in 2003 – critics say this is because he hasn't really done *anything*, let alone anything bad. The next elections are slated for late 2007. General dissatisfaction with the current administration (Berger's approval rating plummeted from 89% in 2004 to 52% at the start of 2006) has placed Álvaro Colom of the center-leftist Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza ahead in the opinion polls and a real possibility to take over as president.

## HISTORY

Earliest estimates put humans in what is now Guatemala as far back as 11,000 BC. The prevailing theory is that they got here by walking across an ice bridge from Siberia (pretty compelling if you compare a Tibetan with a Bolivian).

Once their traditional food sources (mammoths, wild nuts and berries) began to dry up, these early inhabitants became farmers, domesticating corn, beans, tomatoes, chilies, turkeys and dogs for the dinner table. The improvement in the stability of the food supply led to population growth, an improvement in agricultural techniques, the development of early art forms and a language that is traceable to what many Maya speak today.

Maya astronomers count the present era as starting at 3114 BC. Archaeologists generally put the birth of the Maya civilization (the pre-Classical Period) at around 2000 BC.

## Rise & Fall of the Maya

Further developments in agriculture and increases in population gave these early civilizations time and resources to develop artistic and architectural techniques.

Between 800 BC and AD 100 population centers such as El Mirador in the Petén and Kaminaljuyú (site of present-day Guatemala City) grew with trade and conquest and hundreds (if not thousands – many are yet

to be uncovered) of temples and ceremonial centers were built. Guatemala's most famous Maya site, Tikal, came into its own around the start of the Classic Period – AD 250.

The history of these – and many other – city states was troubled at best, characterized by broken military alliances, food shortages and droughts. The best not-too-academic reading on this time is in Simon Martin and Nicholas Grube's *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens* (2000).

By the time the Spanish arrived, Maya civilization was already in trouble. Some centers, such as El Mirador had already been abandoned and others such as Tikal and Quiriguá had shrunk to the size of minor towns. Theories suggest that many abandoned the Petén in favor of the highlands, setting up capitals in K'umarcaaj (see p132), Iximché (p122), Zaculeu (p148), and Mixco Viejo.

Relocation didn't bring peace, though – soon, Toltec tribes, having abandoned the Yucatán, moved in and began to take control. Infighting amongst tribes, overpopulation and the resulting strain on the food supply combined to make conditions very favorable to the Spanish when they arrived in 1523. For more information see p31.

### Conquest & Colonization

The Spanish didn't just walk on in, as many think. Spirited resistance was met, most notably from the K'iche (in a famous battle led by Tecún Umán, near present-day Quetzaltenango). In yet another sad episode in Guatemalan history, the neighboring Kaqchiquel not only refused to join forces with the K'iche, they actually joined the Spanish and fought against them!

It didn't take long for the Spanish to shaft the Kaqchiquel, though, and pretty soon most of the Maya were under Spanish control, the exceptions being the Rabinal (who have largely maintained their culture) and the Itzáes, who, hidden out on the island of Flores in El Petén were unconquered until 1697.

### The 19th Century

During the short existence of the United Provinces of Central America, liberal president Francisco Morazán (1830–39) instituted reforms aimed at correcting three persistent problems: the overwhelming power of the Church; the division of society into a Hispanic upper class and an *indígena* (of indigenous

origin) lower class; and the region's impotence in world markets.

But unpopular economic policies, heavy taxes and an 1837 cholera epidemic led to an *indígena* uprising that brought conservative Rafael Carrera to power. Carrera ruled until 1865 and undid much of Morazán's achievements. His government allowed Britain to take control of Belize in exchange for construction of a road between Guatemala City and Belize City. The road was never built, and Guatemala's claims for compensation never resolved.

The liberals regained power in the 1870s under president Justo Rufino Barrios, a rich, young coffee *finca* (plantation) owner who ruled as a dictator. He embarked on a program of modernization – constructing roads, railways, schools and a modern banking system. Unsurprisingly, Barrios also did everything possible to encourage coffee production, including promoting forced relocation and labor. Succeeding governments generally pursued the same policies of control by a wealthy minority and repression of opposition.

### The Early 20th Century

From 1898 to 1920, Manuel Estrada Cabrera ruled as a dictator. He fancied himself an enlightened despot, seeking to turn Guatemala into a 'tropical Athens,' while looting the treasury, ignoring education and spending millions on the military.

When Estrada Cabrera was overthrown, Guatemala entered a period of instability that ended in 1931 with the election of General Jorge Ubico, who modernized the country's health and social welfare infrastructure.

In the early 1940s Ubico dispossessed and exiled the German coffee *finca* owners. He assumed a pro-Allied stance during the war, but openly admired Spain's General Franco. In 1944 he was forced into exile.

Philosopher Juan José Arévalo came to power in 1945, establishing the nation's social security system, a bureau of *indígena* affairs, a modern public health system and liberal labor laws. His six years as president saw 25 coup attempts by conservative military forces.

Arévalo was succeeded in 1951 by Colonel Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, who looked to break up estates and foster high productivity on small farms. But the US supported the interests of large companies such as United Fruit, and in 1954 (in one of the first documented covert

CIA operations) the US government orchestrated an invasion from Honduras led by two exiled Guatemalan military officers. Arbenz was forced to step down and land reform never took place. Violence, oppression and disenfranchisement ensued, fueling the formation of guerrilla groups and fomenting discord.

### Civil War

During the 1960s and '70s, economic inequality, surging urban migration and the developing union movement forced oppression to new heights. Amnesty International estimates that 50,000 to 60,000 people were killed in Guatemala during the political violence of the 1970s. Furthermore, the 1976 earthquake killed about 22,000 people and left about a million homeless.

In 1982 General José Efraín Ríos Montt initiated a 'scorched earth' policy, which is believed to have resulted in the extermination of the populations of over 400 villages at the hands of the military. President Ríos Montt, an evangelical Christian, was acting in the name of anti-insurgency, stabilization and anticommunism. An estimated 15,000 people, mostly Maya men, were tortured and massacred; 100,000 refugees fled to Mexico. In response four guerrilla organizations united to form the URNG (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity).

In August 1983 Ríos Montt was deposed in a coup led by General Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores, but the human-rights abuses continued. It was estimated that more than 100 political assassinations and 40 abductions occurred every month under the new ruler. The USA suspended military aid to the government, leading to the 1985 election of civilian Christian Democrat Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo – but not before the military secured immunity from prosecution and control of the countryside.

### The 1990s

In 1990 Cerezo Arévalo was succeeded by Jorge Serrano Elías, who reopened dialogue with the URNG. But the talks collapsed, Serrano's popularity declined, and he came to depend more on the army for support. On May 25, 1993, Serrano carried out an *autogolpe* (auto coup), suspending the constitution and ruling by decree. Although supported by the military, the coup was unsuccessful and Serrano was forced into exile. Congress

elected Ramiro de León Carpio, the Solicitor for Human Rights and an outspoken critic of the army, to complete Serrano's term.

In March 1995 the USA announced another suspension of aid due to the government's failure to investigate the murder or disappearance of US citizens in Guatemala. These cases included the 1990 murder of Michael Devine and URNG leader Efraín Bámaca Velásquez, whose wife, US attorney Jennifer Harbury, had been conducting a protest (covered in the international media) since his disappearance in 1992. Eventually it was revealed that he had been murdered. Claims were made of CIA involvement in both of the murders, which the US government denied.

### The Signing of Peace Accords

In 1996 Álvaro Enrique Arzú Irigoyen of the middle-right PAN (Partido de Avanzada Nacional) was elected. In December he and the URNG signed peace accords ending the 36-year civil war – a war in which an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans were killed, a million were left homeless and untold thousands 'disappeared.'

The accords called for accountability for the armed forces' human-rights violations and resettlement of one million refugees. They also addressed the identity and rights of indigenous peoples, health care, education and other basic social services, women's rights, the abolition of compulsory military service and the incorporation of the ex-guerrillas into civilian life.

It's been a rocky road since the war's end. Bishop Juan Gerardi, coordinator of the Guatemalan Archbishop's Human Rights Office (Odhag), was beaten to death outside his home in 1998, and in May 1999 a minuscule 18% of the population came out to vote down referenda that would have permitted constitutional reforms integral to the peace process. On an encouraging note, the country's Maya population has mobilized politically since the signing of the peace accords.

The greatest challenge to peace stems from inequities in the power structure. It's estimated that 70% of the country's arable land is owned by less than 3% of the population. According to a UN report, the top 20% of the population has an income 30 times greater than the bottom 20%. Or, as most Guatemalans will tell you, there are seven families who 'own' Guatemala.

Discrimination against indigenous people, deeply ingrained in society, results in poverty and misery for most of the population. How the need for economic and social reforms is met may be the most important factor in creating a true and lasting peace.

## Guatemala Today

In November 1999 Guatemala held its first peacetime elections in nearly 40 years. In a runoff, conservative and confessed murderer Alfonso Portillo of the FRG (Frente Republicano Guatemalteco) defeated Oscar Berger of the incumbent PAN party. Portillo promised to be tough on criminals, citing his murders as proof of his ability to defend his people. For many human-rights observers, more disturbing than this muddy logic was that Ríos Montt also ran on the FRG ticket and advised Portillo. (Ríos Montt went on to become the leader of Congress.)

Portillo vowed to clean up the judicial system, crack down on crime, tax the rich and respect human rights. In March 2000 he invited UN observers to stay beyond their targeted December 2000 departure date. However, some moves, such as bolstering municipal police squads with national troops and sending most of his family to Canada in self-imposed exile, were particularly worrisome.

In 2002 the UN representative for indigenous peoples, after an 11-day Guatemalan tour, stated that 60% of Guatemalan Maya were still marginalized by discrimination and violence. Poverty, illiteracy, lack of education and poor medical facilities are all much more common in rural areas, where the Maya population is concentrated.

International organizations from the European Parliament to the Interamerican Human Rights Commission criticized the state of human rights in Guatemala. Human Rights workers were subjected to threats and killings by perpetrators acting with seeming impunity. President Portillo failed to carry out a promise to disband the presidential guard and he doubled the defense budget, taking it beyond the maximum level fixed in the Peace Accords.

Lawlessness and violent crime increased dramatically. The US 'decertified' Guatemala (meaning it no longer considered it an ally in the battle against the drugs trade) in 2002. The same year Amnesty International reported that criminals were colluding with sectors

of the police, military and local affiliates of multinational corporations to flout human rights.

Most worryingly of all, Ríos Montt himself was named FRG candidate for the late-2003 presidential elections, and then, incredibly, was given the go-ahead by the country's constitutional court – despite a constitutional ban on presidents who had in the past taken power by coup (which Ríos Montt did in 1982). The FRG blatantly showed its colors in the run-up to the election by making sizeable 'compensation' payments to former members of the Civil Defense Patrols (PACs), who had carried out many atrocities during the civil war.

## THE CULTURE The National Psyche

You'll be amazed when you first reach Guatemala just how helpful, polite and unhurried Guatemalans are. Everyone has time to stop and chat and explain what you want to know. This is apparent even if you've just crossed the border from Mexico, where things aren't exactly rushed either. Most Guatemalans like to get to know other people without haste, feeling for common ground and things to agree on. Some observers explain this mild manner as a reaction to centuries of repression and violence by the ruling class, but whatever the truth of that, it makes most Guatemalans a pleasure to deal with.

What goes on behind this outward politeness is harder to encapsulate. Few Guatemalans exhibit the stress, worry and hurry of the 'developed' nations, but this obviously isn't because they don't have to worry about money or employment. They're a long-suffering people who don't expect wealth or good government but make the best of what comes their way – friendship, their family, a good meal, a bit of good company.

Outwardly, it appears that family ties are strong, but beneath the surface you may find that the real reason that three generations live together in one house has more to do with economics than affection.

Guatemalans are a religious bunch – agnostics and atheists are very thin on the ground. People will often ask what religion you are quite early in a conversation. Unless you really want to get into it, saying 'Christian' generally satisfies.

Orthodox Catholicism is gradually giving way to evangelical Protestantism amongst the

ladinos, with the animist-Catholic syncretism of the traditional Maya always present. People's faiths give them hope, not only of better things in the afterlife but also of improvements in the here and now – whether through answered prayers or, in the evangelicals' case, of a more sober, more gainful and happier existence without alcohol, gambling or domestic violence.

The tales of violence – domestic, civil war, criminal – that one inevitably hears in Guatemala sit strangely with the mild-mannered approach you will encounter nearly everywhere. Whatever the explanation, it helps to show why a little caution is in order when strangers meet.

Some say that Guatemala has no middle class, just a ruling class and an exploited class. It's true that Guatemala has a small, rich, ladino ruling elite whose main goal seems to be to maintain wealth and power at almost any cost. It also has an indigenous Maya population, comprising more than half the people in the country, which tends to be poor, poorly educated and poorly provided for and has always been kept in a secondary role by the ruling elite.

The Maya villagers' strengths lie in their family and community ties and traditions. Those who do break out of the poverty cycle, through business or education, do not turn their backs on their communities. But as well as these two groups at the extremes, there is also a large group of poor and middle-class ladinos, typically Catholic and family-oriented but with aspirations influenced by education, TV, international popular music and North America (of which many Guatemalans have direct experience as migrant workers) – and maybe by liberal ideas of equality and social tolerance. This segment of society has its bohemian/student/artist circles whose overlap with educated, forward-looking Maya may hold the greatest hope for progress toward an equitable society.

## Lifestyle

The majority of Guatemalans live in one-room houses of brick, concrete blocks or traditional *bajareque* (a construction of stones, wooden poles and mud), with roofs of tin, tiles or thatch. They have earth floors, a fireplace (but usually no chimney) and minimal possessions – often just a couple of bare beds and a few pots. These small homes are often grouped

in compounds with several others, all housing members of one extended family. Thus live most of Guatemala's great Maya majority, in the countryside, in villages and in towns.

The few wealthier Maya and most ladino families have larger houses in towns and the bigger villages, but their homes may still not be much more than one or two bedrooms and a kitchen that also serves as a living area. Possessions, adornments and decorations may be sparse. Middle-class families in the wealthier suburbs of Guatemala City live in good-sized one- or two-story houses with gardens. Most such residences will have their gardens walled (and the walls topped with razor wire) for security. The elite few possess rural as well as urban properties – for example a coffee *finca* on the Pacific Slope with a comfortable farmhouse, or a seaside villa on the Pacific or Caribbean coast.

Despite modernizing influences, traditional family ties remain strong at all levels of society. Extended-family groups gather for weekend meals and holidays. Old-fashioned gender roles are strong too: many women have jobs to increase the family income but relatively few have positions of much responsibility. Homosexuality barely raises its head above the parapet: only in Guatemala City is there anything approaching an open gay scene, and that is pretty much for men only.

Traveling in Guatemala you will encounter a much wider cross-section of Guatemalans than many Guatemalans ever do, as they live their lives within relatively narrow worlds. The Guatemalans you'll meet on the road, though, will also tend to be among the most worldly and open-minded, as a result of their contact with tourists and travelers from around the globe. If you spend time studying Spanish or work on one of the many volunteer projects, you stand an even higher chance of meeting Guatemalans interested in learning – in other cultures, in human rights, in music and the arts, in improving the position of women, the indigenous and the poor. Guatemala has a broad web of people, often young, with these kinds of concerns.

By UN figures 6.4 million Guatemalans – more than half the population – live in poverty. The official national minimum wage is only US\$130 a month in urban areas and US\$120 in rural areas – and not everyone is entitled even to this. A typical teacher earns around US\$180 a month. Poverty is most

prevalent in rural, indigenous areas, especially the highlands. Wealth, industry and commerce are concentrated overwhelmingly in sprawling, polluted Guatemala City, the country's only large city and home to about 18% of its people.

## Population

Of Guatemala's 13.1 million people, some 50% to 60% are indigenous – nearly all of this indigenous population is Maya, although there is a very small population of non-Maya indigenous people called the Chinka' (Xinca) in the southeastern corner of the country. The rest of Guatemala's population are nearly all ladinos – descended from both the Maya and from the European (mostly Spanish) settlers. There are also a few thousand Garífuna (descended from Caribbean islanders and shipwrecked African slaves) around the Caribbean town of Livingston.

The Maya are spread throughout the country but are most densely concentrated in the Highlands, which are home to the four biggest Maya groups, the K'iche' (Quiché), Mam, Q'eqchi' (Kekchi) and Kaqchiquel. Maya languages are still the way most Maya communicate, with approximately 20 separate (and often mutually unintelligible) Maya languages spoken in different regions of the country. It's language that primarily defines which Maya people someone belongs to. Though many Maya speak some Spanish, it's always a second language – and there are many who don't speak any Spanish.

The overall population is densest in the highland strip from Guatemala City to Quetzaltenango, the country's two biggest cities. Many towns and large villages are dotted around this region. Some 40% of the population lives in towns and cities, and 44% are under 15 years of age.

## ARTS

### Literature

Guatemalan writer Miguel Ángel Asturias won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1967. Best known for his thinly veiled vilification of Latin American dictators in *El Señor Presidente*, Asturias also wrote poetry (collected in *Sien de Alondra*, published in English as *Temple of the Lark*). Other celebrated Guatemalan writers include poet Luis Cardoza y Aragón and short-story master Augusto Monterroso. Gaspar Pedro González' *A Mayan Life*

is claimed to be the first novel written by a Maya author.

### Music

Music is a very important part of Guatemalan society, and a source of pride is that the marimba may have been invented here. (Other possibilities are that this xylophone-type instrument might have been brought from Africa by slaves, or created/refined in the New World.) The Maya also play traditional instruments including the *chirimía* (of Arabic origin and related to the oboe) and reed flute.

Guatemalan tastes in pop music are greatly influenced by the products of other Latin American countries. Reggaeton is huge – current favorites being Daddy Yankee, Don Omar and Calle 13.

Guatemalan rock went through its golden age in the '80s and early '90s. Bands from this era such as Razonos de Cambio, Bohemia Suburbana and Viernes Verde still have their diehard fans. The most famous Guatemalan-born musician is Ricardo Arjona, who has lived in Mexico since the '90s.

### Architecture

Modern Guatemalan architecture, apart from flashy bank and office buildings along Guatemala City's Av La Reforma, is chiefly characterized by expanses of drab concrete with reinforcing rods poking out of the roof, waiting on funds to build the next story. Some humbler rural dwellings use a traditional wall construction known as *bajareque*, where a core of stones is held in place by poles of bamboo or other wood then covered with stucco or mud. Village houses are increasingly roofed with sheets of tin instead of tiles or thatch – less aesthetic but also less expensive.

The ancient Maya ruins and Spanish colonial structures in Antigua are impressive works of architecture. Interestingly, Maya embellishments can be found on many colonial buildings (such as the lotus flowers adorning Antigua's La Merced) – an enduring testament of the Maya laborers forced to carry out European architectural concepts.

### Weaving

Guatemalans make many traditional *artesanías* (handicrafts), both for everyday use and to sell to tourists and collectors. Crafts include basketry, ceramics and wood carving, but the most prominent are weaving, embroi-

dery and other textile arts practiced by Maya women. The beautiful traditional clothing (*traje*) made and worn by these women is one of the most awe-inspiring expressions of Maya culture.

The *huipil* (a long, sleeveless tunic) is one of several types of garment that have been in use since pre-Hispanic times. Other colorful types include: the *tocoyal*, a woven head-covering often decorated with bright tassels; the *corte*, a piece of material 7m or 10m long that is used as a wraparound skirt; and the *faja*, a long, woven waist sash that can be folded to hold what other people might put in pockets.

It's generally in the heavily Maya-populated highlands that colorful traditional dress is still predominant, but you'll see it in all parts of the country. The variety of techniques, materials, styles and designs is bewildering to the newcomer, but you'll see some of the most colorful, intricate, eye-catching and widely worn designs in Sololá and Santiago Atitlán, near the Lago de Atitlán, Nebaj in the Ixil triangle, Zunil near Quetzaltenango, and Todos Santos and San Mateo Ixtatán in the Cuchumatanes mountains.

## SPORT

The sport that most ignites Guatemalans' passion and enthusiasm is football (soccer). Though Guatemalan teams always flop in international competition, the 10-club Liga Mayor (Major League) is keenly followed by reasonably large crowds. The two big clubs are Municipal and Comunicaciones, both from Guatemala City. The *Clásico Gringo* is when teams from Quetzaltenango and Antigua (the two big tourist towns) play. The national press always has details on upcoming games. Admission to games runs from US\$2 to US\$3.50 for the cheapest areas and US\$12 to US\$20 for the best seats.

## RELIGION

Roman Catholicism is the predominant religion in Guatemala, but it is not the only religion by any stretch of the imagination. Since the 1980s evangelical Protestant sects, around 75% of them Pentecostal, have surged in popularity and it is estimated that 30% to 40% of Guatemalans are now evangelical. These numbers continue to grow as evangelical churches compete hard for further souls.

Catholicism's fall can also be attributed in part to the civil war. Catholic priests were, on

occasion, (and still are) outspoken defenders of human rights, and attracted persecution (or worse) from dictators at the time, especially from Ríos Montt. As a result, many Catholic churches in rural areas simply closed down during this time and evangelical ones moved in to fill the vacuum.

The number of new evangelical churches in some towns and villages, especially indigenous Maya villages, is astonishing. You will undoubtedly hear loud Guatemalan versions of gospel music pouring out of some of them as you walk around, and in some places loudspeakers broadcast the music and its accompanying preaching across entire towns. One reason for the evangelicals' success is their opposition to alcohol, gambling and domestic violence.

Catholicism in the Maya areas has never been exactly orthodox. The missionaries who brought Catholicism to the Maya in the 16th century wisely permitted aspects of the existing animistic, shamanistic Maya religion to continue alongside Christian rites and beliefs. Syncretism was aided by the identification of certain Maya deities with certain Christian saints and survives to this day. A bizarre example is the deity known as Maximón in Santiago Atitlán, San Simón in Zunil and Ry Laj Man in San Andrés Itzapa near Antigua, who seems to be a combination of Maya gods, the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado and Judas Iscariot (see the boxed text, p114).

The Maya still worship at a number of places sacred since ancient times, bringing offerings and sacrificing chickens to gods who predate the arrival of the Spanish. Each place has its own different set of gods – or at least different names for similar gods.

Visitors might also be able to observe traditional Maya ceremonies in places such as the Pascual Abaj shrine at Chichicastenango, the altars on Laguna Chicabal outside Quetzaltenango, or El Baúl near Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa, but a lot of traditional rites are off-limits to foreigners.

## ENVIRONMENT

### The Land

Consisting primarily of mountainous forest highlands and jungle plains, Guatemala covers an area of 109,000 sq km. The western highlands hold 30 volcanoes, reaching heights of 3800m in the Cuchumatanes range northwest of Huehuetenango. Here, land not cleared

for Maya *milpas* (cornfields) is covered in pine forests, although these are dwindling rapidly.

The Pacific Slope holds rich coffee, cacao, fruit and sugar plantations. Down along the shore the volcanic slope meets the sea, yielding vast, sweltering beaches of black volcanic sand.

Guatemala City lies at an altitude of around 1500m. To the north, the Alta Verapaz highlands gradually give way to El Petén, whose climate and topography is similar to the Yucatán: hot and humid or hot and dry. Southeast of El Petén is the banana-rich valley of the Río Motagua, dry in some areas, moist in others.

Guatemala is at the confluence of three tectonic plates, resulting in earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Major quakes struck in 1773, 1917 and 1976. Its dynamic geology includes a tremendous system of surface-level and subterranean caves. This type of terrain – known as karst – riddles the Verapaces region and has made Guatemala a popular spelunking destination. Surface-level caves have been used for Maya ceremonies since ancient times.

## Wildlife

### ANIMALS

The country's abundance of animals includes 250 species of mammal, 600 bird species, 200 species of reptile and amphibian, and numerous butterflies and other insects.

The national bird, the resplendent quetzal, is often used to symbolize Central America. Though small, the quetzal is exceptionally beautiful. The males sport a bright red breast, brilliant blue-green across the rest of the body and a spot of bright white on the underside of the long tail.

Other colorful birds include toucans, macaws and parrots. Boasting the ocellated turkey (or 'Petén turkey') – a large, impressive, multicolored bird reminiscent of a peacock, Tikal is a birding hot spot, with some 300 tropical and migratory species sighted to date. Several woodpecker species, nine types of hummingbirds and four trogon species are just the beginning of the list. Also in the area are large white herons, hawks, warblers, kingfishers, harpy eagles (rare) and many others.

Although Guatemala's forests host several mammal and reptile species, many remain

difficult to observe. Still, visitors to Tikal can enjoy the antics of the omnipresent *pizotes* (coatis, a tropical mammal related to raccoons) and might spy howler and spider monkeys.

Other mammals deeper in the forest include jaguars, ocelots, pumas, peccaries, agoutis, opossums, tapirs, kinkajous (nocturnal arboreal mammals), *tepezcutintles* (pacas, white-spotted brownish rodents), white-tailed and red brocket deer, armadillos and very large rattlesnakes. Reptiles and amphibians in the rest of Guatemala include at least three species of sea turtle (leatherback, *tortuga negra* and olive ridley) and two species of crocodile (one found in El Petén, the other in the Río Dulce). Manatees also frequent the waters around Río Dulce.

## PLANTS

Guatemala has over 8000 plant species in 19 different ecosystems, ranging from coastal mangrove forests to mountainous interior pine forests to high cloud forests. In addition, El Petén supports a variety of trees, including mahogany, cedar, ramón and sapodilla.

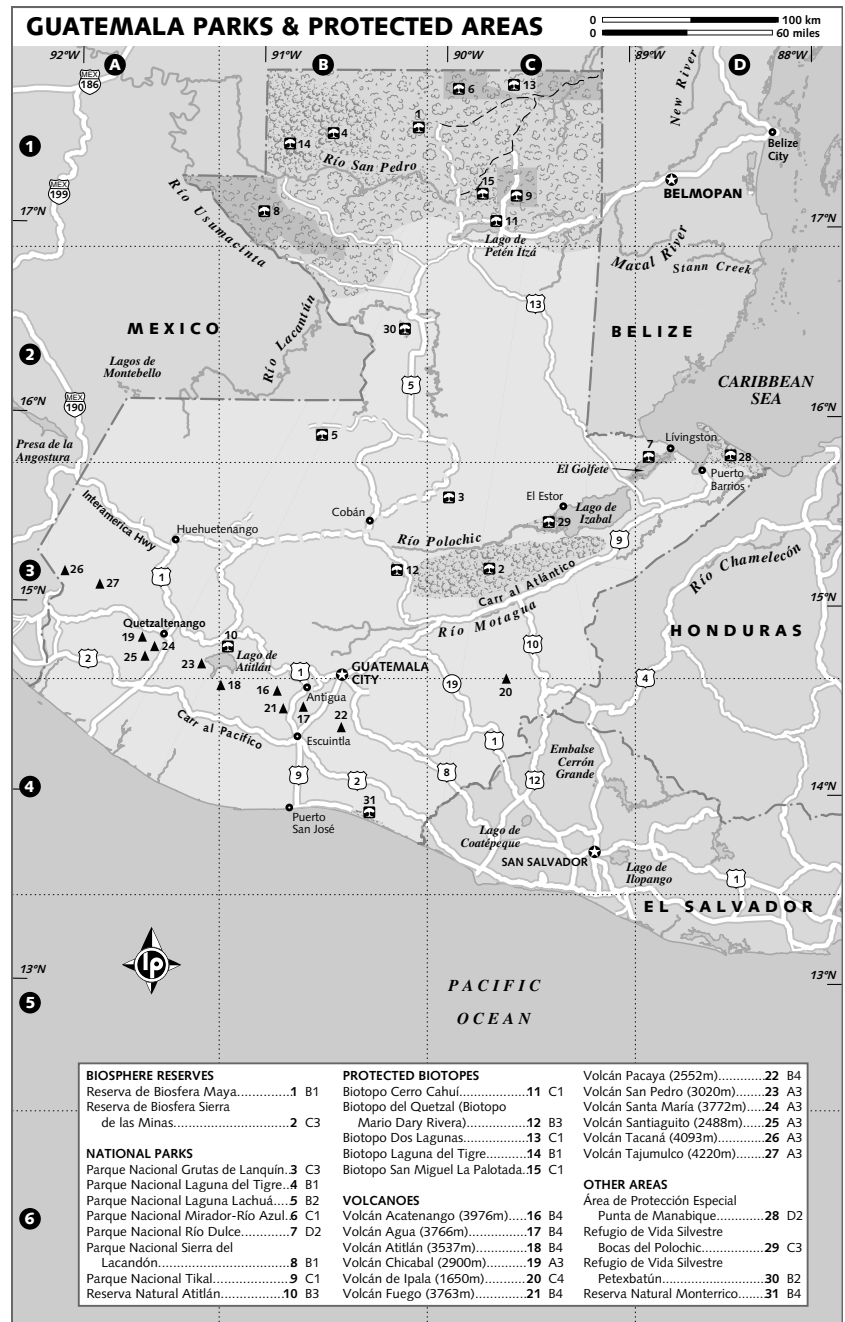
The national flower, the *monja blanca* (white nun orchid), is said to have been picked so much that it's now rare in the wild. Nevertheless, the country has around 600 species of orchid, a third of which are endemic.

Guatemala also has the perfect climate for *xate* (*sha-tay*), a low-growing palm that thrives in El Petén and is prized in the developed world as a flower-arrangement filler. *Xateros* (*xate* collectors) live in the jungle for months at a time, disrupting its fragile ecosystem. The same type of degradation is perpetuated by *chicleros*, men who harvest *chicle* for chewing gum.

## National Parks & Reserves

Guatemala has 92 protected areas, including biosphere reserves, national parks, protected biotopes, wildlife refuges and private nature reserves. Even though some areas are contained within other, larger ones, they amount to 28% of the national territory.

Many of the protected areas are remote and hard to access by the independent traveler; the table (p86) shows those that are easiest to reach and/or most interesting to visitors (but excludes the volcanoes, nearly all of which are protected, and areas of mainly archaeological interest).



## GUATEMALA'S MAJOR PARKS &amp; RESERVES

Protected Area	Features	Activities	Best Time to Visit	Page
Parque Nacional Tikal	diverse jungle wildlife among Guatemala's most magnificent Maya ruins	wildlife spotting, seeing Maya city	any, Nov-May drier	p194
Parque Nacional Laguna del Tigre	remote, large park within Reserva Maya; freshwater wetlands, Petén flora and fauna	wildlife spotting including scarlet macaws, monkeys, crocodiles, visiting El Perú archaeological site, volunteer opportunities at Las Guacamayas biological station	any, Nov-May drier	p203
Parque Nacional Mirador-Río Azul	national park with Reserva Maya; Petén flora and fauna	jungle treks to El Mirador archaeological site	any, Nov-May drier	p204
Parque Nacional Río Dulce	beautiful jungle-lined lower Río Dulce between Lago de Izabal and Caribbean; manatee refuge	boat trips	any	p183
Parque Nacional Grutas de Lanquín	large cave system 61km from Cobán	visiting caves, swimming, seeing bats; don't miss the nearby Semuc Champey lagoons and waterfalls	any	p167
Biotopo del Quetzal	easy-access cloud forest reserve; howler monkeys, birds	nature trails, bird-watching, possible quetzal sightings	any	p162
Biotopo Cerro Cahuí	forest reserve beside Lago de Petén Itzá; Petén wildlife including monkeys	walking trails	any	p194
Refugio de Vida Silvestre Bocas del Polochic	delta of Río Polochic at western end of Lago de Izabal; Guatemala's second-largest freshwater wetlands	bird-watching (more than 300 species), howler monkey observation	any	p176
Reserva Natural Hawaii (in Reserva Natural Monterrico)	Pacific beaches and wetlands; birdlife, turtles	boat tours, bird- and turtle-watching (turtle nesting)	Jun-Nov	p159

## Environmental Issues

Environmental consciousness is not largely developed in Guatemala, as vast amounts of garbage strewn across the country will quickly tell you. Despite the impressive list of parks and protected areas, genuine protection for those areas is harder to achieve, partly because of official collusion to ignore the regulations and partly because of pressure from poor Guatemalans in need of land. Deforestation is a problem in many areas, especially El Petén,

where jungle is being felled at an alarming rate not just for timber but also to make way for cattle ranches, oil pipelines, clandestine airstrips, new settlements and new maize fields cleared by the slash-and-burn method.

On the more populous Pacific side of the country, the land is mostly agricultural or given over to industry. The remaining forests on the Pacific coastal and highland areas are not long for this world, as local communities cut down the remaining trees for heating and cooking.

Nevertheless, a number of Guatemalan organizations are doing valiant work to protect their country's environment and biodiversity. The following are good resources for finding out more about Guatemala's natural parks and protected areas:

**Alianza Verde** ([www.alianzaverde.org](http://www.alianzaverde.org), in Spanish; Parque Central, Flores, Petén) Association of organizations, businesses and people involved in conservation and tourism in El Petén; provides information services such as *Destination Petén* magazine, and Cincap, the Centro de Información Sobre la Naturaleza, Cultura y Artesanía de Petén, in Flores.

**Arcas** (Asociación de Rescate y Conservación de Vida Silvestre; ☎ /fax 2478 4096; [www.arcasguatemala.com](http://www.arcasguatemala.com); 4 Av 2-47, Sector B5, Zona 8 Mixco, San Cristóbal, Guatemala) NGO working with volunteers in sea-turtle conservation and rehabilitation of Petén wildlife.

**Asociación Ak' Tenamit** (in Guatemala City ☎ 2254 1560, in Río Dulce 7908 3392; [www.aktanamit.org](http://www.aktanamit.org); 11a Av A 9-39, Zona 2, Guatemala City) Maya-run NGO working to reduce poverty and promote conservation and ecotourism in the rain forests of eastern Guatemala.

**Cecon** (Centro de Estudios Conservacionistas de la Universidad de San Carlos; ☎ 3361 6065; [www.usac.edu.gt/cecon](http://www.usac.edu.gt/cecon), in Spanish; Av La Reforma 0-63, Zona 10, Guatemala City) Manages six public *biótopos* and one *reserva natural*.

**Conap** (Consejo Nacional de Áreas Protegidas; ☎ 2238 0000; <http://conap.online.gt>; Edificio IPM, 5a Av 6-06, Zona 1, Guatemala City) The government arm in charge of protected areas.

**Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza** (☎ 2440 8138; [www.defensores.org.gt](http://www.defensores.org.gt), in Spanish; 7a Av 7-09, Zona 13, Guatemala City) NGO that owns and administers several protected areas.

**ProPetén** (☎ 7926 1370; [www.propeten.org](http://www.propeten.org); Calle Central, Flores, Petén) NGO that works in conservation and natural resources management in Parque Nacional Laguna del Tigre.

**Proyecto Ecoquetzal** (☎ /fax 7952 1047; [www.ecoquetzal.org](http://www.ecoquetzal.org); 2a Calle 14-36, Zona 1, Cobán, Alta Verapaz) Works in forest conservation and ecotourism.

## DEPARTURE TAX

A US\$30 departure tax (plus US\$3 airport security tax) is charged on all international flights leaving Guatemala. All passengers on domestic flights are charged a US\$1 departure tax, payable at the airport.

Mérida (Yucatán), Mexico City, Miami, New York, Palenque (Chiapas), Panama City, San Francisco, San José (Costa Rica), San Pedro Sula (Honduras), and San Salvador.

The following airlines are represented in Guatemala City with many having offices in Aeropuerto Internacional La Aurora:

**American Airlines** ([www.aa.com](http://www.aa.com)) airport (☎ 2260 6550); city (☎ 2422 0000; Guatemala City Marriott Hotel, 7a Av 15-45, Zona 9)

**Continental Airlines** ([www.continental.com](http://www.continental.com)) airport (☎ 331 2051/2); city (☎ 2385 9601; Edificio Unicentro, 18a Calle 5-56, Zona 10)

**Copa Airlines** (☎ 2385 5555; [www.copaair.com](http://www.copaair.com); 1a Av 10-17, Zona 10, Guatemala City)

**Cubana** (☎ 2367 2288/89/90; [www.cubana.cu](http://www.cubana.cu); Local 29, Edificio Atlantis, 13a Calle 3-40, Zona 10, Guatemala City) **Delta Airlines** airport (☎ 2260 6439); city (☎ 1 800 300 0005; Edificio Centro Ejecutivo, 15a Calle 3-20, Zona 10)

**Grupo TACA** (Aviateca, Inter, LACSA, Nica, TACA; [www.taca.com](http://www.taca.com)) airport (☎ 2260 6497); city (☎ 2470 8222; Av Hincapié 12-22, Zona 13)

**Iberia** ([www.iberia.com](http://www.iberia.com)) airport (☎ 2260 6337); city (☎ 2332 0911, 2332 3913; Oficina 507, Edificio Galerias Reforma, Av La Reforma 8-00, Zona 9)

**Mexicana** ([www.mexicana.com](http://www.mexicana.com)) airport (☎ 2260 6335); city (☎ 2333 6001; Local 104, Edificio Edyma Plaza, 13a Calle 8-44, Zona 10)

**United Airlines** ([www.unitedguatemala.com](http://www.unitedguatemala.com)) airport (☎ 2260 6481); city (☎ 2336 9900; Oficina 201, Edificio El Reformador, Av La Reforma 1-50, Zona 9)

## Land

Guatemala is linked to Chiapas (Mexico) by two official highway routes and three road-and-river routes; to Belize by one road route and one sea route; and to Honduras and El Salvador by numerous overland routes.

The most popular and easily accessible entry points to Guatemala from Mexico are at Tecún Umán-Ciudad Hidalgo, and at La Mesilla-Ciudad Cuauhtémoc. More adventurous routes take you by country bus and riverboat from Yaxchilán in Chiapas via the Río Usumacinta or the Río de la Pasión to

## TRANSPORTATION

## GETTING THERE &amp; AWAY

## Air

Guatemala's two major international airports are in Guatemala City (Aeropuerto La Aurora; p99) and Flores, near Tikal (p192).

Destinations include Belize City, Cancún, Tapachula and Chetumal (Mexico), Havana, Houston, Los Angeles, Madrid, Managua,

El Petén. For information on these routes, see p202.

Most border crossings between Guatemala and neighboring countries are now well established, including the so-called jungle route from eastern Guatemala to Honduras and the road-and-river routes between El Petén and Chiapas.

Several international bus routes connect Guatemala with Mexico, Belize, El Salvador and Honduras. When traveling between Guatemala and neighboring countries, you will often have the choice of a direct, 1st-class bus or a series of ‘chicken buses.’ The latter option usually takes longer but is always cheaper and more interesting.

International bus destinations from Guatemala City include: Belize City, El Carmen–Talismán (Mexican border), El Florido–Copán (Honduras), La Mesilla–Ciudad Cuauhtémoc (Mexican border), Managua (Nicaragua), San Salvador (El Salvador), Tapachula (Mexico) and Tecún Umán–Ciudad Hidalgo (Mexican border).

### Sea & River

On the Caribbean coast, boats leave Punta Gorda (Belize) for Puerto Barrios and Livingston. Passage from Omoa (Honduras) to Livingston is also possible, although it might be difficult to arrange in low season. Generally, sea passage is easiest to and from Puerto Barrios, as this is an active transit point. No car ferries are available.

Three river crossings connect Chiapas, Mexico, to El Petén, Guatemala. These are good alternatives for travelers visiting Palenque and Tikal in one trip. All involve a combination of bus and boat travel. See the boxed text, p202 for details.

## GETTING AROUND

### Air

In addition to the international airports in Guatemala City and Santa Elena–Flores, there are domestic airports in Coatepeque, Cobán, Huehuetenango, Playa Grande, Puerto Barrios, Quetzaltenango, Quiché, Retalhuleu and Río Dulce. However, the only *scheduled* domestic flights operating at the time of research are between Guatemala City and Flores.

### Bicycle

Cycling is coming into its own in Guatemala. You can join biking tours or take to the hills

independently. Bicycles can be rented in Antigua, Flores, Panajachel and Quetzaltenango. Remember that few drivers are accustomed to sharing the roads with bikes.

### Boat

Speedy motorboats called *lanchas* are becoming the norm for transportation on Lago de Atitlán and between Puerto Barrios, Livingston and Río Dulce, replacing bigger, cheaper ferries.

A few of Guatemala’s natural reserves and archaeological sites are accessible only – or preferably – by water.

### Bus

Buses go just about everywhere in Guatemala, and where they don’t, you’ll find minivans and trucks picking up the slack. Fares are generally cheap (around US\$1 per hour), although comfort levels vary. If you can’t bear another jaunt on a ‘chicken bus,’ ask if there is a Pullman service available. These larger, coach-style buses are way more comfortable, leave from major destinations and only cost slightly more than the 2nd-class buses.

If you’re traveling light, keep your luggage with you inside the bus. Otherwise, heave it onto the roof or stuff it into the luggage compartment and keep your eye on it.

Long-distance buses rarely have toilets, but usually stop for 20-minute meal and bladder-relief breaks at appropriate times. If not, drivers will stop to let you fertilize the roadside.

### Car & Motorcycle

Although few people do, it’s possible to hire a car at the airport in Guatemala City, in Antigua and Quetzaltenango. You can hire motorcycles in Antigua, Quetzaltenango and Panajachel. For general information about driving around the region, see p743.

### Hitchhiking

Hitching in the Western sense of the word is not practiced in Guatemala because it is not safe. However, where the bus service is sporadic or nonexistent, pickup trucks and other vehicles serve as public transportation. Stand by the side of the road, hold your arm out and someone will stop. You are expected to pay the driver as if it were a bus, and the fare will be similar. This is a safe and reliable system used by locals and travelers; get used to severe overcrowding.

## Local Transportation

Local buses (available only in Guatemala City and Quetzaltenango) are crowded and cheap. Few Guatemalan taxis are metered, and fares can be exorbitant. If you don’t like the price quoted, walk away. Then go back and bargain. Then walk away again. Repeat process until a reasonable price is established.

## GUATEMALA CITY

### pop 3.1 million

Depending on who you talk to, Guatemala’s capital (known universally as ‘Guate’) is either big, dirty, dangerous and utterly forgettable or big, dirty, dangerous and fascinating. Either way, there’s no doubt that there’s an energy here unlike that found in the rest of Guatemala, and the extremes that categorize the whole country are in plain view.

It’s a place where dilapidated buses belch fumes next to BMWs and Hummers, where skyscrapers drop shadows on shantytowns, and where immigrants from the countryside and the rest of Central America eke out a meager existence, barely noticed by the country’s elite.

This is the real cultural capital of Guatemala – the writers, the thinkers, the artists mostly live and work here. All the best museum pieces go to the capital, and while nearly every city-dweller dreams of getting away to Antigua or Monterrico for the weekend, this is where they spend most of their time, a fact reflected in the growing sophistication of the restaurant and bar scene.

## ORIENTATION

Guatemala City, like almost all Guatemalan towns, is laid out according to a logical grid system. Avenidas run north–south; calles run east–west. Streets are usually numbered from north and west (lowest) to south and east (highest); building numbers run in the same directions, with odd numbers on the left side and even on the right heading south or east. However, Guatemala City is divided into 15 *zonas*, each with its own version of the grid. Thus 14a Calle in Zona 10 is a completely different street several miles from 14a Calle in Zona 1, though major thoroughfares such as 6a Av and 7a Av cross several zones.

Addresses are given in this form: ‘9a Av 15-12, Zona 1,’ which means ‘9th Av above

15th St, No 12, in Zona 1.’ The building will be on 9th Av between 15th and 16th Sts, on the right side as you walk south. Beware of anomalies, such as diagonal *rutas* and vias and wandering *diagonales*.

Short streets may be suffixed ‘A,’ as in 14a Calle A, running between 14a Calle and 15a Calle.

## Maps

Intelimapas’ *Mapa Turístico Guatemala*, Ignat’s *Mapa Vial Turístico* and International Travel Maps’ *Guatemala* all contain useful maps of Guatemala City.

**Sophos** (☎ 2334 6797; Av La Reforma 13-89, Zona 10) One of the most reliable sources of maps.

**Instituto Geográfico Nacional** (IGN; ☎ 2332 2611; www.ign.gov.gt in Spanish; Av Las Américas 5-76, Zona 13; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Sells 1:50,000 and 1:250,000 topographical maps of all parts of Guatemala (US\$6 each).

## INFORMATION

### Bookstores

**Sophos** (☎ 2334 6797; Av La Reforma 13-89, Zona 10) Relaxed place to have a coffee and read while in the Zona Viva. A good selection of books in English on Guatemala and the Maya, including guidebooks and maps.

**Vista Hermosa Book Shop** (☎ 2369 1003; 2a Calle 18-50, Zona 15) Ditto.

## Emergency

**Ambulance** (☎ 123)

**Fire Department** (☎ 123)

**Police** (☎ 110 or 120)

## Internet Access

Zona 1 is thronged with inexpensive internet cafés. Elsewhere, rates tend to be higher.

**Café Internet Navigator** (14a Calle east of 6a Av, Zona 1; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8am-8pm)

**Carambolo Café Internet** (14a Calle east of 7a Av, Zona 1; per hr US\$1.30; ☎ 8:30am-8:30pm)

**Internet** (Local 5, 6a Av 9-27, Zona 1; per hr US\$0.65; ☎ 8am-7pm)

**Web Station** (2a Av 14-63, Zona 10; per hr US\$2.60; ☎ 10am-midnight Mon-Sat, noon-midnight Sun) One of the cheapest in the Zona Viva.

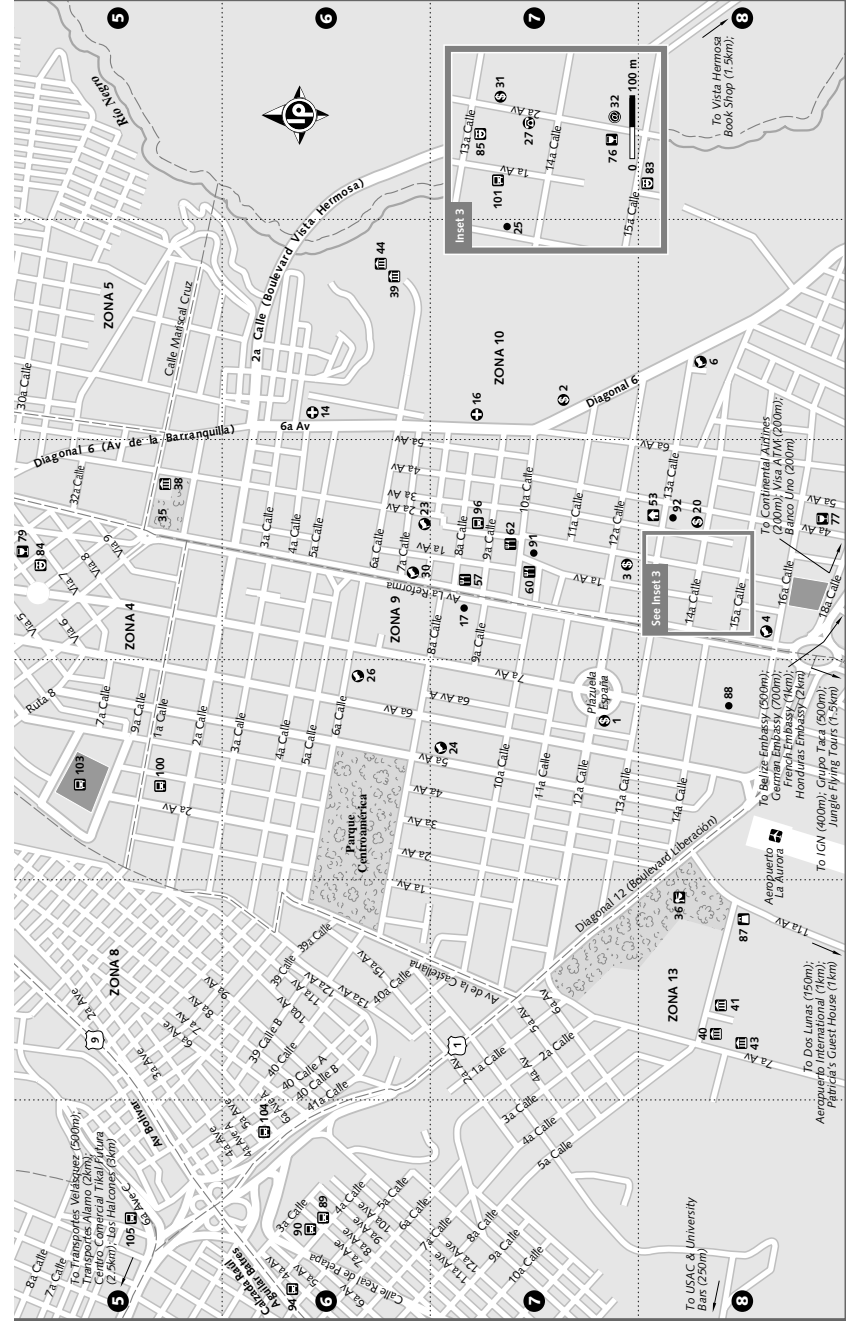
## Laundry

**Lavandería El Siglo** (12a Calle 3-42, Zona 1; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) Charges US\$4 for up to 12lb (5.5kg).

## Medical Services

Guatemala City has many private hospitals and clinics. Public hospitals and clinics





<b>INFORMATION</b>	Museo de Historia Natural.....	38 D5	La Arcada.....	72 A1
ABM.....	Museo Ixchel del Traje	1 C7	La Bodeguita del Centro.....	73 D2
American Express.....	Indígena.....	2 E7	La Playa.....	74 A3
ATM (Hotel Stofella).....	Museo Nacional de Arqueología y	3 D7	Las Cien Puertas.....	75 A1
British Embassy.....	Etnología.....	4 D8	Mi Guajira.....	76 F7
Café Internet Navigator.....	Museo Nacional de Arte	5 D2	Rattle & Hum.....	77 D8
Canadian Embassy.....	Moderno.....	6 E8	Suae.....	78 A3
Carambolo Café Internet.....	Museo Nacional de Historia.....	7 D2	TrovaJazz.....	79 D5
Clark Tours.....(see 2)	Museo Nacional de Historia Natural			
Conap.....	Jorge Ibarra.....	8 D1	<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b> 📺	
Credomatic.....	Museo Popol Vuh.....	9 D2	Centro Cultural de España.....	80 A3
Departamento de Extranjería.....	Palacio Nacional de la Cultura.....	10 D4	Centro Cultural Miguel Ángel	
Digital Mundo Celular.....	Parque Centenario.....	11 D2	Asturias.....	81 D3
Edificio Testa.....	Parque Central.....	12 D2	IGA Cultural Center.....	82 A3
Farmacia del Ejecutivo.....		13 D2	Kahlua.....	83 F8
Hospital Centro Médico.....	<b>SLEEPING</b> 🛏	14 E6	La Estación Norte.....	84 D5
Hospital General San Juan de	Hotel Ajau.....		Mr Jerry.....	85 F7
Dios.....	Hotel Capri.....	15 C1		
Hospital Herrera Llerandi.....	Hotel Colonial.....	16 E7	<b>SHOPPING</b> 🛍	
Iberia.....	Hotel Fenix.....	17 D7	Mercado Central.....	86 D1
Internet.....	Hotel San Martin.....(see 48)	18 A1	Mercado de Artesanías.....	87 B8
Lavandería El Siglo.....	Hotel Spring.....	19 D2		
Lloyds TSB.....	Xamanek Inn.....	20 D8	<b>TRANSPORT</b>	
Main Post Office.....		21 D2	American Airlines.....	88 C8
Main Tourist Office (Inguat).....	<b>EATING</b> 🍴	22 D4	Buses to Santiago Atitlán.....	89 A6
Mexican Embassy.....	Bagel Factory.....	23 D6	Chatía Gomerana.....	90 A6
Salvadoran Embassy.....	Café de Imeri.....	24 C7	Copa Airlines.....	91 D7
Sophos.....	Café-Restaurante Hamburgo.....	25 E7	Cubana.....	92 D8
Spanish Embassy.....	Cafetería Patsy.....	26 C6	Escobar y Monja Blanca Bus	
Telefónica Office.....	Doner Kebab.....	27 F7	Station.....	93 D2
Telgua.....	Flamenco.....	28 D2	Fortaleza del Sur.....	94 A6
Telgua Telephone Office.....	La Chapinita.....	29 D4	Fuente del Norte Bus Station.....	95 D3
US Embassy.....	L'Osteria.....	30 D6	Hedman Alas Bus Station.....	96 D7
Visa ATM.....	Marea Alta.....	31 F7	Linea Dorada Bus Station.....	97 E3
Visa ATM.....(see 8)	Parrillada Doña Sara.....	32 F7	Lineas América Bus Station.....	98 C3
Web Station.....	Picadilly.....	32 F7	Litegua Bus Station.....	99 E2
	Restaurante Long Wah.....	33 D2	Melva Internacional.....	100 C5
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>	Restaurante Rey Sol.....	34 D3	Mexicana.....(see 6)	
Casa MIIMA.....	Tarboosh.....	35 D5	Pullmantur.....	101 F7
Centro Cultural		36 B8	Rutas Orientales.....	102 D3
Metropolitano.....(see 21)	<b>DRINKING</b> 🍷	37 D3	Terminal de Autobuses.....	103 C5
Civic Center.....	Blue Town Café Bar.....	38 B8	Transportes Rébuli & Veloz	
Jardín Botánico.....	El Encuentro.....	39 D5	Quichelense.....	104 A6
La Aurora Zoo.....	El Portal.....	40 B8	Veloz Poaqueleña & Buses to	
Museo de Ferrocarril.....	Genetic.....	41 B8	Antigua.....	105 A5

provide free consultations but can be very busy. To reduce waiting time, try to be there before 7am.

**Clinica Cruz Roja** (Red Cross Clinic; 3a Calle 8-40, Zona 1; ☎ 8am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) This public clinic charges for consultations but is inexpensive.

**Farmacia del Ejecutivo** (☎ 2238 1447; 7a Av 15-01, Zona 1; ☎ 24hr) Accepts Visa and MasterCard.

**Hospital Centro Médico** (☎ 2332 3555, 334 2157; 6a Av 3-47, Zona 10) Recommended private hospital with some English-speaking doctors.

**Hospital General San Juan de Dios** (☎ 2253 0443/7; 1a Av at 10a Calle, Zona 1) One of the city's best public hospitals.

**Hospital Herrera Llerandi** (☎ 2334 5959, emergency 334 5955; 6a Av 8-71, Zona 10) This is another recommended private hospital with some English-speaking doctors.

**Money**

Take normal precautions when using ATMs. **ABM** (☎ 2361 5602; Plazuela España, Zona 9) Changes euros into quetzals.

**American Express** (☎ 2331 7422; Centro Comercial Montufar, 12a Calle 0-93, Zona 9; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) In an office of Clark Tours.

**Banco Uno** (☎ 2366 2191; Edificio Unicentro, 18a Calle 5-56, Zona 10) Changes cash euros into quetzals.

**Banquetzal** airport arrivals (☎ 6am-9pm) Changes US dollars and American Express traveler's checks into quetzals, plus MasterCard and Amex ATM; airport departures (☎ 6am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat & Sun) Currency exchange and a MasterCard ATM.

**Edificio Testa** (cnr 5a Av & 11a Calle, Zona 1) Visa, MasterCard and Amex ATMs.

**Lloyds TSB** (14a Calle 3-51, Zona 10) Changes euro traveler's checks.

**MasterCard ATM** (Hotel Stofella, 2a Av 12-28, Zona 10)  
**Visa ATMs** (cnr 5a Av & 6a Calle, Zona 1); (2a Av, Zona 10) South of 13a Calle.

**Post**

**Main post office** (7a Av 11-67, Zona 1; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) In the huge pink Palacio de Correos. There's also a small post office at the airport.

**Telephone**

Telgua street card phones are plentiful.  
**Telefónica office** (2a Av btwn 13a & 14a Calles, Zona 10) Telefónica phone cards are fairly common too; cards can be bought at the Telefónica office.

**Tourist Information**

**Inguat** main tourist office (☎ 2331 1333, 2331 1347; informacion@inguat.gob.gt; 7a Av 1-17, Zona 4; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Located in the lobby of the Inguat (Guatemalan Tourism Institute) headquarters in the Centro Cívico. The office has limited handout material, but staff are extremely helpful; Aeropuerto La Aurora (☎ 2331 4256; arrivals hall; ☎ 6am-9pm)

**DANGERS & ANNOYANCES**

Street crime, including armed robbery, has increased in recent years. Use normal urban common sense: don't walk down the street

with your wallet bulging out of your back pocket, and avoid walking downtown alone late at night. Work out your route before you start so you're not standing on corners looking lost or peering at a map; pop into a café if you need to find your bearings. It's safe to walk downtown in the early evening, as long as you stick to streets with plenty of lighting and people. Stay alert and leave your valuables in your hotel. Don't flaunt anything of value, and be aware that women and children swell the ranks of thieves here. The incidence of robbery increases around the 15th and the end of each month, when workers get paid.

The area around 18a Calle in Zona 1 has many bus stations and even more lowlifes and hustlers. Nearly half of Zona 1's robberies happen here, the worst black spots being the intersections with 4a, 6a and 9a Avs. This part of town (also a red-light district) is notoriously dangerous at night; if you are arriving by bus at night or must go someplace on 18a Calle at night, take a taxi.

The more affluent sections of the city – Zona 9 and Zona 10, for example – are safer, but don't let your guard down. Thieves have figured out that rich people hang out in fancy areas, and so sometimes work the area in

**GETTING INTO TOWN**

**From the Airport**

Aeropuerto La Aurora is in Zona 13, in the southern part of the city, about 10 to 15 minutes from Zona 1 by taxi, 30 minutes by bus.

For the city bus, cross the road outside the arrivals exit and climb the steps. At the top, with your back to the terminal building, walk to the left down the approach road (about 100m), then turn right to the bus stop. Bus 83 'Terminal' and No 83 'Bolívar' go to Parque Central in Zona 1, passing through Zonas 9 and 4 en route: you can get off at any corner along the way. Bus 83 'Terminal' goes up 7a Av through Zonas 9, 4 and 1; bus 83 'Bolívar' goes via Av Bolívar and then 5a Av. Both run about every 15 minutes, from 6am to 9pm, and cost US\$0.15. Going from the city center to the airport, No 83 'Aeropuerto' goes south through Zona 1 on 10a Av, south through Zonas 4 and 9 on 6a Av, passes by the west end of La Aurora Zoo and the Zona 13 museums and stops outside the international terminal. It then continues southward passing close to all Zona 13 guesthouses.

Taxis wait outside the airport's arrivals exit. Official fares are posted on signs (US\$8 to US\$9 to Zona 9 or 10, US\$10 to Zona 1, US\$30 to Antigua) but in reality you may have to pay a bit more. Be sure to establish the destination and price before getting in. A tip is expected. Prices for taxis to the airport, hailed on the street, are likely to be lower – around US\$6 from Zona 1. For **Antigua**, shuttle minibuses are more economical if there's only one or two of you (see p113).

**From the Bus Terminal**

Going by city bus, the best way into town from the Terminal de Autobuses in Zona 4 is to walk a few blocks east to 6a Av and catch any bus going north (such as bus 83 'Aeropuerto'). This saves you getting caught in the traffic snarls around the terminal itself. The same holds true in reverse if you want to get to the terminal by city bus.

groups of two or three. The Zona Viva, in Zona 10, has police patrols at night. But even here, going in pairs is better than going alone.

All buses are the turf of adroit pickpockets. Some armed robberies happen on buses too, although mainly in outlying zones.

Never (never!) try to resist if confronted by a robber.

## SIGHTS

### Zona 1

#### PARQUE CENTRAL

Most of the city's notable sights are in Zona 1 near Parque Central (officially the Plaza de la Constitución), which is bounded by 6a and 8a Calles and 6a and 7a Avs.

Every town in the New World had a plaza used for military exercises, reviews and ceremonies. On the plaza's northern side would be the *palacio de gobierno* (colonial government headquarters). On another side, preferably east, was a church (or cathedral). The other sides of the square could house additional civic buildings or imposing mansions. Parque Central is a good example of this classic town plan.

Visit on Sunday, when locals stroll, play in the fountains, gossip, neck and groove to salsa music. Otherwise, try for lunchtime or late afternoon. You'll be besieged by shoe-shine boys, Polaroid photographers and sellers of kitsch.

#### PALACIO NACIONAL

On Parque Central's north side is the magnificent **Palacio Nacional de la Cultura** (☎ 2253 0748; 6a Calle; ☎ 9-11:45am & 2-4:45pm Mon-Fri, 9-10:45am & 2-3:45pm Sat & Sun), built at enormous cost by dictator/president Jorge Ubico (1931-44). It's the third palace to stand here. It often hosts revolving exhibitions featuring contemporary Guatemalan artists.

You can go wandering independently, or else free tours take you through a labyrinth of gleaming brass, polished wood, carved stone and frescoed arches (painted by Alberto Gálvez Suárez). Notable features include the 2000kg gold, bronze and Bohemian-crystal chandelier in the reception salon, and two Moorish-style courtyards.

#### CENTRO CULTURAL METROPOLITANO

On the 1st floor of the **Palacio de Correos** (12a Calle & 7 Av; ☎ 9-5pm Mon-Fri) you'll find this surprisingly avant-garde cultural center,

hosting art exhibitions, book launches, handicraft workshops and film nights.

#### CASA MIMA

This wonderfully presented **museum and cultural center** (8a Av & 14a Calle; ☎ 9am-12:30pm, 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat) is set in a house dating from the late 19th century. The owners of the house were collectors with eclectic tastes ranging from French neorococo, Chinese, Art Deco to indigenous artifacts. The place is set up like a functioning house, filled with curios and furniture spanning the centuries.

#### MERCADO CENTRAL

Until it was destroyed by the earthquake of 1976, the **central market** (9a Av btwn 6a & 8a Calles; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat, 6am-noon Sun), east of the cathedral, was where locals bought food and other necessities. Reconstructed in the late 1970s, the new market specializes in touristy items such as cloth, carved wood, worked leather and metal, basketry and other handicrafts. Except for the odd tour group, not that many tourists make it here – if you're a hard bargainer, you might get a good deal. Vegetables and other daily needs are on sale on the lower floor – check it out for a sensory overload. The city's true 'central' food market is in Zona 4.

#### MUSEO DE FERROCARRIL

The **Railway Museum** (18a Calle btwn 9a & 10a Avs; ☎ 9am-4:30pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4:30pm Sat & Sun) is one of the cities more intriguing museums (and the only one with a Domino's Pizza attached). Documented here are the glory days of the troubled Guatemalan rail system, along with some quirky artifacts, like hand-drawn diagrams of derailments and a kitchen set up with items used in dining cars. You can go climbing around the passenger carriages, but not the locomotives.

#### MUSEO NACIONAL DE HISTORIA

The **National History Museum** (☎ 2253 6149; 9a Calle 9-70; admission US\$4; ☎ 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri) is a jumble of historical relics with an emphasis on photography and portraits. Check the hair-styles of the 19th-century politicians.

### Zona 2

Zona 2, north of Zona 1, is a mostly middle-class residential district, though its northern end holds the large Parque Minerva, which is

surrounded by golf courses, sports grounds and the buildings of the Universidad Mariano Gálvez.

#### PARQUE MINERVA

Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, technical skill and invention, was a favorite of President Manuel Estrada Cabrera. Her park is a placid place, good for walking among the eucalyptus trees and sipping a cool drink. However, watch out for pickpockets and purse-snatchers.

The prime sight here is the **Mapa En Relieve** (Relief Map; admission US\$4; ☎ 9am-5pm), a huge relief map of Guatemala. Constructed in 1904 under the direction of Francisco Vela, the map shows the country at a scale of 1:10,000, but the height of the mountainous terrain has been exaggerated to 1:2000 for dramatic effect. You may note that Belize features on the map – a hangover from the fact that most Guatemalans consider this to be Guatemalan territory. The Mapa En Relieve and Parque Minerva are 2km north of Parque Central along 6a Av, but that street is one-way heading south. To get there take bus V-21 northbound on 7a Av just north or south of Parque Central.

#### Civic Center Area

The Centro Cívico complex, constructed during the 1950s and '60s, lies around the junction of Zonas 1, 4 and 5. Here you'll find the Palace of Justice, the headquarters of the Guatemalan Institute of Social Security (IGSS), the Banco del Quetzal, the city hall and the Inguat headquarters. The Banco del Quetzal building bears high-relief murals by Dagoberto Vásquez depicting the history of his homeland. City Hall holds a huge mosaic by Carlos Mérida.

On a hilltop across the street from the Centro Cívico is the **Centro Cultural Miguel Ángel Asturias**, which holds the national theater, a chamber theater and an open-air theater, as well as a small museum of old armaments.

Other than the Centro Cívico, this area is known mostly for its markets and bus stations, all thrown together in the chaotic southwestern corner of Zona 4 near the railway.

### Zona 10

East of Av La Reforma, the posh Zona 10 holds two of the city's most important museums, both in large new buildings at the Universidad Francisco Marroquín.

**Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena** (☎ 2331 3634/8; 6a Calle Final; admission US\$3; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) is named for Ixchel, wife of Maya sky god Itzamná and goddess of the moon, women, reproduction and textiles, among other things. Photographs and exhibits of indigenous costumes, textiles and other crafts show the incredible richness of traditional highland art. If you enjoy seeing Guatemalan textiles, you must make a visit to this museum.

Behind it is the **Museo Popol Vuh** (☎ 2361 2301; www.popolvuh.ufm.edu; adult/child US\$3/1; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat), where well-chosen polychrome pottery, figurines, incense burners, burial urns, carved-wood masks and traditional textiles fill several exhibit rooms. Other rooms hold colonial paintings and wood and silver objects. A faithful copy of the Dresden Codex, one of the precious 'painted books' of the Maya, is among the most interesting pieces. This is an important collection, especially given its precolonial emphasis.

The Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala has a large, lush **Jardín Botánico** (Botanical Garden; Calle Mariscal Cruz 1-56; admission US\$0.80; ☎ 8am-3:30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) on the northern edge of Zona 10. The admission includes the university's **Museo de Historia Natural** (Natural History Museum) at the site.

### Zona 13

The major attraction in the city's southern reaches is Parque Aurora, with its zoo, children's playground, fairgrounds and several museums. One of the museums, the Moorish-looking **Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología** (☎ 2472 0489; Sala 5, Finca La Aurora; admission US\$4; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon & 1:30-4pm Sat & Sun), has a collection of Maya artifacts from all over Guatemala, including stone carvings, jade, ceramics, statues, stelae and a tomb. Models depict the ruins at Tikal and Zaculeu. Exhibits in the ethnology section highlight the various indigenous peoples and languages in Guatemala, with emphasis on traditional costumes, dances and implements of daily life.

Facing it is the **Museo Nacional de Arte Moderno** (☎ 2472 0467; Sala 6, Finca La Aurora; admission US\$1.30; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-4pm Sat & Sun), which holds a collection of 20th-century Guatemalan art, especially paintings and sculpture.

Nearby is the **Museo Nacional de Historia Natural Jorge Ibarra** (☎ 2472 0468; 6a Calle 7-30; admission US\$1.30; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-4pm Sat & Sun), whose claim to fame is its large collection of dissected

animals. Several hundred meters east of these museums is the city's official handicrafts market, the **Mercado de Artesanías** (Crafts Market; ☎ 2472 0208; cnr 5a Calle & 11a Av; ☎ 9:30am-6pm), just off the access road to the airport. It's a sleepy place where shopkeepers display the same items available in hotel gift shops.

**La Aurora Zoo** (☎ 2472 0894; adult/child US\$2.50/1; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is not badly kept as zoos go, and the lovely, parklike grounds alone are worth the admission fee.

## SLEEPING

### Zona 1

Shoestringers tend to head straight for Zona 1. Prices in Guate are higher than in the rest of the country, but there are a few bargains. Many of the city's cheaper lodgings are 10 to 15 minutes' walk south from Parque Central.

**Hotel San Martin** (☎ 2238 0319; 16a Calle 7-65; r with/without bathroom US\$9/7) If you're on a serious budget, the San Martin's the one to go for – nothing fancy, but good solid value and reasonably clean.

**Hotel Fenix** (☎ 2251 6625; 7a Av 15-81; r US\$8, with bathroom & TV US\$11) For Zona 1 budget digs, the Fenix does alright, with a fair bit of charm (most of it crumbling off the walls). The high ceilings, spacious rooms and old-time feel keep this a popular option.

**Hotel Capri** (☎ 2232 8191; 9a Av 15-63; s/d US\$9/14, with bathroom US\$14/21; ☎) This modern three-story number is in a decent location, and rooms are set back from the street so they're quiet. Big windows looking onto patios and light wells keep the place sunny and airy.

**Hotel Ajau** (☎ 2232 0488; hotelajau@hotmail.com; 8a Av 15-62; s/d US\$10/14, with bathroom US\$16/20; ☎) If you're coming or going to Cobán, the Ajau's the obvious choice, being right next door to the Monja Blanca bus station. Otherwise, it's still a pretty good deal, with lovely polished floor tiles and cool, clean rooms.

**Hotel Spring** (☎ 2230 2858; hotelspring@hotmail.com; 8a Av 12-65; s/d/tr US\$12/17/22, with bathroom US\$17/22/26 or US\$25/31/37; ☎ ☎) With a beautiful courtyard setting, the Spring has a lot more style than other Zona 1 joints. It's central but has quiet sunny patios. The 43 rooms vary greatly, but most are tall, spacious and clean. Have a look around if you can. All rooms have cable TV. It's worth booking ahead.

**Hotel Colonial** (☎ 2232 6722; www.hotelcolonial.net; 7a Av 14-19; s/d/tr US\$17/22/27, with bathroom US\$25/30/35; ☎) This is a large old house converted to

a hotel with spacious communal areas and heavy, dark, colonial decor. It's a very well-run establishment whose 42 rooms are clean, good-sized and adequately furnished. Nearly all have a bathroom and TV.

### Zona 10 & Zona 13

**Xamaneq Inn** (☎ 2360 8345; www.mayaworld.net; 13a Calle 3-57, Zona 10; dm US\$14, r with bathroom US\$35; ☎) A welcome newcomer in the often-overpriced Zona Viva area is this comfy little hostel. Dorms are spacious and airy, separated into male and female. Rates include a light breakfast and free internet. There's a book exchange, kitchen use and skype calling for US\$0.30 per minute.

Guesthouses are springing up all over the place in a middle-class residential area in Zona 13. They're very convenient for the airport, and staff will pick you up or drop you off there. There are no restaurants out here, but these places offer breakfast and have the complete lowdown on home-delivery fast food in the area.

**Patricia's Guest House** (☎ 2261 4251, in English 5402 3256; 19 Calle 10-65; r per person US\$12) The most relaxed and comfortable option is in this family house with a sweet little backyard where guests can hang out. They also offer private transport around the city and shuttles to bus stations.

**Dos Lunas** (☎ /fax 2261 4248; www.xelapages.com /doslunas; 21a Calle 10-92; dm US\$12, s/d US\$15/30; ☎ ☎) An old faithful, the Dos Lunas has excellent common areas, a cramped dorm and a couple of very nice private rooms. Book through their website. Dos Lunas also offers onward-travel packages and Flores flights at good prices.

## EATING

Cheap eats are easily found, as fast food and snack shops abound. To really save money, head for Parque Concordia, in Zona 1 bounded by 5a and 6a Aves and 14a and 15a Calles, whose west side is lined with stalls serving sandwiches and snacks at rock-bottom prices from early morning to late evening. Fine dining is concentrated in Zona 10.

### Zona 1

Dozens of restaurants and fast-food shops are strung along and just off 6a Av between 8a and 15a Calles.

**Doner Kebab** (10 Calle 6-35; kebabs US\$3; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) For a quick Turkish food fix in the center, it's hard to beat the authentic flavors

in this place. Nothing fancy in the décor, but you can get six beers for US\$7.

**Café de Imeri** (6a Calle 3-34; mains US\$3-5; ☎) 8am-7pm Tue-Sat) Completely out of step with the majority of Zona 1 eateries, this place offers interesting breakfasts, soups and pastas. The list of sandwiches is impressive and there's a beautiful little courtyard area out back.

**Parrillada Doña Sara** (9a Calle & 9a Av; mains US\$3.50-5; ☎) lunch & dinner) A lot of places call themselves Argentine steakhouses, but this one recreates the atmosphere almost exactly, with photo-covered walls, cheap wine and good (but not great) steaks.

**Restaurante Rey Sol** (11a Calle 5-51; meals around US\$4; ☎) 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) Good, fresh ingredients and some innovative cooking keep this strictly vegetarian restaurant busy at lunchtimes.

**Bagel Factory** (cnr 7a Av & 10 Calle; bagels US\$4; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Anywhere outside of NYC, bagels can be a dodgy proposition, but these guys do OK. Fresh ingredients, plenty of options, a superclean environment and a sunny courtyard make this place a winner.

**Café-Restaurante Hamburgo** (15a Calle 5-34; set lunch or dinner US\$4-6; ☎) 7am-9:30pm) This bustling spot facing the south side of Parque Concordia serves good Guatemalan food, with chefs at work along one side and orange-aproned waitresses scurrying about. At weekends a marimba band adds atmosphere.

**Restaurante Long Wah** (6a Calle 3-70; dishes US\$4-6; ☎) 11am-10pm) With friendly service and decorative red-painted arches, the Long Wah is a good choice from Zona 1's other concentration of Chinese eateries, in the blocks west of Parque Centenario.

**Picadily** (cnr 6 Av & 11a Calle; mains US\$4-8; ☎) lunch & dinner) Right in the thick of the 6a Av action, this bustling restaurant does OK pizzas and pastas and good steak dishes. The place is clean and street views out of the big front windows are mesmerizing.

### Zona 4

**Tarboosh** (Vía 5, Cuatro Grados Norte; mains US\$6-15; ☎) lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Done out like a harem (but tastefully), this place offers authentic Middle Eastern fare such as falafel (US\$6.50), *kibellah* and delicious mezzeh (appetizer) platters (US\$20).

**Flamenco** (Vía 4, Cuatro Grados Norte; tapas US\$6, mains US\$10; ☎) lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Catch a breeze and take a breather on the upstairs balcony at this tapas bar and Spanish restaurant.

**L'Osteria** (Vía 5 & Ruta 2, Cuatro Grados Norte; mains US\$7-10; ☎) lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Excellent Italian dishes – mostly pizzas and pastas – and a good wine list. The shady terrace out front earns top marks for people-watching.

### Zona 10

A string of (mostly) nameless *comedores* opposite the Los Proceres mall serve up the cheapest eats in Zona 10. There's nothing fancy going on here – just good, filling eats at rock-bottom prices.

**Cafeteria Patsy** (Av La Reforma 8-01; set lunch US\$3.50; ☎) 7:30am-8pm) A bright, cheerful place popular with local office workers, it offers subs, sandwiches and good-value set lunches.

**La Chapinita** (1 Av 10-24; mains US\$4-6; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Home-style Guatemalan food served in more or less formal surrounds can be hard to come by in Zona 10, but this place does it well at good prices. Tables out front on the shady terrace are cool and breezy.

**Marea Alta** (10a Calle 1-89; mains US\$10-20; ☎) lunch & dinner) Specializing in imported seafood, this place has some good prices considering the location. The lunchtime buffet (Monday to Wednesday; US\$13) is a winner, as is the surf and turf platter (US\$10).

## DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

### Zona 1

Staggering from bar to bar along the darkened streets of Zona 1 is not recommended, but fortunately there's a clutch of good drinking places all within half a block of each other just south of Parque Central.

**Las Cien Puertas** (Pasaje Aycinena 8-44, 9a Calle 6-45) This superhip (but not studiously so) little watering hole is a gathering place for all manner of local creative types and other colorful characters. It's in a shabby colonial arcade that is sometimes closed off for live bands.

**La Arcada** (7 Av 9-10) Drop into this friendly little neighborhood bar for a few drinks – they'll let you pick the music, or spin some of their own – anything from Guat Rock to ambient trance.

**El Portal** (Portal del Comercio, 6a Av; ☎) 10am-10pm Mon-Sat) This atmospheric old drinking den serves fine draft beer (around US\$2 a mug) and free tapas. Ché Guevara was once a patron. Sit at the long wooden bar or on one of the wooden tables. To find it, enter the Portal del Comercio arcade from 6a Av a few steps south of Parque Central.

## GAY & LESBIAN VENUES

Don't get too excited about this heading: there are a couple of places worthy of mention for men, and nothing much for women.

**Genetic** (Ruta 3 No 3-08, Zona 4; ☎ 9pm-1am Fri & Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) This used to be called Pandora's Box and has been hosting Guatemala's gay crowd since the '70s, although it gets a mixed crowd and is one of the best places in town to go for trance/dance music. It has two dance floors, a rooftop patio and a relaxed atmosphere with a mainly under-thirty crowd.

**Ephesus** (4a Calle 5-30, Zona 1; ☎ 9pm-1am Thu-Sat) A well-established gay disco-bar in a former private house near the city center, often with strippers.

**El Encuentro** (Local 229, Centro Capitol, 6a Av 12-51, Zona 1; ☎ 5pm-midnight Mon-Sat) This quiet bar, in the back of a noisy downtown mall, is another gay meeting place.

## Zona 4

Guat's restaurant-bar precinct, Cuatro Grados Norte, is taking over from Zona 10 as *the* place to go out. You can just have a drink at any of the restaurants along here, but there are a couple of good bars.

**Suae** (Vía 5, Cuatro Grados Norte) Hip, but not exclusive, this bar has a great, laid-back ambience in the day and heats up at night. Rotating art exhibitions, a funky clothes boutique and guest DJs all add to the appeal.

**La Playa** (Vía 5 & Ruata 1, Cuatro Grados Norte) With a heap of pool tables and cheap beer on tap, this upstairs bar is as good a place as any to start your night.

## Zona 10

The best place to go bar-hopping is around the corner of 2a Av and 15a Calle – there's plenty of places to choose from – check and see who's got the crowd tonight.

**Mi Guajira** (2 Av 14-42) This happening little disco-bar has a pretty good atmosphere and goes fairly light on the snob factor. Music varies depending on the night, but be prepared for anything from salsa to reggaeton to trance.

## Zona 12

For a seriously down to earth night out, you should go out partying with the students from USAC, Guatemala's public university. The strip of bars along 31a Calle at the corner of 11a Av, just near the main entrance to the university all offer cheap beer, loud music and bar junk food. Like student bars all over the world, they're busy any time of day, but nights and weekends are best. A taxi out here from the center should cost about US\$6 if it's not too late, or you can catch any bus that says 'USAC' that doesn't go along Av Petapa.

**El Tarro** (31a Calle 13-08) The most formal of the bunch (in that it has menus, vaguely comfortable seats and draft beer), has a dance floor out back.

**Liverpool** (31a Calle 11-53) Plenty of pool tables and cheap drinks keep this place swinging.

**Ice** (31a Calle 13-39) This one heats up later into the night, when the dance floor fills up with students dancing salsa, merengue and reggaeton.

## Live Music

**La Bodeguita del Centro** (12a Calle 3-55, Zona 1) There's a hopping, creative local scene in Guatemala City, and this large, bohemian hangout is one of the best places to connect with it. There's live music of some kind almost every night from Tuesday to Saturday, usually starting at 9pm, plus occasional poetry readings, films or forums. Entry is usually free, with a charge of US\$2.50 to US\$5 on Friday and Saturday nights.

**Rattle & Hum** (4a Av & 16 Calle, Zona 10) One of the last places in Zona 10 to still be hosting live music, this Australian-owned place has a warm and friendly atmosphere.

**Blue Town Café Bar** (11a Calle 4-51, Zona 1) If La Bodeguita doesn't really suit you, check out this nearby youthful spot that hosts live bands.

**Trovajazz** (Vía 6 No 3-55, Zona 4) Jazz, blues and folk fans should look into what's happening here.

## Discotecas

**La Estación Norte** (Ruta 4, 6-32, Zona 4) As far as mega discos go, this one around the corner from Cuatro Grados Norte is kind of interesting. It's done out in a train theme, with carriages for bars and platforms for dance floors. Dress well, but not over the top.

Zona 10 has a bunch of clubs attracting twenty-something local crowds along 13a Calle and adjacent streets such as 1a Av. The area's exclusivity means that door staff are well versed in the old 'members only' routine. If you want to try your luck, the universal rules apply: dress up, go before 11pm and make sure your group has more women than men in it. Check flyers around town for special nights. Here are a couple to get you started:

**Kahlua** (cnr 15a Calle & 1a Av, Zona 10) For electronica and bright young things.

**Mr Jerry** (13a Calle 1-26, Zona 10) For salsa and merengue.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Two very good cultural centers in Cuatro Grados Norte host regular theatrical performances and other artistic events. It's always worth dropping in or checking their websites to see what's on.

**IGA Cultural Center** ([www.iga.edu](http://www.iga.edu); Ruta 1, 4-05, Zona 4) The Instituto Guatemalteco Americano hosts art exhibitions and live theater.

**Centro Cultural de España** ([www.centrocultural.espana.com.gt](http://www.centrocultural.espana.com.gt); Vía 5 1-23, Zona 4) The Spanish Cultural center hosts an excellent range of events, including live music, film nights and art exhibitions, mostly with free admission.

**Centro Cultural Miguel Ángel Asturias** (☎ 232 4042; 24a Calle 3-81, Zona 1) Cultural events are also held here.

Movie and some other listings can be found in the *Prensa Libre* newspaper. The English language magazine *Revue* ([www.revuemag.com](http://www.revuemag.com)) has events details, although it focuses more on Antigua. Your hotel should have a copy, or know where to get one. Free events mags in Spanish come and go. At the time of writing *El Azar* ([elazarcultural@yahoo.es](mailto:elazarcultural@yahoo.es)) had the best info. Pick up a copy at any cultural center listed above.

## SHOPPING

**Mercado de Artesanías** (Crafts Market; ☎ 472 0208; cnr 5a Calle & 11a Av, Zona 13; ☎ 9:30am-6pm) This sleepy official market near the museums and zoo sells similar goods in less crowded conditions.

For fashion boutiques, electronic goods and other first-world paraphernalia, head for the large shopping malls such as **Centro Comercial Tikal Futura** (Calz Roosevelt 22-43, Zona 11).

For a more everyday Guatemalan experience, take a walk along 6a Av between 8a and 16a Calles in Zona 1. This street is always choked with street stalls noisily hawking everything from cheap pirated DVDs and CDs to shoes, underwear and overalls.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Guatemala City's **Aeropuerto La Aurora** (code GUA; ☎ 2260 6415) is the country's major airport. All international flights to Guatemala City land and take off here. At the time of writing, the country's only *scheduled* domestic flights are between Guatemala City and Flores. The major carrier, Grupo TACA, makes two round-trip flights daily (one in the morning, one in the afternoon), plus an extra flight four mornings a week that continues from Flores to Cancún (Mexico) and flies back from the afternoon. See p87 for contact details.

Tickets to Flores cost around US\$127/204 one-way/round-trip with Grupo TACA, but some travel agents, especially in Antigua, offer large discounts on these prices.

### Bus

Buses from here run all over Guatemala and into Mexico, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador and beyond. Most bus companies have their own terminals, some of which are in Zona 1. The Terminal de Autobuses, in Zona 4, is used only by some 2nd-class buses. The city council has been on a campaign to get long-distance bus companies out of the city center, so it may be wise to double check with Inguat or your hotel about the office location.

## INTERNATIONAL

**Belize City (Belize)** Línea Dorada (☎ 2232 9658; 10a Av & 16 Calle, Zona 1) has 1st-class buses (US\$40, 16 hours), with a few hours wait in Flores. Alternatively, take a bus to Flores/Santa Elena and an onward bus from there.

**Chetumal (Mexico)** Take a bus to Flores/Santa Elena, where daily buses leave for Chetumal (see p192).

**Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado/La Hachadura (Salvadoran border)** Buses to Taxisco depart from the Terminal de Autobuses (US\$2, two hours, every 30 minutes 5am-4pm). Some continue to the border; otherwise change at Taxisco where buses leave for the border every 15 minutes until 5pm.

**Ciudad Tecún Umán/Ciudad Hidalgo (Mexican border)** Fortaleza del Sur (☎ 2230 3390; Calz Aguilar Batres 4-15, Zona 12) has buses (US\$8, six hours, 250km, 20 daily 12:15am-6:30pm).

**Copán (Honduras)** Hedman Alas (☎ 2362 5072/5; 2a Av 8-73, Zona 10) has 1st-class buses (US\$36, five hours, 238km, 5am daily), which continue to San Pedro Sula and La Ceiba. It's cheaper and slower to take a bus to Chiquimula, then another to the border at El Florido, then another to Copán.

**El Carmen/Talismán (Mexican border)** Fortaleza del Sur (☎ 2230 3390; Calz Aguilar Batres 4-15, Zona 12) has buses (US\$6.50, seven hours, 290km, 20 daily 12:15am-6:30pm).

**La Mesilla/Ciudad Cuauhtémoc (Mexican border)** Transportes Velásquez (☎ 2440 3316; Calz Roosevelt 9-56, Zona 7) has buses (US\$9, seven hours, 345km, every 30 minutes 8-11am). From Ciudad Cuauhtémoc there are fairly frequent buses and vans on to Comitán and San Cristóbal de Las Casas.

**Melchor de Mencos (Belizean border)** Fuente del Norte (☎ 2251 3817; 17a Calle 8-46, Zona 1) goes hourly (US\$10.50, 11 hours, 600km), with a special Maya de Oro service (US\$17) at 10:30pm.

**San Salvador (El Salvador)** Melva Internacional (☎ 2331 0874; 3a Av 1-38, Zona 9) runs buses via the border at Valle Nuevo (US\$10, five to six hours, 240km, hourly 5:15am-4:15pm); Tica Bus (☎ 2366 4038; Blvd Los Proceres 26-55, Zona 10) departs daily (US\$9.50, 12:30pm). From San Salvador, Tica Bus services all other Central American capitals except Belize City. King Quality & Confort Lines (☎ 2369 0404/56; 18a Av 1-96, Zona 15) runs luxury buses (US\$20; 6:30am, 8am, 2pm & 3:30pm), with connections to Tegucigalpa & Managua; Pullmantur (☎ 2332 9785/6; Holiday Inn, 1a Av 13-22, Zona 10) has luxury buses (7am, 1pm and 3pm).

**Tapachula (Mexico)** Transportes Galgos (☎ 2253 9131; 7a Av 19-44, Zona 1) has buses (US\$21.50, six to seven hours, 290km, 7:30am and 1:30pm); Línea Dorada (☎ 2232 9658; 16a Calle & 10a Av, Zona 1) departs twice daily (US\$33, 7am and 4pm); Tica Bus (☎ 2366 4038; Blvd Los Proceres 26-55, Zona 10) departs daily (US\$19, noon). From Tapachula buses run to many points in Mexico.

**Tegucigalpa (Honduras)** Hedman Alas (☎ 2362 5072/5; 2a Av 8-73, Zona 10) departs daily (US\$54, 12 hours, 700km, 5am) with 1st-class buses.

## DOMESTIC

**Antigua** (US\$0.65; 1¼hr; 45km; every few minutes 5am-9pm) Buses depart from 1a Av between 3a and 4a Calle, Zona 7. See p113 for details on shuttle minibuses.

**Biotopo del Quetzal** Escobar y Monja Blanca (☎ 2238 1409; 8a Av 15-16, Zona 1) has buses (US\$4, 3½hr, 156km, hourly 4am-5pm), via El Rancho & Purullhá.

**Chichicastenango** Veloz Quichelense (41 Calle btwn 6a & 7a Aves, Zona 8) has buses (US\$1.55, 3hr, 145km, hourly 5am-8pm).

**Chiquimula** Rutas Orientales (☎ 2253 7282; 19 Calle 8-18, Zona 1) departs regularly (US\$2.60, 3hr, 170km, every 30 minutes 4:30am-6pm).

**Cobán** Escobar y Monja Blanca (☎ 2238 1409; 8a Av 15-16, Zona 1) has buses (US\$4.25, 4½hr, 213km, hourly 4am-5pm) stopping at El Rancho & the Biotopo del Quetzal.

**Escuintla** See La Democracia & Puerto San José (US\$1.25, 1hr, 57km)

**Esquipulas** Rutas Orientales (☎ 2253 7282; 19 Calle 8-18, Zona 1) has buses (US\$4, 4½hr, 222km, every 30 minutes 4:30am-6pm).

**Flores/Santa Elena** Fuente del Norte (☎ 2251 3817; 17a Calle 8-46, Zona 1) runs buses (US\$9-17, eight to 10 hours, 500km, 18 daily); Línea Dorada (☎ 2232 9658; 16a Calle & 10 Av, Zona 1) also has buses (US\$23; 9am, 9pm & 10pm).

**Huehuetenango** Los Halcones (☎ 2439 2780; Calz Roosevelt 37-47, Zona 11) departs thrice daily (US\$6.50, five hours, 266km, 7am, 2pm and 5pm); Transportes Velásquez (☎ 2440 3316; Calz Roosevelt 9-56, Zona 7) buses also stop at Huehuetenango. All go by the Interamericana.

**La Democracia** Chatía Gomerana (cnr 4a Calle & 8a Av, Zona 12) has buses (US\$1.50, two hours, 92km, every 30 minutes 6am-4:30pm), stopping at Escuintla.

**Livingston** See Puerto Barrios and Río Dulce; from either place you can reach Livingston by boat (see p179 & p175).

**Monterrico** Take one of the half-hourly buses from the Terminal de Autobuses to Taxisco (US\$1.50, two hours, 5am-4pm) and change there for a bus to La Avellana (US\$1, one hour, 12 daily 7am-6pm) and from there take a boat (see p160).

**Nebaj** Take a bus to Santa Cruz del Quiché and another from there.

**Panajachel** Transportes Rébuli (☎ 2230 2748; 41a Calle btwn 6a & 7a Calles, Zona 8) departs hourly (US\$2, 3½ hours, 150km, 7am-4pm); also by Pullman bus (US\$4.25, 9:30am).

**Poptún** Take a bus headed to Flores.

**Puerto Barrios** Litegua (☎ 2253 8169, 15a Calle 10-40, Zona 1) departs every half-hour (US\$11/5.50 in 1st/stander class Pullman, five hours, 295km, 4:30am-6pm).

**Puerto San José** Various companies run about every 15 minutes (US\$2, 2½hr, 90km, 5am-6pm) from 4a Calle between 7a & 8a Aves, Zona 12, via Escuintla.

**Quetzaltenango** Transportes Álamo (☎ 2251 4838; 12 Av A 0-65, Zona 7) has buses (US\$6, five hours, 205km, six daily 8am-5:30pm); Líneas América (☎ 2232-1432; 2a Av 18-47, Zona 1) has seven buses between 5am and 7:30pm; Transportes Galgos (☎ 2253 4868; 7a Av 19-44, Zona 1) has seven buses between 5:30am-5pm. All are Pullman services.

**Quirigua** Take a Puerto Barrios bus (see p173 for details on getting from the highway to Quirigua ruins).

**Retalhuleu** Fortaleza del Sur (☎ 2230 3390; Calz Aguilar Batres 4-15, Zona 12) has buses (US\$6, three hours, 196km, 20 daily 12:10am-7:10pm).

**Río Dulce** Litegua (☎ 2232 8169, 15a Calle 10-40, Zona 1) departs regularly (US\$6, six hours, 280km; 6am, 9am, 11:30am & 1pm). Flores-bound buses stop at here.

**Salamá** Transportes Dulce María (☎ 2253 4618; 17a Calle 11-32, Zona 1) departs hourly (US\$3, three hours, 150km, 5am-5pm).

**Santa Cruz del Quiché** Buses depart from the Terminal de Autobuses every 15 to 20 minutes (US\$3.50, 3½ hours, 163km, 5am-5pm).

**Santa Elena** See Flores/Santa Elena.

**Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa** Take a bus to Escuintla and another from there.

**Santiago Atitlán** Various companies depart from 4a Calle btwn 8a & 9a Aves, Zona 12 every half-hour (US\$3.50, four hours, 165km, 4am-5pm).

**Sayaxché** Fuente del Norte (☎ 2251 3817; 17a Calle 8-46, Zona 1) departs at 4pm (US\$12) & 7pm (US\$15) via Río Dulce and Flores (11 hours, 560km) and at 5:30pm via Cobán (US\$12, 10 hours, 420km).

**Tecpán** Veloz Poaqueñeña (1a Av btwn 3a & 4a Calles, Zona 7) departs every 15 minutes (US\$1, two hours, 92km, 5:30am-7pm).

**Tikal** Take a bus to Flores/Santa Elena and onward transportation from there.

## Shuttle Minibus

Door-to-door minibuses run from the airport to any address in Antigua (usually US\$10 per person, one hour). Look for signs in the airport exit hall or people holding up 'Antigua Shuttle' signs. The first shuttle leaves for Antigua about 7am and the last around 8pm or 9pm. Shuttle services from Guatemala City to popular destinations such as Panajachel and Chichicastenango (both around US\$25) are offered by travel agencies in Antigua such as Sin Fronteras – see p105.

## GETTING AROUND BUS

If you spend any time in Guatemala City, especially Zona 1, its buses will become a major feature of your existence as they roar along, belching great clouds of black smoke. Still, buses are cheap, frequent and, although very crowded in peak hour, useful. They are not, however, always safe. Theft and robbery are not unusual; there have even been murders on board, but most of this nastiness happens late at night or in outlying suburbs. Buses cost US\$0.15 (Q1) per ride; have a coin ready – you pay the driver as you get on, but he won't hold the bus as you fumble around.

To get from Zona 1 to Zona 10, take bus 82 or 101 southbound on 10a Av between 8a

and 13a Calles. These buses swing west to travel south down 6a Av for 1km or so before swinging southeast along Ruta 6 (Zona 4) then south along Av La Reforma. For the main Inguat tourist office, get off on 6a Av at 22a Calle (Zona 1) and walk east along 22a Calle, then south down the far (east) side of 7a Av.

Traveling north to Zona 1, buses 82 and 101 go along Av La Reforma then 7a Av, Zona 4 (passing right by Inguat) and 9a Av, Zona 1.

## Taxi

Plenty of taxis cruise most parts of the city. Fares are negotiable: always establish your destination and fare before getting in. Zona 1 to Zona 10, or vice-versa, costs around US\$5.50 to US\$8. If you want to phone for a taxi, **Taxi Amarillo Express** (☎ 2232 1515) has metered cabs that often work out cheaper than others, although true *capitaleños* will tell you that taximeters are all rigged and you get a better deal bargaining.

## ANTIGUA

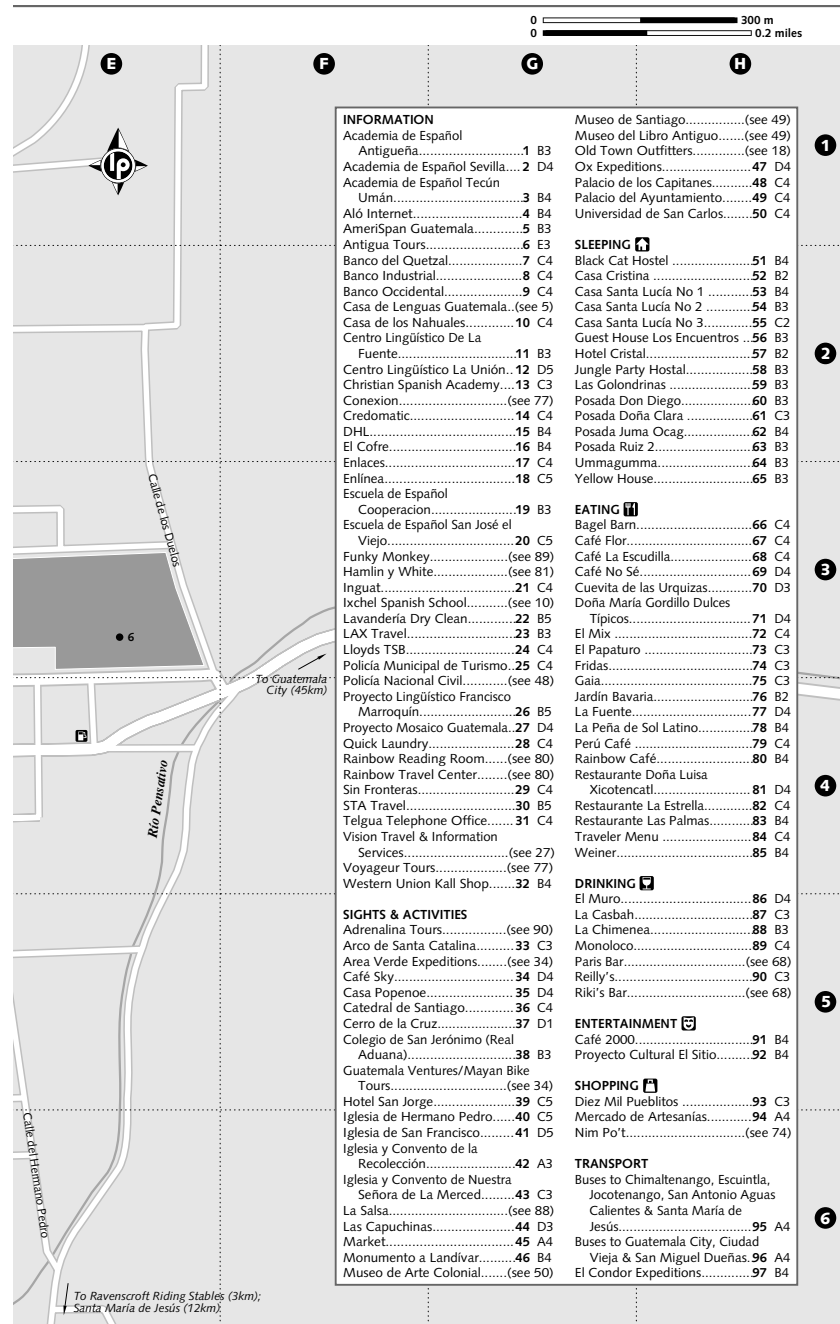
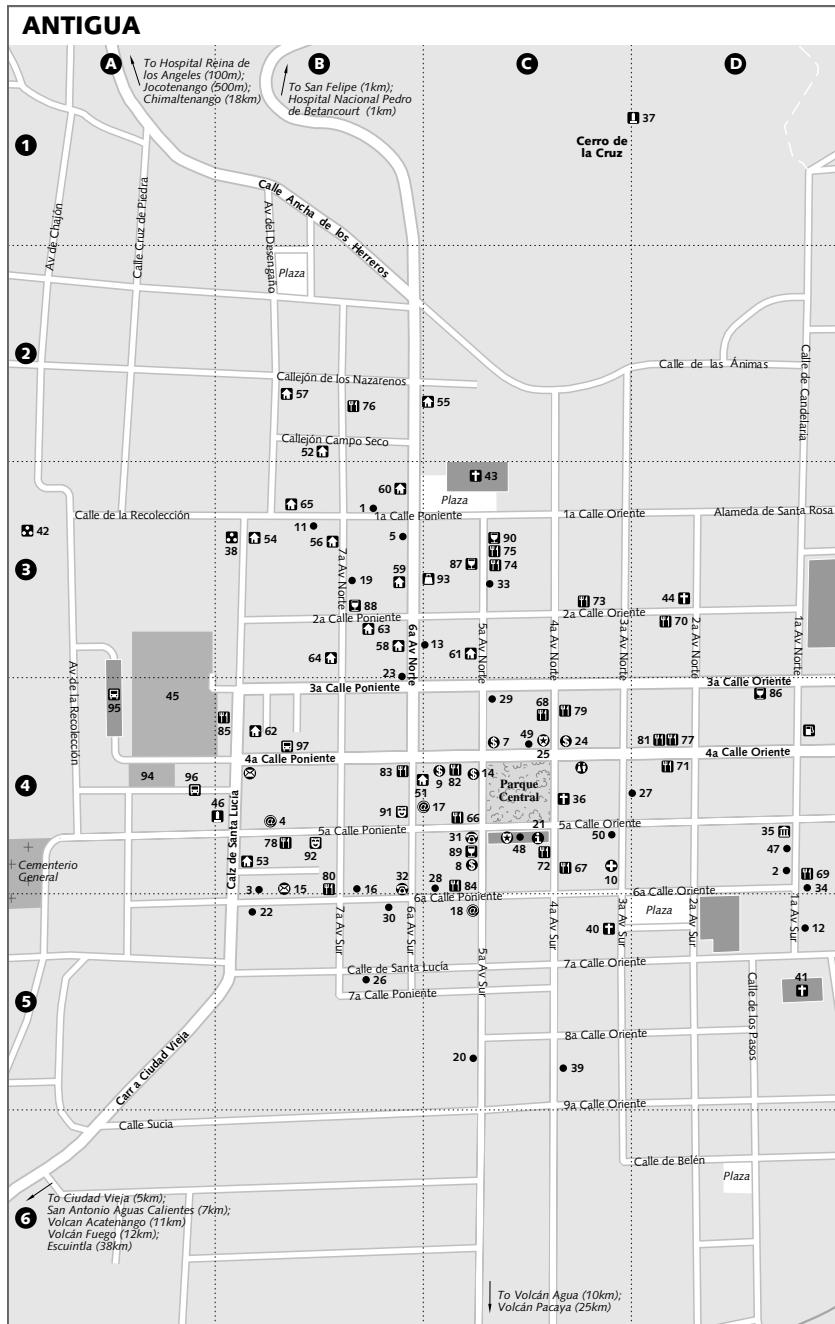
### pop 45,200

In all the long, boring discussions about where the 'real Guatemala' is, you can be sure the word Antigua has never come up. This is fantasyland – what the country would look like if the Scandinavians came in and took over for a couple of years. It's a place where power lines run underground, building codes are adhered to, rubbish is collected, traffic diverted and stray dogs 'disappear' mysteriously in the middle of the night.

But you'd be a fool to miss it. Antigua's setting is gorgeous, nestled between three volcanoes, and its streetscapes offer photo opportunities at every turn. The language-school scene is thriving, hindered only by the fact that nearly everybody speaks at least a little English. The hostels offer colonial-chic accommodations and the dining is some of the best in the country.

The most exciting time to visit Antigua is during Semana Santa – especially Good Friday. It takes planning (reserve hotels at least four months in advance), as this is the busiest week of the year. Other busy times are June through August and November to April.

Antigua is cold after sunset, especially between September and March, so bring warm clothes, a sleeping bag or a blanket. Antigua



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GUATEMALA

GUATEMALA

residents are known by the nickname *panza verde* (green belly), as they are said to eat lots of avocados, which grow abundantly here.

## HISTORY

Antigua was founded on March 10, 1543, and served as the colonial capital for 233 years. The capital was transferred to Guatemala City in 1776, after Antigua was razed in the earthquake of July 29, 1773.

The town was slowly rebuilt, retaining much of its traditional character. In 1944 the Legislative Assembly declared Antigua a national monument, and in 1979 Unesco declared it a World Heritage Site.

Most of Antigua's buildings were constructed during the 17th and 18th centuries, when the city was a rich Spanish outpost and the Catholic church was ascending to power. Many handsome, sturdy colonial buildings remain, and several impressive ruins have been preserved and are open to the public.

## ORIENTATION

Volcán Agua is southeast of the city and visible from most points; Volcán Acatenango is to the west; and Volcán Fuego (Fire) – easily recognizable by its plume of smoke and red glow – is to the southwest. These three volcanoes (which appear on the city's coat of arms) provide easy reference points.

In Antigua compass points are added to the avenidas and calles. Calles run east–west, so 4a Calle west of Parque Central is 4a Calle Poniente; avenidas run north–south, so 3a Av north of Parque Central is 3a Av Norte.

Most buses arrive at the Terminal de Buses, a large open lot just west of the market, four blocks west of Parque Central along 4a Calle Poniente.

## INFORMATION

### Bookstores

**El Cofre** (6a Calle Poniente 26) Second-hand books, mainly in English.

**Hamlin y White** (☎ 7832 7075; 4a Calle Oriente 12A) New and used books in several languages.

**Rainbow Reading Room** (7a Av Sur 8) Thousands of used books in English and Spanish for sale, rent or trade.

### Emergency

**Bomberos Municipales** (Municipal Firefighters;

☎ 7831 0049)

**Policia Municipal de Turismo** (Municipal Tourism Police; ☎ 7832 7290; 4a Av Norte; ☎ 24hr) The helpful

tourism police will go with you to the National Police and assist with the formalities, including any translating that needs to be done.

**Policia Nacional Civil** (National Civil Police; ☎ 7832 0251; Palacio de los Capitanes, Parque Central) Lodge formal reports here.

### Internet Access

Antigua is awash with affordable internet services. The best, for price, connection quality and/or convenience, include the following:

**Aló Internet** (5a Calle Poniente 28; per hr US\$0.80)

**Conexion** (Centro Comercial La Fuente, 4a Calle Oriente 14; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8:30am–7:30pm) All-purpose communications center charges US\$2 per hour to hook up your laptop, plus printing, photocopying and CD-burning services.

**El Cofre** (6a Calle Poniente 26; per hr US\$1)

**Enlaces** (☎ 832 5555; 6a Av Norte 1; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8am–7:30pm Mon–Sat, 8am–1pm Sun) Good connections, smoking and nonsmoking areas.

**Enlínea** (5a Av Sur 12; per hr US\$1)

**Funky Monkey** (Pasaje El Corregidor, 5a Av Sur 6; per hr US\$1)

### Laundry

Laundries are everywhere, especially along 6a Calle Poniente.

**Lavandería Dry Clean** (6a Calle Poniente 49; ☎ 7am–7pm Mon–Sat, 9am–6pm Sun) Charges US\$3.75.

**Quick Laundry** (6a Calle Poniente 14; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Sat) Fast and reliable. Charges US\$3.25 to wash and dry a 2.25kg load.

### Media

The Antigua-based *Revue Magazine* (www.revuemag.com) runs about 90% ads, but has reasonable cultural events information. It's available everywhere.

*La Cuadra*, also Antigua-based, is a much more underground publication, which mixes politics with irreverent commentary.

### Medical Services

**Casa de los Nahuales** (☎ 7832 0068; 3a Av Sur 6)

Offers alternative medical and spiritual services, including Mayan horoscopes, massages, aromatherapy and Bach flower remedies.

**Hospital Nacional Pedro de Betancourt** (☎ 7832 2801) This public hospital in San Felipe, 2km north of the center, has an emergency service.

**Hospital Reina de los Ángeles** (☎ 7832 2258; Calle Ancha de los Herreros 59) If possible, you're probably best off going to a private hospital such as this.

## Money

**Banco del Quetzal** (4a Calle; ☎ 8:30am–7pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat & Sun) Often has the best exchange rates and has a MasterCard ATM outside. Also changes US dollars (cash and traveler's checks). It faces Parque Central.

**Banco Industrial** (5a Av Sur 4; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Fri, to 5pm Sat) Has Visa ATMs and changes US dollars (cash and traveler's checks).

**Credomatic** (Portal del Comercio; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Fri, to 1pm Sat) Gives Visa and MasterCard cash advances. Changes US dollars (cash and traveler's checks).

**Lloyds TSB** (cnr 4a Calle Oriente & 4a Av Norte; ☎ 9am–3:30pm Mon–Fri, 9:30am–12:30pm Sat) Gives Visa and MasterCard advances. Changes US dollars (cash and traveler's checks).

## Post

**DHL** (☎ 832 0073; 6a Calle Poniente 34) Offers door-to-door service.

**Post office** (cnr 4a Calle Poniente & Calz de Santa Lucía) West of Parque Central, near the market.

## Telephone

Many businesses, including several internet cafés, offer cut-rate international calls. Some of these are done through internet telephone – very cheap, however the line quality is quite unpredictable.

**Funky Monkey** (5a Av Sur 6, Pasaje El Corregidor) Offers internet calls anywhere in the world for between US\$0.15 and US\$0.40 per minute.

**Guatemala Ventures** (☎ /fax 832 3383; 1a Av Sur 15) Rents cell phones on which you can call the US for US\$0.10 per minute or Europe for US\$0.20, for US\$10 per week (with a US\$50 deposit).

**Western Union Kall Shop** (6a Av Sur 12; ☎ 8:30am–6pm Mon–Fri, to 4pm Sat) Pay US\$0.30 per minute to call the USA or Canada, US\$0.45 to Mexico, Central America or Europe, US\$0.55 to South America and US\$0.60 to anywhere else.

## Tourist Information

*Antigua Guatemala: The City and its Heritage*, by long-time Antigua resident Elizabeth Bell, is well worth picking up at a bookstore: it describes all of the city's important buildings and museums, and neatly encapsulates Antigua's history and fiestas.

**Inguat** (☎ 7832 0763; Palacio de los Capitanes, Parque Central; ☎ 8am–12:30pm & 2:30–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–12:30pm & 2:30–5pm Sat & Sun) Has free city maps, bus information and schedules of Semana Santa events; staff try to find the answers to any curly ones you might throw at them.

## Travel Agencies

Everywhere you turn in Antigua, you'll see travel agencies offering tours to interesting sites around Antigua and elsewhere in Guatemala, international flights, shuttle minibuses and more. Reputable agencies include the following:

**Adrenalina Tours** (☎ 7832 1108; www.adrenalina.tours.com; 5a Av Norte 31) Specialists in the Western Highlands, can arrange everything from tours and shuttles to domestic and international flights.

**LAX Travel** (☎ /fax 7832 1621; laxantigua@intelnet.net.gt; 3a Calle Poniente 12) International flight specialist.

**Sin Fronteras** (☎ 7832 1017; www.sinfront.com; 5a Av Norte 15A) Sells one-way international air tickets; issues student and youth cards for US\$8; sells International Travel Maps; runs tours to Cuba among other destinations.

**STA Travel** (☎ 7832 4080; www.isyta.com; 6a Calle Poniente 21) Offers student and teacher airfares and a change-of-date and lost-ticket-replacement service for tickets issued by student/youth travel agencies; issues student, teacher and youth cards (US\$8).

**Vision Travel & Information Services** (☎ 7832 3293; www.guatemalainfo.com; Casa de Mito, 3a Av Norte 3) Tours ranging from Tikal to local coffee *fincas* are offered here, as are shuttle services and many guidebooks (including Lonely Planet titles).

**Voyager Tours** (☎ 7832 4237; www.travel.net.gt; Centro Comercial La Fuente, 4a Calle Oriente 14) Operates some good-value shuttle minibus services.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Antigua isn't quite as mellow as it seems. Although you'll probably never have a problem, be wary at night. Armed robberies (and worse) have occurred on Cerro de la Cruz, on Volcán Pacaya and at the cemetery, both of which should be considered off-limits unless you're escorted by the Tourist Police. Crime against tourists has dropped dramatically since the formation of this agency (see opposite for contact details).

## SIGHTS

### Parque Central

The gathering place for locals and visitors alike, on most days the plaza is lined with villagers selling handicrafts to tourists; on Sunday it's mobbed and the streets on the east and west sides are closed to traffic. Things are cheapest late Sunday afternoon, when the peddling is winding down.

The plaza's famous fountain was built in 1738. At night, mariachi or marimba bands play in the park.



### PALACIO DE LOS CAPITANES

Begun in 1558, the Captain-Generals' Palace was the governmental center of all Central America from Chiapas to Costa Rica until 1773. The stately double-arcaded façade, which marches proudly along the southern side of the Parque, was added in the early 1760s. Today the palace houses the Inguat tourist office, national police and office of the governor of Sacatepéquez department.

### CATEDRAL DE SANTIAGO

On the park's east side, Cathedral de Santiago was founded in 1542, damaged by earthquakes many times, badly ruined in 1773 and only partially rebuilt between 1780 and 1820. In the 16th and early 17th centuries, Antigua's churches had lavish baroque interiors, but most – including this one – lost this richness during post-earthquake rebuilding. Inside, a crypt contains the bones of Bernal Díaz del Castillo, historian of the Spanish conquest, who died in 1581. If the front entrance is closed, you can enter at the rear or on the south side.

### PALACIO DEL AYUNTAMIENTO

The City Hall, on the north side of the park, dates mostly from 1743. In addition to town offices, it houses the **Museo de Santiago** (☎ 7832 2868; admission US\$1.30; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-4pm Sat & Sun) in the former town jail, exhibiting furnishings, artifacts and weapons from colonial times. Next door is the **Museo del Libro Antiguo** (Old Book Museum; ☎ 7832 5511; admission US\$1.30; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-4pm Sat & Sun), with exhibits of colonial printing and binding, including a replica of Guatemala's first printing press, which began work here in the 1660s.

### UNIVERSIDAD DE SAN CARLOS

Now in Guatemala City, San Carlos University was founded in Antigua in 1676. What used to be its main building (built in 1763), half a block east of the park, houses the **Museo de Arte Colonial** (☎ 7832 0429; 5a Calle Oriente 5; admission US\$3.25; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-4pm Sat & Sun), with some expressive sculptures of saints and paintings by leading Mexican artists of the era such as Miguel Cabrera and Juan de Correa.

### Churches

Once glorious in their gilded baroque finery, Antigua's churches have suffered indignities from both nature and humankind. Rebuilding

after earthquakes gave the churches thicker walls, lower towers and belfries, and bland interiors, and moving the capital to Guatemala City deprived Antigua of the population needed to maintain the churches in their traditional glory. Still, they are impressive. In addition to those noted here, you'll find many others scattered around town in various states of decay.

### LA MERCED

At the north end of 5a Av is **Iglesia y Convento de Nuestra Señora de La Merced**, Antigua's most striking colonial church.

La Merced's construction began in 1548. Improvements continued until 1717, when the church was ruined by earthquakes. Reconstruction was completed in 1767, but in 1773 an earthquake struck again and the convent was destroyed. Repairs to the church were made from 1850 to 1855; its baroque facade dates from this period. Inside the **monastery ruins** (admission US\$0.40; ☎ 9am-6:30pm) is a fountain 27m in diameter – possibly the largest in Central America.

### SAN FRANCISCO

The town's next most notable church is the Iglesia de San Francisco (east end of 8a Calle). It dates from the mid-16th century, but little of the original building remains. Rebuilding and restoration over the centuries have produced a handsome structure. All that remains of the original church is the resting place of Hermano Pedro de San José Betancourt, a Franciscan monk who founded a hospital for the poor and earned the gratitude of generations. He died here in 1667; his intercession is still sought by the ill, who pray here fervently.

### LAS CAPUCHINAS

The Iglesia y Convento de Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Zaragoza, usually called **Las Capuchinas** (cnr 2a Av Norte & 2a Calle Oriente; nonstudent/student US\$4/2; ☎ 9am-5pm), was founded in 1736 by nuns from Madrid. Destroyed repeatedly by earthquakes, it is now a museum, with exhibits on religious life in colonial times. The building has an unusual structure of 18 concentric cells around a circular patio.

### CHURCH RUINS

A massive ruin at the west end of 1a Calle Poniente, the **Iglesia y Convento de la Recolectión**

(Av de la Recolectión; US\$4; ☎ 9am-5pm), is among Antigua's most impressive monuments. Built between 1701 and 1708, it was destroyed in the 1773 earthquake.

Near La Recolectión, at Alameda de Santa Lucía and 1a Calle Poniente, **Colegio de San Jerónimo** (cnr Calz de Santa Lucía & 1a Calle Poniente; US\$4; ☎ 9am-5pm), also called the Real Aduana, was built in 1757 by friars of the Merced order. Because it did not have royal authorization, it was taken over by Spain's Carlos III in 1761. In 1765 it was designated for use as the Royal Customhouse, but was destroyed in the 1773 earthquake.

### Casa Popenoe

This beautiful **house** (☎ 7832 3087; 1a Av Sur 2; admission US\$1.30; ☎ 2-4pm Mon-Sat) was built in 1636 by Don Luis de las Infantas Mendoza. After the 1773 earthquake, the house stood desolate for more than 150 years until it was bought in 1929 by agricultural scientist William Popenoe and his wife Dorothy. Their painstaking, authentic restoration yields a fascinating glimpse of how a royal official lived in 17th-century Antigua.

### Monumento a Landívar

At the west end of 5a Calle Poniente is the Landívar Monument, a structure of five colonial-style arches set in a little park. The poetry of Rafael Landívar, an 18th-century Jesuit priest, is esteemed as the colonial period's best, even though he wrote much of it in Italy after the Jesuits' expulsion from Guatemala. Landívar's Antigua house was nearby on 5a Calle Poniente.

### Market

At the west end of 4a Calle Poniente, across Calzada de Santa Lucía, sprawls the market – chaotic, colorful and always bustling. The frenzied mornings are the best time to come. Official market days are Monday, Thursday and Saturday.

### Cerro de la Cruz

On the town's northeast side is the Hill of the Cross, offering fine views over Antigua and south toward Volcán Agua. Don't come here without a Tourist Police escort (see p104), as it's notorious for muggers. The Tourist Police was formed because of robberies here; reportedly no crime against tourists has taken place on the hill since.

## ACTIVITIES

Two professional, established and friendly outfits offering a big range of activities are **Old Town Outfitters** (☎ /fax 7832 4171; www.bikeguatemala.com; 5a Av Sur 12C) and **Guatemala Ventures/Mayan Bike Tours** (☎ /fax 7832 3383; www.guatemalaventures.com; 1a Av Sur 15). Drop by either place to chat about possibilities.

**Ox Expeditions** (☎ 7832 0074; www.guatemalavolcano.com; 1 Av Sur 4B) are a new outfit offering rigorous climbing opportunities in the area. Part of their profits goes to local environmental projects.

### Climbing the Volcanoes

Around foreigners climbing the volcanoes near Antigua were sometimes robbed, raped or murdered, recent tourist safety measures have reduced the problem dramatically.

### VOLCÁN PACAYA

Because of its status as the only active volcano near Antigua, Volcán Pacaya (2552m) attracts the most tourists and the most bandits. The situation is improving, however, since each group is now accompanied by a security guard (little comfort when he turns out to be pre-pubescent). Guards or no, a hike up Pacaya still entails risks. Still, travelers now are more likely to be hurt by flaming rocks and sulfurous fog than criminals. Climbers have suffered serious, even fatal, injuries when the volcano erupted unexpectedly while they were near the summit.

Get reliable safety advice before you climb. Check with your embassy in Guatemala City or with the tourist office in Antigua. If you decide to go, make sure you're with reputable guides, arranged through an established agency.

Wear adequate footwear (volcanic rock can shred shoes), warm clothing and, in the rainy season, some sort of rain gear. Carry snacks, water and a flashlight.

### OTHER VOLCANOES

The volcanoes nearer Antigua (Agua, Fuego and Acatenango) are inactive and attract fewer tourists. Still, they are impressive and offer magnificent views.

**Volcán Agua** (3766m) looms over Antigua, south of town. Various outfitters in Antigua can furnish details about the climb. To get to the mountain, follow 2a Av Sur or Calle de los Pasos south toward El Calvario (2km), then

continue via San Juan del Obispo (another 3km) to Santa María de Jesús, a tiny village in the shadow of the volcano. This is the jumping-off point for treks. The main plaza is also the bus terminal. Comedor & Hospedaje El Oasis, a tidy little pensión, offers meals and beds.

You could also climb the other two volcanoes near Antigua: **Volcán Acatenango** (3976m) and **Volcán Fuego** (3763m). All three companies listed above offer tours up these volcanoes.

## Cycling

**Old Town Outfitters** (☎ /fax 7832 4171; www.bikeguate.com; 5a Av Sur 12C) rents quality bikes with gloves, helmets and maps for US\$8/12 per half/whole day. It also has a great range of mountain bike tours at all levels of difficulty, from the gentle Sip & Cycle Coffee Tour (US\$25) or the exhilarating one-day Cielo Grande Ridge Ride (US\$45) to the two-day Pedal & Paddle Tour (US\$140 to US\$175), which includes kayaking and hiking at the Lago de Atitlán.

**Guatemala Ventures/Mayan Bike Tours** (☎ /fax 832 3383; www.guatemalaventures.com; 1a Av Sur 15) also rents good mountain bikes for US\$2 per hour, and offers some tasty bike tours from intermediate to expert levels. It does hike-and-bike tours to Volcán Acatenango (US\$49 to US\$109, one or two days) and bike-and-kayak trips to Lago de Atitlán and Monterrico (both two days, US\$129).

## Horseback Riding

**Ravenscroft Riding Stables** (☎ 7832 6229 afternoons; 2a Av Sur 3, San Juan del Obispo), 3km south of Antigua on the road to Santa María de Jesús, offers English-style riding, with scenic rides of three, four or five hours in the valleys and hills around Antigua, for US\$15 per hour per person. Reservations and information are available through the **Hotel San Jorge** (☎ 7832 3132; 4a Av Sur 13). You can reach the stables on a bus bound for Santa María de Jesús.

Guatemala Ventures/Mayan Bike Tours offers full-day rides on trails around Volcán Agua for US\$49, although, at the time of writing, these had been cancelled due to security concerns.

## White-Water Rafting

**Area Verde Expeditions** (☎ /fax 7832 3383; mayanbike@guate.net; 1a Av Sur 15), in Café Sky, offers a variety of one- to five-day rafting tours year-round.

**Sin Fronteras** (☎ 7832 1017; 3a Calle Poniente 12), representing Maya Expeditions in Antigua, and it also leads a variety of day trips and multiday tours on several rivers.

## COURSES

### Dancing

You can learn to salsa at several places around town. **La Salsa** (☎ 5400 0315; www.lasalsadance.com; 7 Av Norte 11) comes highly recommended, both for teaching style and lack of 'slave factor.'

### Spanish

Antigua is world-famous for its many Spanish-language schools. Prices, teacher quality and student satisfaction vary greatly, so shop around. Ask for references and talk to ex-students. The Inguat tourist office has a list of reputable schools, including the following:

**Academia de Español Antiguaña** (☎ 7832 7241; www.spanishacademyantigua.com; 1a Calle Poniente 10) A highly recommended school, only hiring experienced teachers. They can arrange volunteer work in the area too.

**Academia de Español Sevilla** (☎ /fax 7832 5101; www.sevillantigua.com; 1a Av Sur 8) This school has a good free activity program, and offers a shared student house as an accommodation option.

**Academia de Español Tecún Umán** (☎ /fax 7832 2792; www.escuelatecun.com; 6a Calle Poniente 34A) Also has a school on Lago de Atitlán.

**Casa de Lenguas Guatemala** (☎ 7832 4846; www.casadelenguas.com; 6a Av Norte 40) This school has group classes (US\$65 per week) as well as individual classes (US\$95 per week).

**Centro Lingüístico De La Fuente** (☎ 7832 2711; www.delafuenteschool.com; 1a Calle Poniente 27)

**Centro Lingüístico La Unión** (☎ /fax 7832 7337; www.launion.conexion.com; 1a Av Sur 21) Many classes take place in the school's pretty patio; discounts are given for good test results!

**Christian Spanish Academy** (☎ 7832 3922; www.learnscs.com; 6a Av Norte 15) Very professional outfit where students get to report on the teachers weekly.

**Escuela de Español Cooperación** (☎ 7812 2482; www.geocities.com/escuela\_coop; 7 Av Norte, No 15B) A highly recommended school run as a cooperative, ensuring teachers get paid fairly.

**Escuela de Español San José el Viejo** (☎ 7832 3028; www.sanjoelviejo.com; 5a Av Sur 34) Professional, 30-teacher school with pool, superb gardens, tennis court and own tasteful accommodations.

**Ixchel Spanish School** (☎ /fax 7832 7137; www.ixchel.school.com; 3a Av Sur 6) Comfortable, welcoming school with enjoyable group activities and lush garden.

**Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín** (☎ /fax 7832 2886; www.plfm-antigua.org; 7a Calle Poniente 31) Antigua's oldest Spanish school, founded in 1971; it's run by a nonprofit foundation working to preserve Maya languages and culture; courses in some of these are also available.

Classes start Mondays at most schools, though you can usually be placed with a teacher any day of the week. The busiest seasons are January, and April to August – some schools request advance reservations for these times. Instruction is usually one-on-one and costs between US\$65 to US\$115 per week for four hours of classes daily, five days per week. You can enroll for up to 10 hours a day of instruction. Most schools offer room and board with local families, where you'll often have your own room, usually with shared bathrooms, for around US\$55 per week (including three meals daily except Sunday). Homestays are supposed to promote the 'total immersion' concept of language learning, but often there are several foreigners staying with one family and separate mealtimes for students and the family. Make a point of inquiring about such details if you really want to be totally immersed.

Antigua is not for everyone who wants to study Spanish; there are so many foreigners about, it takes some real discipline to converse in Spanish rather than your native tongue. Many enjoy this social scene, but if you think it will bother you, consider studying in Xela, El Petén or elsewhere, where there are fewer foreign students and more opportunities to dive into Spanish.

## VOLUNTEERING

**AmeriSpan Guatemala** (☎ 7832 0164; www.amerispan.com; 6a Av Norte 40A) Can hook you up with volunteer opportunities all over Guatemala. It charges a US\$50 registration fee.

**Proyecto Mosaico Guatemala** (☎ /fax 7932 0955; Casa de Mito, 3a Av Norte 3; ☎ 2-4pm Mon-Fri) A nonprofit organization providing volunteers and resources to more than 60 projects in Guatemala. It's interested in people with medical experience but there's work for periods from one week to one year doing things as varied as carpentry, teaching, environmental protection, helping HIV-positive kids and organic farming. You should be over 18 and fit.

## TOURS

Elizabeth Bell, author of books on Antigua, leads three-hour cultural walking tours of the town (in English and/or Spanish) at 9:30am Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. On Monday and Thursday tours start at 2pm. The cost is US\$18 (US\$15 for Spanish students and project volunteers). Reservations are suggested and can be made at **Antigua Tours** (☎ /fax 7832 5821; www.antiguatours.net; Portal de Santo Domingo, 3a Calle Oriente 28, in Casa Santo Domingo Hotel). Vision Travel and Sin Fronteras (p105) also offer daily city walking tours, visiting a variety of convents, ruins and museums. These firms also do interesting tours of villages and coffee or macadamia plantations for US\$20 to US\$30.

Cycling, horesback riding and white-water rafting tours are also available (see p108).

Many travel agencies offer tours to more distant places, including Tikal, Copán, Río Dulce, the Cobán area, Monterrico, Chichicastenango, Guatemala City and Panajachel (see p105). Two-day trips to Tikal, flying from Guatemala City to Flores and back, cost between US\$150 and US\$300, largely depending on where you stay. A hectic one-day Tikal round-trip costs US\$150 to US\$180. Two-day land tours to Copán (some also including Quiriguá and Río Dulce) are between US\$115 and US\$150.

On long-distance tours be sure of what you are paying for – some of the cheaper 'tours' simply amount to shuttling you to Guatemala City then popping you on a public bus.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Antigua really comes alive in **Semana Santa** (Holy Week), when hundreds of people dress in purple robes to accompany the most revered sculptural images from the city's churches in daily street processions remembering Christ's Crucifixion and the events surrounding it. Dense clouds of incense envelop the parades and the streets are covered in breathtakingly elaborate *alfombras* (carpets) of colored sawdust and flower petals.

The fervor and the crowds peak on Good Friday, when an early morning procession departs from La Merced church, and a late afternoon one leaves from the Escuela de Cristo church. There may also be an enactment of the Crucifixion in Parque Central. Have ironclad Antigua room reservations well in advance of Semana Santa, or plan to stay in Guatemala City or another town and commute to the festivities.

Processions, *velaciones* (vigils) and other events actually go on every weekend through Lent, the 40-day period prior to Holy Week. Antigua's tourist office has schedules of everything, and the booklet *Lent and Holy Week in Antigua*, written by Elizabeth Bell, gives explanations.

It seems that Guatemala City's entire population of pickpockets decamps to Antigua for Semana Santa; they target foreign tourists especially.

## SLEEPING

When checking a budget establishment, look at several rooms, as some are much better than others.

**Posada Ruiz 2** (2a Calle Poniente 25; s/d with shared bathroom US\$3/6) The rough-hewn archway over the entrance is by far the most impressive aspect of this super cheapie, but it has a sociable patio area and the bathrooms are moderately clean.

**Guest House Los Encuentros** (☎ 7832 4232; 7a Av Norte 60; dm/s/d US\$5/6/12; 📺) Nothing fancy going on here – the rooms are basic, the bathrooms shared, but this family-run place has a great feel to it in this often-impersonal town. Kitchen access and breakfast is available.

**Ummagumma** (☎ 7832 4413; www.ummagumma.hostel.blogspot.com; 7a Av Norte 15; dm/s/d US\$5/7/12, s/d with bathroom US\$10/20) Slightly tatty at the edges, the Ummagumma has some of the best atmosphere in town – it's a great place to relax, meet people and hang out on the leafy rooftop terrace. Kitchen access for guests.

**Black Cat Hostel** (☎ 7832 1229; www.blackcatantigua.com; 6a Av Norte 1A; dm US\$6.50) The Black Cat is a near-inexplicably happening hostel right in the middle of the action. The dorms are cramped, you can't use the kitchen, but the place is hopping, both as a hostel and the bar out front for the nightly happy hour. Plenty of tours are on offer, plus free movies, good local advice and a huge breakfast included in the price.

**Jungle Party Hostel** (☎ 7832 0463; www.jungleparty.hostel.com; 6a Av Norte 20; dm US\$7) One of Antigua's hottest hostels keeps going from strength to strength, with a great hostel atmosphere, bar service, hammock hangouts and the famous all-you-can-eat Saturday barbecue.

**Hotel Cristal** (☎ 7832 4177; Av el Desengaño 25; s/d US\$8/12, s/d with bathroom US\$10/14) There's some good solid value on offer here, even if the place is a little out of the center. Rooms at

the front can be noisy and the bathrooms aren't huge, but it's well priced by Antigua standards.

**Casa Santa Lucía No 1** (☎ 7832 7418; Calz de Santa Lucía Sur 9; s or d US\$13) Of all the Santa Lucías in town, this is probably the nicest and definitely the most central. Why is it the cheapest? Another mystery of Guatemala...

**Posada Juma Ocag** (☎ 7832 3109; Calz de Santa Lucía Norte 13; s/d US\$12/14) Sun bursts through the patio at this cheerful little hotel – the budget prices belying the tranquil atmosphere. Grab a room upstairs for even more peace in this central location.

**Yellow House** (☎ 7832 6646; main@granjaguar.com; 1a Calle Poniente 24; s/d US\$8/16; 📺 📺) Rooms here are simple but clean, with comfy beds, wooden furniture, pastel walls and big mosquito nets on the windows. Try to get one upstairs. The shared bathrooms are immaculate and use solar-heated water. Rates include use of the guest kitchen, unlimited internet and drinking water.

**Posada Doña Clara** (☎ 5432 6091; 5a Av Norte 16; s/d US\$12/18) The maze of rooms set around leafy patios just keeps unwinding, but persevere and head for the rear upstairs, where they're most spacious and the balconies come with volcano views.

**Casa Cristina** (☎ 7832 0623; www.casa-cristina.com; Callejón Campo Seco 3A; s/d US\$16/20) A near-overdose of quaint in this comfy little two-story hotel – they lay it on thick with the indigenous bedspreads and soft pastel paint job, but it's a quiet spot in a good area and a good deal for the price.

**Las Golondrinas** (☎ 7832 3343; drrios@intel.net.gt; 6a Av Norte 34 Apt 6; s/d US\$12/24, with kitchen US\$15/30) This is an excellent option for serious self-caterers; on offer here are apartment-like rooms with balconies (and views). Good weekly and monthly discounts are usually available.

If the above are full, don't despair, Antigua has many more hotels. Here are a few good ones:

**Posada Don Diego** (☎ 7832 1401; posadadon\_diego@hotmail.com; 6a Av Norte 52; s/d US\$18/20) No-frill rooms set around a pretty patio.

**Casa Santa Lucía No 3** (☎ 7832 1386; 6a Av Norte; s/d US\$19) A stylish colonial-style hotel with plain rooms boasting blasting hot showers.

**Casa Santa Lucía No 2** (☎ 7832 7418; Calz de Santa Lucía Norte 21; s or d US\$19; 📺) Spacious rooms with plenty of colonial charm.

## EATING

The cheapest eating in town is the good, clean, tasty food served from street stalls a block west of Parque Central in the early evening. Small restaurants north of the bus station on Alameda de Santa Lucía do good value set lunches for around US\$2.50. Note that most formal restaurants in Antigua whack on a 10% tip before presenting the bill. It should be itemized, but if in doubt, ask.

## Guatemalan & Latin American

**Doña María Gordillo Dulces Típicos** (4a Calle Oriente 11) This shop opposite Hotel Aurora is filled with traditional Guatemalan sweets, and there's often a crowd of Antigüenses lined up to buy them.

**Café La Escudilla** (4a Av Norte 4; pasta US\$2.50-3.25, meat US\$3.50-5.50; 📺 7am-midnight) Hugely popular with travelers and language students, La Escudilla is an inexpensive patio restaurant with tinkling fountain, lush foliage and some tables under the open sky. The food on offer is simple but well prepared and there are plenty of vegetarian options, as well as economical breakfasts and a one-course set lunch or dinner for under US\$2.40. At the back you'll find Riki's Bar.

**Restaurante Doña Luisa Xicotencatl** (4a Calle Oriente 12; sandwiches & breakfast dishes US\$3-4; 📺 7am-9:30pm) Probably Antigua's best-known restaurant, this is a place to enjoy the colonial patio ambience over breakfast or a light meal. The bakery here sells many kinds of breads, including whole grain. Check out the hot-from-the-oven banana bread at around 2pm daily.

**La Peña de Sol Latino** (5a Calle Poniente; mains US\$3-8; 📺 lunch & dinner) With good, cheap and innovative food and free live music nightly, this little indoor/outdoor place is fast becoming one of the hottest bar-restaurants in town. Get there before 7pm for a good table.

**Cuevita de las Urquizas** (2 Calle Oriente 9D; mains US\$4-5; 📺 lunch & dinner) Sumptuous *típico* (regional specialties) is the draw here – all kept warming in earthenware pots out front – a dirty trick as the smells wafting out are impossible to go past. Hugely popular with locals, it's worth getting here early to avoid waiting for a table.

**Fridas** (5a Av Norte 29; snacks US\$2.50-4, mains US\$6-8; 📺 lunch & dinner) Dedicated to Ms Kahlo, this bright bar-cum-restaurant serves tasty, if not cheap, Mexican fare and is always busy.

**Perú Café** (4a Av Norte 7; mains US\$7-11; 📺 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Enjoy tasty Peruvian specialties

at this pretty patio restaurant. The excellent *causas* are like burgers, with layers of mashed potato instead of bread; *ají de gallina* is chicken in yellow chili sauce with baked potatoes, parmesan and rice.

**El Papaturo** (2 Calle Oriente 4; mains US\$8-11; 📺 lunch & dinner) If you've got a hankering for Salvadorian food, but you're not likely to make it that far, check this place out for some authentic dishes and good steak plates.

## International Cuisine

**Bagel Barn** (5a Calle Poniente 2; bagels US\$2-3.25; 📺 6am-9pm) Just off Parque Central, this is popular for bagels with almost any filling, and breakfasts and coffee. They also offer decaf espresso, although we fail to see the point.

**Restaurante La Estrella** (4a Calle Poniente 3; mains US\$2.50-4; 📺 lunch & dinner) An efficient, friendly, economical Chinese restaurant, the Estrella has several tofu options.

**Jardín Bavaria** (7a Av Norte 49; breakfast US\$2.20, mains US\$2.20-4.50; 📺 7am-1am Mon-Sat, off-season 1pm-1am Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) This is a bar-restaurant with a verdant patio and spacious roof terrace, offering a mixed Guatemalan-German menu, including buffalo steak and suckling pig. There's a good range of beers and US\$4.50 Sunday buffet lunches.

**Café No Sé** (1 Av Sur 11C; mains US\$3-5; 📺 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Advertising uncomfortable seats, confused staff and battered books, this is a pleasantly down-beat option amongst all of Antigua's finery. There's a little bit of everything here – breakfast (including one option of a shot of mescal and two boiled eggs; US\$2.50), burritos, fried chicken, sandwiches, movies, a tequila bar and live music.

**Weiner** (Calz Santa Lucía Norte 8; mains US\$3-7) Possibly the biggest Wiener schnitzel you've ever seen, alongside some good value set lunches and the sort of beer list you'd expect from a German restaurant.

**Traveler Menu** (6a Calle Poniente 14; mains US\$4-5; 📺 dinner Tue-Sun) Not nearly as unimaginative as the name would imply, this little bar and restaurant serves up big portions of food that you may have been craving (chow mein, curry etc) in an intimate candlelit environment.

**Rainbow Café** (7a Av Sur 8; mains US\$4-6; 📺 7am-midnight) Fill up from an eclectic range of all-day breakfasts, curries, stir-fries, Cajun chicken, guacamole and more, and enjoy the relaxed patio atmosphere. The Rainbow has a bookshop and travel agency on the premises.

**Café Flor** (4a Av Sur 1; mains US\$4-8; ☎ 11am-11pm)

The Flor makes a good stab at Thai, Indonesian and Chinese food. Dishes come in generous quantities and there's live music nightly.

**Restaurante Las Palmas** (6a Av Norte 14; mains US\$6-8) Twinkling lights and gentle guitar music make this a popular romantic dinner spot. The staples are chicken, seafood, steaks and pasta; try the fettuccine with goat's cheese, shrimps, herbs and garlic.

**Gaia** (5a Av Norte 35; mains US\$7-10; ☎ lunch & dinner) An almost painfully hip Middle Eastern flavored restaurant with an excellent menu, long wine and cocktail list and *margilehs* (water pipes) for US\$6.

Here are some other goodies:

**El Mix** (4 Calle Sur 2A; mains US\$3-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Good breakfasts and a mind-boggling array of make-your-own sandwich options.

**La Fuente** (4a Calle Oriente 14; mains US\$4; ☎ 7am-7pm) A pretty courtyard with lots of vegetarian options and good breakfasts.

**DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE**

Antigua's bar scene is jumping, except for the nationwide law that says that all bars must close at 1am. Many people roll in from Guatemala City for a spot of Antigua-style revelry on Friday and Saturday. Eateries La Peña de Sol Latino, Café No Sé and Rainbow Café are all good places to go for drinks.

**Riki's Bar** (4a Av Norte 4; ☎ until midnight) Behind Café La Escudilla this old favorite gets packed every evening with Antigua's young, international scene of locals, travelers and language students. For quieter moments, slip through to the low-key Paris Bar in the rear.

**Monoloco** (5a Av Sur 6, Pasaje El Corregidor) The 'Crazy Monkey' is the place that everybody goes until they get sick of it, so it has a real party atmosphere with plenty of newcomers. It's a two-level place (semi-open-air upstairs, with benches and long tables), with sports on TV and good-value food.

**Reilly's** (5a Av Norte 31; ☎ 1:30pm-1am) Guatemala's only Irish bar (so far), Reilly's is sociable and relaxed, with a young international clientele. Sadly, small bottles of Guinness are US\$4.50 – more than double the cost of local beers!

**El Muro** (3a Calle Oriente 19D) A friendly little neighborhood pub with a good range of beers, it has some decent snacks and plenty of sofas to lounge on.

**Discotecas**

**La Casbah** (☎ 832 2640; 5a Av Norte 30; admission US\$2.50-4 with 1 drink; ☎ 9pm-1am Mon-Sat) This two-level disco near the Santa Catalina arch has a warm atmosphere and is gay-friendly and quite a party most nights.

**La Chimenea** (cnr 7a Av Norte & 2a Calle Poniente) This is the latest hot spot for salsa and merengue dancers.

**ENTERTAINMENT****Arts & Concerts**

**Proyecto Cultural El Sitio** (☎ 7832 3037; www.elsitio cultural.org, in Spanish; 5a Calle Poniente 15) This arts center has lots going on, from music, dance and theater events (including plays in English) to exhibition openings most Saturdays. Stop by to check the schedule.

**Cinema & TV**

Several cinema houses show a wide range of Latin American, general-release and art-house movies, some in English, some in Spanish, usually for US\$1.30 to US\$2. Check the programs of the following:

**Bagel Barn** (5a Calle Poniente 2) Café with movies at 8pm.

**Café 2000** (☎ 832 2981; 6a Av Norte 2) Café showing free movies on big screen.

**Proyecto Cultural El Sitio** Movies usually on Tuesday evening.

For North American and European sports on TV, check the programs posted at Café 2000 and Monoloco.

**SHOPPING**

**Nim Po't** (www.nimpot.com; 5a Av Norte 29) This shop boasts a huge collection of Maya dress, as well as hundreds of masks and other wood carvings. This sprawling space is packed with *huipiles*, *cortes* (wraparound skirts), *fajas* (waist sashes) and more, all arranged according to region, so it makes for a fascinating visit whether you're in the market or not.

**Diez Mil Pueblitos** (6a Av Norte 21; diezmilpueblitos@yahoo.com) One of the country's few exclusively fair-trade stores (where the majority of profits go to producers), it sells an excellent selection of quality handmade products as well as crepes and coffee in the café out back.

**Mercado de Artesanías** (Handicrafts Market; 4a Calle Poniente; ☎ 8am-8pm) At the west end of town by the main market, this market sells masses of Guatemalan handicrafts – mostly not top

quality but with plenty of colorful variety in masks, blankets, jewelry, purses and so on. Don't be afraid to bargain.

**GETTING THERE & AROUND**

**Bus**  
Buses to Guatemala City, Ciudad Vieja and San Miguel Dueñas arrive and depart from a street just south of the market. Buses to Chimaltenango, Escuintla, San Antonio Aguas Calientes and Santa María de Jesús go from the street outside the west side of the market. If you're heading out to local villages, it's best to go early in the morning and return by mid-afternoon, as bus services drop off dramatically as evening approaches.

To reach highland towns such as Chichicastenango, Quetzaltenango, Huehuetenango or Panajachel (except for the one direct daily bus to Panajachel), take one of the frequent buses to Chimaltenango, on the Interamericana Hwy, and catch an onward bus from there. Making connections in Chimaltenango is easy, as many friendly folks will jump to your aid as you alight from one bus looking for another. Alternatively, you can take a bus from Antigua heading toward Guatemala City, get off at San Lucas Sacatepéquez and change buses there – this takes a little longer, but you'll be boarding closer to the capital so you're more likely to get a seat.

**Chimaltenango** (US\$0.50, 30 minutes, 19km, every 15 minutes 5am-7pm)

**Ciudad Vieja** (US\$0.30, 15 minutes, 7km) Take a San Miguel Dueñas bus.

**Escuintla** (US\$0.80, one hour, 39km, 16 buses daily, 5:30am-5pm)

**Guatemala City** (US\$1, 1¼ hours, 45km) Every few minutes between 6am-7pm.

**Panajachel** El Condor Expeditions (☎ 5498 9812; 4a Calle Poniente 34) One Pullman bus at 7am daily (US\$5, 2½ hours, 146km).

**San Antonio Aguas Calientes** (US\$0.30, 30 minutes, 9km, every 20 minutes 6:30am-7pm)

**San Miguel Dueñas** (US\$0.25, 30 minutes, 10km) Buses every few minutes between 6am-7pm (placards just say 'Dueñas').

**Santa María de Jesús** (US\$0.30, 30 minutes, 12km, buses every 45 minutes 6am-7:30pm)

**Shuttle Minibus**

Numerous travel agencies offer frequent and convenient shuttle services to places including Guatemala City, La Aurora International Airport, Panajachel and Chichi. They also go

less frequently (usually on weekends) to places further afield such as Río Dulce, Copán Ruinas (Honduras) and Monterrico. These services cost a lot more than ordinary buses (for example, from US\$7 to US\$10 to Guatemala City, as opposed to US\$1 on a chicken bus), but they are comfortable and convenient, with door-to-door service at both ends

**Taxi & Tuk Tuk**

Taxis and tuk tuks wait where the Guatemala City buses stop and on the east side of Parque Central. A ride in town costs around US\$1.60. A taxi to or from Guatemala City usually costs US\$30 (US\$40 after midnight).

**THE HIGHLANDS – LAGO DE ATITLÁN**

Guatemala's most dramatic region – the highlands – stretch from Antigua to the Mexican border northwest of Huehuetenango. Here the verdant hills sport emerald green grass, cornfields and towering stands of pine, and every town and village has a story.

The traditional values and customs of Guatemala's indigenous peoples are strongest in the highlands. Maya dialects are the first language, Spanish a distant second. The age-old culture based on maize (from which the Maya believe that humans were created) is still alive; a sturdy cottage set in the midst of a thriving *milpa* (cornfield) is a common sight. And on every road you'll see men, women and children carrying burdens of *leña* (firewood), to be used for heating and cooking.

The poster child for Guatemala's natural beauty, the volcano-ringed Lago de Atitlán has been attracting tourists for decades. Surrounded by small villages, the lake deals with its popularity well. The only place that feels really played out is Panajachel – the other villages maintain a quiet air, while offering a reasonable degree of comfort. This area was particularly badly hit by Hurricane Stan – see (p.125) for more information.

**DANGERS & ANNOYANCES**

Although most visitors never experience any trouble, there have been incidents of robbery, rape and murder in the highlands. The most frequent sites for robberies are unfortunately some of the most beautiful – the paths that

### THAT'S ONE SMOKIN' GOD

The Spanish called him San Simón, the ladinos (persons of mixed indigenous and European race) named him Maximón and the Maya know him as Rilaj Maam (ree-lah-mahm). By any name, he's a deity revered throughout the Guatemalan Highlands. Assumed to be a combination of Maya gods, Pedro de Alvarado (the Spanish conquistador of Guatemala) and the biblical Judas, San Simón is an effigy to which Guatemalans of every stripe go to make offerings and ask for blessings. The effigy is usually housed by a member of a *cofradía* (Maya Catholic brotherhood), moving from one place to another from year to year, a custom anthropologists believe was established to maintain the local balance of power. The name, shape and ceremonies associated with this deity vary from town to town, but a visit will be memorable no matter where you encounter him. For a small fee, photography is usually permitted, and offerings of cigarettes, liquor or candles are always appreciated.

In Santiago Atitlán, Maximón is a wooden figure draped in colorful silk scarves and smoking a fat cigar. Locals guard and worship him, singing and managing the offerings made to him (including your US\$0.25 entry fee). His favorite gifts are Payaso cigarettes and Venado rum, but he often has to settle for the cheaper firewater Quetzalteca Especial. Fruits and gaudy, flashing electric lights decorate his chamber; effigies of Jesus Christ and Christian saints lie or stand either side of Maximón and his guardians. Fires may be burning in the courtyard outside as offerings are made to him.

In Nahualá, between Los Encuentros and Quetzaltenango, the Maximón effigy is à la Picasso: a simple wooden box with a cigarette protruding from it. Still, the same offerings are made and the same sort of blessings asked for. In Zunil, near Quetzaltenango, the deity is called San Simón but is similar to Santiago's Maximón in custom and form.

San Jorge La Laguna on Lago Atitlán is a very spiritual place for the highland Maya; here they worship Rilaj Maam. It is possible that the first effigy was made near here, carved from the *palo de pito* tree that spoke to the ancient shamans and told them to preserve their culture, language and traditions by carving Rilaj Maam. (*Palo de pito* flowers can be smoked to induce hallucinations). The effigy in San Jorge looks like a joker, with an absurdly long tongue.

In San Andrés Itzapa near Antigua, Rilaj Maam has a permanent home, and is brought out on October 28 and paraded about in an unparalleled pagan festival. This is an all-night, hedonistic party where dancers grab the staff of Rilaj Maam to harness his power and receive magical visions. San Andrés is less than 10km south of Chimaltenango, so you can easily make the party from Antigua.

run around Lago de Atitlán. The security situation is forever changing here – some months it's OK to walk between certain villages, then that route suddenly becomes dangerous.

If you do plan to go walking, use common sense – don't take any more money than you need, or anything that you really don't want to lose. Walk in groups of at least six and (one piece of local advice), consider taking a machete along (for deterrent purposes only, naturally). If you do run into trouble, don't resist – chances are your life is worth more than your camera.

There are persistent rumors about a Japanese tourist who was lynched for taking a photo of a child in the highlands. This is slightly misleading. What he actually did was pick up a crying child in an effort to comfort

it, which led the locals to think that a kidnapping was afoot. Fears of foreigners kidnapping children are common in the highlands, so use some restraint. And, of course, ask permission before taking photos of people.

### GETTING THERE & AROUND The Highlands

The curvy Interamericana Hwy, also known as Centroamérica 1 (CA-1), passes through the highlands on its way between Guatemala City and the Mexican border at La Mesilla. Driving the 266km between Guatemala City and Huehuetenango can take five hours, but the scenery is beautiful. The lower Carr al Pacífico (CA-2), via Escuintla and Retalhuleu, is straighter and faster; it's the better route if you're trying to reach Mexico as quickly as possible.

The Interamericana is thick with bus traffic. As most places you'll want to reach are off the Interamericana, you may find yourself waiting at junctions such as Los Encuentros and Cuatro Caminos to connect with a bus or pickup. Travel is easiest on market days and in the morning. By mid or late afternoon, buses may be scarce, and short-distance local traffic stops by dinnertime. On remote routes, you'll probably be relying more on pickups than buses for transportation.

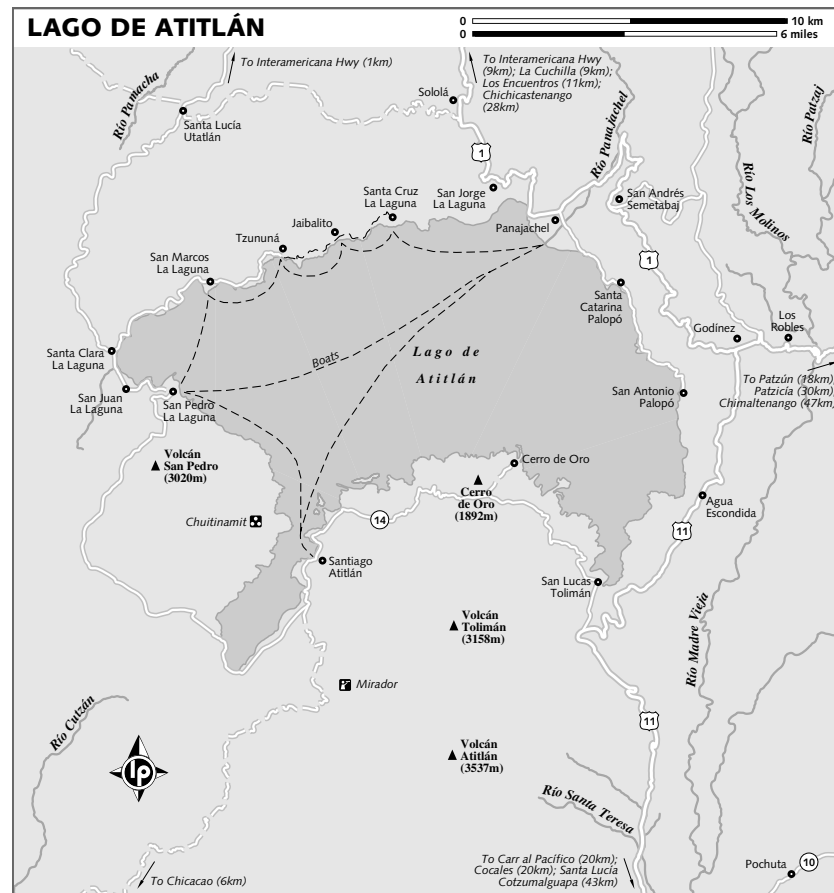
### Lago de Atitlán

Following the Interamericana 32km west from Chimaltenango, you'll reach the turnoff for the back road to Lago de Atitlán via Patzicía and Patzún. The area around these two towns

has been notable for high levels of guerrilla and bandit activity in the past, so stay on the Interamericana to Tecpán Guatemala, the starting point for a visit to the ruined Kaqchiquel capital of Iximché (*esh-im-chay*).

Another 40km west along the Interamericana from Tecpán is the Los Encuentros junction. It's a new town serving people waiting to catch buses. The road to the right heads north to Chichicastenango and Santa Cruz del Quiché. From the Interamericana a road to the left descends 12km to Sololá and another 8km to Panajachel, on the shores of Lago de Atitlán.

If you are not on a direct bus, you can get off at Los Encuentros and catch another bus or minibus, or flag a pickup, from here down



to Panajachel or up to Chichicastenango; it's a half-hour ride to either place.

The road from Sololá descends through pine forests, losing more than 500m in elevation on its 8km course to Panajachel. Sit on the right for breathtaking views of the lake and volcanoes.

## PANAJACHEL

pop 15,000

The busiest and most built-up lakeside settlement, Panajachel ('Pana' to pretty much the entire country) has developed haphazardly and, some say, in a less than beautiful way. Several different cultures mingle on Panajachel's dusty streets.

Ladinos and gringos control the tourist industry. The Kaqchiquel and Tz'utuhil Maya from surrounding villages come to sell their handicrafts to tourists. Tour groups descend on the town by bus for a few hours or overnight.

Its excellent transport connections and thumping nightlife make it a favorite for weekendening Guatemalans. During the week, things quiet down, but the main street, Calle Santander, remains the same – internet café after handicrafts store after restaurant after travel agent, but you need only go down to the lakeshore to understand why Pana attracts so many visitors.

## Information

### BOOKSTORES

**Bus Stop Books** (Centro Comercial El Dorado, Calle Principal) A good selection of mainly used books to swap and buy and a small selection of guidebooks.

**Gallery Bookstore** (Comercial El Pueblito, Av Los Árboles) Sells and exchanges used books, and sells a few new ones, including some Lonely Planet guides.

**Libros del Lago** (Calle Santander) Has an excellent stock of books, including Latin American literature in English and other languages on Guatemala, the Maya and Mesoamerica, plus maps and guidebooks.

## EMERGENCY

**Policia de Turismo** (Tourist Police; ☎ 7762 1120; Municipalidad, Calle Principal)

## INTERNET ACCESS

As you'd expect, Pana has plenty of places to check your email and surf the web. The standard price is US\$0.50 to US\$1 per hour; typical opening hours are 9am to 10pm, perhaps slightly shorter on Sunday.

**Jade Internet** (Centro Comercial San Rafael, Calle Santander)

**MayaNet** (Calle Santander 3-62)

**Planet Internet** (Calle Santander) Has good connections.

## LAUNDRY

**Lavandería Viajero** (Edificio Rincón Sai, Calle Santander; ☎ 8am-7pm) Reliable place; charges US\$0.45 per pound (600g).

## MEDICAL SERVICES

The nearest hospital is at Sololá.

**Centro de Salud** (Clinic; Calle Principal; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat)

## MONEY

**Banco Agromercantil** (cnr Calles Principal & Santander; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) Changes US-dollar cash and traveler's checks, and has a MasterCard ATM.

**Banco Industrial** (Comercial Los Pinos, Calle Santander) Has Visa ATM.

**Credomatic** (Centro Comercial San Rafael, Calle Santander) Does Visa and MasterCard cash advances and changes US-dollar cash.

## POST

**DHL** (Edificio Rincón Sai, Calle Santander) Courier service. **Post office** (cnr Calles Santander & 15 de Febrero) About 200m from the lake.

## TELEPHONE

Some internet cafés and travel agencies on Calle Santander offer moderately cheap phone calls – around US\$0.15 per minute to North or Central America, US\$0.25 per minute to Europe. Try Jade Internet or Planet Internet. For local calls there's a line of card phones outside **Telgua** (Calle Santander).

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Inguat** (☎ 5874 9450; Centro Comercial San Rafael Local 11, Calle Santander; ☎ 9am-5pm) This tourist office is on the main street. There are a few brochures available and staff can answer straightforward questions.

## Sights & Activities

The **Reserva Natural Atitlán** (☎ 7762 2565; www.atitlanreserva.com; admission US\$5; ☎ 8am-5pm) is down the spur leading to Hotel Atitlán and makes a good day trip. The well-designed nature reserve has trails, an interpretive center, zip lines, camping, a butterfly farm, small shade coffee plantation, lots of monkeys and an aviary.

Lago de Atitlán offers phenomenal **hiking** and **cycling**. You can walk from Panajachel to

Santa Catarina in about an hour, continuing to San Antonio in about another hour; it takes only half as long by bicycle, on hilly roads. Or take a bike by boat to Santiago, San Pedro or another village to start a tour of the lake. Several places along Calle Santander rent bicycles; rates start around US\$12 per day. Equipment varies, so check your bike first.

**ATI Divers** (☎ 7762 2621; www.laiguanaperdida.com; Plaza Los Patios, Calle Santander; ☎ 9:30am-1pm Mon-Sat), leads dive trips from Santa Cruz La Laguna (p127). A four-day PADI-certification course costs US\$205. The best time to dive here is between May and October, when the water is clear.

ATI Divers organize the annual garbage cleanup of the lake, during which several tons of trash are collected. This event, typically held in September, is a great opportunity to give something back to the community and make new friends.

Visitors short on time should consider a **boat tour** around the lake. A typical tour lasts around seven hours and visits San Pedro, Santiago and San Antonio for US\$8 per person. To arrange a tour, head to the pier at the foot of Calle del Balneario and start bargaining. Most travel agencies also arrange boat tours. **Kayaks** are also rented from here from US\$4 per hour.

## Courses

Panajachel has a niche in the language-school scene. Two well set-up schools are **Jardín de América** (☎ /fax 7762 2637; www.jardindeamerica.com; Calle 14 de Febrero, 3a Av Peatonal 4-44) and **Jabel Tinamit** (☎ 7762 0238; www.jabeltinamit.com; Calle Santander). Both have ample gardens and good atmospheres. Four hours of one-on-one study five days per week, including a homestay with a local family, will cost around US\$120 per week at either place. Other schools include **Centro de Tutoría e Idiomas** (CTI; ☎ 7762 0259/1005; 2a Av Peatonal 1-84, Zona 2) and **Spanish School Maya** (☎ 7810 7196; Callejón Santa Elena), both of which teach some Maya languages as well as Spanish.

## Festivals & Events

The festival of **San Francisco de Asís**, held on October 4, is celebrated with massive drinking and fireworks.

## Sleeping

### HOSPEDAJES & HOTELS

Budget travelers here will rejoice at the profusion of family-run *hospedajes* (guesthouses).

They're simple – perhaps two rough beds, a small table and a light bulb in a bare boarding room – but cheap. Most provide clean toilets and some have hot showers. More expensive hotels offer generous discounts for longer stays.

**Casa Linda** (☎ 7762 0386; Callejón El Capulin; s/d US\$5/7, with bathroom US\$9/12) Spotless little rooms down an alley off Calle Santander. Upstairs, they get a good breeze and the balconies are good for that afternoon siesta.

**Villa Lupita** (☎ 5511 0541; Callejón Don Tino; s/d US\$6/7.50, with bathroom US\$7/8.50) Family-run Lupita is great value if you feel like staying in the town center. The 18 clean, secure rooms have comfortable beds, reading lamps and colorful carpets, and they offer free coffee and drinking water. The shared hot-water bathrooms are clean and the roof terrace affords good views.

**Rooms Santander** (☎ 7762 1304; s/d US\$5/8, with bathroom US\$9/12) One of Panajachel's longest-running budget hostelries, the Santander is still going strong with clean rooms on two levels around a small patio full of trees. It's off Calle Santander.

**Hospedaje García** (☎ 7762 2787; Calle 14 de Febrero 2-24; s/d US\$5/9, with bathroom US\$15/20) The rooms with bathroom here are OK – clean enough, but the real winners are the cheaper ones – they're about twice the size and have balconies looking out onto the patio.

**Mario's Rooms** (☎ 7762 2370; Calle Santander; s/d US\$6.50/9, with bathroom US\$9/13) Offering some of the best budget rooms in town, Mario's smallish rooms face a cheery, plant filled courtyard and have blasting hot showers.

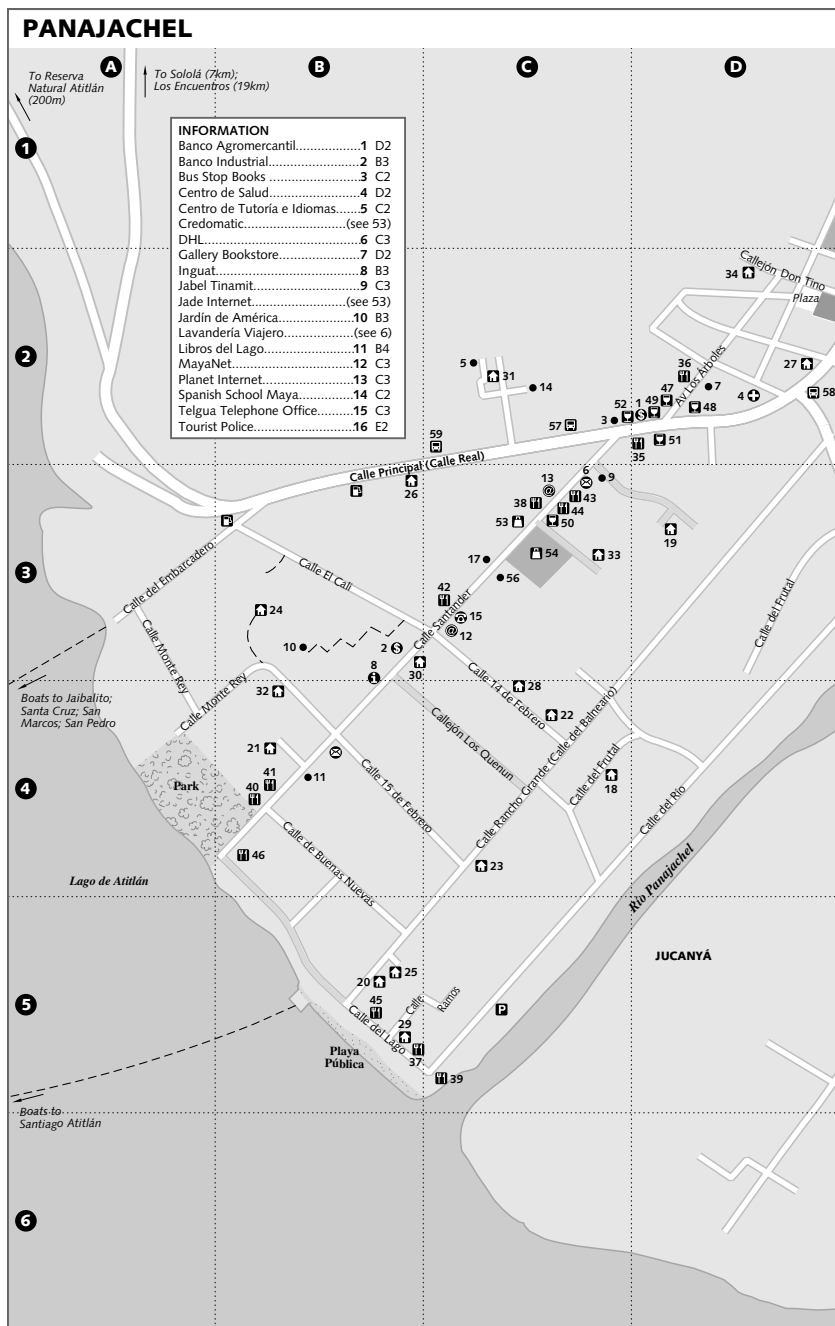
**Casa Loma** (☎ 7762 1447; Calle Rancho Grande; s/d US\$5/10, with bathroom US\$20/26) Excellent value, solid wooden rooms are on offer at this place. The huge grassy lawn out the back is a great place to hang out.

**Hospedaje Tzutujil** (☎ 7762 0102; s/d US\$8/10, with bathroom & cable TV US\$14/18) Down a little alley set among cornfields, the Tzutujil is one of the best budget deals in town with clean, modern rooms, balconies and firm beds. All upstairs rooms have fantastic mountain views. The alley way is located off Calle del Balneario.

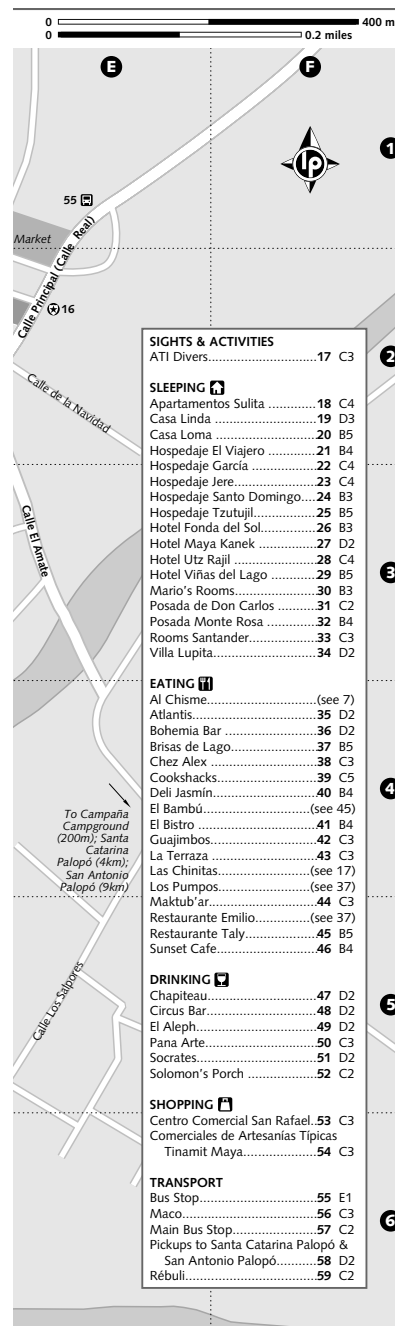
**Hotel Viñas del Lago** (☎ 7762 0389; Playa Pública; s/d with bathroom US\$10/13; ☎) Don't let the garish paint job put you off – the big, airy rooms upstairs here have some of the best views in town.

**Hospedaje Jere** (☎ 7762 2781; jere\_armando@yahoo.com; Calle Rancho Grande; s/d with bathroom US\$10/13;

GUATEMALA



GUATEMALA



(P) (B) The Jere's big, tastefully decorated rooms are another class act in this part of town. The owners also operate shuttle services and have free internet for guests.

**Hotel Fonda del Sol** (☎ 7762 0407; h\_fondadel.sol@yahoo.com; Calle Principal; s/d US\$7/14, with bathroom US\$12/24; (P)) The more expensive rooms here are heavy on stonework and light on other decoration. The cheaper ones are an excellent budget choice – large, wood-paneled rooms with comfy beds and random decorations. It's near the bus stop.

**Hotel Utz Rajil** (☎ 7762 0303; gguated@yahoo.com; Calle 14 de Febrero; s/d with bathroom US\$13/19) The Utz Rajil is a modern, three-story hotel with bigger rooms than most. Try to snag a front one as their big balconies have good views.

**Posada Monte Rosa** (☎ 7762 0055; Calle Monte Rey; s/d with bathroom US\$13/20) A short distance off Calle Santander, rooms here are sizable with colorful Mayan fabric curtains and fronted by patches of lawn. Unfortunately, they don't take phone reservations.

**Posada de Don Carlos** (☎ 7762 0658; Callejón Santa Elena 4-45; s/d with bathroom US\$15/20) Huge upstairs rooms face a balcony overlooking a lush courtyard in this place, and the bathrooms with full-sized tubs are unbeaten in this price range.

**Apartamentos Sulita** (☎ 7762 2514; Calle del Frutal 3-42; cabin per week US\$125) These cute little one- or two-person cabins are a great option if you're going to be hanging around for a while – they come fully equipped with kitchen, lounge, bathroom and one bedroom. Cable TV is available on request.

There are plenty more:  
**Hospedaje El Viajero** (☎ 7762 0128; www.sleeprent.buy.com/elviajero; s/d US\$10/13) No frills, but nice and close to the lake.

**Hospedaje Santo Domingo** (☎ 7762 0236; Calle Monte Rey; s/d US\$5/8, with bathroom US\$10/13) Quiet rooms set around a relaxed central garden.

**Hotel Maya Kanek** (☎ 7762 1104; Calle Principal; s/d with bathroom US\$14/18; (P)) Has good value motel-style rooms around a cobbled courtyard in the town center.

**CAMPING**  
**Campaña Campground** (☎ 7762 2479; Carr a Santa Catarina Palopó; per person US\$4) This campground is located 1km out of town on the road to Santa Catarina Palopó. Amenities include a kitchen, book exchange, luggage storage and pickup from Pana.

## Eating

The cheapest places to eat are by the beach at the mouth of the Río Panajachel. The cook shacks on the shore have rock-bottom prices, as do the food stalls around the parking lot. Across the street, you can fill up for US\$4 at any of several little restaurants, all of which offer priceless lake views.

**Delí Jasmín** (Calle Santander; items US\$3-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch Wed-Mon) This tranquil garden restaurant serves a great range of healthy foods and drinks to the strains of soft classical music. Breakfast is served all day, and you can buy whole wheat or pita bread, hummus or mango chutney to take away.

**Al Chisme** (Comercial El Pueblito, Av Los Árboles; mains US\$3-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The Al Chisme offers Tex-Mex, vegetarian and pasta dishes, and more expensive meat and fish as well as home-style food such as biscuits and gravy (US\$3). Its streetside patio is most popular in the evening, especially when there's live music.

**Guajimbo's** (Calle Santander; mains US\$4-6) This Uruguayan grill is one of Pana's best eateries, serving up generous meat and chicken dishes with vegetables, salad, garlic bread and either rice or boiled potatoes. You won't leave hungry. Try the *chivita Hernandezarias* (tenderloin cooked with bacon, mozzarella, peppers and olives). There are vegetarian dishes too, and good-value breakfasts, and bottomless cups of coffee for US\$0.70.

**Las Chinitas** (Plaza Los Patios, Calle Santander; mains or set lunch US\$4-6.50) Las Chinitas serves up unbelievably delicious, moderately priced food. Try the Malaysian curry with coconut milk or the satay, both with rice, tropical salad and your choice of tofu, tempeh, chicken, pork or prawns.

**Atlantis** (Calle Principal; mains US\$4-9; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This café-bar serves up some excellent submarines (US\$4) alongside more substantial meals. The beer garden out the back is the place to be on a balmy night.

**Maktub'ar** (Calle Santander 3-72; mains US\$5-7; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The garden setting here is an excellent, relaxed place to hang out during the day. At night, once happy hour kicks in, things start to liven up. The menu runs from sandwiches and burgers to larger meals, but the real winner is the wood-fired thin-crust pizza.

**La Terraza** (☎ 7762 0041; Calle Santander; mains US\$6-11; ☺ lunch & dinner) One of Calle Santander's

most atmospheric spots, this breezy upstairs restaurant has French, Mexican and Asian influences. It's a good idea to book ahead on weekends.

**El Bistro** (Calle Santander; meals from US\$6; ☺ 5-10pm Mon, noon-10pm Tue-Sun) It doesn't look like much from the outside, but this is the place to come for authentic Italian food, including a range of pastas, and treats such as carpaccio and antipasto.

**Chez Alex** (☎ 7762 2052; Calle Santander; mains US\$10-17; ☺ lunch & dinner) Chez Alex offers some of Pana's finest dining, with plenty of European influences. There's fondue, stuffed trout and a whole range of seafood, amongst other delicacies.

If you're looking for cheapie with a view, check out the touristy restaurants overlooking the lake at the east end of Calle del Lago, such as El Bambú and Restaurante Taly (both with breezy upper floors), Los Pumpos, Restaurante Emilio and Brisas de Lago. Most of these places will do you breakfast for US\$1.50 to US\$2 or quite acceptable lunch or dinner means for US\$4.

Here are a couple more options:

**Bohemia Bar** (Av Los Árboles; mains US\$3-5; ☺ lunch & dinner) Good snacks and burgers and a three-hour happy hour starting at 6pm.

**Sunset Café** (cnr Calles Santander & del Lago; mains US\$6-8; ☺ lunch & dinner) Good meat, fish and vegetarian dishes and live music nightly at this open-air eatery with a lake vista.

## Drinking

**Pana Arte** (Calle Santander) This is a good place to start, continue or finish your night, with a seemingly endless happy hour. The classic rock may not be to your liking, but two mixed drinks for under US\$2 is hard to argue with.

**Circus Bar** (Av Los Árboles; ☺ noon-midnight) The best thing about this place is the double swing doors, so you can go busting in like a real cowboy. Yeehaw! Closely followed by the huge list of imported liquors, US\$2 Bloody Marys, good pizza and live music most nights.

**Solomon's Porch** (Calle Principal; ☺ lunch & dinner) The balcony overlooking Calle Santander is a great place for a few drinks, accompanied by big screen TV, wireless internet and live music.

## DISCOTECAS & LIVE MUSIC

**Chapiteau** (Av Los Árboles) After the music stops at the Circus Bar or Al Chisme, simply cross

the street and come here, a disco-bar with billiards upstairs.

**El Aleph** (Av Los Árboles) Located a couple of doors down, this bar has occasional trance and hip-hop DJ sessions or live music.

**Socrates** (Calle Principal) Opposite the start of Av Los Árboles, Socrates is a large disco-bar playing thumping Latin pop, highly popular with the Guatemalan teens and twenty-somethings (and a smattering of gringos) who descend on Pana at weekends and holidays. The assorted folk pictured on the walls run the gamut from Albert Einstein to Jerry García of the Grateful Dead.

**Al Chisme** (Comercial El Pueblito; Av Los Árboles) Often serves up neat jazz or piano music on Friday or Saturday nights.

**Sunset Café** (cnr Calles Santander & del Lago; ☺ 11am-midnight) Head here for sunset (and later) drinks overlooking the lake. It's popular, with great views, food, a bar and live music nightly.

## Shopping

**Comerciales de Artesanías Típicas Tinamit Maya** (☺ 7am-7pm) One of Guatemala's most extensive handicrafts markets, this market sells traditional clothing, jade, leather items, wood carvings and more. You can get good deals if you're patient and bargain.

## Getting There & Away

### BOAT

Passenger boats for Santiago Atitlán depart from the public beach at the foot of Calle del Balneario. All other departures leave from the dock at the foot of Calle del Embarcadero. The big, slow ferries are generally only used for the Santiago run, with fast, frequent *lanchas* (small motorboats) going elsewhere. Boats stop running around 4:30pm.

One-way passage anywhere on Lago de Atitlán costs US\$1.30, but prepare to get done like a sucker. Generally, foreigners end up paying around US\$2.50. You can hold out for the local fare, but you may have to let a few boats go by. One way to keep the cost down is to ignore all middlemen (or boys as the case may be) and negotiate the fare directly with the captain.

Another route goes counterclockwise around the lake, stopping in Santa Cruz La Laguna (15 minutes), Jaibalito, Tzununá, San Marcos La Laguna (30 minutes), San Juan La Laguna and San Pedro La Laguna (40 minutes). After departing Panajachel from the

Calle del Balneario dock, the boats stop at another dock at the foot of Calle del Embarcadero before heading out (or vice versa, when arriving at Panajachel).

## BUS

The town's main bus stop is where Calles Santander and Real meet, across from the Banco Agrícola Mercantil. Rébuli buses depart from the Rébuli office on Calle Real.

## International

**Ciudad Tecún Umán (Mexican border)** By the Pacific route (210km), take a bus to Cocales and change there; by the highland route (210km), bus to Quetzaltenango and change there.

**La Mesilla (Mexican border)** (six hours, 225km) See Huehuetenango following.

## Domestic

**Antigua** (US\$5, 2½ hours, 146km) A direct Pullman bus departs from the Rébuli office at 10:45am Monday to Saturday. Or take a Guatemala City bus and change at Chimaltenango.

**Chichicastenango** (US\$1.50, 1½ hours, 37km) About eight buses between 7am-4pm. Or take any bus heading to Los Encuentros and change buses there.

**Cocales (Carr al Pacifico)** (US\$1, 2½ hours, 70km, eight buses 6:30am-2:30pm)

**Guatemala City** Transportes Rébuli departs 10 times daily between 5am-2:30pm (US\$2.50, 3½ hours, 150km). Or take a bus to Los Encuentros and change there.

**Huehuetenango** (3½hr, 140km) Bus to Los Encuentros and wait there for a bus bound for Huehue or La Mesilla. Or catch a bus heading to Quetzaltenango, alight at Cuatro Caminos and change buses there. There are buses at least hourly from these junctions.

**Los Encuentros** (US\$1, 35 minutes, 20km) Take any bus heading toward Guatemala City, Chichicastenango, Quetzaltenango or the Interamericana.

**Quetzaltenango** (US\$2, 2½ hours, 90km, six buses 5am-4pm) Or bus to Los Encuentros and change there.

**San Lucas Tolimán** (US\$1.20, 1½ hours, 28km, 4pm) Or take any bus heading for Cocales, get off at the San Lucas turnoff and walk about 1km into town.

**Santa Catarina Palopó** (US\$0.80, 20 minutes, 4km) Daily buses; or get a pickup at the corner of Calles Real and El Amate.

**Sololá** (US\$0.60, 20 minutes, 8km) Frequent direct local buses; or take any bus heading to Guatemala City, Chichicastenango, Quetzaltenango or Los Encuentros.

## MOTORCYCLE

**Maco** (☎ 7762 0883; Calle Santander) rents motorbikes for around US\$8/40 per hour/day.



## SIDE TRIPS FROM PANAJACHEL

### Sololá

Sololá (population 9000) lies along trade routes between the *tierra caliente* (Pacific Slope 'hot lands') and *tierra fría* (the chilly highlands). All the traders meet here, and Sololá's Friday market – a local, rather than a tourist, affair – is one of the highlands' best. The plaza next to the cathedral comes ablaze with the colorful costumes of people from a dozen surrounding villages, and neatly arranged displays of meat, vegetables, fruit, housewares and clothing occupy every available space.

Every Sunday morning the *cofradías* (traditional religious brotherhoods) parade ceremoniously to the cathedral for their devotions. On other days, Sololá sleeps.

It's a pleasant walk from Sololá down to the lake, whether on the highway to Panajachel (9km) or on the path to Santa Cruz La Laguna (10km).

### Iximché

Off the Interamericana near the small town of Tecpán lie the **ruins of Iximché** (admission US\$4; ☎ 8am-4:30pm), capital of the Kaqchiquel Maya. Set on a flat promontory surrounded by cliffs, Iximché (*eesh-im-chay*; founded in the late 15th century) was easily defended against attack by the hostile Quiché Maya.

When the conquistadors arrived in 1524, the Kaqchiquel formed an alliance with them against the Quiché and the Tz'utuhils. The Spaniards set up headquarters next door to the Kaqchiquel capital at Tecpán Guatemala, but Spanish demands for gold and other loot soured the alliance; the Kaqchiquel were defeated in the ensuing battles.

Entering Tecpán, you'll see signs for the unpaved road leading less than 6km south to Iximché. You can walk, see the ruins and rest, then walk back to Tecpán in around three hours. Minibuses leave regularly from the center of town (US\$0.20, 10 minutes) for the ruins. Go in the morning so you can return to the highway by early afternoon, before bus traffic dwindles.

The archaeological site has a small museum, four ceremonial plazas surrounded by grass-covered temple structures and ball courts. Some structures have been cleaned and maintained; on a few, the original plaster coating still exists, and traces of the original paint are visible. Tecpán has a couple of basic hotels and eateries. Veloz Poaquileña runs buses to Guatemala City (US\$1, two hour, every 30 minutes, 5:30am to 7pm) from in front of the church.

## SANTA CATARINA PALOPÓ & SAN ANTONIO PALOPÓ

Four winding kilometers east of Panajachel lies Santa Catarina Palopó. Here, narrow streets paved in stone blocks run past adobe houses with roofs of thatch or corrugated tin, and the gleaming white church commands your attention. Chickens cackle, dogs bark and the villagers go about their daily life dressed in beautiful clothing. It's interesting to imagine that this is what all the lakeside villages would once have been like.

Except for appreciating village life and enjoying stunning views, there's little to do. This is one of the best places to buy the luminous indigo *huipiles* you see around Lago de Atitlán. Look for vendors on the path to the shore, or pop into one of the simple wooden storefronts. Several little *comedores* on the main plaza sell refreshments, and the

open-air **Restaurante Laguna Azul** (mains US\$4-6), on the lakeshore below the Villa Santa Catarina, does reasonably priced chicken, fish and meat dishes. **Posada Don Vitalino** (☎ 7762 2660; s/d US\$7/14) offers basic, decent rooms with hot showers.

The road continues past Santa Catarina 5km to San Antonio Palopó, a larger but similar village where men and women in traditional clothing tend their terraced fields and clean mountains of scallions by the lakeshore.

See above for transportation details. From Panajachel, you can walk to Santa Catarina in about an hour, continuing to San Antonio in another. Bicycling is another option.

## SANTIAGO ATITLÁN

South across the lake from Panajachel, on the shore of a lagoon squeezed between the volcanoes of Tolimán and San Pedro, lies Santiago

Atitlán, known to everybody as Santiago. It's the most workaday of the lake villages, home to Maximón (mah-shee-*mohn*; see p114), who is paraded around during Semana Santa – a good excuse to head this way during Easter. The rest of the year, Maximón resides with a caretaker, receiving offerings. He changes house every year, but he's easy enough to find by asking around. If that's too much work, local children will take you to see him for a small tip.

Although the most visited village outside Panajachel, Santiago clings to the traditional lifestyle and clothing of the Tz'utuhil Maya. The best days to visit are market days (Friday and Sunday, with a lesser market held on Tuesday).

## Orientation & Information

The street straight ahead from the dock leads up to the town center. Every tourist walks up and down this street, so it's lined with craft shops and art galleries.

You'll find a lot of fascinating information about Santiago, in English, at [www.santiagoatitlan.com](http://www.santiagoatitlan.com).

Santiago has a post office, a Telgua telephone/fax office and a bank where you can change US dollars and traveler's checks. There's a MasterCard ATM located on the square.

## Sights

At the top of the slope is the main square, flanked by the town office and a huge centuries-old church. Within are wooden statues of the saints, each of whom gets new handmade clothes every year.

On the carved pulpit, note the figures of corn (from which humans were formed, according to Maya religion), as well as a literate quetzal bird and Yum-Kax, the Maya god of corn. A similar carving is on the back of the priest's chair.

A memorial plaque at the back commemorates Father Stanley Francis Rother, a missionary priest from Oklahoma; beloved by the local people, he was murdered in the church by ultrarightist death squads in 1981.

There are many rewarding **day hikes** around Santiago. Unfortunately, owing to robberies and attacks on tourists in the Atitlán area, it's highly advisable to go with a guide (ask in your hotel for a reputable one) and tourist police escort. You can go with a guide and

two tourist police up any of the three **volcanoes** (US\$80 per group), or to the **Mirador de Tepepul**, about 4km south of Santiago (US\$30 for two), or to **Cerro de Oro**, some 8km northeast (US\$28 for two).

Walking to San Pedro La Laguna is not recommended, unless the security situation improves, since this remote route has a robbery risk.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Tzanjuya** (☎ 590 7980; s/d US\$4/6, with bathroom US\$6/8) Up the hill on the main street, this modern tiled hotel is reasonable value. You get a choice of lake or volcano views. Note that it is prohibited, as signs point out, to spit on the walls here.

**Hotel Chi-Nim-Yá** (☎ 7721 7131; s/d US\$4/8, with bathroom US\$6/11) This simple hotel is 30m to the left from the first crossroads as you walk up from the dock. The 22 rooms, around a central courtyard, are bare and clean, with concrete floors. The nicest is No 6 on the upper floor, which is large and airy, with lots of windows and lake views.

**Hotel Lago de Atitlán** (☎ 7721 7174; s/d with bathroom from US\$10/12) Go four blocks uphill from the dock then turn left to this hotel, whose reception is in the hardware store next door. It's a modern five-story building (rather an anomaly in this little town). Rooms are bland but mostly bright, many having large windows with decent views. Go up on the rooftop for great sunsets.

**El Pescador** (set lunch US\$4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Two blocks up the street straight ahead from the dock, this is a good, clean restaurant with big windows, white-shirted waiters and neatly laid tables. A typical *menú del día* (set lunch) might bring you chicken, rice, salad, guacamole, tortillas and a drink.

There are plenty of cheap *comedores* above the market next to the plaza.

## Getting There & Away

Boats to Santiago from Panajachel take about an hour; from San Pedro La Laguna 20 minutes. As you disembark, children greet you selling clay whistles and little embroidered strips of cloth.

They can act as guides, find you a taxi or lead you to a hotel, for a tip.

Buses to Guatemala City (US\$3.50, three hours) leave from the main square regularly throughout the day.

## SAN PEDRO LA LAGUNA

pop 10,000

It all comes down to what you're looking for – price wars between competing businesses keep San Pedro among the cheapest of the lakeside villages, and the beautiful setting attracts long-term visitors whose interests include (in no particular order): drinking, fire twirling, African drumming, Spanish classes, volcano hiking and hammock swinging.

Right alongside this whirling circus, San Pedro has a very conservative side – there's plenty of traditional dress and subsistence agriculture going on. You'll see coffee being picked and spread out to dry on wide platforms at the beginning of the dry season.

### Orientation & Information

San Pedro has two docks. The one on the south side of town serves boats going to and from Santiago Atitlán. Another dock, around on the east side of town, serves boats going to and from Pana. At either, walk uphill to reach the center of town. Alternatively, from the Santiago dock, you can take your first right and follow the beaten path for about 15 minutes to the other side of town. Along this path is where a lot of the tourist-oriented businesses start up. To take this route coming from the Panajachel dock, take your first left and then a right into the little alley across from the Hospedaje Casa Elena; a sign painted on the wall says 'to El Balneario.'

You can exchange US dollars and traveler's checks at **Banrural** (☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) in the town center. It also has a MasterCard ATM. There's internet access at D'Noz, Casa Verde Internet and the Internet Café, just up the street from the Panajachel dock. The typical access rate is a little under US\$1 per hour. You can make calls to North America/Europe for US\$0.65/0.90 per minute at D'Noz.

### Sights & Activities

Looming above the village, **Volcán San Pedro** (3020m) almost asks to be climbed by anyone with a bit of energy and adventurous spirit. The Volcano has recently been placed within an ecological park to minimize environmental damage caused by hikers and also improve the security situation, which wasn't great before. Guides can take you up here from San Pedro for US\$13, including entrance fee. The ascent is through fields of maize, beans and squash,

followed by primary cloud forest. Take water, snacks, a hat and sunblock.

Once you've watched the sunset, one of the best places to be is soaking in these solar-heated tubs at **Thermal Waters** (admission per person US\$3; ☎ 9am-9pm), down a small path next to the Buddha Bar. Book ahead so they have a pool nice and hot for you when you arrive.

**Big Foot Adventures** (☎ 7721 8203; sanpedro.laguna@yahoo.com) offers treks to volcanoes, the Indio's Nose and Santa Cruz for US\$10 to US\$12. Horse treks cost US\$2.50 per hour and they rent bikes for US\$1.50/7 per hour/day.

Several **walks** between San Pedro and neighboring villages make terrific day trips, although armed muggings on the lonely roads between villages are not uncommon. See the warning at the start of this chapter. You can walk west to San Juan La Laguna (30 minutes), San Pablo La Laguna (1½ hours), San Marcos (three hours), Jaibalito (five hours) and finally, Santa Cruz (all day). From the last three you can easily hail a *lancha* back to San Pedro until around 3pm.

**Kayaks** are available for hire turning right from the Pana dock. Prices start at US\$1.50 per hour.

### Courses

The standard price for four hours of one-on-one Spanish classes, five days per week, is US\$50 to US\$55. Accommodations with a local family, with three meals daily (except Sunday), usually costs US\$40. Schools can also organize other accommodation options. Schools include the following:

**Cooperativa Spanish School** (☎ 5398 6448; www.cooperativeschoolsanpedro.com) Run as a cooperative (therefore guaranteeing fair wages for teachers), this school comes highly recommended. A percentage of profits goes to needy families around the lake. After school activities include videos, conferences, salsa classes, volunteer work, kayaking and hiking. The office is halfway along the path between the two docks.

**Escuela Mayab** (☎ 5556 4785) Down a laneway coming off the street between the two docks, this well-organized school holds classes under shelters in artistically designed gardens. Activities include videos, kayaking and horse treks, although tuition is cheaper without these things. They are associated with a medical clinic in Nahuala and can organize volunteer work for doctors, nurses and assistants.

### IN THE PATH OF STAN

In October 2005 Hurricane Stan slammed into the west coast of Guatemala, killing hundreds and leaving thousands homeless. Areas hardest hit were the coastal regions, San Marcos and Huehuetenango province, and the area around Lago de Atitlán.

Much of the devastation was caused by landslides, as mud from deforested hillsides slid down and buried villages below. This is what happened in Panabaj, a village behind Santiago Atitlán. The slide happened at night, causing many to be buried as they slept. Exact figures vary, but everybody agrees that there were at least 250 people buried underneath the mudslide.

A frantic, week-long rescue effort began, but had to be abandoned as the land was too unstable and the work became dangerous. President Berger announced that the area, the size of six football fields, would become a burial ground, as the risk of infection from unearthed corpses was too great.

Massive protests from victim's families fell on deaf ears, and the Forensic Anthropology Foundation NGO, more experienced at excavating civil war mass graves, moved in to help recover the bodies.

Government relief and reconstruction efforts have been characteristically slow, and more than a year after the tragedy displaced families were still living in makeshift refuges. To learn more about relief efforts, log on to [www.puebloapueblo.org](http://www.puebloapueblo.org).

**La Mysticoteca** (☎ 5871 0506; [www.freewebs.com/lamysticoteca](http://www.freewebs.com/lamysticoteca)) Turning right from the Pana dock and following the 'Yoga and Massage' signs brings you to this health and wellness center. There are courses in Shiatsu massage, reiki and meditation. You can also practice yoga (US\$3.50) here or come for reiki (US\$10), sound healing (US\$17) or massages (from US\$15).

**Cielo Maya** (☎ 5928 6189; ☎ 2-5:30pm) On the path between the docks, this Tz'utuhil women's collective sells fair-trade woven goods and offers weaving and beading classes from US\$2 per hour, materials not included.

### Sleeping

#### NEAR THE PANA DOCK

**Hotel Xocomil** (☎ 5598 4546; [xocomil333@yahoo.com](mailto:xocomil333@yahoo.com); s/d US\$2/4) Up the lane to the right just after the Gran Sueño is this place – definitely in the basic backpacker category, with quiet rooms around a cement courtyard.

**Hotel Mansión del Lago** (7721 8124; 3a via & 4a Av, Zona 2; s/d US\$4/8) Straight up from the Pana dock, you'll see this concrete monster. Rooms are good and big, with wide balconies and lake views. A room at the top costs another US\$2.

**Gran Sueño** (☎ 7221 8110; 8a Calle 4-40, Zona 2; s/d US\$5/10) On the street going left from the Mansión is the Gran Sueño. Rooms here are OK-sized, spotless with tiled floors, cable TV, and good hot showers. Get one upstairs for glimpses of the lake.

**Hotel Nahual Maya** (☎ 7721 8158; 6 Av 8 C-12; s/d US\$5/10) This modern construction isn't the loveliest piece of architecture you're likely to see in Guatemala, but the rooms are big and homey and have little balconies with hammocks out front.

#### BETWEEN THE DOCKS

**Hotel Mikaso** (☎ 5173 3129; [www.mikasohotel.com](http://www.mikasohotel.com); 4a Callejon A 1-88; dm/r US\$8/30) Fans of Antigua's colonial-hotel scene will find some comforting memories in this built-new-to-look-old construction. Really the only 'fine' hotel in San Pedro, rooms are big and well-furnished, and the rooftop bar and Spanish restaurant (p126) have lovely lake views. Dorms are spacious, spotless and a good deal for large groups.

**Hostel Jarachik** (☎ 5571 8720; 4a Calle 2-95, Zona 2; s/d US\$8/10) This happening little hostel is a new-comer in town and rightly popular. Rooms are clean and bright. Get one on the top floor for light and ventilation.

**Hotelito El Amanecer Sak'cari** (☎ 812 1113, 721 8096; [www.hotelsakcari.com](http://www.hotelsakcari.com); 7a Av 2-12, Zona 2; s/d US\$8/12; ☐) On the left just after San Pedro Spanish School, the Sak'cari has clean, tangerine-colored rooms. They vary greatly in size and comfort, so have a look around. Right down the back, rooms have big balcony areas out front with excellent lake views and hammocks.

#### NEAR THE SANTIAGO DOCK

**Hotel Peneleu** (☎ 5925 0583; 5a Av 2-20, Zona 2; s/d US\$3/6) It doesn't look like much from the

outside, but once you get past the dirt yard, you'll find a clean, modern hotel with some of the best budget rooms in town. Try to get No 1 or 2, which are up top, with big windows overlooking the lake. To find it, go 80m up Calle Principal from Hotel Villasol, then along the street to the left.

**Hotel Villa Sol** (☎ 7721 8009; cnr 7a Av & Calle Principal; s/d US\$3/4, with bathroom US\$5/8; (P)) The 45 rooms here, just 200m up from the Santiago dock, are bare but clean; those with a bathroom look onto a grassy courtyard.

## Eating

There are plenty of places to get your grub on around the Pana dock:

**Alegre Pub** (8a Calle 4-10; mains US\$3-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Near the Pana dock, the Alegre is always, well, *alegre* (happy), with a real British pub feel – drinks specials, a Sunday roast and trivia nights. There are free movies twice a week in the way laid-back rooftop garden and loads of free, reliable tourist info. The big breakfast fry-up will make Brits weep with homesickness.

**Fata Morgana** (8a Calle 4-12; mains US\$4-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed Wed) Really good coffee has finally made it to San Pedro thanks to this little Italian restaurant-café-bakery. Also on offer are some good basic pastas and excellent homemade breads and pastries.

**Chile's** (4a Av 8-12; mains US\$4-7; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Chile's deck overlooking the Pana dock and lake will always be a popular dining option. The party starts later here, too, with free salsa classes and dance music through the week.

**D'Noz** (4a Av 8-16; mains US\$4-7; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is upstairs above Nick's and is another popular hangout – it's about as close as San Pedro gets to a cultural center, with a global menu, free movies, a big bar, board games and a lending library.

The following restaurants are on the path between the two docks:

**Buddha Bar** (2a Av 2-24; mains US\$6-8; ☎ lunch & dinner, closed Tue) The Buddha's an excellent place to hang out – downstairs there's a pool table, upstairs a restaurant doing convincing versions of Thai, Indian and other Asian dishes.

**Mikaso** (4a Callejón A 1-88; mains US\$6-8; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) With a real live Spanish chef, this is the place to come for Iberian delights. If you want the paella (US\$8 per person) you'll have to give 24 hours notice.

## Drinking & Nightlife

**El Barrio** (7a Av 2-07, Zona 2; ☎ 5pm-1am) This cozy little bar on the path between the two docks has one of the most happening happy hours in town, with food till midnight and drinks till 1am. There's a good cocktail and snacks list and a couple of chilled-out outside areas.

**Alegre Lounge** (8a Calle 4-10) It has a range of ridiculous drinks specials, such as US\$0.30 Cuba Libres all through the week.

**Freedom Bar** (8a Calle 3-95, Zona 2; ☎ to 1am) The hardest-partying bar in town, the Freedom has good lounging areas, a pool table, a (relatively) huge dance floor and often hosts guest DJs on weekends. It's on the first street to your left coming up from the Pana dock.

## Getting There & Away

Unless you want to bring a vehicle, it's easiest to reach San Pedro by passenger boats, which come here from Panajachel and from Santiago.

## SAN MARCOS LA LAGUNA

pop 3000

Without doubt the prettiest of the lakeside villages, the flat shoreline here has paths snaking through banana, coffee and avocado trees. The town has become something of a magnet for hippies-with-a-purpose, who believe the place has a particular spiritual energy, and is an excellent place to learn or practice meditation, holistic therapies, massage, Reiki and other spiritually oriented activities.

Whatever you're into, it's definitely a great place to kick back and distance the everyday world for a spell. Lago de Atitlán is beautiful and clean here, with several little docks you can swim from.

## Activities & Courses

**Guy** (☎ 5854 5365) at Restaurant Sol y Tul offers paragliding rides in the mornings from Santa Clara down to San Juan (US\$60). It's an exhilarating experience, offering some great photo opportunities.

The town's greatest claim to fame is **Las Pirámides Meditation Center** (☎ 5205 7151; www.laspiramidesdelka.com), on the path heading inland from Posada Schumann. Every structure on the property is built in a pyramid shape and oriented to the four cardinal points. Among the many physical (eg yoga, massage) and metaphysical (eg Tarot readings, channeling) offerings is a one-month lunar meditation

course that begins every full moon and covers the four elements of human development (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual). Most sessions are held in English. The last week of the course requires fasting and silence by participants. Nonguests can come for meditation or Hatha yoga sessions Monday to Saturday (US\$4).

Accommodations in pyramid-shaped houses are available for US\$15 per day and are only offered to people interested in joining the course. This includes the meditation course, use of the sauna and access to a fascinating multilingual library. A restaurant serves vegetarian fare. The best chance to get a space is just prior to the full moon. Las Pirámides has a private dock; all the *lancheiros* know it and can drop you here.

## Sleeping

**Hotel El Unicornio** (s/d US\$5/9) A favorite with the budget-conscious, El Unicornio has eight rooms in small, thatched-roofed A-frame bungalows among verdant gardens, sharing hot-water showers, nice hangout areas, a sauna and an equipped kitchen. To get here turn left past Hotel La Paz, or walk along the lakeside path and turn right after Las Pirámides.

**Hotel La Paz** (☎ 7702 9168; r per person US\$6) Along a side path off the track behind Posada Schumann, the mellow La Paz has rambling grounds holding two doubles and five dormitory-style rooms. All are in bungalows of traditional *bajareque* (a stone, bamboo and mud construction) with thatched roofs, and some have loft beds. Antiques, art works, the organic gardens and vegetarian restaurant, the traditional Maya sauna and the music and book room all contribute to making this a special place.

**Aaculaax** (☎ 5803 7243; www.aaculax.com; s/d from US\$12/15) An artful, atmospheric hotel that looks like it grew out of the rock by itself, this place is constructed using recycled materials like old bottles. Each room is unique, and most have good lake views. There's a bar-chill-out area on the top floor with board games and comfy seating.

**Posada del Bosque Encantado** (☎ 5208 5334; gringamaya@yahoo.com; s/d US\$13/21) Set in jungle grounds that could well be an enchanted forest, the rooms in this posada strike a good balance between rustic and stylish. Each room has a loft with a double bed and another bed downstairs. Walls are mud brick, beds are big

and firm, and there are hammocks strewn around the place.

## Eating

A couple of *comedores* around the plaza sell tasty, good-value Guatemalan standards.

**Il Giardino** (mains US\$2.75-5.25) This excellent vegetarian restaurant, owned by a Costa Rican-Italian couple, is set in a tranquil, spacious garden reached just before Hotel Paco Real. Main dishes include pizzas, spaghetti and fondues. The burritos with salsa and melted mozzarella are a treat.

**Il Forno** (mains US\$6-10; ☎ lunch & dinner) Serves up delicious pizzas cooked in their wood-fired oven. To get there follow the signs from the main path to the dock.

**Soly Tul** (mains US\$6-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Out on the balcony at this French-influenced restaurant are some of the best lake views in town. Meals are huge and the service is friendly. To get there turn left from the main dock and follow the path for 20m.

## Getting There & Away

You can drive to San Marcos from the Interamericana Hwy; the turnout is at Km 148. The walk or drive between Santa Clara La Laguna and San Marcos is incredible.

See p121 for information on passenger boats.

## JAIBALITO

Accessible only by boat or on foot, Jaibalito hosts Guatemala's most magical hotel. Perched on a secluded cliff facing volcanoes, **La Casa del Mundo Hotel & Café** (☎ 218 5332, 204 5558; www.lacasadelmundo.com; r US\$27, with bathroom US\$55; ☎) has gorgeous gardens, swimming holes and a hot tub overhanging the lake. All rooms have views and are impeccably outfitted with comfortable beds, *tipico* (typical of the region) fabrics and fresh flowers. The attached restaurant is fantastic. You can rent kayaks or bikes here. Reservations (by telephone) are advisable.

## SANTA CRUZ LA LAGUNA

pop 5680

For all practical purposes this place consists of four hotels spread along the lakeside near the dock: it's the earthiest of the lake options, and also the home of the lake's scuba-diving outfit, ATI Divers. The main part of the village is uphill from the dock.

**ATI Divers** (☎ 7762 2621; www.laiguana Perdida.com) offers a four-day PADI open-water diving certification course (US\$205), as well as a PADI high-altitude course and fun dives, including one in a volcano caldera. It's based at La Iguana Perdida hotel.

Good walks from Santa Cruz include the beautiful lakeside walking track between Santa Cruz and San Marcos, about four hours one way. You can stop for a beer and a meal at La Casa del Mundo en route (see p127). Or you can walk up the hill to Sololá, a 3½-hour walk one way.

### Sleeping & Eating

**La Iguana Perdida** (☎ 5706 4117; www.laiguana Perdida.com; dm US\$3, r US\$8-10) Some might say they're going a bit overboard on the whole rustic thing, but this is still a good place to hang out, enjoy the lake views and meet other travelers. There's no electricity and the showers in the bathrooms (all shared) are lovely and cold! Meals are served family-style, with everyone eating together; a three-course dinner is US\$5.50. You always have a vegetarian choice, and everything here is on the honor system: your tab is totaled up when you leave. Don't miss the Saturday night cross-dressing, fire and music barbecues!

**Arca de Noé** (☎ 5515 3712; arcasantacruz@yahoo.com; s/d US\$8/12, with bathroom US\$22/24) Spread out along the lakeside, the rooms and bungalows at this place are spacious with good views. It's just that the concrete bed bases are a bit of a let down.

### Getting There & Away

See p121 for details on passenger boats. Not every boat stops here, but they will if you tell the captain as you get on.

## THE HIGHLANDS – QUICHÉ

A largely forgotten little pocket of the country, most visitors to this region are on a quick in-and-out for the famous market at Chichicastenango, reached by a winding road north of the Interamericana. Further to the north is Santa Cruz del Quiché, the departmental capital; on its outskirts lie the ruins of K'umarcaaj (or Gumarcaah), also called Utatlán, the last capital city of the Quiché Maya.

More adventurous souls come for the excellent hiking around Nebaj, and the breathtaking backdoor route to Cobán.

For introductory information on the highlands, including a warning, see p113.

### Getting There & Away

The road to Quiché leaves the Interamericana Hey at Los Encuentros, winding its way north through pine forests and cornfields, down into a steep valley and up the other side.

### CHICHICASTENANGO

pop 49,000

Surrounded by valleys, with nearby mountains looming overhead, Chichicastenango seems isolated in time and space from the rest of Guatemala. When its narrow cobbled streets and red-tiled roofs are enveloped in mists, it's magical.

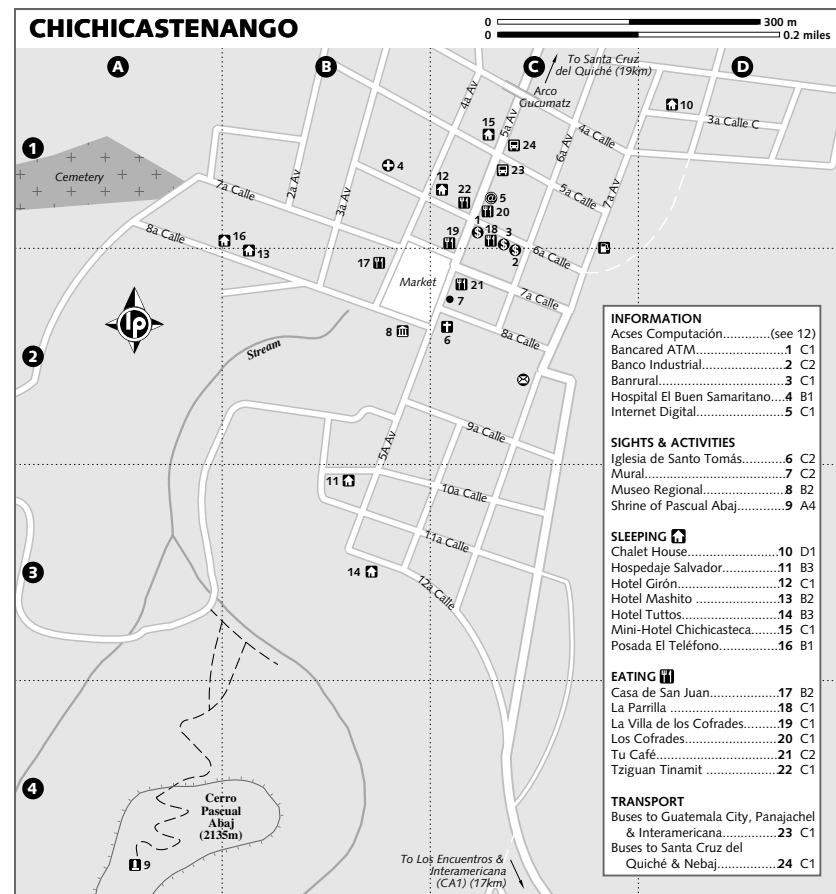
Chichi is a beautiful, interesting place with shamanistic and ceremonial undertones despite gaggles of camera-toting tour groups. *Masheños* (citizens of Chichicastenango) are famous for their adherence to pre-Christian religious beliefs and ceremonies. You can readily see versions of these old rites in and around the Iglesia de Santo Tomás and at the shrine of Pascual Abaj on the outskirts of town.

Chichi has always been an important trading town, and its Sunday and Thursday markets remain fabulous. If you have a choice of days, come on Sunday, when the *cofrades* often hold processions.

### History

Once called Chaviar, this was an important Kaqchiquel trading town long before the Spanish conquest. Just prior to the arrival of the conquistadors, the Kaqchiquel and the Quiché (based at K'umarcaaj near present-day Santa Cruz del Quiché) went to war. The Kaqchiquel abandoned Chaviar and moved to Iximché, which was easier to defend. The conquistadors came and conquered K'umarcaaj, and many of its residents fled to Chaviar, which they renamed Chugüilá (Above the Nettles) and Tziguán Tinamit (Surrounded by Canyons).

These names are still used by the Quiché Maya, although everyone else calls the place Chichicastenango, a foreign name given by the conquistadors' Mexican allies.



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### Information

Most banks change US dollars and traveler's checks, including **Banrural** (6a Calle east of 5a Av; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) and **Banco Industrial** (☎ 10am-2pm Mon, 10am-5pm Wed & Fri, 9am-5pm Thu & Sun, 10am-3pm Sat), almost next door. Banrural has a MasterCard ATM and there's a **Bancared ATM** (nr 5a Av & 6a Calle) along the street that takes Visa.

**Acces Computación** (6a Calle), east of 5a Av and **Internet Digital** (5a Av 5-60) charge US\$0.80 per hour for internet use. The **post office** (7a Av 8-47) is on the road into town.

### Dangers & Annoyances

Like any small town, Chichi is fairly hassle-free to walk around. Be aware, though, that pickpockets love the jammed streets when

the market's in full swing. The picturesque cemetery on Chichicastenango's western edge is a decidedly unsavory place to wander, even in groups. There have been several reports of tourists robbed at gunpoint.

### Sights & Activities

Make sure you check out the fascinating mural that runs alongside the wall of the town hall on the east side of the plaza, which also serves as the market. The mural is dedicated to the victims of the civil war and tells the story of the war using symbology from the Popol Vuh.

### MARKET

Maya traders from outlying villages come to Chichi on Wednesday and Saturday evenings

in preparation for the indigenous market, one of Guatemala's largest. You'll see them carrying bundles of long poles up the narrow cobbled streets to the square, then laying down their loads and spreading out blankets to cook dinner and sleep in the arcades surrounding the square.

Just after dawn on Sunday and Thursday, the poles are erected into stalls, which are hung with cloth, furnished with tables and piled with goods.

In general, the tourist-oriented stalls sell carved-wood masks, lengths of embroidered cloth and garments; these stalls are around the market's outer edges in the most visible areas. Behind them, the center of the square is devoted to locals needs: vegetables and fruit, baked goods, macaroni, soap, clothing, spices, sewing notions and toys. Cheap cookshops provide lunch for buyers and sellers alike.

Most stalls are taken down by late afternoon. Prices are best just before the market breaks up, as traders would rather sell an item cheap than carry it back with them.

Arriving in town the day before the market to pin down a room is highly recommended. In this way, too, you'll be up early for the action. One traveler wrote to say it's worth being here on Saturday night to attend the Saturday night mass. Otherwise, you can always come by bus, or by shuttle bus; market day shuttle buses come from Antigua, Panajachel and Guatemala City, returning in early afternoon. The market starts winding down around 3pm or 4pm.

### IGLESIA DE SANTO TOMÁS

Although dedicated to the Catholic rite, this simple church (nr 5a Av & 8a Calle), dating from about 1540, is more often the scene of rituals that are only slightly Catholic and more distinctly Mayan. The front steps of the church serve much the same purpose as did the great flights of stairs leading up to Maya pyramids. For much of the day (especially on Sunday), the steps smolder with copal incense, while indigenous prayer leaders called *chuchkajaues* (mother-fathers) swing censers containing *estoraque* (balsam) incense and chant magic words in honor of the ancient Maya calendar and their ancestors.

It's customary for the front steps and door of the church to be used only by important church officials and by the *chuchkajaues*, so

you should go around to the right and enter by the side door.

Inside, the floor of the church may be spread with pine boughs and dotted with offerings of corn, flowers and bottles of liquor; candles are everywhere. The candles and offerings on the floor are in remembrance of the ancestors, many of whom are buried beneath the church floor just as Maya kings were buried beneath pyramids. Photography is not permitted in this church.

### MUSEO REGIONAL

In the arcade facing the square's south side is the **Museo Regional** (5a Av 4-47; admission US\$0.80; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Tue-Sat, to 2pm Sun), which holds exhibits of ancient clay pots and figurines, flint and obsidian (glass formed by the cooling of molten lava) arrowheads and spearheads, copper ax heads, metates and a jade collection.

### SHRINE OF PASCUAL ABAJ

Before you have been in Chichi very long, some village lad will offer to guide you (for a tip) to a pine-clad hilltop on the town's outskirts to have a look at Pascual Abaj (Sacrifice Stone), the local shrine to Huyup Tak'ah, the Maya earth god. Said to be hundreds – perhaps thousands – of years old, the stone-faced idol has suffered numerous indignities at the hands of outsiders, but locals still revere it. *Chuchkajaues* come here regularly to offer incense, food, cigarettes, flowers, liquor and Coca-Cola to the earth god. They may even sacrifice a chicken – all to express their thanks and hope for the earth's continuing fertility. The site also offers nice views of the town and valley.

Tourists have been robbed walking to Pascual Abaj – the best plan is to go in a large group. To get there, walk down the hill on 5a Av from the Santo Tomás church, turn right onto 9a Calle and continue downhill along this unpaved road, which bends to the left. At the bottom of the hill, when the road turns sharply right, bear left and follow a path through the cornfields, keeping the stream on your left. Signs mark the way. Walk to the buildings just ahead, which include a farmhouse and a **mask-making workshop**. Greet the family here. If the children aren't in school, you may be invited to see them perform a local dance in full costume on your return from Pascual Abaj (a tip is expected).

### MIXING IT UP

Much is made of the blend of Catholicism and Maya beliefs. And indeed, one survival technique for the Maya was to 'accept' Catholicism, and simply rename their objects of worship. This is most obvious in that Mary is associated with the moon and the stars whereas God or Jesus represents the sun.

But the Maya were using the cross long before the Spanish arrived – for them the four points represent the sun, the Earth, the moon and people. Four is an especially holy number for the Maya, as they believe that the world is supported at its four corners by gods.

One Maya creation story that obviously owes little to the bible is that of Old Jesus and Young Jesus. The story goes that one day the two Jesuses found a tree with wax at the top. The young one climbed the tree and started dropping the wax down to the old one, who made an army from it. But young Jesus dropped too much wax, angering the old one, who ordered his army to bite off the tree trunk, causing Young Jesus to fall to his death.

Old Jesus went to tell his mother, the Virgin Mary, what happened and she banished him to a mountaintop, where he found an umbilical cord, climbed to heaven and became the sun, at which point his mother became the moon.

Walk through the farm buildings to the hill behind, then follow the switchbacking path to the top and along the ridge. Soon you'll reach a clearing and see the idol in its rocky shrine. The idol looks like something from Easter Island. The squat stone crosses near it have many levels of significance for the Maya, only one of which pertains to Christ. The area of the shrine is littered with past offerings, and the bark of nearby pines has been stripped away in places to be used as fuel in the incense fires.

### Festivals & Events

**Quema del Diablo** (Burning of the Devil; December 7) Residents burn their garbage in the streets to release the evil spirits within. Highlights include a marimba band and a daring fireworks display that has observers running for cover.

**Feast of the Immaculate Conception** (December 8) Don't miss the early-morning dance of the giant cartoon characters in the plaza.

**Feast of Santo Tomás** (December 13-21) When pairs of brave (or crazy) men fly about at high speeds suspended from a pole.

### Sleeping

As Chichi has few accommodations, arrive early on Wednesday or Saturday if you want to secure a room before market day.

**Posada El Teléfono** (8a Calle A 1-64; s/d US\$4/8) Not exactly luxury, but the rooms here are comfortable enough and good value for the price. The view of the town's technicolor cemetery from the rooftop is a draw in itself. There's a kitchen that guests can use.

**Hospedaje Salvador** (☎ 7756 1329; 5a Av 10-09; s/d US\$5/7, with bathroom US\$8/10) Huge and crumbling, the Salvador still scrapes together a bit of character, but it's mostly just budget digs for market days. Rooms get better as you go higher: Nos 49 to 52 on the top floor are light and airy, with good views. Try negotiating for a discount.

**Mini-Hotel Chichicasteca** (☎ 7756 2111; 5a Calle 4-42; s/d US\$5/9) This hotel's adequately clean rooms with bare brick walls are a decent budget choice. It's conveniently located for both the bus stop and plaza.

**Hotel Mashito** (☎ 7756 1343; 8a Calle 1-72; s/d US\$5.50/11, with bathroom US\$7/14) Another cheap-but-goodie, also on the road to the cemetery, is this place, offering plain but comfortable rooms in a big family house.

**Hotel Tuttos** (☎ 7756 1540; 12a Calle 6-29; s/d with bathroom US\$10/12) Up on a hill away from the chaos of the market area, the Tuttos has good-sized, fairly clean rooms. The terrace and rooms out back have great views over the valley behind town.

**Hotel Girón** (☎ 7756 1156; 6a Calle 4-52; s/d with bathroom US\$11/15; 📍) There's plenty of varnished pine going on here, but the paint job's cheery, rooms are big and spotless, and the proximity to the market can't be beat for the price. There are broad, sunny walkways in front of the rooms for catching a few rays.

**Chalet House** (☎ 7756 1360; www.chalethotelguatemala.com; 3a Calle C7-44; s/d with bathroom US\$15/22) The cozy Chalet House has good beds, homey touches and private hot-water bathrooms. Rooms get better the further upstairs you go, so ask to see a few.

## Eating

On Sunday and Thursday, eating at the cookshops set up in the center of the market is the cheapest way to go. Don't be deterred by the fried-food stalls crowding the fringe – dive into the center for wholesome fare. On other days, look for the little *comedores* near the post office on the road into town.

**Casa de San Juan** (4a Av; dishes US\$3-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The San Juan is one of the few eateries in town with style – art on the walls and the tables themselves, jugs of lilies, wrought-iron chairs – and its food is great too, ranging from burgers and tortillas to homemade cakes and more traditional dishes. There are balcony tables overlooking the market and live music some nights.

**Tu Café** (5a Av; mains US\$3.50-5; ☺ lunch & dinner) The *plato vegetariano* here is soup, rice, beans, cheese, salad and tortillas, for a reasonable US\$3.50. Add *lomito* (a pork fillet) and it becomes a *plato típico* (US\$4.50).

**Tziguan Tinamit** (5a Av 5-67; mains US\$3.50-6; ☺ lunch & dinner) For a more down-to-earth dining experience, check out this local eatery, with good pastas (US\$4) and hit-and-miss pizzas (US\$5).

**La Villa de los Cofrades** (6a Calle A, main plaza; dishes US\$4-6; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) You can't beat this location in the arcade on the north side of the plaza. This is a fine café for breakfast, crepes or larger meals, with an Italian influence and good strong coffee.

**La Parrilla** (6a Calle 5-37; mains US\$5-6; ☺ lunch & dinner) A meat lover's dream, La Parrilla serves up every cut imaginable, chargrilled, in a quiet courtyard setting.

**Los Cofrades** (cnr 6a Calle & 5a Av; 2-course lunch or dinner US\$6-7; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This bright upstairs restaurant (enter from 6a Calle) serves up some excellent set meals and has a decent drinks list. Go for a table out on the balcony – inside the atmosphere is very dining hall.

## Getting There & Away

Buses heading south to Los Encuentros, Panajachel, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala City and all other points reached from the Interamericana normally arrive and depart from the corner of 5a Calle and 5a Av, one block uphill from the Arco Gucumatz arch. Buses heading north to Santa Cruz del Quiché stop half a block downhill on the same street. On market days, however, buses to or from the south may

stop at the corner of 7a Av and 9a Calle, to avoid the congested central streets.

**Antigua** (3½ hours, 108km) Take any bus heading for Guatemala City and change at Chimaltenango.

**Guatemala City** (US\$3, three hours, 145km, every 20 minutes 4am-5pm)

**Los Encuentros** (US\$1.50, 30 minutes, 17km) Take any bus heading south for Guatemala City, Panajachel, Quetzaltenango and so on.

**Nebaj** (103km) Take a bus to Santa Cruz del Quiché and change there.

**Panajachel** (US\$2.50, 1½ hours, 37km, about eight buses 5am-2pm) Or take any southbound bus and change at Los Encuentros.

**Quetzaltenango** (US\$3, three hours, 94km, seven buses) Mostly in the morning; or take any southbound bus & change at Los Encuentros.

**Santa Cruz del Quiché** (US\$1.50, 30 minutes, 19km, every 20 minutes 5am-8pm)

On market days, shuttle buses arrive en masse mid-morning, bringing tourists from Panajachel, Antigua, Guatemala City and Quetzaltenango. They depart around 2pm. If you're looking to leave Chichi, you can usually catch a ride out on one of these.

## SANTA CRUZ DEL QUICHÉ

pop 18,700

The capital of the department, Santa Cruz – which is usually called 'El Quiché' or simply 'Quiché' – is 19km north of Chichicastenango. This small, dusty town is quieter and more typical of the Guatemalan countryside than Chichi. Few tourists come here, but those who do come are treated well. Saturday is the main day for the **market**, making things slightly more interesting and way more crowded.

## K'umarcaaj

The **ruins** (admission US\$2.50; ☺ 8am-5pm) of the ancient Quiché Maya capital are 3km west of El Quiché. Start out of town along 10a Calle and ask the way frequently. No signs mark the way and no buses ply the route. A taxi there and back from the bus station, including waiting time, costs around US\$12. Consider yourself lucky if you succeed in hitching a ride with other travelers.

The kingdom of Quiché was established in late post-Classical times (about the 14th century) from a mixture of indigenous people and Mexican invaders. Around 1400 King Gucumatz founded his capital here at K'umarcaaj and conquered many neighboring cities.

Eventually, the kingdom of Quiché extended its borders to Huehuetenango, Sacapulas, Rabinal and Cobán, even coming to influence the peoples of the Soconusco region in Mexico.

Pedro de Alvarado led his Spanish conquistadors into Guatemala in 1524, and it was the Quiché, under their king, Tecún Umán, who organized the defense of the territory. In the decisive battle fought near Quetzaltenango on February 12, 1524, Alvarado and Tecún Umán locked in mortal combat. Alvarado won. The defeated Quiché invited the victorious Alvarado to visit their capital, where they secretly planned to kill him. Smelling a rat, Alvarado enlisted the aid of his Mexican auxiliaries and the anti-Quiché Kaqchiquel, and together they captured the Quiché leaders, burnt them alive and then destroyed K'umarcaaj.

The history is more interesting than the ruined city, of which little remains but a few grass-covered mounds. Still, the site – shaded by tall trees and surrounded by defensive ravines (which failed to save the city from the conquistadors) – is a beautiful place for a picnic. It's also used by locals as a religious ritual site; a long tunnel beneath the plaza is a favorite spot for prayers and chicken sacrifices.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel San Pascual** (☎ 7755 1107; 7a Calle 0-43, Zona 1; s/d US\$5/8, with bathroom US\$11/14; (P)) Between the bus station and plaza, this is a clean and friendly hotel with plants in its two courtyards. More expensive rooms have big clean bathrooms and cable TV.

**Hotel Leo** (☎ 7765 0776; 1 Av 9-02, Zona 5; s/d US\$10/12) An excellent deal right around the corner from the bus terminal, with spacious, quiet rooms and good clean bathrooms.

**San Miguel** (cnr 2 Av & 5 Calle, Zona 1; snacks US\$2-3; ☺ breakfast & lunch) It's a little bakery café that injects a bit of style into Santa Cruz's eating scene. The environment is friendly and tranquil with some excellent baked goods and sandwiches on offer.

**Café La Torre** (2a Av, Zona 1; mains US\$3-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) If you want to escape the hectic streets for a while, this little upstairs café is a good place to do it and catch some plaza views at the same time. Snacks include burgers and sandwiches, and good-value set lunches (US\$3) are available.

## Getting There & Away

Many buses from Guatemala City to Chichicastenango continue to El Quiché. The last bus from El Quiché headed south to Chichicastenango and Los Encuentros leaves mid-afternoon.

El Quiché is the jumping-off point for the somewhat remote reaches of northern Quiché, which extend all the way to the Mexican border. Departures from the bus station include the following:

**Chichicastenango** (US\$1.50, 30 minutes, 19km) Take any bus heading for Guatemala City.

**Guatemala City** (US\$4, 3½ hours, 163km, every 20 minutes, 3am-5pm)

**Los Encuentros** (US\$2.50, one hour, 36km) Take any bus heading for Guatemala City.

**Nebaj** (US\$3, 2½ hours, 75km, eight buses 8:30am-5pm)

**Sacapulas** (US\$2, one hour, 45km, every 30 minutes 8:30am-5pm) Or take any bus heading for Nebaj or Uspantán.

**Uspantán** (US\$3.50, three hour, 75km) Buses at roughly 9:30am, 10:30am, 1:30pm, 3pm and 3:30pm.

## NEBAJ

pop 11,000 / elevation 1900m

Set deep in a bowl in the dramatic, largely untouched Cuchumatanes mountains, Nebaj's foreigner population consists of equal parts hardcore hikers and volunteers who work with the desperately poor communities in the surrounding countryside.

The locals, removed from modern influences, proudly preserve their ancient way of life. They make excellent handicrafts (mostly textiles) and the Nebaj women wear beautiful *huipiles*.

Nebaj's remote location has been a blessing and a curse. The Spaniards found it difficult to conquer (they laid waste to the inhabitants when they finally did). In more recent times, guerrilla forces made the area a base of operations, drawing strong measures from the army to dislodge them – particularly during the short, brutal reign of Ríos Montt. The few surviving inhabitants of these villages either fled across the border into Mexico or were herded into 'strategic hamlets.' Refugees are still making their way back home here.

## Information

**Banrural** (2a Av 46; ☺ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat), one block east from the northeast corner of the Parque, then half a block north, changes US dollars and traveler's checks and has a

Visa ATM. The **post office** (5a Av 4-37) is one block north of the Parque. **Centro de Internet Cámara de Comercio** (2a Av; ☎ 8am-9pm), in the same block as Banrural, charges US\$0.50 per hour online.

There's a heap of fascinating and helpful information about Nebaj in Spanish at [www.nebaj.org](http://www.nebaj.org). If you can't understand Spanish, the maps and listings are still useful. The Guías Ixil website ([www.nebaj.com](http://www.nebaj.com)) also has good information on hiking, volunteering and studying in the area.

### Activities

**Guías Ixil** (☎ 5311 9100; [www.nebaj.com](http://www.nebaj.com); 3a Calle, Zona 1), in the El Descanso building, offers hikes with informative young local guides. Like all the other enterprises in this building, a portion of Trekking Ixil's profits goes to a community project. Short one-day hikes, costing US\$6 for one person plus US\$3 for each extra person, go to **Las Cataratas** (a series of waterfalls on the Río Las Cataratas north of town), or around town with visits to the **sacred sites** of the *costumbristas* (people who still practice pre-Christian Maya rites). They also arrange longer hikes, including overnights to Todos Santos (three days, US\$120 one person, US\$40 for an additional person).

Las Cataratas is actually easy enough to reach on your own: walk 1.3km past Hotel Il-ebal Tenam along the Chajul road, to a bridge over a small river.

Immediately before the bridge, turn left (north) onto a gravel road and follow the river. Walking downriver for 45 minutes to an hour, you'll pass several small waterfalls before reaching a larger waterfall about 25m high.

### Festivals & Events

Nebaj's **annual festival** (August 12-15) honors La Virgen de la Asunción.

### Sleeping

**Popi's Hostel** (☎ 7756 0159; 5a Calle 6-74; dm US\$3.50) An excellent choice for the truly budget-conscious are the comfortable if plain rooms at this popular café-bakery. Choose your bed carefully – some sag dramatically.

**Hotel Ixil** (☎ 7756 0036; cnr 9 Calle & 2 Av, Zona 5; s/d US\$9/12) A great little budget hotel, it has clean, bright rooms set around a plant-filled courtyard. Rooms have cable TV and good hot showers.

### Eating

**Popi's Restaurant** (5a Calle 6-74; mains US\$2-4) For all your baked goods needs, head straight to Popi's. You can also buy a mean selection of breads and pies here to take away, and some good comfort food, such as BBQ pork ribs (US\$3.50).

**El Descanso** (3a Calle, Zona 1; mains US\$3-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Probably the most comfortable café in the entire highlands, this two-story place has a bar and lounge areas, good music and board games, and serves everything from salads to sandwiches to *churrascos* (grilled steak). It was started as a Peace Corps project as a sustainable way for local youth to earn money and shares its building with Trekking Ixil and the Nebaj Language School. A portion of the profits from all these businesses goes to fund a lending library in town for children and young adults.

### Getting There & Away

About eight daily buses run to and from Santa Cruz del Quiché (US\$3, 2½ hours), via Sacapulas (US\$1.50, 1½ hours). The best time to get one is between 5am and 8am, and the last departure may be no later than noon, but there are plenty of minibuses running this route, so you shouldn't get stuck. There's an 11pm bus all the way to Guatemala City via Chichicastenango.

Coming from Cobán (six hours), you must change buses several times, but it's nearly possible to make Nebaj in one day. It's easier to reach Nebaj from Huehuetenango or from El Quiché, going via Sacapulas, as buses are more frequent.

Buses leave Nebaj for Quiché via Sacapulas (US\$3) at 6am, 11:30am and 2pm daily, and minibuses leave whenever full in daylight hours.

### SACAPULAS TO COBÁN

Heading east out of Sacapulas, the road meanders up sadly deforested slopes before reaching the village of **Uspantán**. Rigoberta Menchú, the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, grew up a five-hour walk from Uspantán. Be aware that Menchú is not universally loved around here.

If you're headed to Cobán by bus, you may end up spending the night in Uspantán, as the last minibus leaves town at 4pm (US\$3.50, four hours). It can get very cold here. **Pensión Galindo** (5a Calle 2-09; s/d US\$3.50/7), about three

### EXPLORE MORE OF QUICHÉ

Nebaj is the jumping-off point for many picturesque hikes around Quiché. Below are just a few options. If you want to do these without a guide, pick up a copy of *Trekking en la Región Ixil*, available from Guías Ixil (see opposite).

- **Cocop**, one of the worst-hit villages of the civil war, is an easy four hours from Nebaj
- Stay in community-run lodges on a three-day loop through Xeo, Cotzal and AkTxumbal
- Catch a bus or pickup to **Salquil Grande**, then take a gorgeous two-hour stroll past waterfalls to the village of **Parramos Grande**

blocks from the plaza, has a dozen tiny, clean rooms around a neat little patio open to the stars. **Hotel Doña Leonar** (☎ 7951 8041; 6a Calle 4-25; s/d from US\$10/12) offers a lot more comfort. A Banrural bank on the plaza will change US dollars.

Along with the Huehue to Sacapulas leg of the same highway, the Uspantán–Cobán road (see East Toward Cobán, p150) is one of the most gorgeous rides in Guatemala. Sit on the right for views.

## WESTERN HIGHLANDS

Dramatic scenery, traditional villages, excellent hiking and the traveler's oasis of Quetzaltenango are what really shine in this region. Roads and buses are some of the worst in the country, making travel tough but rewarding.

For introductory information on the highlands, including a warning, see p113

### CUATRO CAMINOS

Heading westward from Los Encuentros, the Interamericana Hwy twists and turns ever higher into the mountains, bringing increasingly dramatic scenery and cooler temperatures. After 59km you come to the important highway junction known as Cuatro Caminos (Four Roads), where you can continue north (straight on) to Huehuetenango (77km), turn

east to Totonicapán (12km) or turn southwest to Quetzaltenango (13km).

Buses pass through Cuatro Caminos about every half-hour from 6am to 6pm on their way between Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán.

### TOTONICAPÁN

pop 94,700 / elevation 2500m

San Miguel Totonicapán is a pretty Guatemalan highland town known for its artisans. Shoemakers, weavers, tinsmiths, potters and woodworkers all make and sell their goods here. Market days are Tuesday and Saturday; it's a locals' market, not a tourist affair, and it winds down by late morning.

Flanking Totonicapán's parque (as the plaza is called) are the requisite **colonial church** and a wonderful **municipal theater**, built in 1924 in the neoclassical style and restored in recent years. **Agua Caliente hot springs**, a popular local bathing place is 2km from the parque.

### Sights & Activities

**Casa de la Cultura Totonicapense** (☎ 7766 1575; [www.larutamayaonline.com/aventura.html](http://www.larutamayaonline.com/aventura.html); 8a Av 2-17), left of Hospedaje San Miguel, holds displays on indigenous culture and crafts. It also administers a wonderful 'Meet the Artisans' program that allows tourists to meet artisans and local families, observing how they live, work and play. The prices for four people, on a per person basis, range from US\$49, but for 15 to 20 people the per person cost is US\$24. An alternative program, for two/six/10 people, costs US\$15/10/6 per person, and takes you on foot to nearby villages to visit community development projects, natural medicine projects, schools, artisans' workshops and Maya sacred sites. All tours are in Spanish.

### Festivals & Events

**Apparition of the Archangel Michael** (May 8)

Features fireworks and traditional dances.

**Feria Titular de San Miguel Arcángel** (Name-Day Festival of Archangel Saint Michael; September 24-30) Peaks on September 29.

**Festival Tradicional de Danza** (late October – dates vary) Totonicapán keeps traditional masked dances very much alive with this festival.

### Sleeping & Eating

Casa de la Cultura clients can stay with local families for around US\$18 per person, including dinner and breakfast.

**Hospedaje Paco Centro** (☎ 7766 2810; 3a Calle 8-22, Zona 2; s/d US\$5.50/11, with bathroom US\$8/16) A clean, tidy place with big bare rooms, it's a couple of blocks from the lower plaza. Rooms with bathroom have TV. Front rooms get a bit of street noise.

**Restaurante Bonanza** (4a Calle 8-16, Zona 2; meals US\$4-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Toto's most formal restaurant won't blow your mind, but it will fill your stomach. Mostly meat, with a few seafood and veggie options.

## Getting There & Away

Buses between Totonicapán and Quetzaltenango (passing through Cuatro Caminos) run frequently throughout the day. Signs in the bus window say 'Toto.' The ride from Cuatro Caminos is along a beautiful pine-studded valley. The last direct bus to Quetzaltenango (US\$0.50, one hour) leaves Toto at 6:30pm.

## QUETZALTENANGO (XELA)

pop 140,400 / elevation 2335m

Quetzaltenango, – which the locals kindly shorten to Xela (*shell-ah*), itself an abbreviation of the original Quiché Maya name, Xelajú – may well be the perfect Guatemalan town – not too big, not too small, enough foreigners to support a good range of hotels and restaurants, but not so many that it loses its national flavor. The Guatemalan 'layering' effect is at work in the city center here – once the Spanish moved out, the Germans moved in and their architecture gives the zone a somber, some would say Gothic, feel.

Xela attracts a more serious type of traveler – people who really want to learn Spanish, and then stay around and get involved in myriad volunteer projects on offer.

It also functions as a base for a range of spectacular hikes through the surrounding countryside – the constantly active Santiaguito and highest-point-in-Central-America Tajumulco volcanoes, and the picturesque, fascinating three-day trek to Lake Atitlán to name a few.

## History

Quetzaltenango came under the sway of the Quiché Maya of K'umarcaaj in the 14th century. Before that it had been a Mam Maya town.

With the formation of the Federation of Central America in the mid-19th century,

Quetzaltenango initially decided on federation with Chiapas and Mexico, instead of with Central America. Later, the city switched alliances and joined the Central American Federation, becoming an integral part of Guatemala in 1840. The late-19th century coffee boom augmented Quetzaltenango's wealth. Plantation owners came to buy supplies, and coffee brokers opened warehouses. The city prospered until 1902, when a dual calamity – an earthquake and a volcanic eruption – brought mass destruction.

Still, Xela's position at the intersection of the roads to the Pacific Slope, Mexico and Guatemala City guaranteed it some degree of affluence. Today it's again busy with commerce.

## Orientation

The heart of Xela is the Parque Centroamérica, shaded by old trees, graced with neoclassical monuments and surrounded by the city's important buildings.

The main bus station is Terminal Minerva, on 7a Calle, Zona 3, on the western outskirts and next to one of the city's main markets. First-class bus lines have their own terminals.

Minibuses run between Terminal Minerva and Parque Centroamérica – listen for helpers yelling 'parque' or 'terminal' respectively.

## Information

### BOOKSTORES

**El Libro Abierto** (Map p139; 15a Av A 1-56, Zona 1)

Great selection of books in English and Spanish on Guatemala and the Maya, plus guidebooks, fiction, dictionaries, language textbooks and maps; will buy used books.

**North & South** (Map p137; 8 Calle & 15 Av, Zona 1)

A wide range of books focusing on Latin America, politics, poetry and history. Also plenty of new and used guidebooks and Spanish student resources.

**Visa Bookstore** (Map p139; 15a Av 3-64, Zona 1) Excellent range of second-hand books in English and European languages. One of the best noticeboards in town.

### EMERGENCY

**Bomberos** (Firefighters; ☎ 7761 2002)

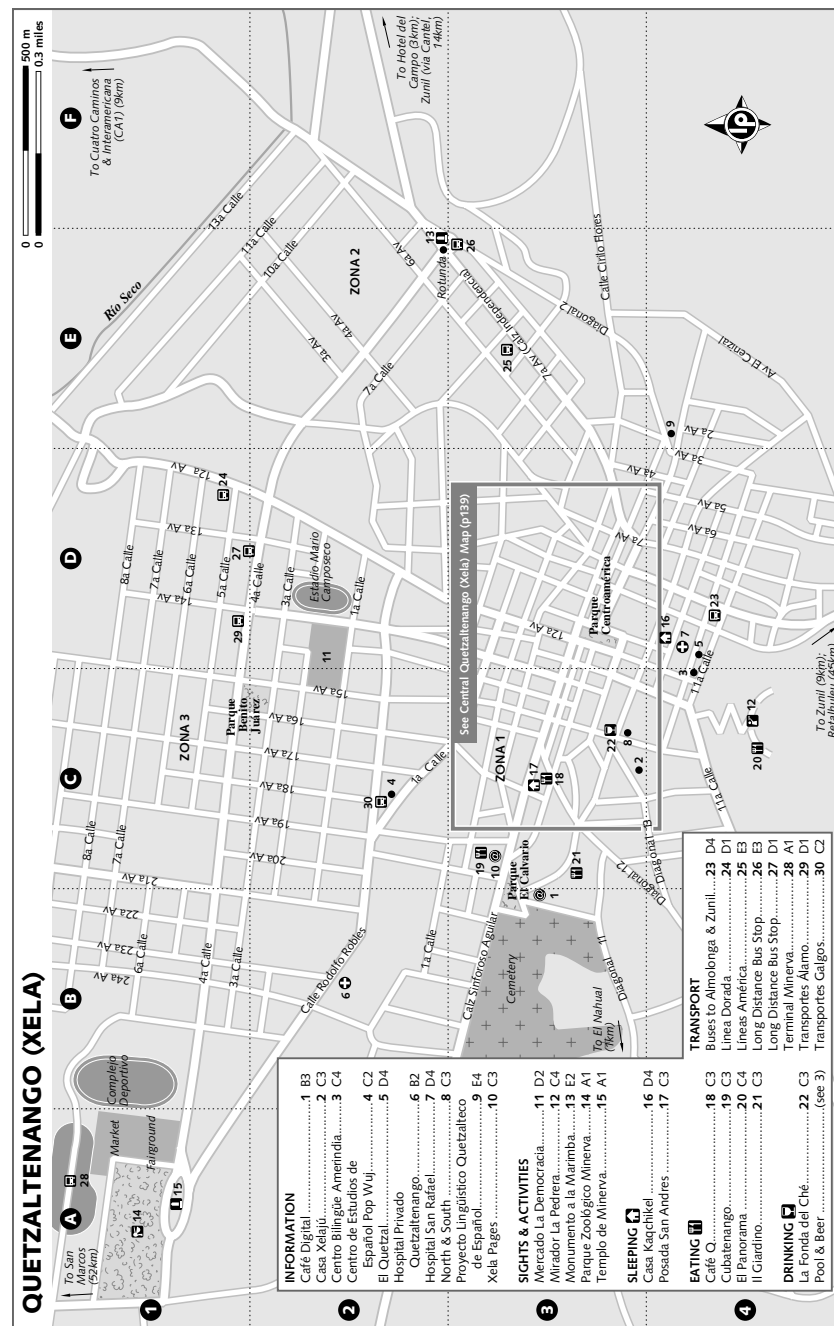
**Cruz Roja** (Red Cross; ☎ 7761 2746)

**Policía Municipal** (☎ 7761 5805)

**Policía Nacional** (☎ 7765 4991/2)

### INTERNET ACCESS

Email access here is some of the cheapest in Guatemala, at around US\$0.25 to US\$0.80 per hour. These are just some of the places available:





**Café Digital** (Map p137; Diagonal 9 19-77, Zona 1)  
**Celas Maya** (Map p139; 6a Calle 14-55, Zona 1)  
**Infinito Internet** (Map p139; 7a Calle 15-16, Zona 1)  
**Xelapages** (Map p137; 4 Calle 19-48, Zona 1)

#### INTERNET RESOURCES

**Xelapages** (www.xelapages.com) Packed with information about Xela and nearby attractions. Also a useful discussion forum.

#### LAUNDRY

These places charge around US\$0.50 to wash and dry 1kg and maybe a bit more for the detergent:

**Lavandería El Centro** (Map p139; 15a Av 3-51, Zona 1; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-5pm Sat)  
**Rapi-Servicio Laundromat** (Map p139; 7a Calle 13-25A, Zona 1; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat)

#### MEDIA

The following English-language publications are available free in bars, restaurants and cafés around town:

**Entre Mundos** (www.entremundos.org) Newspaper published every two months by the Xela-based organization of the same name. It has plenty of information on political and current events, and volunteer projects in the region.

**XelaWho** (www.xelawho.com) Billing itself as 'Quetzaltenango's leading Culture & Nightlife Magazine' (where's the competition?), this little magazine has details of cultural events in the city, plus some fairly irreverent takes on life in Guatemala in general.

#### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Hospital San Rafael** (Map p137; ☎ 761 4414, 761 2956, 9a Calle 10-41, Zona 1) Has 24-hour emergency service.

**Hospital Privado Quetzaltenango** (Map p137; ☎ 761 4381, Calle Rodolfo Robles 23-51)

#### MONEY

Parque Centroamérica (Map p139) is the place to go when you're looking for banks. There are MasterCard & Visa ATMs on the west side of the plaza. The Banco Industrial (Map p139) has a Visa ATM.

#### POST

**Main post office** (Map p139; 4a Calle 15-07, Zona 1) Central location, east of Telgua office.

#### TELEPHONE

**Café Digital** (Map p137; Diagonal 9 19-77, Zona 1) Calls to USA or Canada/Europe costs US\$0.10/0.15 per minute.

**Infinito Internet** (Map p139; 7a Calle 15-16, Zona 1) Calls to US or Canada/Europe costs US\$0.10/0.15 per minute.

**Xelapages** (Map p137; 4 Calle 19-48, Zona 1) Calls to the USA or Canada/Europe costs US\$0.15/0.20 per minute.

**Telgua** (Map p139; cnr 15a Av A & 4a Calle) Plenty of card phones outside this office.

#### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Inguat** (Map p139; ☎ /fax 7761 4931; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) At the south end of Parque Centroamérica. If you're looking for a brochure, this is the place to come. For hard information, you're better off asking tour operators (see p141).

#### Sights

##### PARQUE CENTROAMÉRICA

This plaza (Map p139) and its surrounding buildings are pretty much all there is to see in Xela proper. At its southeast end, the Casa de la Cultura holds the **Museo de Historia Natural** (admission US\$0.80; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat), which has exhibits on the Maya, the liberal revolution in Central American politics and the Estado de Los Altos, of which Quetzaltenango was the capital. Marimbas, weaving, taxidermy and other local lore also claim places here. It's fascinating because it's funky.

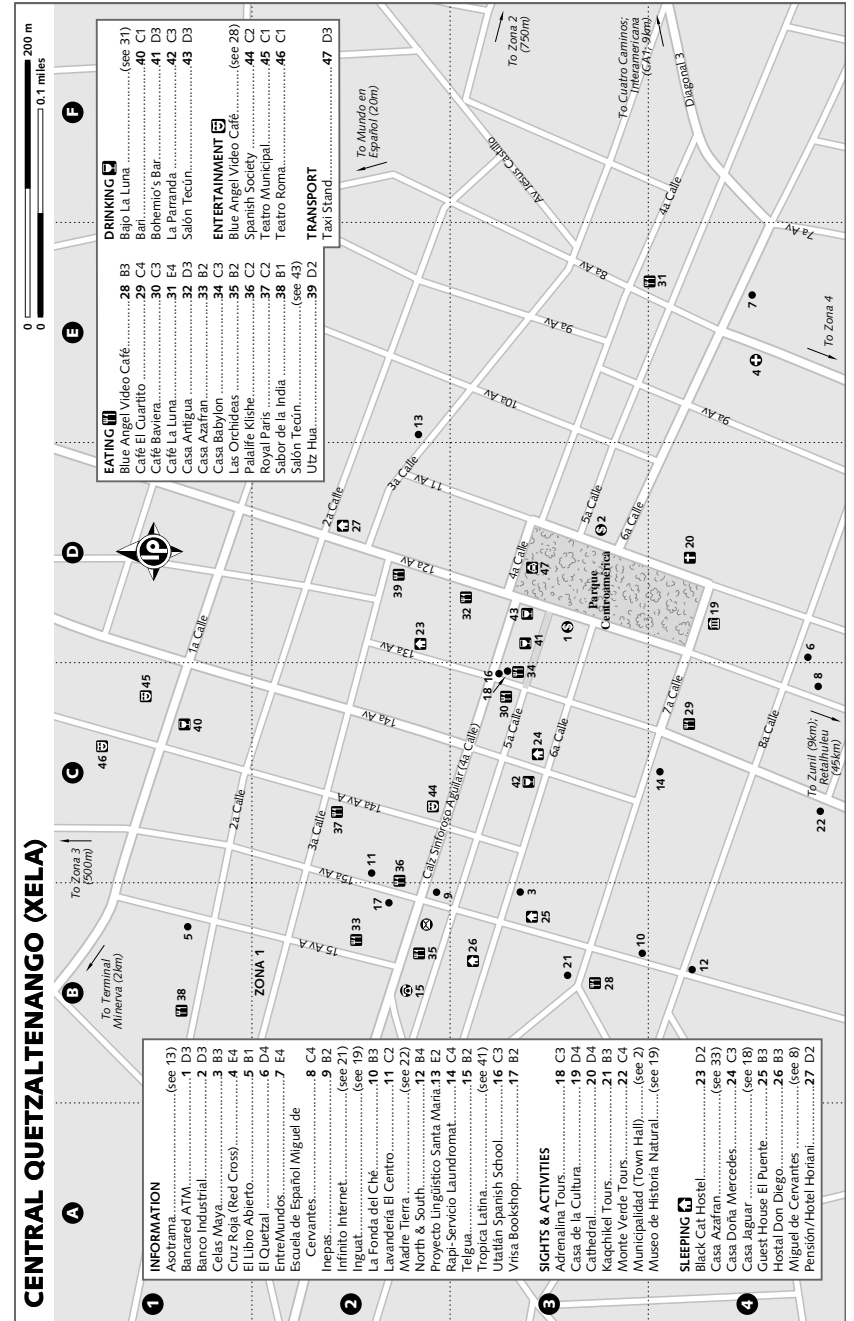
The once-crumbling **cathedral** has been rebuilt in the last few decades and was still being renovated at the time of writing. Up the block, the **municipalidad** (town hall) follows the grandiose neoclassical style so favored as a symbol of culture and refinement in this wild mountain country. On the plaza's northwest side, the palatial **Pasaje Enriquez**, between 4a and 5a Calles, was built to be lined with elegant shops, but it now declines with grungy dignity.

##### OTHER SIGHTS

On 1a Calle is the impressive neoclassical **Teatro Municipal** (Map p139), which hosts regular performing arts productions, from international dance recitals to the crowning of La Señorita Quetzaltenango.

Check out the **Mercado La Democracia** (Map p137; 1a Calle, Zona 3), 10 blocks north of Parque Centroamérica, for the hustle of a real Guatemalan city market.

About 3km northwest of Parque Centroamérica, near the Terminal Minerva bus station and another big market, is **Parque Zoológico Minerva** (Map p137; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), a zoo-park with a few monkeys, coyotes, raccoons, deer, Barbary sheep and a sad,



solitary lion. Outside the zoo on an island in the middle of 4a Calle stands the neoclassical **Templo de Minerva** (Map p137), built by dictator Estrada Cabrera to honor the Roman goddess of education and to inspire Guatemalans to new heights of learning. The **Mirador La Pedrera** (Map p137), a 3km (or US\$4) taxi ride from the center, offers a fine view of the city.

## Activities

### HIKING

Volcán Tajumulco (4220m) is the highest point in Central America and a challenging two-day hike from Quetzaltenango. Volcán Santiaguito (2488m) and Volcán Santa María (3772m) can also be ascended. All of the following companies charge around US\$40 for a two-day Tajumulco trip, US\$15 for full-moon ascents of Santa María, US\$70 for the three-day Quetzaltenango–Lago de Atitlán trek.

**Adrenalina Tours** (Map p139; ☎ 7761 4509; www.adrenalinatours.com; 13a Av, Zona 1, inside Pasaje Enriquez)

**Kaqchikel Tours** (Map p139; ☎ 5294 8828; www.kaqchikeltours.com; 7a Calle 15-36, Zona 1) Also does a challenging two-day hike right up close to the active Santiaguito.

**Monte Verde Tours** (Map p139; ☎ 7761 6105; www.monte-verdetours.com; 13a Av 8-34, Zona 1)

### CYCLING

Cycling is a great way to explore the surrounding countryside or commute to Spanish class. Fuentes Georginas, San Andrés Xequil and the steam vents at Los Vahos (see p145) are all attainable day trips. **Vrisa Bookstore** (Map p139; 15a Av 3-64, Zona 1) rents mountain and town bikes for US\$3.50 per day, US\$9.50 per week.

## Courses

### DANCE & WEAVING

**Tropica Latina** (Map 000; ☎ 5892 8861; www.xelawho.com/tropicalatina; 5a Calle 12-24, Zona 1) This highly recommended dance school is the longest running in town, and gets top marks for its fun atmosphere and professionalism. Group and private salsa classes and private merengue classes are offered.

**Asotrama** (Map 000; ☎ 7765 8564; www.xelapages.com/asotrama; 3a Calle 10-56, Zona 1) This women's cooperative offers backstrap weaving classes and operates a fair-trade fabrics shop.

## SPANISH

In recent years, Xela has become well known for its Spanish-language schools. Unlike Antigua, Xela is not overrun with foreigners, but it does have a small student social scene. **Xelapages** (www.xelapages.com/schools.htm), has information on many of the schools here.

Most of the city's Spanish schools participate in social-action programs with the local Quiché people and provide students with an opportunity to get involved. The standard price is US\$110/125 per week for four/five hours of instruction per day, Monday to Friday, including room and board with a local family, or around US\$80/95 per week without homestay. Some schools charge up to 20% more tuition during the high season (June through August), and many require non-refundable registration fees, particularly when booking in advance from overseas. College students may be able to take classes for academic credit.

The following are among the many reputable schools:

**Casa Xelajú** (Map p137; ☎ 7761 5954; www.casaxelaju.com; Callejón 15 D13-02, Zona 1) One of the biggest, also offering classes in K'iche and college credits.

**Celas Maya** (Map p139; ☎ /fax 7761 4342; www.celasmaya.edu.gt; 6a Calle 14-55, Zona 1) Set around a pleasant garden-courtyard; also offers classes in K'iche.

**Centro Bilingüe Amerindia** (CBA; Map p137; ☎ 7771 8049; www.languageschool.com.gt; 12a Av 10-27, Zona 1) Classes in Mayan languages as well.

**Centro de Estudios de Español Pop Wuj** (Map p137; ☎ /fax 7761 8286; www.pop-wuj.org; 1a Calle 17-72, Zona 1) Pop Wuj's profits go to development projects in nearby villages, in which students can participate.

The school also offers medical and social work specialist language programs.

**El Nahual** (Map p137; ☎ 7765 2098; www.languageselnahual.com; 27 Av 8-68, Zona 1) A bit out of town, but runs some excellent, grass roots community projects in which students are invited to participate, such as teaching classes for underprivileged kids and maintaining an organic community garden.

**El Quetzal** (Map p139; ☎ 7765 1085; www.xelawho.com/elquetzal; 10a Calle 10-29, Zona 1) One of the few indigenous-run businesses in town, plenty of activities and a reading room with over 300 books.

**Escuela de Español Miguel de Cervantes** (Map p139; ☎ 7765 5554; www.learn2speakspanish.com; 12a Av 8-31) Friendly female owner, intimate atmosphere, also has accommodation (p142).

**Inepas** (Map p139; Instituto de Estudios de Español y Participación en Ayuda Social; ☎ 765 1308; www

.inepas.org; 15a Av 4-59) Offers a range of cheap accommodations other than living with a family; also organizes worthy projects in which students are invited to participate.

**Madre Tierra** (Map p139; ☎ 7761 6105; www.madretierra.org; 13a Av 8-34, Zona 1) Plenty of activities; runs its own reforestation project; classes held in pretty courtyard in classic colonial house.

**Mundo en Español** (Map p139; ☎ 7761 3256; www.elmundoenespanol.org; 8a Av Calle B A-61, Zona 1) Over 17 years' experience, family atmosphere, gym, garden and accommodation on premises.

**Proyecto Lingüístico Quetzalteco de Español** (Map p137; ☎ /fax 763 1061; www.hermandad.com; 5a Calle 2-42, Zona 1) This very professional and politically minded school also runs the Escuela de la Montaña, a language school with a maximum enrollment of eight, on an organic coffee *finca* in the mountains near Xela; participation in local culture and volunteering are strongly encouraged.

**Proyecto Lingüístico Santa María** (Map p139; ☎ 7765 8136; 3a Calle 10-56, Zona 1) With a young staff and good atmosphere, it has had nonprofit status since 1984. Can organize volunteer work with Maya women's weaving cooperative. The director writes books on Spanish grammar and usage.

**Utatlán Spanish School** (Map p139; ☎ 7763 0446; www.xelapages.com/utatlan; Pasaje Enriquez, 12a Av 4-32, Zona 1) Young and energetic with plenty of parties and activities.

## Volunteering

Xela has several organizations that need volunteers. The Asociación Hogar Nuevos Horizontes, La Escuela de la Calle and Red Internacional are all organizations based in Quetzaltenango.

**EntreMundos** (Map p139; ☎ 7761 2179; www.entremundos.org; El Espacio, 6a Calle 7-31, Zona 1) Apart from providing volunteer resources and matching volunteers with projects, this organization actively seeks volunteers for capacity building workshops for NGOs and to produce their bimonthly newspaper.

## Tours

**Adrenalina Tours** (Map p139; ☎ 7761 4509; www.adrenalinatours.com; Pasaje Enriquez, Zona 1) A professional, knowledgeable and amiable outfit providing a range of trips in the Xela area, including Zunil, Fuentes Georginas and little-visited parts of the department of Huehuetenango. Also offers shuttles around the country, international flights and personalized trips all over Central America.

**Monte Verde Tours** (Map p139; ☎ 7761 6105; www.monte-verdetours.com; 13a Av 8-34, Zona 1) Also offers tours in the Xela area, beach trips, ecotours and tours of local coffee farms, as well as shuttle buses and guided bike tours.

## Festivals & Events

**Xela Music Festival** (late March or early April) Organized by the Alianza Francaise, this one- or two-day festival sees city streets blocked off, as local musicians play on five or six stages around the city center.

**Feria de la Virgen del Rosario** (Feria Centroamericana de Independencia; September 15-22) Xela's big annual party. Residents kick up their heels at a fairground on the city's perimeter, and there's plenty of entertainment at selected venues around town.

**Juegos Florales Centroamericanos** The prizes in this international Spanish-language literary competition hosted by the city are awarded at this time too.

## Sleeping

All of the following are in Zona 1.

**Casa Kaqchikel** (Map p137; ☎ 7761 2628; 9a Calle 11-26; dm US\$4, s/d US\$5.50/10, with bathroom US\$8/12) There's only a few rooms in this old wooden house, but they're all good value – big and comfortable. The superfriendly family who run the place can whip you up a Guatemalan meal, or you can use the kitchen.

**Pensión/Hotel Horiani** (Map p139; ☎ 7763 5228; 12a Av 2-23; s/d US\$4/6) There's very little in the way of frills on offer here, but the small plain rooms upstairs set around a plant-filled patio have a certain charm to them. Enter from 2a Calle.

**Posada San Andres** (Map p137; 4 Calle D 12-41; www.guesthousesanandres.com; s/d US\$4/7) Undergoing renovations at the time of writing, this old wooden house has spacious, bare rooms with shared bathrooms and kitchen access. A few sticks of furniture and some art on the walls make the place comfortable enough.

**Hostal Don Diego** (Map p139; ☎ 5511 3211; hostaldondiego@gmail.com; 6a Calle 15-12; dm US\$4.50, s/d US\$6/10) A beautiful little budget choice – rooms are OK, with parquet floors and good firm beds. Kitchen access and a sunny courtyard are other bonuses. They offer reduced rates for weekly or monthly stays, with or without kitchen use.

**Guest House El Puente** (Map p139; ☎ 7765 4342; 15a Av 6-75; s/d US\$5.50/8, with bathroom US\$8/10) An intimate little place, it has five good-sized rooms, kitchen access and a grassy garden area. Discounts for longer stays keep the place filled with long-termers.

**Casa Azafran** (Map p139; ☎ 7763 0206; casababylon-restauraneyhotel@yahoo.com; 15 Av A 3-33; s/d US\$10/12, with bathroom US\$14/20) A classic old house on a quiet street just out of the center. Each room is spacious, with two big firm beds, closets and cable TV. One has a fireplace.

**Miguel de Cervantes** (Map p139; ☎ 7765 5554; www.learn2speakspanish.com; 12a Av 8-31; s/d US\$7/14) These basic but comfortable wood and concrete rooms are set around one of the cutest courtyards in Xela. When there's water pressure, the showers in the shared bathrooms rock.

**Black Cat Hostel** (Map p139; ☎ 5037 1871; blackcatxela@gmail.com; 13a Av 3-33; dm US\$7, s/d US\$11/17) Xela's newest hostel is a good deal and a great place if you're looking to meet up with other travelers. There's a sunny courtyard, a bar-restaurant and lounge-TV area. Rates include a big breakfast.

**Casa Doña Mercedes** (Map p139; ☎ 7765 4687; cnr 6a Calle & 14 Av; r US\$20) Some of Xela's best looking budget rooms are on offer here at this newish little guest house in the heart of downtown. Rooms have shared bathrooms, but are otherwise extremely comfortable, with carpeted floors or wooden floorboards, cable TV and closets.

For long-term stays, an option is renting an apartment. Read all the fine print and know the terms for deposits, gas and electricity charges before plunking down cash.

**Casa Jaguar** (☎ 5446 3785; Pasaje Enriquez; r/apt per person per month US\$131/266) Rents fully furnished apartments with cable TV and free gas for the first month. Also available are rooms with access to shared kitchen and bathroom facilities.

## Eating

As with hotels, Quetzaltenango has a broad selection of places to eat. Cheapest are the food stalls around the small market to the east of the Casa de la Cultura, where snacks and substantial main-course plates are sold for US\$1 or less. All of the following are in Zona 1.

## GUATEMALAN & LATIN AMERICAN CUISINE

**Blue Angel Video Café** (Map p139; 7a Calle, Zona 1; snacks US\$2-4; ☎ lunch & dinner) Economical café with excellent, healthy foods and an awesome tea selection – popular with language students.

**Utz Hua** (Map p139; cnr 12a Av & 3a Calle; meals US\$3.50) Delicious, authentic Guatemalan and Quetzaltenango dishes for equally yummy prices. The

restaurant is well (if slightly frantically) decorated, and it's worth stopping by to check out the indoor thatched roof, if nothing else.

**Cubateno** (Map p137; 19a Av 2-06; mains US\$4-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Authentic Cuban food with a Miami twist is the go here – *ropa vieja* (shredded beef), *moros y cristianos* (black beans and rice) and *vaca frita* (fried beef). The *tostones* (fried, mashed, savory bananas) are worth the trip alone and they make a mean *mojito*.

## INTERNATIONAL CUISINE

**Café Q** (Map p137; Diagonal 12 4-46; mains from US\$3.50; ☎ 7-10pm Mon-Fri) The varied international flavors at Q's include interesting vegetarian options such as falafel, soy burgers and chick-pea soup.

**Sabor de la India** (Map p139; 2a Calle 15 A 2-34; mains US\$4-6; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, dinner Sun) Serves probably the most authentic Indian dishes in the country, whipped up by a friendly Indian-Guatemalan couple. Portions are huge and there are plenty of vegetarian options.

**Las Orquídeas** (Map p139; 4a Calle 15-45; mains US\$4-6; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Hanging out for some Thai food? This is the place. Green curry, *pad thai*, satay, oodles of noodles and sticky rice with papaya to round things out.

**Salón Tecún** (Map p139; Pasaje Enriquez; burgers, salads, sandwiches US\$4-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) On the west side of Parque Centroamérica, the Tecún, consistently Xela's busiest bar, serves good bar food including the best burgers in town.

**Casa Antigua** (Map p139; 12a Av 3-26; meals US\$4-8; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) An excellent, tranquil spot right in the middle of downtown. Sandwiches are big, chunky affairs and there's plenty of steaks flame grilling out front.

**Casa Babylon** (Map p139; cnr 13a Av & 5a Calle; mains US\$4-12; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) With the widest menu in town, the Babylon is a travelers' favorite. Dishes run from big, tasty sandwiches to Guatemalan classics such as *pepian* (stew) to more exotic fare such as fondue and Middle Eastern choices.

**El Panorama** (☎ 5319 3536; Map p137; 13a Av A; meals US\$4-8; ☎ dinner Wed-Fri, lunch & dinner Sat & Sun) This Swiss owned restaurant (a 10-minute slog up the hill at the south end of town) does good set meals and raclette. The view is amazing and it's a romantic spot for that special night out.

**Il Giardino** (Map p137; 19a Callejón 8-07; mains US\$5-9; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) The best pizzas in town are made by the Italian-descended family that

run this place. It's set around a big leafy indoor garden and offers pasta, steaks and good salads and sandwiches, too.

**Royal Paris** (☎ 7761 1942; Map p139; 14a Av A 3-06; meals from US\$5; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Xela's oldest French restaurant has some lovely cheesy steak dishes, cheap set lunches and live music on Friday and Saturday nights (reservations recommended).

**Casa Azafran** (Map p139; 15 Av A 3-33; mains from US\$6) Serving up the most elaborate French food in town, this well-decorated, intimate restaurant is a romantic choice with some decadent options such as lobster tails on the menu.

## CAFÉS

Coffee plays an important part in Xela's economy, and there are plenty of places where you can grab a cup.

**Café La Luna** (Map p139; 8a Av 4-11; snacks US\$2; ☎ 9:30am-9pm Mon-Fri, 4-9pm Sat & Sun) La Luna is a comfortable, relaxed place to hang out and eat a cake, salad or sandwich. The hot chocolate is the specialty – the coffee is so-so. Choose any of several rooms: décor is in similar vein to Café Baviera but the music is classical instead of jazz.

**Café Baviera** (Map p139; 5a Calle 13-14; dishes US\$3-4; ☎ 7am-8:30pm) This European-style café has good coffee, roasted on the premises, and is a decent place for breakfast or a snack (crepes, croissants, soups and salads). The wooden walls are hung with countless photos and clippings on Xela and international themes.

**Café El Cuartito** (Map p139; 13a Av 7-09; ☎ 7am-midnight Wed-Mon) Xela's hippest café does a good range of snacks and juices, and coffee just about any way you want it. Weekends they often have DJs spinning laid-back tracks, and there's always art on the walls by local contemporary artists.

## Drinking & Nightlife

The live music scene is particularly strong in Xela. For details on what's on, pick up a copy of *XelaWho* or check www.xelawho.com. All of the following are in Zona 1.

## BARS & CLUBS

**Salón Tecún** (Map p139; Pasaje Enriquez; ☎ 8am-1am) On the west side of Parque Centroamérica, and busy all day and night with a healthy crowd of Guatemalans and foreigners, the Tecún claims to be the country's longest-running bar (since 1935). Don't miss it.

**Bajo La Luna** (Map p139; 8a Av 4-11; ☎ 8pm-1am Thu-Sat) An atmospheric wine and cheese bar set in a cellar with exposed beams. Liters of Chilean red go for US\$6.

**Pool & Beer** (Map p137; 12a Av 10-21; ☎ 5pm-midnight) An excellent place for some drinks and a few games of pool. At the time of writing, the tables hadn't been trashed and the cues were straight.

**Bohemio's Bar** (Map p139; 5a Calle 12-24; ☎ 8pm-1am Tue-Sat, Zona 1) Some nights it's mellow, some nights it goes berserk, but this friendly little bar, a few steps away from the Central Park, is always worth a look in.

**La Parranda** (Map p139; cnr 6a Calle & 14a Av) This is the hottest place in town for dancing and drinking. On Wednesdays there are free salsa classes, other nights have guest DJs and drinks giveaways.

**Bari** (Map p139; 1a Calle 14-31; ☎ 8pm-1am Thu-Sat) This little bar has live *trova*, pop and rock music Thursday to Saturday, and sells a good selection of wine and draft beers.

**La Fonda del Ché** (Map p137; 15a Av 7-43; ☎ 7pm-1am Tue-Sat) *Trova* and other guitar music nightly.

**Palalife Klishe** (Map p139; 15a Av & 4 Calle; ☎ 5pm-1am Tue-Sat) This 'open minded' disco-bar is always fun and attracts a mixed crowd, with good dance music, drinks specials and drag shows on Saturday nights.

## Entertainment

**Spanish Society** (Map p139; cnr 4a Calle & 14a Av A, Zona 1) This cultural center hosts a women's theater group who stage monthly performances, and occasionally has events such as book launches and poetry readings.

Other recommendations:

**Teatro Municipal** (Map p139; 1a Calle) Cultural performances are presented at this beautiful venue.

**Teatro Roma** (Map p139; 14a Av A) Facing Teatro Municipal; sometimes screens interesting movies.

**Blue Angel Video Café** (www.xelawho.com/blueangel; Map p139; 7a Calle 15-79, Zona 1; US\$1.30) Shows Hollywood videos nightly.

## Getting There & Away BUS

For 2nd-class buses, head out to the **Terminal Minerva** (Map p137; 7a Calle, Zona 3), a dusty, noisy, crowded yard in the west of town. Buses leave frequently for many highland destinations. Leaving or entering town, some buses make a stop east of the center at the *rotonda*, a traffic circle on Calz Independencia, marked by the

Monumento a la Marimba. Getting off here when you're coming into Xela saves the 10 or 15 minutes it will take your bus to cross town to Terminal Minerva.

First-class companies operating between Quetzaltenango and Guatemala City have their own terminals.

All the following buses depart from Terminal Minerva, unless otherwise indicated.

### International

**Ciudad Tecún Umán (Mexican border)** (US\$3.50, 3½ hours, 129km, hourly 5am-2pm)

**El Carmen/Talismán (Mexican border)** Take a bus to Coatepeque (US\$2.50, two hours, every 30 minutes) and get a direct bus to El Carmen (US\$2.50, two hours).

**La Mesilla (Mexican border)** (US\$3, 3½ hours, 170km) Buses at 5am, 6am, 7am, 8am, 1pm & 4pm. Or bus to Huehuetenango and change there.

### Domestic

**Almolonga (for Los Vahos)** (US\$0.50, 15 minutes, 6km, every 15 minutes 5:30am-5pm) With a stop for additional passengers at the corner of 9a Av and 10a Calle.

**Antigua** (170km) Take any bus heading to Guatemala City via the Interamericana and change at Chimaltenango.

**Chichicastenango** (US\$3, three hours, 94km) Buses at 5am, 6am, 9:30am, 10:45am, 11am, 1pm, 2pm and 3:30pm. If you don't get one of these, take a bus heading to Guatemala City by the Interamericana and change at Los Encuentros.

**Cuatro Caminos** (US\$0.50, 30 minutes, 11km) Take any bus for Huehuetenango, Momostenango, Tonicapán, San Francisco El Alto etc.

**Guatemala City** Transportes Álamo (☎ 7763 5044; 14a Av 5-15, Zona 3) has seven Pullman buses (US\$6, four to five hours, 205km) between 4:30am and 4:45pm; Líneas América (☎ 7761 4587; 7a Av 3-33, Zona 2) has six pullmans between 5:15am and 3:30pm; Transportes Galgos (☎ 7761 2248; Calle Rodolfo Robles 17-43, Zona 1) has five Pullmans between 3am and 3pm; Línea Dorada (☎ 7767 5198; cnr 12a Av & 5a Calle, Zona 1) has two 1st-class buses (US\$8, 4am and 2:30pm). Each departs from their own terminals. Cheaper 2nd-class buses depart Terminal Minerva every 30 minutes between 3am and 4:30pm, but they make many stops and take longer.

**Huehuetenango** (US\$2, two hours, 90km, every 30 minutes 5am-5:30pm)

**Momostenango** (US\$1, 1¼ hours, 26km, every 30 minutes 6am-5pm)

**Panajachel** (US\$2.50, 2½ hours, 90km) Buses at 5am, 6am, 8am, 10am, noon and 3pm. Or take any bus for Guatemala City via the Interamericana and change at Los Encuentros.

**Retalhuleu** (US\$1.50, one hour, 46km, every 30 minutes 4:30am-6pm) Look for 'Reu' on the bus; 'Retalhuleu' won't be spelled out.

**San Andrés Xecul** (US\$0.80, 40 minutes) Buses every hour or two, 6am to 3pm. Or take any bus to San Francisco El Alto or Tonicapán; get out at the Esso station at the Moreira junction and flag a pickup.

**San Francisco El Alto** (US\$0.60, one hour, 15km, roughly every 15 minutes 6am-6pm)

**San Martín Sacatepéquez (San Martín Chile Verde)** (US\$0.80, 45 minutes, 22km) Various companies have buses that leave when full. Placards may say 'Colomba' or 'El Rincón.' Minibuses also serve this route.

**Tonicapán** (US\$1, one hour, 22km, every 20 minutes 6am-5pm) Departing from the *rotonda* on Calz Independencia. Placards generally say 'Toto.'

**Zunil** (US\$0.60, 20 minutes, 10km, every 30 minutes 7am-7pm) With an additional stop at the corner of 9a Av and 10a Calle, southeast of Parque Centroamérica.

### SHUTTLE MINIBUS

Adrenalina Tours (p141) runs shuttle minibuses to many destinations including Guatemala City (US\$30 per person), Antigua (US\$25), Chichicastenango (US\$15), Panajachel (US\$15), and San Cristóbal Las Casas in Mexico (US\$35). Monte Verde Tours (p141) offers the same runs for slightly cheaper prices.

### Getting Around

Inguat has information on city bus routes. City buses charge US\$0.15, doubling the fare after 7pm and on holidays. Taxis wait at the stand on the north end of Parque Centroamérica. Línea Dorada has a door-to-door shuttle service (US\$3) for passengers getting their 4am departure. Cab fare between Terminal Minerva and the city center is around US\$4.50.

### AROUND QUETZALTENANGO (XELA)

The beautiful volcanic countryside around Quetzaltenango makes for exciting day trips. The natural steam baths at Los Vahos are primitive; the baths at Almolonga are basic, cheap and accessible; and the hot springs at Fuentes Georginas are idyllic.

Feast your eyes and soul on the wild church at San Andrés Xecul, hike to the shores of Laguna Chicabal from Xela or simply hop on a bus and explore the scores of traditional villages that pepper this region. Market days in surrounding towns include Sunday in Momostenango, Monday in Zunil, Tuesday and Saturday in Tonicapán and Friday in San Francisco El Alto.

### Los Vahos

Hikers will enjoy a trip to the rough-and-ready sauna/steam baths at **Los Vahos** (The Vapors; admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-6pm), about 3.5km from Parque Centroamérica. To get there take a bus headed for Almolonga and ask to get out at the road to Los Vahos, which is marked with a small sign: 'A Los Vahos.' From here it's a 2.3km uphill walk (around 1½ hours) to Los Vahos. The views are remarkable.

### San Andrés Xecul

About 10km northwest of Xela is San Andrés Xecul, surrounded by fertile hills. This small town boasts perhaps the most bizarre church anywhere – technicolor saints, angels, flowers and climbing vines share space with whimsical tigers and monkeys on its shocking-yellow facade. The village has no visitor facilities.

The annual festival is held on November 29 and 30 – a good time to visit. The easiest way to get here is by taking any northbound bus from Xela and alighting at the Esso station at the Morería crossroads and hailing a pickup or walking the 3km uphill. Buses returning to Xela line up at the edge of the plaza and depart until about 5pm.

### Zunil

pop 10,900 / elevation 2076m

Zunil is a pretty agricultural market town in a lush valley framed by steep hills and dominated by a towering volcano. As you approach from Quetzaltenango, you'll see it framed as if in a picture, with its white colonial church gleaming above the red-tiled and rusted-tin roofs of the low houses.

On the way to Zunil the road passes **Almolonga**, a vegetable-growing town 6km from Quetzaltenango. Just over 1km beyond Almolonga is **Los Baños**, an area with natural hot sulfur springs. Several little places along here have bathroom installations; most are decrepit, but if a cheap hot-water bathroom is your desire, you may want to stop. Tomblake enclosed concrete tubs rent for US\$2 to US\$3 per hour.

Zunil, founded in 1529 as Santa Catarina Zunil, is a typical Guatemalan highland town. The cultivated plots, divided by stone fences, are irrigated by canals; you'll see the indigent farmers scooping water from the canals with a shovel-like instrument and throwing it over their plants. Women wash clothes near the river bridge, in pools of hot water that emerge from the rocks.

### SIGHTS

Another attraction of Zunil is its particularly pretty church; the ornate facade, with eight pairs of serpentine columns, is echoed inside by a richly worked silver altar. On market day (Monday) the plaza in front of the church is bright with the predominantly red traditional garb of locals buying and selling goods.

Half a block downhill from the church plaza, the **Cooperativa Santa Ana** (☎ 7:30am-6pm) is a handicrafts cooperative in which over 500 local women participate. Handicrafts are displayed and sold here, and weaving lessons are offered.

While you're in Zunil, visit the image of **San Simón**, an effigy of a local Maya hero venerated as a (non-Catholic) saint. The effigy is moved each year to a different house; ask anyone where to find San Simón. You'll be charged a few quetzals to visit him and take pictures (see p114).

The festival of **San Simón** is held each year on October 28, after which the effigy is moved to a new house. The festival of **Santa Catarina Alejandrí**, official patron saint of Zunil, is celebrated on November 25. Almolonga celebrates its annual fair on June 27.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Zunil, which is 10km from Quetzaltenango, you can continue to Fuentes Georginas (8km), return to Quetzaltenango via the Cantel road (16km), or alternatively, take Hwy 9S down through lush countryside to El Zarco junction on the Carr al Pacífico. Buses depart Zunil for Xela from the main road beside the bridge.

### Fuentes Georginas

This is the prettiest natural spa (admission US\$2.50; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 4pm Sun) in Guatemala. Here, pools of varying temperatures are fed by hot sulfur springs and framed by a high wall of tropical vegetation. Fans of Fuentes Georginas were dismayed when a massive landslide destroyed several structures (including the primary bathing pool) in 1998 and crushed the Greek goddess that previously gazed upon the pools. After restoration, spa regulars realized the landslide had opened a new vent.

As a result, the water is hotter than ever. Although the setting is intensely tropical, the mountain air keeps it deliciously cool all day.

The site has a restaurant and three sheltered picnic tables with cooking grills (bring your own fuel). Down the valley are seven rustic **cottages** (s/d/tr/q US\$12/16/20/24), each with a shower, a barbecue area and a fireplace to ward off the mountain chill at night (wood and matches are provided; US\$3.25 for extra wood). Included in the price of the cottages is access to the pools all day and night. Trails here lead to two nearby volcanoes: **Volcán Zunil** (three hours each way) and **Volcán Santo Tomás** (five hours each way). Going with a guide is essential. They're available (ask at the restaurant) for US\$14 for either trip, whatever the number of people in the group.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Take any bus to Zunil, where pickups wait to take you 8km up to the springs (30 minutes). Negotiate the price. They'll probably tell you it's US\$4.50 round-trip, but when you arrive at the top they may say it's US\$4.50 each way. If there are many people in the group, they may charge US\$1 per person. Unless you want to walk back down the hill, arrange a time for the driver to return. Note that Monte Verde Tours and Adrenalina Tours (p141) in Quetzaltenango offer shuttle services directly here from Xela for US\$5, including waiting time.

You can walk from Zunil to Fuentes Georginas in about two hours (8km uphill). Hitching is not good on the Fuentes Georginas access road. You might luck out on weekends.

If you're driving, walking or hitching, go uphill from Zunil's plaza to the Cantel road (about 60m), turn right and go downhill 100m to a road on the left marked 'Turicentro Fuentes Georginas, 8km.' This road (near the bus stop on the Quetzaltenango-Retalhuleu road – note that there are three different bus stops in Zunil) heads off into the mountains; the baths are 9km from Zunil's plaza.

### San Francisco El Alto

pop 45,000 / elevation 2630m

High on a hilltop overlooking Quetzaltenango stands San Francisco El Alto, Guatemala's garment district. Every inch is jammed with vendors selling sweaters, socks, blankets, jeans and more. Bolts of cloth spill from overstuffed storefronts, and that is on the quiet days! On Friday the town explodes as the real market action kicks in. The large plaza, surrounded by the church and *municipalidad* and centered on a cupola-like *mirador* (lookout), is

covered in goods. Stalls crowd into neighboring streets, and the press of traffic is so great that a special system of one-way roads is established. Vehicles entering the town on market day must pay a small fee.

This is regarded as the country's biggest, most authentic market, but it's not nearly as heavy with handicrafts as are the markets in Chichicastenango and Antigua. Beware of pickpockets and stay alert.

Around mid-morning when the clouds roll away, panoramic views can be had throughout town, especially from the church roof. The caretaker will let you up.

**Banco Reformador** (2a Calle 2-64; ☎ 8:30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) changes US dollars and traveler's checks and has a Visa ATM.

San Francisco's big party is the **Fiesta de San Francisco de Asís**, celebrated around October 4 with traditional dances such as La Danza de Conquista and La Danza de los Monos.

**Hotel Vista Hermosa** (cnr 2a Calle & 3a Av; s/d with bathroom US\$8/16) does indeed have beautiful views from its big, comfortable rooms.

For food, **El Manantial** (☎ 738 4373; 2a Calle 2-42; mains US\$2.50-3), a couple of blocks below the plaza, is pleasant and clean, serving up steaks and a few *típica* dishes.

Buses to San Francisco leave Quetzaltenango (passing through Cuatro Caminos) frequently throughout the day (US\$0.60, one hour). Because of San Francisco's one-way streets, you'll want to get off on 4a Av at the top of the hill (unless you like walking uphill) and walk towards the church. To go back, buses run downhill along 1a Av.

### Momostenango

pop 28,000 / elevation 2200m

Beyond San Francisco El Alto, and 35km from Quetzaltenango, Momostenango is Guatemala's famous center for *chamarras* (thick, heavy woolen blankets). The villagers also make ponchos and other woolen garments. As you enter the plaza, you'll see signs inviting you to watch blankets being made and purchase the finished products. The best time to do this is market day, Sunday; haggle like mad. A basic good blanket costs around US\$13, perhaps twice as much for an extra-heavy 'matrimonial.'

On market days, the streets will be thronged and so buses will often leave you on 3a Calle. It's about a five-minute walk to the plaza from here – follow the crowd or head towards the church spires.

Momostenango is also noted for its adherence to the ancient Maya calendar and traditional rites. Ceremonies coordinated with the important dates of the calendar take place in the hills about 2km west of the plaza. It's not easy to witness these rites, although try Takiliben May Wajshakib Batz (see below).

### INFORMATION

**Banrural** (1a Calle, Zona 2; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sun), a block south of the plaza, changes US dollars and traveler's checks and has a Visa ATM.

The post office is across the park on the eastern corner. Medical services are available at the **hospital** (cnr 1a Calle & 3a Av) near the bus stop. The **Centro Cultural** (☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat) in the *municipalidad* building is good for tourist information.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Momostenango's **Los Riscos** (The Crags) are peculiar geological formations on the edge of town. The eroded pumice spires rise into the air like something from *Star Trek*. To get there, take the left heading downhill from the bus stop at the Artesanía Palecom; look for the sign that says 'Entrada.' At the first intersection, you'll see another sign hanging from a corner store reading 'A Los Riscos.' Cross the bridge and head uphill about 50m and take a right onto 2a Calle, continuing about 120m to the formations.

**Takiliben May Wajshakib Batz** (☎ 7736 5537; 3a Av A 6-85, Zona 3), just past the Texaco at the entrance to town, teaches classes in Maya ceremonies. Its director, Rigoberto Itzep Chanchavac, a Maya priest, does horoscopes (US\$5) and private consultations and hosts ceremonial workshops. His **tuj** (traditional Maya sauna; per person US\$10; ☎ 3-6pm Tue & Thu) requires advance bookings.

### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Picturesque **diablo (devil) dances** are held in the plaza a few times a year, notably on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. The homemade devil costumes can get quite campy and elaborate: all have masks and cardboard wings, and some go the whole hog with fake fur suits and heavily sequined outfits. Dance groups gather in the plaza with a five- to 13-piece band, drinking alcoholic refreshments during the breaks. For entertainment, they are at their best around 3pm, but the festivities go late into the night.

The annual fair, **Octava de Santiago**, is celebrated from July 28 to August 2.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Accommodations are very basic.

**Posada de Doña Pelagia** (☎ 7736 5175; 2a Av A 2-88, Zona 1; s/d US\$2/3) Very basic, door-bumps-bed type rooms set around a courtyard. They're good enough for a night.

**Hospedaje y Comedor Paclom** (cnr 2a Av & 1a Calle, Zona 2; d US\$7) This serviceable *hospedaje*, a block uphill from the first plaza, has rooms facing a courtyard crammed with plants and birds.

**Restaurante La Cascada** (1a Calle 1-35, Zona 2; meals US\$3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A bright and clean upstairs eatery serving up good-value set meals. The food is simple and filling, and there are some good views of the church spires and surrounding hills.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

You can get buses to Momostenango from Quetzaltenango's Terminal Minerva (US\$0.80, 1½ hours), or Cuatro Caminos, or San Francisco El Alto. Buses run about every half-hour, with the last one back to Quetzaltenango normally leaving Momos at 4:30pm.

### Laguna Chicabal

This magical lake is nestled in a crater of the Volcán Chicabal (2900m). The 'Center of Maya-Mam Cosmovision,' it's an intensely sacred place and a hotbed for Maya ceremonies. Maya priests come from all over to make offerings here, especially around May 3. Visitors are definitely not welcome at this time. Do not visit Laguna Chicabal during the first week of May.

The lake is about a two-hour hike from **San Martín Chile Verde** (also known as San Martín Sacatepéquez), a friendly, interesting village about 25km from Xela and notable for the traditional dress worn by the village men. To get to the lake, head down from the highway toward town and look for the sign on your right (you can't miss it). Hike 45 minutes uphill through fields and past houses until you crest the hill. Continue hiking downhill for 15 minutes to the ranger station, where you pay a US\$2.50 entrance fee. From here, it's another 30 minutes uphill to a *mirador* and then a whopping 615 steep steps down to the edge of the lake. Start early for the best visibility; clouds and mists envelop the volcano and crater by early afternoon.

The thick vegetation ringing the lake hides picnic tables and sublime campsites. Treat the lake with the utmost respect.

Xelajú buses leave Quetzaltenango every 30 minutes until 4pm for San Martín Chile Verde; hail a pickup to get back.

## HUEHUETENANGO

pop 99,300 / elevation 1902m

Mostly a stopping-off point for more interesting places, Huehue (*way-way*) offers few charms of its own, but some people do love it for its true Guatemalan character. Either way, there are enough eating and sleeping options here to keep you happy, and the sight of the Cuchumatanes mountain range (highest in Central America) in the background makes for some striking scenery.

The lively *indígena* market is filled daily with traders who come down from surrounding villages. Surprisingly, the market area is about the only place you'll see traditional costumes in this town, as most of its citizens are ladinos wearing modern clothes. Coffee growing, mining, sheep raising, light manufacturing and agriculture are the region's main activities.

For travelers, Huehue is usually a leg on the journey to or from Mexico – the logical place to spend your first night in Guatemala. The town is also the perfect staging area for forays deeper into the Cuchumatanes or through the highlands on back roads.

## Orientation & Information

The town center is 4km northeast of the Interamericana Hwy, and the bus station is off the road linking the two, about 2km from each. Almost every service of interest to tourists is in Zona 1, within a few blocks of Parque Central.

For city buses from the bus station to the town center, leave the east side of the bus station through the gap between the Díaz Álvarez and Transportes Fronterizos offices. During hours of darkness until 11pm and after 2am, 'Centro' buses (US\$0.40) go intermittently from the street outside; in daylight hours, cross this street and walk through the covered market opposite to a second street, where 'Centro' buses (US\$0.20) depart every few minutes. To return to the bus station from the center, catch the buses outside Barbería Wilson (6a Av 2-22). A taxi between the bus terminal and town center costs US\$4.

**Banrural** (cnr 6a Av & 3a Calle; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) and **Corpobanco** (cnr 6a Av & 3a Calle; ☎ 8:30am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 12:30pm Sat) both change US dollars and traveler's checks. There are Visa ATMs at Bancafé and Banco Industrial, a block further north.

The **post office** (2a Calle 3-54; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) is half a block northeast of the parque.

**Génesis Internet** (2a Calle 6-37; ☎ 8:30am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat) and **Interhuehue** (3a Calle 6-65B; ☎ 9am-12:30pm & 2-6pm) charge US\$0.60 per hour for internet access.

The **Mexican Consulate** (5a Av 4-11; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri) is in the same building as the Farmacia del Cid.

## Sights & Activities

### PARQUE CENTRAL

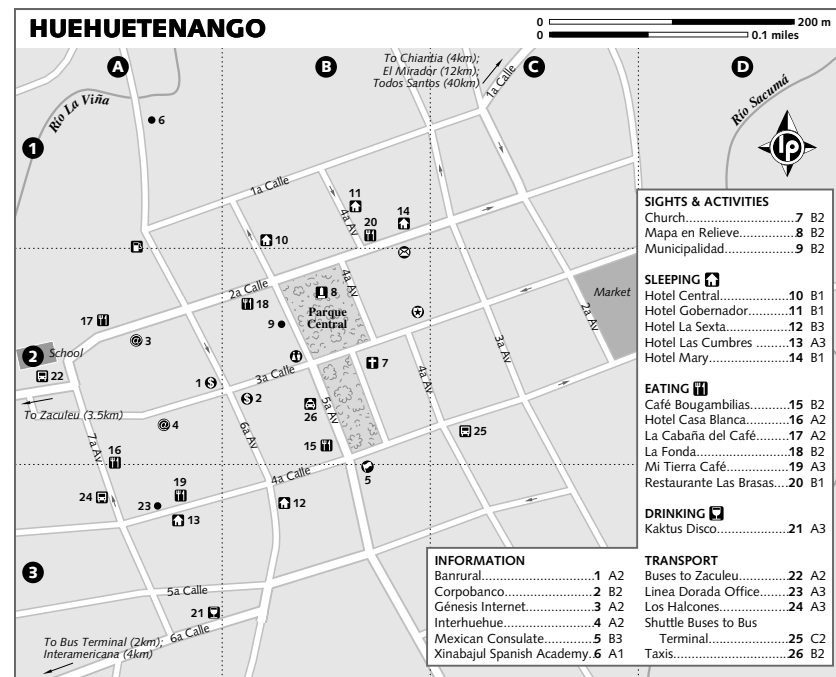
Huehuetenango's main plaza is shaded by old trees and surrounded by the town's imposing buildings: the *municipalidad* (with its band shell on the upper floor) and the huge colonial church. The plaza has its own little relief map of Huehuetenango Department.

### ZACULEU

With ravines on three sides, Zaculeu ('White Earth' in the Mam language), a late post-Classical religious center, occupies a strategic defensive location that served its Mam Maya inhabitants well. It finally failed, however, in 1525 when Gonzalo de Alvarado and his conquistadors laid siege to the site for two months. It was starvation that ultimately defeated the Mam.

The parklike **Zaculeu archaeological zone** (admission US\$4.50; ☎ 8am-6pm), about 200-sq-meters, is 4km west of Huehuetenango's main plaza. Cold soft drinks and snacks are available. A small museum at the site holds, among other things, skulls and items found in a tomb beneath Estructura 1, the tallest structure at the site.

Restoration by the United Fruit Company in the 1940s has left Zaculeu's pyramids, ball courts and ceremonial platforms covered by a thick coat of graying plaster. Many of the restoration methods were not authentic to the buildings, but the work goes further than others in making the site look as it might have done to the Mam priests and worshippers when it was still an active religious center. What is missing, however, is the painted decoration, which was applied to the wet plaster



as in frescoes. The buildings show a great deal of Mexican influence, and were probably designed and built originally with little innovation.

Buses to Zaculeu (US\$0.50, 20 minutes) leave about every 30 minutes, 7am to 6pm, from in front of the school at the corner of 2a Calle and 7a Av. A taxi from the town center costs US\$8 one-way (US\$10 from the bus station). One hour is plenty of time to look round the site and museum.

### EL MIRADOR

This is a lookout point in the Cuchumatanes overlooking Huehuetenango, 12km from town (one hour by bus). On a sunny day it offers great views of the entire region and many volcanoes. A beautiful poem, *A Los Cuchumatanes*, is mounted on plaques here. Any bus from Huehue heading for Todos Santos, Soloma or Barillas comes past here.

### Courses

**Xinabajul Spanish Academy** (☎ /fax 7764 1518; 6a Av 0-69) Offers one-to-one Spanish courses and homestays with local families.

## Festivals & Events

**Fiestas Julias** (July 13-20) This special event honors La Virgen del Carmen, Huehue's patron saint.

**Fiestas de Concepción** (December 5-6) Honoring the Virgen de Concepción.

## Sleeping

**Hotel Central** (☎ 7764 1202; 5a Av 1-33; s/d US\$4/8) This rough-and-ready little number might be to your liking. Rooms are simple, large and plain. Bathrooms are downstairs. The pillared wooden interior balcony gives the place a sliver of charm and it sure is central.

**Hotel Gobernador** (☎ /fax 7764 1197; 4a Av 1-45; s/d US\$5/7, with bathroom US\$7/10) A little maze of rooms (don't get lost!), some much better than others – check your bed for spongability factor and your window for openness and you should be happy.

**Hotel Las Cumbres** (☎ 7764 1189; 4a Calle 6-83; s/d US\$6/8, with bathroom US\$8/12) You're definitely getting what you pay for here – concrete boxes with a weird smell. Front rooms get plenty of street noise.

**Hotel La Sexta** (☎ 7764 1488; 6a Av 4-29; s/d with bathroom US\$14/17; P) Judging by the parking-

garage exterior, this place doesn't look like much, but it's one of the better deals in town, even if the bathrooms do look like improvised afterthoughts.

**Hotel Mary** (☎ 7764 1618; 2a Calle 3-52; s/d with bathroom US\$14/17) This is really the cutting edge of the budget hotel payoff – you can have clean, central, spacious or well equipped, but not all four. Grungy rooms and an odd smell are the only problems here.

## Eating & Drinking

**La Cabaña del Café** (2a Calle 6-50; dishes US\$2-3; ☎ 8am-9pm) Huehue's best coffee (and donuts, incidentally) can be found in this imitation log cabin a short walk from the plaza.

**Hotel Casa Blanca** (7a Av 3-41; set lunch US\$2.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) For lovely surroundings, you can't beat the two restaurants at this classy hotel, one indoors, the other in the garden. Breakfasts cost US\$3 to US\$5 (on Sunday, from 8am to 11am, it's a big buffet for US\$4), burgers and croissants are around US\$3, and steaks (try filet mignon or cordon bleu) are around US\$6.

**Café Bougambilias** (5a Av; breakfast US\$3) One of three *comedores* in a line along the southern part of the Parque, the Bougambilias has a team of busy cooks preparing food on the ground floor, while the two upper floors have tables with views over the park and plenty of fresh air. It's good for all meals, with large serves of straightforward food.

**Mi Tierra Café** (4a Calle 6-46; mains US\$3-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☒) This is an informal café-restaurant serving good home-made soups and burgers. The cooks also take a good crack at some international dishes, muffins and a range of other goodies. Good, cheap and filling set lunches are available.

**La Fonda** (2a Calle 5-35; mains US\$3-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A few steps from Parque Central, this clean, reliable place serves varied Guatemalan and international fare including good-value pizzas.

**Restaurante Las Brasas** (4a Av 1-36; mains US\$5-8; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Half a block from Parque Central, this is one of Huehue's best restaurants. With a good combination of steaks and Chinese on the menu, it should be pushing multiple buttons.

**Kaktus Disco** (6a Calle 6-38; ☎ 9pm-late Fri & Sat) There's not a whole lot going on in the Center, nightlife-wise. This little disco is about your best bet afterhours.

## Getting There & Away

Línea Dorada has a central office (☎ 7764 1617; 4a Calle 6-62, Zona 1) inside the Hotel Imperial.

The bus terminal is in Zona 4, 2km southwest of the plaza along 6a Calle. Local buses make the trip from the street one block to the east of the terminal for US\$0.40, or you can take a taxi. Long-distance buses serving this terminal include:

**Antigua** (230km) Take a Guatemala City bus and change at Chimaltenango.

**Cobán** (142km) No direct service; take a minibus to Aguacatán, change there for Sacapulas, there for Usulután and there for Cobán. The road is paved up to Usulután and the entire trip could be done in seven hours with good connections.

**Cuatro Caminos** (US\$2, 1½ hours, 77km) Take any bus heading for Guatemala City or Quetzaltenango.

**Guatemala City** (five hours, 266km) Los Halcones Pullman buses (US\$8) leave at 4:30am, 7am and 2pm from their town-center terminal on 7a Av; Línea Dorada buses leave from in front of the Hotel California opposite the terminal (US\$10) at 2:30pm and 11pm. From the main terminal, around 20 buses (US\$4 to US\$6) leave between 2am and 4pm by Transportes El Condor, Díaz Álvarez and Transportes Velásquez.

**La Mesilla (Mexican border)** (US\$2, two hours, 84km) At least 20 buses between 5:45am and 6:30pm, by various companies.

**Nebaj** (68km) Take a bus to Sacapulas, or a bus to Aguacatán and a pickup on to Sacapulas, then another bus from Sacapulas to Nebaj.

**Panajachel** (159km) Take a Guatemala City bus and change at Los Encuentros.

**Quetzaltenango** (US\$2, two hours, 90km) At least 14 buses between 6am and 2:30pm, by various companies.

**Sacapulas** (US\$2, 2½ hours, 42km) Buses at 11:30am (Rutas García) and 12:45pm (Transportes Rivas).

**Soloma** (US\$3, three hours, 70km) About 16 buses daily between 2am and 10pm by Transportes Josué and Autobuses del Norte.

**Todos Santos Cuchumatán** (US\$3, three hours, 40km) Buses at around 3:45am, 5:30am, 11:30am, 12:45pm, 1:30pm, 1:45pm, 2pm, 2:45pm and 3:45pm by the Flor de María, Mendoza, Pérez, Todosantera, Concepcionera and Chicoyera companies; some buses do not run Saturday.

## AROUND HUEHUETENANGO

### Todos Santos Cuchumatán

pop 3500 / elevation 2450m

Way up in the highlands, Todos Santos is as raw as Guatemalan village life gets – dramatic mountain scenery, mud streets, beans and tortillas and everything shut by 9pm. There are a couple of language schools operating here and

this is the end point for the spectacular hike from Nebaj. Hiking is also good in the local hills. Saturday is market day, with a smaller market on Wednesday.

The post office and **Banrural** (☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) are on the central plaza. The bank changes US dollars and traveler's checks.

**Todos Santos Internet** (☎ 9am-9pm), 30m off the main street, 400m back toward Huehue from the church, charges US\$1.60 per hour for internet access.

If you're coming to Todos Santos in winter, bring warm clothes.

## COURSES

Todos Santos' two language schools are controlled by villagers and make major contributions to community projects – funding a library, medicines, school materials, and scholarships for village kids to go to high school in Huehue.

**Academia Hispano Maya** (www.hispanomaya.org/) Opposite Hotelito Todos Santos.

**Nuevo Amanecer** (escuela\_linguistica@yahoo.com) Down the main street 150m, opposite the church.

The standard weekly price for 25 hours' one-on-one Spanish tuition, with lodging and meals in a village home, is US\$115. Included are guided walks, movies, seminars on local life and issues, and saunas. All three schools also offer classes in Mam and in Maya weaving (weaving costs around US\$1 per hour or US\$35 for a week's course). Individual language classes cost US\$4 per hour. The schools can put you in touch with volunteer work in reforestation and English teaching.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Todos Santos is famous for the annual horse races held on **El Día de Todos los Santos** (November 1), the culmination of a week of festivities and an all-night male dancing and *aguardiente* (sugarcane liquor) drinking spree on the eve of the races. Traditional foods are served throughout the day, and there are mask dances.

## SLEEPING & EATING

**Hotel Casa Familiar** (☎ 7783 0656; s/d US\$4/8) The simple wooden rooms here are far from luxurious, but the place is run by a friendly family and there are plenty of extra blankets on hand. The rooms here are clean with windows re-

vealing fine views. The hotel also has a sauna and a restaurant where chicken dishes cost around US\$3, or *mosh* (porridge), granola and banana costs US\$2.

**Hotelito Todos Santos** (☎ 7783 0603; s/d with bathroom US\$8/12) Along a side street that goes off to the left a few meters up the hill beside the plaza, this has Todos Santos' most comfortable rooms – bare but clean with tile floors and firm beds. Three of the four rooms with a bathroom open onto the street, separate from the main part of the hotel upstairs. The hotel has a casual café, sinks for washing clothes, and hot water.

You can arrange **rooms with local families** (per person US\$2-2.50, with three meals US\$4.50) through the language schools irrespective of whether you're studying. You'll get your own bedroom, and share the bathroom and meals with the family. A week's full board should cost US\$25.

**Comedor Martita** (meals around US\$2.25) This simple family-run *comedor*, opposite Hotel Mam, serves the best food in town, prepared with fresh ingredients by friendly hosts. You walk through the kitchen to get to the eating area, which has a nice view over the town and valley. A typical meal might be boiled chicken, rice, vegetables, beans, a *refresco* (soft drink) and coffee.

**Restaurante Cuchumatlan** (meals US\$2-8) Todos Santos' most formal restaurant is nothing flash, but they take a good stab at pizzas, stir-fries and curries. It's also the only place in town you'd really want to have a beer, and there's a good selection of used books on sale.

## ENTERTAINMENT

All the language schools show movies on Guatemalan, Maya and Latin American themes in the evening, with a small charge (usually about US\$0.80) for nonstudents. The English-language documentaries *Todos Santos* and *Todos Santos: The Survivors*, made in the 1980s by Olivia Carrescia, are particularly fascinating to see here on the spot. They focus on the traditional life of Todos Santos and of the devastation and terror of the civil war, when, by some accounts, 2000 people were killed in the area.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Half a dozen buses leave for Huehuetenango (US\$3, three hours) between 4:45am and 6:30am, then usually three others between

## LA MESILLA & THE MEXICAN BORDER

Four kilometers separate the Mexican and Guatemalan immigration posts at La Mesilla and Ciudad Cuauhtémoc, and you'll have to drive, walk, hitch or take a collective taxi (US\$0.80) between them. The strip in La Mesilla leading to the border post has a variety of services, including a police station, post office and a Banrural.

Money changers at the border give a good rate if you're exchanging your dollars for their pesos or quetzals, a terrible one if you want dollars for your pesos or quetzals.

If you get marooned in La Mesilla, try **Hotel Mily's** (d US\$15), which has rooms with fan, cable TV and private hot-water bathroom; bargaining may be in order. Further down the hill is the superbasic **Hotel El Pobre Simón** (r per person US\$2).

Good onward connections are available from the border post east to Huehuetenango and northwest to Comitán.

See p69 for information on crossing the border from Mexico.

noon and 1pm. Daily buses head northwest to Concepción Huista, San Antonio Huista and Jacaltenango. Times are erratic, but the 5am departure is fairly reliable.

## East Toward Cobán

Always inspiring, the road from Huehuetenango to Cobán is rarely traveled and often rugged. Starting early and with several transfers, you can make the 150km trip in one day. It's well worth it for the views of highland life along the way. Adventurous types craving more can continue the odyssey via the Cobán to Poptún route.

Starting high in the Cuchumatanes mountains, you climb out of Huehuetenango en route to **Aguacatán**, from where you'll have panoramic views of pine-covered slopes and fertile valleys below. The road then snakes down through the Río Blanco valley to **Sacapulas**, along the Río Negro. This makes a good stopover, but if you left early you can certainly make it to Cobán in one day. For more on the eastward continuation of this route, see Sacapulas to Cobán (p134).

## THE PACIFIC SLOPE

Divided from the highlands by a chain of volcanoes, the flatlands that run down to the Pacific are known universally as La Costa. It's a sultry region – hot and wet or hot and dry, depending on the time of year, with rich volcanic soil good for growing coffee at higher elevations, and palm oil seeds and sugarcane lower down.

Archaeologically, the big draws here are Abaj Takalik and the sculptures left by

pre-Olmec civilizations around Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa

The culture is overwhelmingly ladino, and even the biggest towns are humble affairs, with low-rise wooden or concrete houses and the occasional palm-thatched roof.

Guatemalan beach tourism is seriously underdeveloped. Monterrico is the only real contender in this field, helped along by a nature reserve protecting mangroves and their inhabitants. Almost every town on the beach has places to stay, although more often than not they're very basic affairs. Sipacate gets the best waves and is slowly developing as a surf resort, although serious surfers find much more joy in Mexico or El Salvador.

## RETALHULEU

pop 42,000 / elevation 240m

Arriving at the bus station in Retalhuleu or Reu (*ray-oo*) as it's known to most Guatemalans, you're pretty much guaranteed to be underwhelmed. The neighborhood's a tawdry affair, packed out with dilapidated wooden cantinas and street vendors.

The town center, just five blocks away, is like another world – a majestic, palm-filled plaza, surrounded by some fine old buildings. Even the city police get in on the act, hanging plants outside their headquarters.

On the outskirts are the homes of wealthy plantation owners, impressive weekend get-aways and the gated communities that are springing up all over the country.

The real reason most people visit the town is for access to the Abaj Takalik site, but if you're up for some serious down-time, a couple of world-class fun parks are just down the road.

## Orientation & Information

The town center is 4km southwest of the Carr al Pacífico, along Calz las Palmas, a grand boulevard lined with towering palms. The **bus terminal** (10a Calle btwn 7a & 8a Avs) is northeast of the plaza. To find the plaza, look for the twin church towers and walk toward them.

There is no official tourist office, but people in the *municipalidad*, on 6a Av facing the east side of the church, do their best to help.

**Banco Industrial** (cnr 6a Calle & 5a Av; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) and **Banco Occidente** (cnr 6a Calle & 6a Av) change US dollars and traveler's checks, and give cash advances on Visa cards. Banco Industrial has a Visa ATM. **Banco Agromercantil** (5a Av), on the plaza, changes US dollars and traveler's checks and has a MasterCard ATM.

**Internet** (cnr 5a Calle & 6a Av; per hr US\$0.80) provides internet access.

## Sights & Activities

The **Museo de Arqueología y Etnología** (6a Av 5-68; admission US\$1.30; ☎ 8am-5:30pm Tue-Sat) is a small museum with archaeological relics. Upstairs are historical photos and a mural showing the locations of 33 archaeological sites around Retalhuleu.

You can **swim** (admission US\$1.30) at Siboney Hotel (out on the Carr al Pacífico) even if you're not staying there.

## Sleeping

**Hotel América** (☎ 7771 1154; 8a Av 9-32, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$11/15) A trusty budget option just down the street from the bus terminal, the América has spotless rooms with fan and TV.

**Hotel Genesis** (☎ 7771 2855; 6a Calle 6-27, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$15/28; ♿) A good-value hotel sporting plenty of homely features (but not so many windows) and an excellent, central location.

**Posada Don José** (☎ 7771 0180; posadadonjose@hotmail.com; 5a Calle 3-67, Zona 1; s/d US\$20/26; ♿) A beautiful colonial-style hotel built around a huge swimming pool. Swan dives from the top balcony are tempting, but unwise. Rooms are spacious and comfortable, if a bit dated.

## Eating & Drinking

Reu seems to be slightly obsessed by pizza – 5a Av north of the plaza is almost wall-to-wall pizzerias.

**Cafetería La Luna** (5a Calle 4-97; lunch with drink US\$2.90; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Opposite the west corner of the plaza, this is a town favorite for simple but filling meals in a low-key environment.

**Lo de Chaz** (5a Calle 4-65; mains US\$3-4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A simple place, right off the plaza, serving up good breakfasts, icy beer, soups, snacks and seafood.

## CROSSING INTO MEXICO

### Getting to Ciudad Hidalgo (Mexico) via Ciudad Tecún Umán (Guatemala)

This is the better and busier of the two Pacific Slope border crossings; a bridge links Ciudad Tecún Umán with Ciudad Hidalgo. The border is open 24 hours, and banks change US dollars and traveler's checks. Several basic hotels and restaurants are available, but there's no real point in lingering here.

Minibuses and buses depart until about 6pm along the Carr al Pacífico to **Coatepeque, Retalhuleu, Mazatenango, Escuintla** and **Guatemala City**. Direct buses to **Quetzaltenango** (US\$3.50, 3½ hours) leave until about 2pm. If you don't find a bus to your destination, take one to Coatepeque or, better, Retalhuleu, and change buses there. On the Mexican side, buses run from Ciudad Hidalgo to the city of **Tapachula** (US\$1.50, 45 minutes, every 20 minutes from 7am to 7:30pm).

### Getting to Talismán (Mexico) via El Carmen (Guatemala)

A bridge across the Río Suchiate connects El Carmen with Talismán. The border is open 24 hours. It's generally easier and more convenient to cross at Tecún Umán. There are few services at El Carmen, and those are very basic. Most buses between here and the rest of Guatemala go via **Ciudad Tecún Umán**, 39km south, then along the Carr al Pacífico through **Coatepeque, Retalhuleu** and **Escuintla**. On the way to Ciudad Tecún Umán most stop at **Malacatán** on the road to San Marcos and Quetzaltenango, so you could try looking for a bus to **Quetzaltenango** there, but it's more dependable to change at **Coatepeque** (US\$2, two hours from El Carmen) or Retalhuleu.

On the Mexican side, minibuses run frequently between Talismán and **Tapachula** (US\$1, 30 minutes) up till about 10pm.



**Bar La Carreta** (5a Calle 4-50) For cocktails, check out this bar, next to Hotel Astor.

**Flamingo Disco** (4a Av & 5a Calle A; ☎ Wed-Sat 10pm-1am) Reu's biggest disco really gets going on Friday, but Saturday is a good bet too.

## Getting There & Away

Most buses traveling along the Carr al Pacífico detour into Reu. Departures include the following:

**Champerico** (US\$0.60, one hour, 38km) Buses every few minutes 6am-7pm.

**Ciudad Tecún Umán** (US\$2, 1½ hours, 78km, buses every 20 minutes 5am-10pm)

**Guatemala City** (US\$6, three hour, 196km, buses every 15 minutes 2am-8:30pm)

**Quetzaltenango** (US\$1.50, one hour, 46km, buses every 30 minutes 4am-6pm)

**Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa** (US\$2.50, two hours, 97km) Some Escuintla or Guatemala City-bound buses might drop you at Santa Lucía; otherwise get a bus to Mazatenango ('Mazate') and change there.

Local buses go to El Asintal (for getting to Abaj Takalik).

## ABAJ TAKALIK

The active archaeological dig at Abaj Takalik (ah-bah-tah-kah-leek, Quiché for 'standing stone') is 30km west of Retalhuleu. Large 'Olmecoid' stone heads discovered here date the site as one of the earliest in the Maya realm. The site has yet to be restored and prettified, so don't expect a Chichén Itzá or Tikal. But if you want to see archaeology as it's done, pay a visit. This site is believed to be one of the few places where the Olmec and Maya lived together.

To reach Abaj Takalik by public transportation, catch a bus from Retalhuleu to El Asintal (US\$0.25, 30 minutes), which is 12km northwest of Reu and 5km north of the Carr al Pacífico (Hwy CA-2). The buses leave from a bus station on 5a Av A, 800m southwest of Reu plaza, about every half-hour between 6am to 6pm. Pickups at El Asintal provide transportation to Abaj Takalik, 4km further by paved road. You'll be shown around by a volunteer guide, whom you will probably want to tip. You can also visit Abaj Takalik on tours from Quetzaltenango (p141).

## CHAMPERICO

The most accessible beach from Xela, Champerico isn't a bad place for a quick dip, although the rubbish-strewn sand and heavy

undertow are definite turn offs. It's a good place to avoid on weekends when the place packs out, but midweek is much mellower. A string of beachfront *comedores* serve up good-value seafood dishes.

Beware of strong waves and an undertow if you go in the ocean, and stay in the main, central part of the beach. If you stray too far in either direction you put yourself at risk from impoverished, potentially desperate shack dwellers who live toward the ends of the beach. Tourists have been victims of violent armed robberies here. Most beachgoers come on day trips, but there are several cheap hotels and restaurants: **Hotel Neptuno** (☎ 7773 7206; s/d US\$6/8), on the beachfront, is the best bet. The last bus back to Retalhuleu goes about 6:30pm.

## SANTA LUCÍA COTZUMALGUAPA

pop 26,500 / elevation 356m

A very ordinary coastal town, Santa Lucía stretches haphazardly over a couple of hills. The pace is sleepy and there's no real reason to be here, except to check out the remarkable archaeological sites outside of town, where huge, severe stone heads sit nestled among sugar plantations.

The local people are descended from the Pipil, an indigenous culture known to have historic, linguistic and cultural links with the Náhuatl-speaking peoples of central Mexico. During early Classic times, the Pipil grew cacao, the currency of the time. They were obsessed with the Maya-Aztec ball game, and with the rites and mysteries of death. Pipil art, unlike the flowery, almost romantic Maya style, is cold and severe, but it's finely done. Just how these 'Mexicans' ended up in the midst of Maya territory remains unexplained.

## Orientation & Information

Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa is northwest of the Carr al Pacífico. In its main square, several blocks from the highway, are copies of some of the region's famous carved stones. The town has a few basic hotels and restaurants.

The main archaeological sites to visit are Bilbao, a *finca* right on the outskirts of town; Finca El Baúl, a large plantation further from town, at which there are two sites (an interesting hilltop site and the *finca* headquarters); and Finca Las Ilusiones, which has collected

most of its findings into a museum near the *finca* headquarters.

Taxi drivers in Santa Lucía's main square will take you round all three sites for about US\$25 without too much haggling, although you could do better. In this hot and muggy climate, riding at least part of the way is a very good idea. If you do it all on foot and by bus, pack a lunch; the hilltop site at El Baúl is perfect for a picnic.

**Banco Industrial** (cnr 4a Av & 4a Calle), a block north of the park, changes US dollars and traveler's checks and has a Visa ATM.

## Sights & Activities

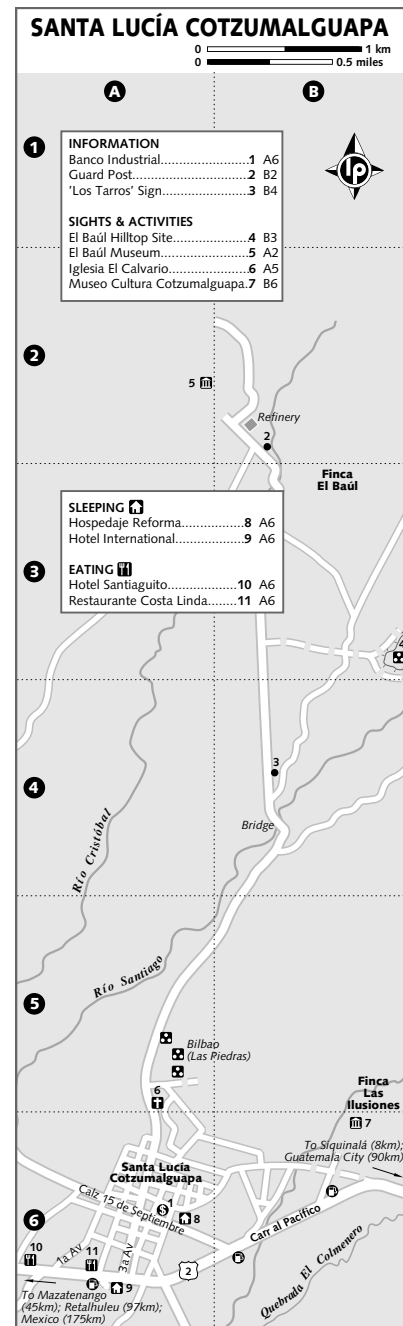
### BILBAO

This ceremonial center flourished about AD 600. Plows have unearthed (and damaged) hundreds of carved stones during the last few centuries; thieves have carted off many others. In 1880 many of the best stones were removed to museums abroad, including nine to the Dahlia Museum in Berlin.

Known locally as simply *Las Piedras* (The Stones), this site actually consists of several sites deep within a sugarcane *finca*. To get there you leave town northward on the road passing Iglesia El Calvario. From the intersection past the church, go 2.7km to a fork in the road just beyond a bridge; the fork is marked by a sign saying 'Los Tarros.' Take the right-hand fork, passing a settlement called Colonia Maya on your right. After you have gone 1.5km from the Los Tarros sign, a dirt track crosses the road: turn right here, between two concrete posts. Ahead now is a low mound topped by three large trees: this is the **hilltop site**. After about 250m fork right between two more identical concrete posts, and follow this track round in front of the mound to its end after some 150m, and take the path up on to the mound, which is actually a great ruined temple platform that has not been restored.

Although some stones are badly worn, others bear Mexican-style circular date glyphs and more mysterious patterns that resemble those used by people along the Gulf Coast of Mexico near Villahermosa.

To continue to El Baúl, backtrack to where you turned right just beyond El Calvario church. Buses to El Baúl pass this point every few hours; you can also hitch. If driving, you'll have to return to the town center along 4a Av and come back out on 3a Av, as these roads are one-way.



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## FINCA EL BAÚL

Just as interesting is the hilltop site at El Baúl, an active place of worship for locals. Some distance from the site on another road, next to the *finca* headquarters, is the *finca*'s private **museum** (admission free; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat), containing stones uncovered on the property.

El Baúl is 4.2km northwest of El Calvario church. From the church (or the intersection just beyond it), go 2.7km to a fork in the road just beyond a bridge; look for the 'Los Tarros' sign – buses will go up to here. Take the right fork (an unpaved road). From the Los Tarros sign it's 1.5km to the point where a dirt track crosses the road; on your right is a tree-covered 'hill' in the midst of flat fields. It's actually a great, unrestored temple platform. Make your way across the field and around the hill's south side, following the track to the top. If you have a car, you can drive to within 50m of the top. If you visit this hilltop site on a weekend, you may find worshipers here; people have been coming to pay homage to the idols for over 1400 years.

Of the two stones here, the great grotesque **half-buried head** is the more striking. The elaborate headdress, 'blind' eyes with big bags underneath, beaklike nose and smug grin seem at odds with the blackened face and its position, half-buried in the ancient soil. The head is stained with candle wax, liquor, and the smoke and ashes of incense fires – all part of worship. The other stone is a relief carving of a figure surrounded by circular motifs that may be date glyphs. A copy of this stone is in Santa Lucía's main square.

From the hilltop site, backtrack 1.5km to the fork with the Los Tarros sign. Take the other fork this time, and follow the paved road 3km to the headquarters of Finca El Baúl. (If you're on foot, you can walk from the hilltop site back to the unpaved road and straight across it, continuing on the dirt track. This will eventually bring you to the asphalt road that leads to the *finca* headquarters. When you reach the road, turn right.) Buses trundle along this road every few hours, shuttling workers between the refinery and the town center.

Approaching the *finca* headquarters (6km from Santa Lucía's main square), cross a narrow bridge. Continue uphill and you will see the entrance on the left, marked by a machine-gun pillbox. Beyond, you pass workers' houses

and a sugar refinery on the right, and finally come to the headquarters, guarded by several men with rifles. Ask permission to visit the museum and a guard will unlock the gate.

Within the gates, sheltered by a *palapa* (a thatched palm leaf-roofed shelter with open sides), are numerous sculpted figures and reliefs found on the plantation, some of which are very fine. Unfortunately, nothing is labeled.

## MUSEO CULTURA COTZUMALGUAPA

This indoor **museum** (admission US\$1.30; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) is very close to Bilbao – set in the *finca* that controls the Bilbao cane fields – but, paradoxically, access is more difficult. Your reward is the chance to view hundreds of objects that have been collected from the fields over the centuries.

Leave the town center heading east along Calz 15 de Septiembre, which joins the highway at an Esso station. Go northeast for a short distance, then take an unpaved road on the left (just before another Esso station); this road leads 1km to Finca Las Ilusiones and its museum. If the key-keeper isn't around you're limited to the many stones collected around the outside of the museum.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hospedaje Reforma** (4a Av 4-71; s/d US\$4/7) This hotel has exactly three things going for it: it's cheap, central and the patio is decorated with stuffed boars' heads. And if you like sleeping in dark, airless little concrete cells, make that four.

**Hotel Internacional** (☎ 7882 5504; Callejón los Morrones; s/d US\$10/12.50; P ☎) Down a short lane (signposted) off Carr al Pacífico is the best budget hotel in town. It has clean, good-sized rooms with a fan, cold showers and a TV. Air conditioning costs US\$10 extra.

**Restaurante Costa Linda**, on the highway about 150m east of Hotel el Camino, is a friendly and clean place serving tasty meat and seafood at reasonable prices. The restaurant at the **Hotel Santiaguito** (mains US\$10-12), 100m west of Hotel El Camino is a good option and a swimming pool that nonguests can use for US\$2.50 per day.

## Getting There & Away

As the CA-2 now bypasses Santa Lucía, lots of buses don't come into town. Coming to Santa Lucía from the east, you'll almost certainly need to change buses at Escuintla (US\$0.80,

30 minutes). From the west you'll probably have to change at Mazatenango (US\$1.50, 1¼ hours). At Cocales, 23km west of Santa Lucía, a road down from Lago de Atitlán meets the CA-2, providing a route to or from the highlands. Eight buses daily run from Cocales to Panajachel (US\$2, 2½ hours, 70km), between about 6am and 2pm.

## LA DEMOCRACIA

pop 5800 / elevation 165m

A sleepy little village on the way to the beach, La Democracia makes it on the map for further investigation into the mysterious, ancient culture that carved the heads found around Santa Lucía. More of these can be seen in the main square here, and the local museum has a surprisingly good collection of artifacts, considering its location.

At the **Monte Alto archaeological site**, on the outskirts of La Democracia, huge basalt heads have been found. Although cruder, the heads resemble those carved by the Olmec near Veracruz several thousand years ago.

Today these heads are arranged around La Democracia's main plaza. As you come into town from the highway, follow signs to the *museo*, which will lead you left, then left again, and left yet again.

Facing the plaza, along with the church and the modest Palacio Municipal, is the small, modern **Museo Regional de Arqueología** (admission US\$3; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sat), which houses some fascinating archaeological finds. The star of the show is an exquisite jade mask. Smaller figures, 'yokes' used in the ball game, relief carvings and other objects make up the rest of this small but important collection.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Guest House Paxil de Cayala** (☎ 7880 3129; s/d with bathroom US\$7/10) Half a block from the plaza, La Democracia's only place to stay is OK for the night, with big, mosquito-proofed rooms.

The flour tortillas stuffed with meat from the little roadside stands around the plaza are delicious, and a bargain at US\$2.50.

**Burger Chops** (mains US\$3-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Also just off the square, this is as close as the town gets to a restaurant.

## Getting There & Away

The Chatía Gomerana company runs buses every half-hour from 6am to 4:30pm, from Guatemala City to La Democracia (US\$2.50,

two hours) via Escuintla. From Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa, catch a bus 8km east to Sigüinalá and change there.

## SIPACATE

An hour and a half down the road from Santa Lucía is Guatemala's surf capital. Waves here average 6ft (2m), the best time being between December and April. The town is separated from the beach by the canal de Chiquimulilla. Oddly unexploited, there are only a couple of hotels on the beach here, the most accessible being **Rancho Carillo** (☎ 5517 1069; cabin from US\$40; ☎), a short boat ride (US\$2.80 return) from town, where the only trouble you will have sleeping is from the noise of crashing waves. Call ahead and you'll probably be able to get a better price. Surfboards are available for rent here.

There are a couple of cheaper, basic **hospedajes** (s/d US\$4/7) in town, but remember you'll be paying for that boat ride every day. Buses from Guatemala City (US\$4, 3½ hours) pass through La Democracia en route to Sipacate every two hours.

## ESCUINTLA

Hot, noisy and crowded, Escuintla has good bus connections and very little else for the average traveler. **Banco Reformador** (cnr 4a Av & 12a Calle; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat), two blocks north of the bus station, changes US dollars and traveler's checks and has a Visa ATM. Escuintla has some marginal hotels and restaurants. If stranded, try the **Hotel Costa Sur** (☎ 5295 9528, 12a Calle 4-13; s/d with bathroom US\$12/16; ☎), a couple of doors from Banco Reformador, which has decent, cool rooms with TV and fan. Air con costs an extra US\$3.

All buses from the terminal pass along 1a Av, but if you really want a seat, head to the main bus station in the southern part of town, just off 4a Av. Its entrance is marked by a Scott 77 fuel station. Buses go to Antigua (US\$1.20, one hour) about every half-hour from 5:30am to 4:30pm. Buses for Guatemala City (US\$2.30, 1½ hours) go about every 20 minutes from the street outside from 5am to 6pm. Buses to Puerto San José (US\$1, 45 minutes), some continuing to Iztapa, have similar frequency. Buses coming along the Carr al Pacífico may drop you in the north of town, meaning a sweaty walk through the hectic town center if you want to get to the main terminal.

## PUERTO SAN JOSÉ & IZTAPA

Guatemala's most important seaside resort, **Puerto San José** leaves much to be desired. If you're eager to get into the Pacific surf, head south from Escuintla 50km to Puerto San José and neighboring settlements.

Puerto San José (population 14,000) was Guatemala's most important Pacific port in the latter half of the 19th century and well into the 20th. Now superseded by Puerto Quetzal to the east, the city languishes. Its beach, inconveniently located across the Canal de Chiquimulilla, is reached by boat. You'd do better to head west along the coast 5km to **Balneario Chula mar**, which has a nicer beach and a suitable hotel or two.

About 5km east of Puerto San José is **Balneario Likén**, Guatemala's only upmarket Pacific resort, beloved by the well-to-do Zona 10 set from Guatemala City.

Another 12km east of Puerto San José is **Iztapa**, Guatemala's first Pacific port, used by prolific conquistador Pedro de Alvarado in the 16th century. When Puerto San José was built in 1853, Iztapa's reign as the port of the capital city came to an end, and the city relaxed into a tropical torpor from which it has never really emerged.

Iztapa has gained notoriety as a premier **deep-sea fishing** spot. World records have been set here and enthusiasts can fish for marlin, sharks and yellow-fin tuna, among others. November through June is the best time to angle for sailfish. Aside from fishing, lounging is the prime pastime. The town has a post office but no bank.

Should you want to stay, the **Sol y Playa Tropical** (☎ 7881 4365/6; 1a Calle 5-48; s/d with bath-room US\$10/20; 🚽) has tolerable rooms, with fan, on two floors around a swimming pool. On the beach, **Rancho Maraca Ibo** (s/d US\$7/14) offers probably the worst accommodation deal in Guatemala, with very basic cabañas, sporting a bed with a reed mat instead of a mattress.

The bonus about Iztapa is that you can catch a bus from Guatemala City all the way here (US\$3, three hours). They leave about every half-hour between 5am to 6pm, traveling via Escuintla and Puerto San José. The last bus heading back from Iztapa goes around 5pm. You can reach Monterrico by paved road from Iztapa: follow the street 1km east from Club Cervecero bar, where the buses terminate, and get a boat across the river to Pueblo Viejo (US\$0.80 per person in pas-

senger *lanchas*; US\$4 per vehicle, including passengers, on the vehicle ferry). From the far side buses leave for the pretty ride to Monterrico (US\$1.50, one hour) at 8am, 11:30am, 2pm, 4pm and 6pm.

## MONTERRICO

A favorite for weekendening Guatemalans (and Antigua-based language students), Monterrico is a relatively pretty town that is slowly developing into a coastal resort.

Many hotels are humble operations – although a few big boys are moving in – as is much of the town. On the outskirts, particularly to the south, are some very opulent weekend houses owned by Guatemala City fat cats. Seeing these monsters next to simple thatched roof huts is a stark reminder of the polarity of Guatemalan economic reality.

Swimming is good here, and there's occasionally a wave worth surfing. Take care, though – a vicious undertow claims victims every year.

Weekends can be hectic. Come on a weekday and you'll find a much mellower scene (with lower hotel prices). The village has a post office (on Calle Principal) but no bank. Internet access is available from **Walfer** (per hr US\$1.80) on the main street.

**Proyecto Lingüístico Monterrico** (☎ 5558 9039) is a recommended Spanish school based in central Monterrico, offering 20 hours of individual classes for US\$75. It can arrange homestays with local families for US\$50 per week, including meals on six days.

Behind the beach, on the other side of town, is a large network of mangrove swamps and canals, part of the 190km Canal de Chiquimulilla. Also in the area is a large wildlife reserve and a center for the hatching and release of sea turtles and caimans (crocodilians similar to alligators).

## Sights

A big attraction is the **Biotopo Monterrico-Hawaii**, a 20km-long nature reserve of coastal mangrove swamps filled with bird and aquatic life. The reserve is a breeding area for endangered leatherback and ridley turtles, who lay their eggs on the beach in many places along the coast.

Canals lace the swamps, connecting 25 lagoons hidden among the mangroves. Boat tours, passing through the mangrove swamps and visiting several lagoons, take around 1½

to two hours and cost US\$10 for one person, US\$6.50 for additional people. Sunrise is the best time for wildlife. If you have binoculars, bring them for bird-watching which is best in January and February. Locals will approach you on the street (some with very impressive-looking ID cards), offering tours, but if you want to support the Tortugario (who, incidentally, have the most environmentally knowledgeable guides), arrange a tour directly through the Cecon-run Tortugario Monterrico.

**Tortugario Monterrico visitors center** (admission US\$1.20; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm) is just a short walk east down the beach and back a block from the Monterrico hotels (left, if you're facing the sea). Several endangered species of animals are raised here, including leatherback, olive ridley and green sea turtles, caimans and iguanas. There's an interesting interpretative trail and a little museum with pickled displays in bottles.

The Arcas-run **Reserva Natural Hawaii** (☎ 2478 4096 in Guatemala City; www.arcasguatemala.com) comprises a sea-turtle hatchery with some caimans 8km east along the beach from Monterrico. It is separate from and rivals Cecon's work in the same field. Volunteers are welcome year-round, but the real sea turtle-nesting season is from June to November, with August and September being the peak months. Volunteers are charged US\$50 a week for a room, with meals extra and homestay options with local families. A bus (US\$0.50, 30 minutes) leaves the Monterrico jetty at 6am, 11am, 1:30pm and 3:30pm (and 6:30pm except Saturday) for the bumpy ride to the reserve. Pickups also operate on this route charging US\$3.25 per person. Check out the website for more information.

## Sleeping & Eating

All hotels listed here are on the beach, unless otherwise stated. To save a difficult, hot walk along the beach, take the last road to the left before you hit the sand. All these hotels either front or back onto it. The majority have restaurants serving whatever is fresh from the sea that day. Many accommodations offer discounts for stays of three nights or more. Reserve for weekends if you want to avoid a long hot walk while you cruise around asking for vacancies. Weekend prices are given here. Midweek, you'll have plenty more bargaining power.

**Johnny's** (☎ 7762 0015; johnnys@backpackamericas.com; dm US\$6, s & d US\$23; 4-person bungalows US\$43; 📶 🚽 🚿) A lot of people are unimpressed by Johnny's – it's the first place you come to turning left on the beach, and one of the biggest operations here. It's got a decent atmosphere though, and attracts a good mix of backpackers and family groups.

**Brisas del Mar** (☎ 5517 1142; s/d US\$7/14; 📶 🚽) Behind Johnny's, one block back from the beach, this popular newcomer offers good-sized rooms and a second-floor dining hall with excellent sea views.

**El Kaiman** (☎ 5517 9285; r per person US\$7; 📶 🚽) Further along the beach, you'll find this other cheapie, which is much worn around the edges. Rooms are in a two-story concrete block set back from the beach. The beachfront area is much more appealing, with hammocks and a decent restaurant.

**El Mangle** (☎ 5514 6517; r with fan/air-con US\$26/50; 📶 🚽) Eclectic decorations fill the grounds of this friendly little place 100m further along the beach. Rooms are decent sized, with hammocks strung on individual porches. The restaurant here pumps out some very tasty wood-fired pizza.

**Dulce y Salado** (☎ 5817 9046; cabin per person with breakfast & lunch US\$27; 📶 🚽) The furthest from town, about 2km east of the center. Neat little thatched roof cabins set around a good-sized swimming pool. The place is Italian owned, so the restaurant out front does good pastas (US\$6) and excellent coffee. Midweek, prices halve, but don't include meals.

**Taberna El Pelicano** (mains US\$7-10; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Sat) By far the best place to eat in town, with the widest menu and most interesting food, such as seafood risotto (US\$8), beef carpaccio (US\$6) and a range of jumbo shrimp dishes (US\$14).

There are many simple seafood restaurants on Calle Principal. For the best cheap eats, hit either of the two nameless *comedores* on the last road to the right before the beach, where you can pick up an excellent plate of garlic shrimp, rice tortillas, fries and salad for US\$4.

## Drinking & Nightlife

**El Animal Desconicido** (☎ 8pm-late Thu-Sat) Really the only bar in town, this gets very happening on weekends, with happy hours, cocktails and excellent music. Comfy seating fills up early out front, and the rest of the place starts

rocking around 11pm. To find it, go down the main street 'til you hit the beach, then walk 200m to your right.

### Getting There & Away

There are two ways to get to Monterrico. You can take a bus to Iztapa (four hours from Guatemala City), catch a *lancha* across the canal to Pueblo Viejo and hop on another bus to Monterrico (US\$1, one hour). This is the longer alternative, but it's a pretty journey, revealing local life at a sane pace.

The other option is to head to La Avellana, where *lanchas* and car ferries depart for Monterrico. The Cubanita company runs a handful of direct buses to and from Guatemala City (US\$4, four hours, 124km). Alternatively you reach La Avellana by changing buses at Taxisco on Hwy CA-2. Buses operate half-hourly from 5am to 4pm between Guatemala City and Taxisco (US\$3, 3½ hours), and roughly hourly from 7am to 6pm between Taxisco and La Avellana (US\$1, 40 minutes), although taxi drivers will tell you that you've missed the last bus, regardless of what time you arrive. A taxi between Taxisco and La Avellana costs around US\$6.50.

Shuttle buses also serve La Avellana. You can take a round-trip from Antigua, coming on one day and returning the next (US\$9 one-way, 2½ hours). Voyageur Tours (p105) comes to La Avellana three or four times weekly in the low season, daily in peak periods, with a minimum of three passengers. On Saturday and Sunday, they pick up in Monterrico (not La Avellana) from outside Proyecto Lingüístico Monterrico at 3pm for the round-trip. They charge US\$6.50 from Monterrico to Antigua, so it's best not to buy a round-trip ticket in Antigua; they'll take you on to Guatemala City (US\$11 total) if you wish. Other shuttle services also make the Antigua–Monterrico trip.

From La Avellana, catch a *lancha* or car ferry to Monterrico. The collective *lanchas* charge US\$0.60 per passenger for the half-hour trip along the Canal de Chiquimulilla, a long mangrove canal. They start at 4:30am and run more or less every half-hour or hour until late afternoon. From Monterrico they leave at 3:30am, 5:30am, 7am, 8am, 9am, 10:30am, noon, 1pm, 2:30pm and 4pm. You can always pay more and charter your own boat. The car ferry costs US\$13 per vehicle.

## COBÁN & CENTRAL GUATEMALA

This region holds some of the best, most rewarding opportunities for getting off the beaten track. While the tour buses are all whizzing between the capital and Tikal, independent travelers are finding a wealth of undiscovered gems.

Semuc Champey and Lanquín are on everybody's list if you're in Guatemala, but there are literally hundreds more caves, waterfalls and other natural attractions to check out, mostly scattered around the well-established travelers' hub of Cobán. Check [www.asociacionasiqumc.guate.ws](http://www.asociacionasiqumc.guate.ws) for a little inspiration.

### SALAMÁ

pop 24,200 / elevation 940m

A wonderful introduction to Baja Verapaz's not-too-hot, not-too-cold climate, Salamá is a town with a couple of attractions. Excellent information on the area is available at [www.laverapaz.com](http://www.laverapaz.com).

Hwy 17, also marked as CA-14 on maps, leaves the Carr al Atlántico at El Rancho, 84km from Guatemala City. It heads west through dry, desert-like lowlands, then turns north and ascends into the forested hills. The turnoff for Salamá is 47km from Guatemala City.

**Banrural** (🕒 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, to 1pm Sat) on the south side of the plaza (opposite the church) changes cash and traveler's checks, and has a Visa and MasterCard ATM. Internet access (US\$0.80 per hour) is available at Telgua, just east of the plaza. A police station is one block west of the plaza.

### Sights

Attractive Salamá has some reminders of colonial rule. The main plaza boasts an ornate **colonial church** with gold encrusted altars and a carved pulpit (look for it to the left before the altar). Be sure to check out Jesus lying in a glass coffin with cotton bunting in his stigmata and droplets of blood seeping from his hairline. Thick mascara and the silver lamé pillow on which he rests his head complete the scene. The Salamá **market** is impressive for its colorful, local bustle, particularly on Sunday.

### Tours

**EcoVerapaz** (📞 7940 0146; [ecoverapaz@hotmail.com](mailto:ecoverapaz@hotmail.com); 8a Av 7-12, Zona 1) has local, trained naturalists offering interesting tours throughout Baja Verapaz, including caving, birding, hiking, horseback riding and orchid trips. The company also goes to Rabinal to check out its museum and crafts, and arranges trips to see the famous rodeos of Baja Verapaz. Guides speak some English. One-day tours are US\$40 per person and group discounts are offered.

### Sleeping

**Turicentro Las Orquídeas** (📞 7940 1622; Carr a Salamá Km 147; per tent US\$4.50) Travelers with camping gear may want to check out this place. Here, a few kilometers east of Salamá out on Hwy 17, the Turicentro has a grassy area for camping plus a café, pool and open spaces hung with hammocks. You can use the pool (US\$2 per person per day) even if you're not camping here.

**Hotel Rosa de Sharon** (📞 5774 8650; 5a Calle 6-39; s/d with bathroom US\$7.50/12; 📞) The neat, bright rooms here loom over the busy market area, but they're set back from the road, so remain peaceful. They're big and clean with whacky decorations such as wrought iron hat stands made to look like trees.

**Posada de Don Maco** (📞 7940 0083; 3a Calle 8-26; s/d with bathroom US\$8/14; 📞) This clean, family-run place has simple but spacious rooms with fan and good bathrooms. The courtyard boasts a collection of caged squirrels.

### Eating

**Café Deli-Donas** (15a Calle 6-61; cakes US\$1.30, sandwiches US\$2, licuados US\$0.90) This exceedingly pleasant little café (where even the bathrooms smell good) is like an oasis in Salamá's busy market zone. Excellent coffee, homemade cakes and light meals are the go here.

**Antojitos Zacapanecos** (cnr 6a Calle & 8a Av; mains US\$2-3) For something a little different in the fast-food vein, check out the huge flour tortillas filled with pork, chicken or beef from this place. Better yet, grab one to go and have a picnic in the plaza.

**Restaurante El Balcón de los Recuerdos** (8a Av 6-28; mains US\$5-7; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon–Sat) This restaurant, a half-block west of the plaza on the road to La Cumbre, is spacious, fan-cooled, and has a central fountain. Here you can choose from a typical list of grilled meats, fish, prawns and seafood soup.

### Getting There & Away

Buses going to Guatemala City (US\$3 to US\$4.50, three hours, 151km) depart hourly between 3am and 8pm from the northeast corner of the park. There is a Pullman at 4am. Arrive early for a seat. Buses coming from Guatemala City continue west from Salamá to Rabinal (US\$1.50, 40 minutes, 19km) and then 15km further along to Cubulco.

Buses for San Jerónimo leave from in front of the *municipalidad* (east side of the plaza) every half-hour from 6am to 5:30pm (US\$0.40, 25 minutes). Buses for La Cumbre (US\$0.60, 25 minutes) and Cobán (US\$2.50; 1½ to two hours) leave just downhill from the corner of 15 Calle and 6a Av about every 30 minutes from early morning to 4pm.

### AROUND SALAMÁ

Ten kilometers along the road to Salamá from the Cobán Hwy you come to the turnoff for **San Jerónimo**. Behind the town's beautiful **church**, a former sugar mill is now a **museum** (admission free; 🕒 8am–4pm Mon–Fri, 10am–noon & 1–4pm Sat & Sun) with a decent collection of unlabeled artifacts and photographs. On the town plaza are some large stones that were carved in ancient times.

Nine kilometers west of Salamá along Hwy 5 is **San Miguel Chicaj**, known for its traditional **fiesta** (September 25–29) and weaving.

Continue along the same road another 10km to reach the colonial town of **Rabinal**, founded in 1537 by Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas as a base for proselytizing. Rabinal has gained fame as a center for pottery-making (look for the hand-painted chocolate cups) and citrus-growing. Rabinal is also known for its adherence to pre-Columbian traditions. Try to make the annual **fiesta of Saint Peter** (January 19–25; things reach a fever pitch on January 21), or **Corpus Cristi**. Market day is Sunday. Two small hotels, **Posada San Pablo** and **Hospedaje Caballeros**, can put you up if you wish to stay.

It's possible to continue from Rabinal another 15km west to **Cubulco** or about 100km south to Guatemala City. Hwy 5 to Guatemala City passes through several small villages en route. It's best to tackle this road with a 4WD vehicle. Buses ply this remote route very slowly. Along the way you can stop to visit the **ruins of Mixco Viejo** (admission US\$4), near San Juan Sacatepéquez, about 25km from Guatemala City.

## BIOTOPO DEL QUETZAL

Along the main highway (CA-14) 34km north of the turnoff for Salamá is the Biotopo Mario Dary Rivera reserve, commonly called the **Biotopo del Quetzal** (admission US\$2.50; ☎ 7am-4pm); it's at Km 161, near the village of Purulhá (no services). The ride along here is sobering: entire hillsides are deforested and covered in huge sheets of black plastic meant to optimize growing conditions for *xate*, a green palm exported for use in floral arrangements.

If you intend on seeing a quetzal, Guatemala's national bird, you'll likely be disappointed – the birds are rare and elusive, and their habitat is almost destroyed. The best time to see them is between February and September. However, it's still worth a visit to explore their lush, high-altitude cloud forest habitat.

Two well-maintained trails wind through the reserve past several waterfalls, most of which cascade into swimmable pools. Deep in the forest is **Xiu Ua Li Che** (Grandfather Tree), some 450 years old, which was alive when the conquistadors fought the Rabinals in these mountains.

Trail maps in English and Spanish are sold at the visitors center for US\$0.70. They contain a checklist of 87 birds commonly seen here. Other animals include spider monkeys and *tigrillos*, similar to ocelots. Good luck.

The reserve has a visitors center, a little shop for drinks and snacks, and a camping and barbecue area. The ruling on camping changes often. Check by contacting **Cecon** (☎ 3361 6065; www.usac.edu.gt/cecon, in Spanish; Av La Reforma 0-63, Zona 10, Guatemala City), which administers this and other *biotopos*. Services in the area include the following.

**Hotel y Comedor Ranchito del Quetzal** (☎ 5368 6397; s/d US\$5/10, with bathroom US\$7.50/15; (P)), carved out of the jungle on a hillside 200m away from the Biotopo entrance, has good-sized, simple rooms with cold showers in the older wooden building and hot showers in the newer concrete one. Reasonably priced, simple meals (mains US\$3.50) are served, and there are vegetarian options.

## Getting There & Away

Any bus to/from Guatemala City will set you down at the park entrance. Heading in the other direction, it's best to flag down a bus or microbus to El Rancho and change there for your next destination. The road between the Biotopo and Cobán is good – smooth and

fast (although curvy). As you ascend into the evergreen forests, you'll still see tropical flowers here and there.

## COBÁN

pop 57,600 / elevation 1320m

Not so much an attraction in itself, but an excellent jumping-off point for the natural wonders of Alta Verapaz, Cobán is a prosperous city with an upbeat air. Return visitors will marvel at how much (and how tastefully) the town has developed since their last visit.

This was once a stronghold of the Rabinal Maya. In the 19th century, German immigrants moved in, founding vast coffee and cardamom *fincas* and giving Cobán the look and feel of a German mountain town. The era of German cultural and economic domination ended during WWII, when the US prevailed upon the Guatemala government to deport the powerful *fincas* owners, many of whom supported the Nazis.

Guatemala's most impressive indigenous festival, the folkloric festival of **Rabin Ajau**, takes place in late July or early August.

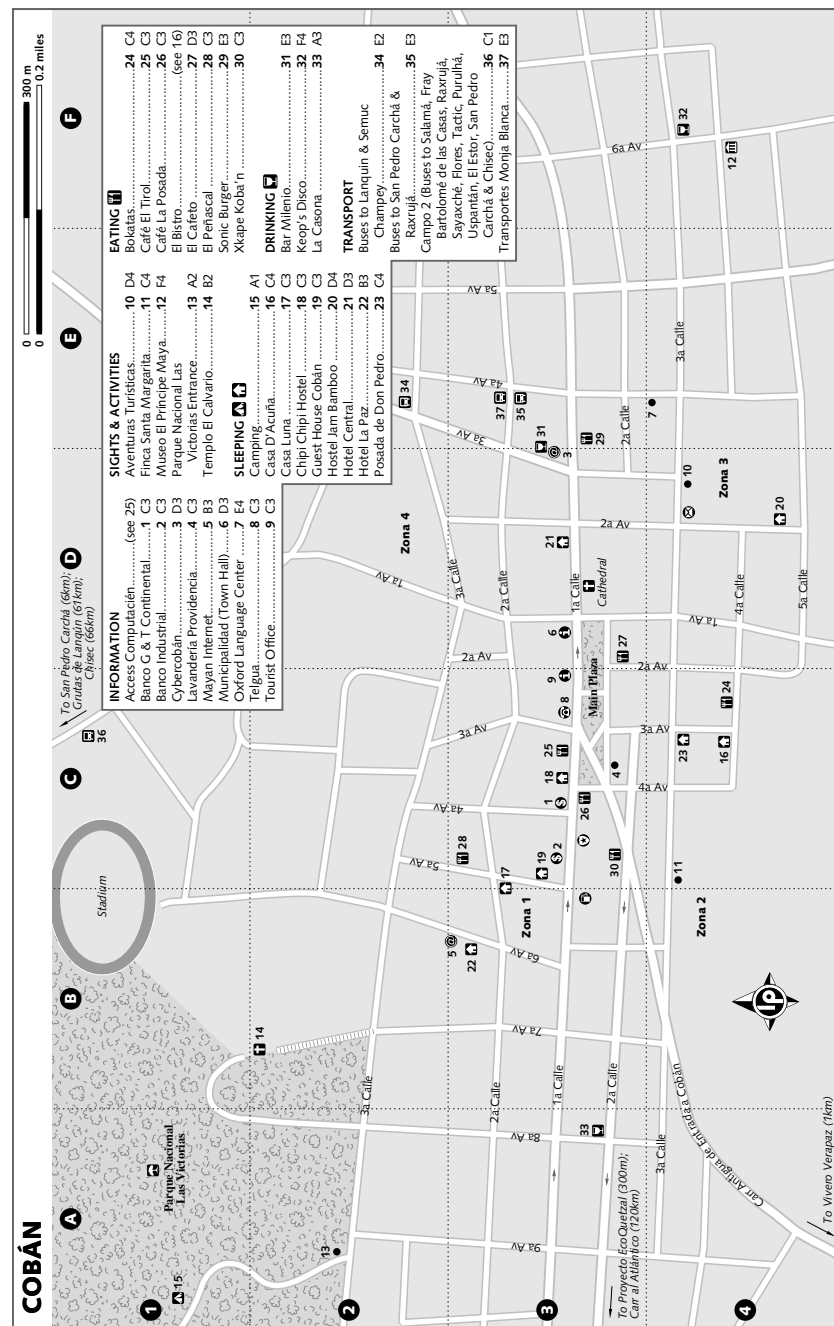
## Orientation & Information

Most services of interest to travelers are within a few blocks of the plaza. Most buses will drop you out of town at the terminal north of town. It's a 15-minute walk or US\$1 taxi ride to the plaza from there. The heart of Cobán is built on a rise, so unless what you're looking for is in the dead center, you'll be trudging uphill and down.

There's a **tourist office** (☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) on the plaza, but unless your question is very basic, they'll probably send you to the tourism people in the **municipalidad** (town hall; ☎ 952 1305, 951 1148), where some switched-on young staff work in an office behind the police office. Casa D'Acuña (p165) can also give you loads of information.

The post office is a block southeast of the plaza on the corner of 2a Av and 3a Calle. There are plenty of card phones outside Telgua on the plaza.

At least four places offer internet service. The going rate is US\$0.80 per hour. **Access Computación** (1a Calle 3-13; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat) is in the same complex as Café El Tirol. **Cybercobán** (3a Av 1-11, Zona 4; ☎ 8:30am-7pm Mon-Sat) is 200m east of the plaza. **Mayan Internet** (6a Av 2-28; ☎ 8:30am-8pm Mon-Sat, 2:30-9pm Sun), with fast connections, is 500m west of the plaza.



**Lavandería Providencia** (☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat), on the south side of the plaza, will wash 3.2kg for US\$1.50; drying costs US\$2.50 per hour.

The following banks are good for changing US dollars and traveler's checks:

**Banco Industrial** (1a Calle 4-36 cnr 1a Calle & 7a Av) The 7a Av branch has a Visa ATM.

**Banco G & T Continental** (1a Calle) Has a MasterCard ATM. Opposite Hotel La Posada.

## Sights & Activities

### TEMPLO EL CALVARIO

You'll get a fine view over town from this church atop a long flight of stairs at the north end of 7a Av Zona 1. Indigenous people leave offerings at shrines and crosses in front of the church.

### PARQUE NACIONAL LAS VICTORIAS

This forested 0.82-sq-km **national park** (admission US\$0.80; ☎ 8am-4:30pm, walking trails 9am-3pm), right in town, has ponds, barbecue, picnic areas, campgrounds, children's play areas, a lookout point and extensive trails. The entrance is near the corner of 3a Calle and 9a Av, Zona 1. It's an isolated spot – consider hiking in a group.

### VIVERO VERAPAZ

Orchid lovers mustn't miss a chance to see the many thousands of species at this famous **nursery** (☎ 7952 1133; Carr Antigua de Entrada a Cobán; admission US\$1.80; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-4pm). The rare *monja blanca*, or white nun orchid (Guatemala's national flower), grows here, as do hundreds of miniature orchid species. The national orchid show is held here each December.

Vivero Verapaz is on the Carr Antigua de Entrada a Cobán, about 2km from the town center – a 40-minute walk southwest from the plaza. You can hire a taxi for around US\$4.

### FINCA SANTA MARGARITA

This working **coffee farm** (☎ 7952 1586; 3a Calle 4-12, Zona 2; admission US\$2.50; ☎ guided tours 8am-12:30pm & 1:30-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) offers guided tours of their operation. From propagation and planting to roasting and exporting, the 45-minute tour will tell you all you ever wanted to know about these powerful beans. At tour's end, you're treated to a cup of coffee and can purchase beans straight from the roaster for US\$3 to US\$7 per 0.5kg. The talented guide speaks English and Spanish.

### MUSEO EL PRÍNCIPE MAYA

This private **museum** (☎ 7952 1541; 6a Av 4-26, Zona 3; admission US\$1.30, ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) features a collection of pre-Columbian artifacts, with an emphasis on jewelry, other body adornments and pottery. The displays are well designed and maintained.

## Courses

The **Oxford Language Center** (☎ 5892 7718; www.olcenglish.com; 4a Av 2-16, Zona 3) charges around US\$170 for 20 hours of Spanish lessons, with discounts for groups. Their rationale for charging more than the competition is that they pay their teachers better.

## Tours

**Aventuras Turísticas** (☎/fax 7951 4213; www.avenaturisticas.com; 3a Calle 2-38, Zona 3), in Hostal de Doña Victoria, leads tours to Laguna Lachuá, the caves of Lanquín, Semuc Champey, Tikal and Ceibal, and will customize itineraries. It employs French-, English- and Spanish-speaking guides.

**Casa D'Acuña** (☎ 7951 0484; casadacuna@yahoo.com; 4a Calle 3-11, Zona 2) offers its own tours to Semuc Champey, the Grutas de Lanquín and other places further afield. Its guides are excellent.

**Proyecto EcoQuetzal** (☎/fax 7952 1047; www.ecoquetzal.org; 2a Calle 14-36, Zona 1; ☎ 8:30am-1pm & 2-5:30pm Mon-Fri) is an innovative project offering 'ethnotourism' trips in which participants hike to nearby villages in the cloud forest and stay with a Q'eqchi' Mayan family. To maximize the experience, travelers are encouraged to learn some Q'eqchi' words and stay with their host family for at least two days. For US\$42 you'll get a guide for three days, lodging for two nights and six meals. Your guide will take you on hikes to interesting spots. The men of the family are the guides, providing them an alternative, sustainable way to make a living.

Reservations are required at least one day in advance. The Proyecto also rents boots, sleeping bags and binoculars at reasonable prices, so you needn't worry if you're unprepared for such a rugged experience. Participants should speak at least a little Spanish. With a month's notice, this outfit also offers quetzal-viewing platforms; contact the office for details.

## Sleeping

**Chipi Chipi Hostel** (☎ 5226 0235; 1a Calle 3-25, Zona 1; dm US\$3.50) This new hostel is a total winner in terms of location, and offers decent shared

rooms, sleeping four in two bunks. The patio has hammocks and the young staff are full of info and tips.

**Hotel La Paz** (☎ 952 1358; 6a Av 2-19, Zona 1; s US\$4, s/d with bathroom US\$6/10; (P)) This cheerful, clean hotel, 1½ blocks north and two blocks west of the plaza, is an excellent deal. It has many flowers, and a good cafeteria next door. They claim to have hot water.

**Casa Luna** (☎ 7951 3528; 5a Av 2-28, Zona 1; dm US\$6; r per person US\$7.50) Modern rooms set around a pretty, grassy courtyard. Dorms have lockers and private rooms are well decorated. The shared bathrooms are spotless.

**Guest House Cobán** (cnr 5a Av & 2a Calle, Zona 1; s/d US\$6/12, with bathroom US\$7.50/15) A basic but comfortable little guest house in a good location. The beds are firm and the family who runs it is superfriendly. Rates include breakfast.

**Hostel Jam Bamboo** (2a Av 4-33, Zona 2; dm US\$6) Definitely party central in Cobán's hostel scene – this one isn't for your retiring types. But if you're looking to meet people and listen to live music (Tuesday to Sunday), this is your place. Rooms are spacious, with three beds per room and a bathroom in each.

**Posada de Don Pedro** (☎ 7951 0562; 3a Calle 3-12 Zona 2; s/d US\$6/12) This family-run place has spacious rooms with terracotta tiled floors around a happy little courtyard. There are good sitting areas to while the day away.

**Casa D'Acuña** (☎ 7951 0482; casadacuna@yahoo.com; 4a Calle 3-11, Zona 2; dm/d US\$6.50/13) This clean and very comfortable European-style hostel has four dorms (each with four beds) and two private doubles, all with shared bathroom with good hot-water showers. Also here is a fabulous restaurant called El Bistro, a gift shop, laundry service and reasonably priced local tours.

**Hotel Central** (☎ 7952 1442; 1a Calle 1-79, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom & TV US\$16/20) Reasonable sized rooms with just a touch of mold on the walls and lovely outdoor sitting areas make this a decent choice.

**Camping** (per person US\$3) is available at Parque Nacional Las Victorias, right in town. Facilities include water and toilets, but no showers.

## Eating

Most of Cobán's hotels have their own restaurants.

**Xkape Koba'n** (2a Calle 5-13, Zona 2; snacks US\$2) The perfect place to take a breather or while away a whole afternoon is this beautiful, artsy

little café with a lush garden out back. The cakes are homemade, the coffee delectable and there are some interesting handicrafts on sale.

**Café El Tirol** (Oficinas Profesionales Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, 1a Calle 3-13; breakfast US\$2-4; ☎ Mon-Sat) Another good central café, the Tirol claims to have Cobán's best coffee (we disagree) and offers several types of hot chocolate. It's a cozy little place in which to enjoy breakfasts, pastries and coffee or light meals, with a pleasant terrace away from the traffic.

**El Cafeto** (2a Calle 1-36 B, Zona 2; mains US\$3-4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This cute little café right on the square does good, light set lunches (US\$3), has a half-decent wine selection and serves delicious coffee.

**Sonic Burger** (1a Calle 3-50, Zona 3; burgers from US\$3, set meals US\$3-5) The best burgers in town are served in a young, almost-hip environment. The food is cheap, the drinks expensive – go figure.

**Café La Posada** (1a Calle 4-12, Zona 2; ☎ 1-9pm; snacks under US\$4) This café has tables on a veranda overlooking the square, and a comfortable sitting room inside with couches, coffee tables and a fireplace. All the usual café fare is served. Snacks comprise nachos, tortillas, sandwiches, burgers, tacos, tostadas, fruit salad etc.

**Bokatas** (4a Calle 2-34, Zona 2; mains US\$4-10; ☎ dinner) This large outdoor eatery pumps out equal portions of big juicy steaks and loud disco music. Also on offer is a decent paella for two or three people (US\$24), and a range of seafood and Mediterranean options.

**El Peñascal** (5a Av 2-61; mains US\$8-10; ☎ lunch & dinner) Probably Cobán's finest dining option, this one has plenty of regional specialties, Guatemalan classics, mixed meat platters, seafood and snacks in a relaxed, upmarket setting.

**El Bistro** (4a Calle 3-11; fish, steak & chicken mains US\$8.50-13; ☎ from 7am) Casa D'Acuña's restaurant offers authentic Italian as well as other European-style dishes served in an attractive oasis of tranquility to background classical music. In addition to protein-oriented mains, there is a range of pastas (US\$4 to US\$5.30), salads, home-made breads, cakes and outstanding desserts.

In the evening, food trucks (kitchens on wheels) park around the plaza and offer some of the cheapest dining in town. As always, the one to go for has the largest crowd of locals hanging around chomping down.

## Drinking & Nightlife

Cobán has several places where you can get down and boogie.

**Bar Milenio** (3a Av 1-11, Zona 4) Has a bar, food, a pool table and mixed-music disco.

**La Casona** (cnr 8a Av & 2 Calle, Zona 2; admission US\$2-3; ☎ Thu-Sat) A mega-disco with balcony seating and bow-tied waiters.

**Keops Disco** (3a Calle 4-71, Zona 3; admission US\$4) A popular disco; wear your best gear.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

The CA-14/Carr al Atlántico route is the most traveled circuit between Cobán and the outside world, but buses also serve other off-the-beaten-track routes. Consider taking the phenomenal route between Cobán and Huehuetenango (see p152). Or head from Cobán to El Estor, on Lago de Izabal, or to Poptún in El Petén on the backdoor route via Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas.

Many buses leave from Cobán's new bus terminal, east of the stadium. Buses to Guatemala City, Salamá, Lanquín and many other destinations depart from completely different stations. The bus stops are shown on the map. From Cobán, buses include the following destinations:

**Biotopo del Quetzal** (US\$1, 1¼ hours, 58km) Any bus heading from Monja Blanca for Guatemala City will drop you at the entrance to the Biotopo.

**Chisec** (US\$1.95, two hours, 66km) 10 buses from Campo 2 between 6am and 5pm.

**Flores** (five to six hours, 224km) Go to Sayaxché and take an onward bus or minibus from there.

**Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas** via Chisec (US\$4, three hours, 121km); via San Pedro Carchá (US\$4.50, four hours, 101km) Several buses and minibuses depart from Campo 2 between 5am and 3:30pm. Buses might just say 'Las Casas.'

**Guatemala City** (US\$4 to US\$6, four to five hours, 213km) Transportes Monja Blanca (☎ 7951 3571; 2a Calle 3-77, Zona 4) has buses leaving for Guatemala City every 30 minutes between 2am and 6am, then hourly till 5pm.

**Lanquín** (US\$2 to US\$3, 2½ to three hours, 61km) Minibuses depart from the corner of 3a Calle and 3a Av, Zona 4, from 7am to 4pm. Check times as they seem to be fluid.

**Playa Grande (for Laguna Lachúa)** (US\$6.50, four hours, 141km) Frequent buses and minibuses from Campo 2. Playa Grande is sometimes called Cantabal.

**Puerto Barrios** (6½ hours, 335km) Take any bus headed to Guatemala City and change at El Rancho junction.

**Río Dulce** (6½ hours, 318km) Take any bus headed to Guatemala City and change at El Rancho junction. You

may have to transfer again at La Ruidosa junction, 169km past El Rancho, but there is plenty of transportation going through to Río Dulce and on to Flores.

**Salamá** (US\$3, 1½ hours, 57km) Frequent minibuses leave from Campo 2, or take any bus to Guatemala City and change at La Cumbre.

**Sayaxché** (US\$7, four hours, 184km) Buses at 6am and noon, and *microbuses* from early until 1pm, from Campo 2.

**Uspantán** (US\$4.50, 4½ hours, 94km) Microbuses go from Campo 2 with a stop at Oficinas Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas.

## AROUND COBÁN

Cobán (indeed all of Alta Verapaz) is becoming a hot destination for adventure travel. Not only does the area hold scores of villages where you can find traditional Maya culture in some of its purest extant form, it also harbors caves, waterfalls, pristine lagoons and many other natural wonders.

### San Juan Chamelco

About 16km southeast of Cobán is the village of San Juan Chamelco, with swimming at **Balneario Chio**. The church here, which dates back to the colonial period and may have been the first church in Alta Verapaz, sits atop a small rise and has awesome views of the villages below. Mass is still held here in Spanish (5pm Sunday) and Q'eqchi' (7am and 9:30am Sunday).

In Aldea Chajaneb, 12km from Cobán, **Don Jerónimo's** (☎ 2308 2255; www.dearbrutus.com/donjeronimo; s/d US\$25/45) rents comfortable, simple bungalows. The price includes three ample, delicious vegetarian meals fresh from the garden. He also offers many activities, including tours to caves and the mountains, and inner tubing on the Río Sotzil. The **Rey Marcos Cave** is near here.

The caves go for more than 1km into the earth, although chances are you won't get taken that far. A river runs through the cave (you have to wade through it at one point) and there are some impressive stalactites and stalagmites.

Buses to San Juan Chamelco leave from 4a Calle, Zona 3, in Cobán. To reach Don Jerónimo's, take a bus or pickup from San Juan Chamelco toward Chamil and ask the driver to let you off at Don Jerónimo's. When you get off, take the footpath to the left for 300m, cross the bridge and it's the first house on the right. Alternatively, hire a taxi from Cobán (US\$6.50).

## Grutas de Lanquín

The best excursion from Cobán is to the caves near Lanquín, a pretty village 61km east. If you get this far, be sure to visit Semuc Champey (right) as well.

The **Grutas de Lanquín** (admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-4pm) are a short distance northwest of the town and extend several kilometers into the earth. You must first stop at the police station in the *municipalidad* (town hall) in Lanquín, pay the admission and ask them to open the caves; there is no attendant at the caves. The caves have lights, but bring a powerful flashlight anyway. You'll also need shoes with good traction, as it's slippery inside.

Although the first few hundred meters of cavern has been equipped with a walkway and electric lights, most of this subterranean system is untouched. If you're a neophyte spelunker, think twice about wandering too far – the entire extent of this cave has yet to be explored, let alone mapped. Aside from funky stalactites and stalagmites, these caves are crammed with bats; at sunset, they fly out of the mouth of the cave in dense, sky-obscuring formations. The river here gushes from the cave in clean, cool and delicious torrents; search out the hot pockets near the shore.

The sublimely located **El Retiro** (☎ 7983 0009; hammock/dm US\$3/4, s/d US\$6/12) is about 500m along the road beyond Rabin Itzam. Be warned – it's the sort of place you could lose yourself for months (and it looks like some have). *Palapas* look down over green fields to a beautiful wide river, the same one that flows out from the Lanquín caves. It's safe to swim, even inner tube if you're a confident swimmer. Attention to detail in every respect makes this a backpackers' paradise. Excellent vegetarian food (three-course dinners US\$4.50) is available in the hammock-lined restaurant.

In Lanquín **Rabin Itzam** (s/d US\$3.50/7, with bathroom US\$13/16) has big rooms with balconies and good views. The wooden doors are carved with Maya symbols. This place is quiet and private. **El Recreo** (☎ 7983 0057; hotel\_e\_l\_recreo@hotmail.com; s/d US\$10/20; ☎ ☎), between the town and the caves, is more attractive and more expensive. It has large gardens, two swimming pools and a restaurant.

**La Estancia de Alfaro** (mains US\$3-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This large outdoor eatery halfway between town and El Retiro serves up good-sized plates of steak, eggs and rice, and gets rowdy and beerish at night.

Buses operate several times daily between Cobán and Lanquín, continuing to Cahabón. Buses leave Lanquín to return to Cobán at 3am, 4am, 5:30am and 1pm, and there are assorted minibuses with no fixed timetable. Since the last reliable return bus departs so early, it's best to stay the night.

## Semuc Champey

Nine kilometers south of Lanquín, along a rough, bumpy, slow road, is **Semuc Champey** (admission US\$4), famed for its great natural limestone bridge 300m long, on top of which is a stepped series of pools of cool, flowing river water that's good for **swimming**.

The water is from the Río Cahabón, and much more of it passes underground, beneath the bridge. Although this bit of paradise is difficult to reach, the beauty of its setting and the perfection of the pools, which range from turquoise to emerald green, make it all worthwhile.

If you're visiting on a tour, some guides will take you down a rope ladder from the lowest pool to the river, which gushes out from the rocks below.

It's possible to camp at Semuc Champey, but be sure to pitch a tent only in the upper areas, as flash floods are common. It's risky to leave anything unattended, as it might get stolen.

The place now has 24-hour security which may reassure potential campers, but you need to bring everything with you.

**Las Marias** (☎ 7861 2209; www.posadalasmarias.com; dm US\$3, s/d US\$6/9.50, with bathroom US\$9.50/14) is a rustic, laid-back place by the road 1km short of Semuc Champey. There are a couple of dorm rooms and three private rooms, all in wooden buildings in a verdant setting. Cool drinks and vegetarian food are available (full dinner US\$2.60) from the restaurant where you can see the Río Cahabón flowing past. They offer cave tours (US\$4/5.50 for guests/nonguests), tubing, walking tours and shuttles to Cobán for US\$4.

You can camp here for US\$1.50 and rent a hammock for US\$2.

Pickups run from the plaza in Lanquín to Semuc Champey – your chances of catching one are better in the early morning and on market days, Sunday, Monday and Thursday. If there are a lot of local people traveling, expect to pay US\$0.65; otherwise, it's US\$1.95. The walk is long and hot.

## BACKDOOR PETÉN ROUTES

The Cobán to Poptún route via Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas used to be a desolate dirt road. Nowadays, plenty of buses and pickups ply the decent roads. This route is a great opportunity for you to get off the Gringo Trail and into the heart of Guatemala.

The hospitable town of **Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas**, often referred to as 'Fray' (pronounced fry), is sizable for the middle of nowhere. You can't make it from Cobán to Poptún in one shot, so you'll be spending the night here. Banrural, just off the plaza, changes US dollars and traveler's checks. The post office and police station are nearby. The *municipalidad* (town hall) is on the plaza.

The friendly **Hotel La Cabaña** (☎ 7952 0352; 2a Calle 1-92 Zona 3; s/d US\$3.50/7, with bathroom US\$8/16) has the best accommodations in town. Eating options are limited here – you could try in the restaurant of Hotel Bartolo, behind the plaza. Otherwise grab a steak (with tortillas and beans; US\$1.50) at the informal BBQ shacks that open up along the main street at night.

One daily bus departs from the plaza at 3am for Poptún (US\$5, five to six hours, 100km). Buses for Cobán leave hourly between 4am and 4pm. Some go via Chisec (3½ hours, US\$4). Others take the slower route via San Pedro Carchá.

Another backdoor trip you could take goes from Cobán to Sayaxché and El Ceibal (see p166). You can also go via Raxrujá (many services), west of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas. One bus daily leaves Fray for Sayaxché at 10am (4½ hours, 117km).

## ZACAPA & CHIQUIMULA

In the steamy, hill studded flatlands that run down to the southern border, cowboy culture lives on. Packing a pistol is not uncommon here – indeed, it goes well with the big hat and boots. Most travelers use the area as a gateway to El Salvador and Honduras, but others come for the religious pilgrimage to Esquipulas or to check out the dinosaur museum at Estanzuela.

### ESTANZUELA

pop 10,000

En route to Chiquimula, you turn off the Carr al Atlántico onto the CA-10 and into the Río Motagua valley, a hot, 'dry tropic' area that

once supported a great number and variety of dinosaurs. Three kilometers south of the Carr al Atlántico you'll see a small monument on the right (west) side of the road commemorating the terrible earthquake of February 4, 1976.

Less than 2km south of the monument is the small town of Estanzuela, with its **Museo de Paleontología, Arqueología y Geología Ingeniero Roberto Woolfolk Sarvia** (☎ 7941 4981; admission free; ☹ 9am-5pm). This interesting museum holds bones of dinosaurs, a giant ground sloth some 30,000 years old and a prehistoric whale. Also on display are early Maya artifacts. To get here, go 1km west from the highway directly through town, following the small *museo* signs.

### CHIQUIMULA

pop 44,200 / elevation 370m

Capital of its namesake department, Chiquimula lies in a mining and tobacco-growing region on CA-10, 32km south of the Carr al Atlántico. Although small, it's a major market town for eastern Guatemala. It's also a transportation point and overnight stop for those en route to Copán in Honduras (the reason most travelers stop here). Among other things, Chiquimula is known for its sweltering climate, decent budget hotels and the flower-packed central plaza, wired for sound and pumping out nonstop powerschmaltz.

### Orientation & Information

Chiquimula is easy to get around on foot.

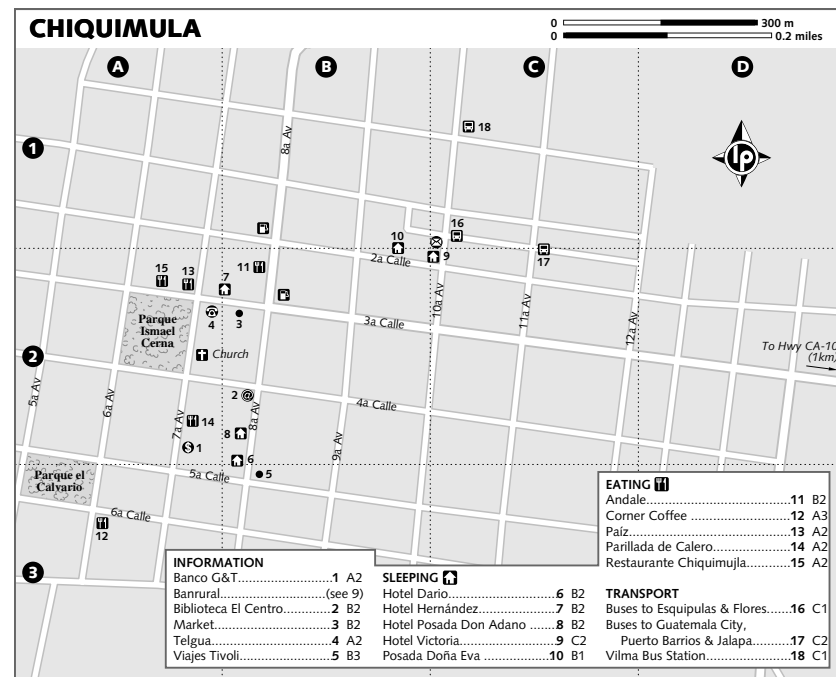
The **post office** (10a Av btwn 1a & 2a Calles) is in an alley around the side of the building opposite the bus station. **Telgua** (3a Calle) is a few doors downhill from Parque Ismael Cerna. Check email at **Biblioteca El Centro** (cnr 4a Calle & 8a Av; per hr US\$0.80; ☹ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat & Sun). The busy **market** is right by Telgua.

Many banks will change US dollars and traveler's checks. **Banco G&T** (7a Av 4-75, Zona 1; ☹ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat), half a block south of the plaza, changes both and also gives cash advances on Visa and MasterCard. **Banrural** (cnr 2a Calle & 10a Av, Zona 1) has a Visa ATM.

**Viajes Tivoli** (☎ 7942 4915; 8a Av 4-71, Zona 1) can help you with travel arrangements.

### Sleeping

**Hotel Darío** (☎ 7942 0192; 8a Av 4-40, Zona 1; s/d US\$4/6, with bathroom US\$9/12) Big, plain rooms around a leafy courtyard. Upstairs rooms share a breezy sitting area, but have shared bathrooms.



**Hotel Hernández** (☎ 7942 0708; 3a Calle 7-41, Zona 1; s/d US\$5.50/8, s/d with bathroom US\$11/13; ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹) It's hard to beat the Hernández – it's been a favorite for years and keeps going strong, with its central position, spacious, simple rooms and good-sized swimming pool. Be sure to check out the carp pond in the *pila* (laundry trough).

**Posada Doña Eva** (☎ 7942 4956; 2a Calle 9-61, Zona 1; s/d US\$8/12) Set way back from the busy streets, the cool, clean rooms here offer a minimalist approach to comfort, with bathrooms, TV and fans.

**Hotel Victoria** (☎ 7942 2732; cnr 2a Calle & 10a Av; s/d with bathroom US\$9/12) If you're just looking for somewhere to crash close to the bus terminal, these rooms are a pretty good bet. Clean and not too cramped, with TV and a decent *comedor* downstairs. Get one at the back – the street noise can be insane.

**Hotel Posada Don Adano** (☎ 7942 3924; 8a Av 4-30, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$13/20; ☹ ☹) The Don offers the best deal in this price range – neat, complete rooms with TV, fan, air-con, a couple of sticks of furniture and good, firm beds.

### Eating

There's a string of cheap *comedores* on 8a Av behind the market. At night snack vendors and taco carts set up along 7a Av opposite the plaza, selling the cheapest eats in town.

**Andale** (8a Av 2-34, Zona 1; mains US\$3-5; ☹ lunch & dinner) For that late-night (until 11pm) Tex-Mex munchout, this is the place to be – big burritos, tacos (three for US\$1.50) and cheap beer in a relaxed, clean environment.

**Restaurante Chiquimujla** (3a Calle 6-51; breakfast US\$2-3.25, mains US\$4-7) In Hotel Chiquimulja, this is an impressive palm-roofed building on two levels. Relax with a lovely long drink and choose from the list of pasta dishes, prawns and grilled meats. The *parillada* platter for two is a real heart-stopper, in more ways than one.

**The Corner Coffee** (6a Calle 6-70, Zona 1; mains US\$4-8; ☹ lunch & dinner) You could argue with the syntax, but this air-con haven right on the lovely Parque el Calvario serves up the best range of steaks, pasta, burgers and bagels in town.

**Parillada de Calero** (7a Av 4-83; mains US\$5-8; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is an open-air steakhouse, serving the juiciest flame-grilled cuts



in town. This is also the breakfast hot spot – the tropical breakfast (pancakes served with a mound of fresh fruit; US\$4.50) goes down well in this climate.

**Paiz** (3a Calle on the plaza) This grocery store is tremendous and sells close to everything under the sun. Stock up here for a picnic, or stop in to enjoy the air-con.

### Getting There & Away

Several companies operate buses to Guatemala City and Puerto Barrios; all of them arrive and depart from the bus station area on 11a Av, between 1a and 2a Calles. Ipala and San Lúis Jilotepeque *microbuses* and the Jalapa bus also go from here. Minibuses to Esquipulas, Río Hondo and Anguiatú and buses to Flores arrive and depart a block away, on 10a Av, between 1a and 2a Calles. **Vilma** (☎ 7942 2064), which operates buses to El Florido, the border crossing on the way to Copán, has its own bus station a couple of blocks north.

### INTERNATIONAL

**Agua Caliente (Honduran border)** Take a minibus to Esquipulas and change there.

**Anguiatú (Salvadoran border)** (US\$2, one hour, 54km) Hourly minibuses between 5am and 5:30pm.

**El Florido for Copán (Honduran border)** (US\$2, 1½ hours, 58km) Minibuses depart from the Vilma bus station every 30 minutes from 5:30am to 4:30pm.

### DOMESTIC

**Esquipulas** (US\$2, 45 minutes, 52km) Minibuses run every 10 minutes, 4am to 8pm. Sit on the left for the best views of the basilica.

**Flores** (US\$10, seven to eight hours, 385km) Transportes María Elena (☎ 7942 3420) goes at 6am, 10am and 3pm.

**Guatemala City** (US\$5, three hours, 169km) Rutas Orientales and other companies depart at least hourly, from 3am to 3:30pm. The 3am bus leaves from the plaza, the rest from the bus station.

**Puerto Barrios** (US\$5, 4½ hours, 192km, every 30 minutes 4am–6pm)

**Quiriguá** (US\$4, two hours, 103km) Take a Puerto Barrios bus.

**Río Dulce** (US\$4.50, three hours, 144km) Take a Flores bus, or a Puerto Barrios bus to La Ruidosa junction and change there.

**Río Hondo** (US\$2, 35 minutes, 32km) There are minibuses every 30 minutes from 5am to 6pm. Or take any bus heading for Guatemala City, Flores or Puerto Barrios. On Sunday Guatemala City buses won't let you on for Río Hondo – take a minibus.

## ESQUIPULAS

From Chiquimula, CA-10 goes south into the mountains, where it's cooler and a bit more comfortable. After an hour's ride through pretty country, the highway descends into a valley ringed by mountains. Halfway down the slope, about a kilometer from town, a *mirador* provides a good view. As soon as you catch sight of the place, you'll see the reason for coming: the great Basílica de Esquipulas that towers above the town, its whiteness shining in the sun.

### History

This town may have been a place of pilgrimage even before the conquest. Legend has it that Esquipulas takes its name from a Maya lord who ruled this region when the Spanish arrived.

With the arrival of the friars, a church was built, and in 1595 an image of Christ carved from black wood was installed. It's known almost universally as the 'Black Christ.' The steady flow of pilgrims to Esquipulas became a flood after 1737, when Pedro Pardo de Figueroa, Archbishop of Guatemala, came here on pilgrimage and went away cured of a chronic ailment.

Delighted with this development, the prelate commissioned a huge new church to be built on the site. It was finished in 1758, and the pilgrimage trade has been the town's livelihood ever since.

Esquipulas is assured a place in modern history, too. Beginning here in 1986, President Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo brokered agreements with the other Central American leaders on economic cooperation and conflict resolution. These became the seeds of the Guatemalan Peace Accords, which were finally signed in 1996.

### Orientation & Information

The basilica is the center of everything. Most of the good cheap hotels are within a block or two, as are numerous small restaurants. The highway does not enter town; 11a Calle, also sometimes called Doble Vía Quirio Cataño, comes in from the highway and is the town's 'main drag.'

The **post office** (6a Av 2-15) is about 10 blocks north of the center. **Telgua** (cnr 5a Av & 9a Calle) has plenty of card phones. Check your email at **Global.com** (3a Av opposite Banco Internacional; per hr US\$0.80).

A number of banks change US dollars and traveler's checks. **Banco Internacional** (3a Av 8-87, Zona 1) changes both, gives cash advances on Visa and MasterCard, is the town's American Express agent and has a Visa ATM.

January 15 is the annual **Cristo de Esquipulas festival**, with mobs of devout pilgrims coming from all over the region to worship at the altar of the Black Christ.

### Sights & Activities

#### BASILICA

A massive pile of stone that has resisted earthquakes for almost 250 years, the basilica is approached through a pretty park and up a flight of steps. The impressive facade and towers are floodlit at night.

Inside, the devout approach **El Cristo Negro** with extreme reverence, many on their knees. Incense, the murmur of prayers and the scuffle of sandaled feet fill the air. When throngs of pilgrims are here, you must enter the church from the side to get a close view of the famous Black Christ. Shuffling along quickly, you may get a good glimpse before being shoved onward by the press of the crowd. On Sunday, religious holidays and (especially) during the festival, the press of devotees is intense. Otherwise, you may have the place to yourself.

#### CUEVA DE LAS MINAS

The **Centro Turístico Cueva de las Minas** (admission US\$1.50; ☎ 6:30am–4pm) has a 50m-deep cave

(bring your own light), grassy picnic areas, and the Río El Milagro, where people come for a miraculous dip. The cave and river are half a kilometer from the entrance gate, which is behind the basilica's cemetery, 300m south of the turnoff into town on the road heading off toward Honduras. Refreshments are available.

### Sleeping

Esquipulas has an abundance of accommodations. On holidays and during the annual festival, every hotel in town is filled, whatever the price; weekends are busy as well, with prices substantially higher. On nonfestival weekdays, ask for a *descuento* (discount). For cheap rooms, look in the streets immediately north of the towering basilica.

**Pensión Santa Rosa** (☎ 7943 2908; cnr 10a Calle & 1a Av, Zona 1; s/d US\$5/8, with bathroom US\$14/17) Some splashes of color make this a cheerier-than-usual budget choice. Rooms with shared bathroom are plainer; those with bathroom have a bit of furniture and cable TV. The Hotel San Carlos II next door is similar, as is the Pensión La Favorita, and there are several others on this street.

**Hotel Monte Cristo** (☎ 7943 1453; www.hotelmontecristo.i8.com; 3a Av 9-12, Zona 1; s/d US\$10/12, s/d with bathroom US\$15/18; 📺) Good-sized rooms with a bit of furniture and superhot showers. A policy of not letting the upstairs rooms till the downstairs ones are full might see you on the ground floor.

### GETTING TO EL SALVADOR

See p298 for information on crossing the border from El Salvador.

#### To Santa Ana via Anguiatú

Thirty-five kilometers from Chiquimula and 14km from Esquipulas, Padre Miguel junction is the turnoff for **Anguiatú**, the border of El Salvador, which is 19km (one hour) away. Minibuses pass frequently, coming from Chiquimula, Quezaltepeque and Esquipulas.

The border at Anguiatú is open from 6am to 7pm. Plenty of trucks cross here. Across the border there are hourly buses to **San Salvador**, passing through **Metapán** and **Santa Ana**.

#### To Santa Ana via San Cristóbal

Hourly buses (US\$3.50, one hour) connect El Progreso on the Guatemalan side with the border crossing at **San Cristóbal**.

#### To Las Chiminas

Frequent minibuses connect Guatemala City, Cuilapa and Valle Nuevo (the border crossing for **Las Chinamas** in El Salvador). Note that there's nowhere to stay between Cuilapa and the border.

**Hotel Posada Santiago** (☎ 7943 2023; s/d US\$10/14, with bathroom & cable TV US\$20; 📺) With some interesting (but don't get excited) architecture, these rustic/chic rooms are some of the most attractive in town. They're spacious and clean, with good showers and cable TV.

**Hotel El Peregrino** (☎ 7943 1054; 2a Av 11-94, Zona 1; s/d US\$10/15, with bathroom US\$15/20; 📺) It has hotel-style rooms looking out onto plant-filled balconies. The rooftop pool is what makes this place.

## Eating

Esquipulas' budget restaurants are clustered around the north end of the park, where hungry pilgrims can find them readily. Most eateries open from 6:30am until 9pm or 10pm.

The street running north opposite the church – 3a Av – has several eateries.

**Restaurante Calle Real** (breakfast US\$2-4, mains US\$4-6; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Typical of many restaurants here, this big eating barn turns out cheap meals for the pilgrims. There's a wide menu, strip lighting and loud TV.

**Restaurante El Angel** (☎ 7943 1372; cnr 11a Calle & 2 Av; mains US\$4-8; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This main-street Chinese eatery does all the standard dishes, plus steaks and a good range of *licuados* (fresh fruit drink, blended with milk or water). Home delivery is available.

**Restaurante La Frontera** (breakfast US\$3-5, mains US\$5-11) Opposite the park and attached to Hotel Las Cúpulas, this is a spacious, clean place serving up a good variety of rice, chicken, meat, fish and seafood dishes for good prices.

**La Hacienda** (cnr 2a Av & 10a Calle, Zona 1; mains from US\$6; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The best steakhouse in town also serves up some decent seafood and pasta dishes. There's a café-bakery attached and the breakfasts (US\$5.50) are a good (but slightly pricey) bet.

## Getting There & Away

Buses to Guatemala City arrive and depart from the **Rutas Orientales bus station** (☎ 7943 1366; cnr 11a Calle & 1a Av), near the entrance to town. Minibuses to Agua Caliente arrive and depart across the street; taxis also wait here, charging the same as the minibuses, once they have five passengers.

Minibuses to Chiquimula and to Anguiatú depart from the east end of 11a Calle; you'll probably see them hawking for passengers along the main street.

## INTERNATIONAL

**Agua Caliente (Honduran border)** (US\$1.80, 30 minutes, 10km) Minibuses every 30 minutes from 6am to 5pm.

**Anguiatú (Salvadoran border)** (US\$1.50, one hour, 33km) Minibuses every 30 minutes from 6am to 6pm.

## DOMESTIC

**Chiquimula** (US\$1.50, 45 minutes, 52km) Minibuses every 15 minutes from 5am to 6pm.

**Flores** (US\$12, eight to 10 hours, 437km) Transportes María Elena (☎ 7943 0448) has buses at 4am, 8am and 1pm from east of the basilica, amid the market.

**Guatemala City** (US\$7, four hours, 222km) Rutas Orientales *servicio especial* buses depart at 6:30am, 7:30am, 1:30pm and 3pm; ordinary buses depart every 30 minutes from 4:30am to 6pm.

# IZABAL

This lush little corner of the country really packs in the attractions. The Río Dulce–Lago de Izabal area is gorgeous and largely untouched. The Garifuna enclave of Livingston shows a whole other side to Guatemala and the little-visited ruins at Quiriguá have some of the finest carvings in the country.

## QUIRIGUÁ

Quiriguá's archaeological zone is famed for its intricately carved stelae – gigantic sandstone monoliths up to 10.5m tall – that rise like ancient sentinels in a quiet tropical park. Visiting the ruins is easy if you have your own transportation, more difficult if you're traveling by bus. From the Río Hondo junction it's 67km along the Carr al Atlántico to **Los Amates**, which has a couple of hotels, a restaurant and a bank. The village of Quiriguá is 1.5km east of Los Amates. See opposite for details of how to get to the archaeological site from here.

## History

Quiriguá's history parallels that of Copán, of which it was a dependency during much of the Classic period. The location lent itself to the carving of giant stelae. Beds of brown sandstone in the nearby Río Motagua had cleavage planes suitable for cutting large pieces. Although soft when first cut, the sandstone dried hard. With Copán's expert artisans nearby for guidance, Quiriguá's stone carvers were ready for greatness. All they needed was a leader to inspire them – and pay for the carving.

That leader was Cauac Sky (AD 725–84), who sought Quiriguá's independence from Copán. In a war with his former suzerain, Cauac Sky took Copán's King 18 Rabbit prisoner in 737 and beheaded him soon after. Independent at last, Cauac Sky called up the stonemasons and for the next 38 years they turned out giant stelae and zoomorphs dedicated to his glory.

In the early 20th century the United Fruit Company bought all the land around Quiriguá and turned it into banana groves. The company is gone, but the bananas and Quiriguá remain. In 1981, Unesco declared Quiriguá a World Heritage Site.

## Ruins

It's hot and there are mosquitoes everywhere, but the park-like **archaeological zone** (admission US\$4; 🕒 7:30am–5pm) is unforgettable. The giant stela on the Great Plaza are awe-inspiring despite their worn condition.

Stelae A, C, D, E, F, H and J, were built during the reign of Cauac Sky and carved with his image. **Stela E** is the largest Maya stela known, standing 8m above ground, with about another 3m buried in the earth. It weighs almost 60,000kg. Note the elaborate head-dresses; the beards on some figures (an oddity in Mayan art and life); the staffs of office held in the kings' hands; and the glyphs on the stelae's sides.

At the far end of the plaza is the **Acropolis**. At its base are several zoomorphs, blocks of stone carved to resemble real and mythic creatures. Frogs, tortoises, jaguars and serpents were favorite subjects. The low zoomorphs can't compete with the towering stelae in impressiveness, but are superb as works of art, imagination and mythic significance.

A small *tienda* (shop) near the entrance sells cold drinks and snacks, but you'd be better off bringing a picnic.

## Sleeping & Eating

Both of the hotels listed below have restaurants. There seems to be a bit of a price war going on in Quiriguá – just mention that you're going to have a look at the other place and listen to the prices plummet. To get to them both, walk down the main street, veering right at the first fork and then follow the road around to the left at the bend.

**Hotel El Paraiso** (s/d US\$5.50/8, with bathroom US\$8/11) The better of the two hotels in town,

the rooms with shared bathrooms here are fine, plus you get to use the shower with the awesome mountain views.

**Hotel y Restaurante Royal** (☎ 7947 3639; s/d US\$5.50/8, with bathroom US\$8/11) The first hotel you come to, this one has small but adequate rooms – those with bathrooms are a lot nicer. The restaurant serves both meat and vegetarian meals.

## Getting There & Away

Buses running along the routes Guatemala City–Puerto Barrios, Guatemala City–Flores, Esquipulas–Flores or Chiquimula–Flores will drop you off or pick you up at the turnoff to Quiriguá town. Better yet, drivers will drop you at the turnoff to the archaeological site if you ask.

The transportation center in this area is Morales, about 40km northeast of Quiriguá. It's not pretty, but it's where the bus for Río Dulce originates. If a seat isn't important, skip Morales and wait at the La Ruidosa junction for the Río Dulce bus.

## Getting Around

From the turnoff on the highway (1.5km from Quiriguá town) it's 3.4km to the archaeological site. Buses and pickups provide transportation between the turnoff and the site for US\$0.80 each way. If you don't see one, don't fret; it's a nice walk on a dirt road through banana plantations to get there.

If you're staying in Quiriguá and walking to and from the archaeological site, take the shortcut along the railway line from the village through the banana fields, crossing the access road near the site entrance.

## LAGO DE IZABAL

Guatemala's largest lake is starting to register on travelers' radars. Most visitors stay at Río Dulce village, north of the bridge where Hwy CA-13, the road leading north to Flores and Tikal, crosses the lake's east end. East of this bridge is the beautiful Río Dulce, which opens into El Golfete lake before flowing into the Caribbean at Livingston; a river trip is one of the highlights of a visit to eastern Guatemala.

Other lake highlights include El Castillo de San Felipe (an old Spanish fortress) and the Bocas del Polochic river delta. Many quiet and secluded spots in this area await your exploration.

## Río Dulce

At the east end of the Lago de Izabal where it empties into the Río Dulce, this town still gets referred to as Fronteras. It's a hangover from the days when the only way across the river was by ferry, and this was the last piece of civilization before embarking on the long, difficult journey into the Petén.

Times have changed. A huge bridge now spans the water and the Petén roads are some of the best in the country. The town sees most tourist traffic from yachting – the US coast guard says this is the safest place on the western Caribbean for boats during hurricane season. The rest of the foreigners here are either coming or going on the spectacular river trip down to Livingston (see p183).

### ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The places listed here – except for Hotel Backpacker's and Casa Guatemala – are on the north side of the bridge. Get off near Río Bravo Restaurant. Otherwise you'll be walking the length of what is purported to be Central America's longest bridge – a steamy 30-minute walk.

Many businesses in the area use radio to communicate. You can make calls at Cap't Nemo's.

Tijax Express, in the little lane between the river and the Fuente del Norte office, is Río Dulce's unofficial tourist information center. Bus, *lancha*, hotel and other important travel details are available here. It's open every day and English is spoken. There are two similar places near Tijax, Otitours and Atitrans. You can book *lanchas*, tours, sailing trips and shuttles with all three.

If you need to change cash or traveler's checks, hit one of the four banks in town, all on the main road. **Banco Industrial** (☎ 9am-5pm) has a Visa ATM. Banrural has Visa and MasterCard ATMs. Banco Agromercantil will give cash advances on credit cards if there is a problem with the ATMs.

**Cap't Nemo's Communications** (☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun), beside Bruno's on the river, offers email (US\$2 per hour) and international phone and radiophone calls. The website www.mayaparadise.com has loads of information about Río Dulce.

### TOURS

**Aventuras Vacacionales** (☎ /fax 7832 5938; www.sailing-diving-guatemala.com; Centro Comercial María, 4a Calle Poniente 17, Antigua) runs fun sailing trips on the

sailboat *Las Sirenas* from Río Dulce to the Belize reefs and islands (US\$400, seven days) and Lago Izabal (US\$180, four days). Their office is in Antigua but you can hook up with them in Río Dulce. They make the Belize and lake trips in alternate weeks.

### SLEEPING

#### By the Water

The following three places are out of town on the water, which is the best place to be. You can call or radio them from Tijax Express and they'll come and pick you up.

**Casa Perico** (☎ 7930 5666, VHF channel 68; dm US\$5.50, s/d US\$6/7, with bathroom US\$20/27) One of the more low-key options in the area, this is set on a little inlet about 200m from the main river. Cabins are well built and connected by boardwalks. The Swiss guys who run it offer tours all up and down the river, and put on an excellent buffet dinner (US\$6), or you can choose from the menu (mains US\$3 to US\$4). The place has a good book exchange and a young, fun atmosphere.

**Hacienda Tijax** (☎ 7930 5505/7, VHF channel 09; www.tijax.com; camping per person US\$3, s/d from US\$8/13 to US\$34/39; ☎ ☎) This 500-acre hacienda, a two-minute boat ride across the cove from Bruno's, is a special place to stay. Activities include horseback riding, hiking, birding, sailboat trips and tours around the rubber plantation. Accommodation is in lovely little cabins connected by a boardwalk. Most cabins face the water and there's a very relaxing pool/bar area. Access is by boat or by a road that turns off the highway about 1km north of the village. The folks here speak Spanish, English, Dutch, French and Italian, and they'll pick you up from across the river; ask at the Tijax Express office.

**Hotel Backpacker's** (☎ 7930 5169; casaguatemala@guate.net; dm US\$4, s/d US\$8/16, with bathroom US\$10/20) Across the bridge, this is a business run by Casa Guatemala and the orphans it serves. It's an old (with the emphasis on old) backpacker favorite, set in a rickety building with very basic rooms. Volunteer work is available here, either working in the hotel or the nearby children's refuge. The bar kicks on here at night. If you're coming by *lancha* or bus, ask the driver to let you off here to spare yourself the walk across the bridge.

**El Tortugal** (☎ 5306 6432; www.tortugal.com; bungalows US\$20) The best looking bungalows on the river are located here, five minutes *lan-*

*cha* ride east from town. There are plenty of hammocks, the showers are seriously hot and kayaks are free for guest use.

### In Town

**Bruno's** (☎ 7930 5721; www.mayaparadise.com/bruno.htm; dm US\$5, s/d US\$6/12, with bathroom US\$23/33; ☎ ☎ ☎) A path leads down from the northwest end of the bridge to this riverside hangout for yachting needing to get some land under their feet. The cheapest rooms here are barely worth looking at, but the dorms are clean and spacious and the new building offers some of the most comfortable rooms in town, with air-con and balconies overlooking the river. They're well set up for families and sleep up to six, charging US\$10 per additional person over the doubles rate.

**Las Brisas Hotel** (☎ 7930 5124; s/d with bathroom US\$10/13; ☎) This hotel is opposite Tijax Express. All rooms are clean enough and have three beds and fans. Three rooms upstairs have bathroom and air-con (US\$40). It's central and good enough for a night, but there are much better places around.

### EATING

**Restaurante La Carreta**, (breakfast US\$2, mains US\$5-8) While most of the waterside joints are serving up pricey food with romantic views, this *palapa*-style restaurant off the highway on the road toward San Felipe (with charming views of the neighbor's backyard) is keeping it real for the locals, with big serves at low prices. The surf and turf (US\$9.50) comes highly recommended.

**Restaurant Los Pinchos** (breakfast US\$3, mains US\$6-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) With an open-air deck over the lake, this place has some good eats and a very local flavor. They don't get too fancy, but there is a good range of steaks, seafood and Chinese dishes on offer in a relaxed environment.

**Bruno's** (breakfast US\$2.60-4, mains US\$10) Another open-air place right beside the water, Bruno's is a restaurant-sports bar with satellite TV and video; its floating dock makes it popular with yachting.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Beginning at 7am, 14 Fuente del Norte buses a day head north along to Poptún (US\$4, two hours, 99km) and Flores (US\$6.50, four hours, 208km). The 12:30pm, 7:30pm, 9:30pm and 11:30pm buses continue all the way to

Melchor de Mencos (US\$12) on the Belizean border. With good connections you can get to Tikal (279km) in a snappy six hours. In the other direction, at least 17 buses daily go to Guatemala City (US\$6.50, six hours, 280km) with Fuente del Norte and Litegua. Línea Dorada/Fuente del Norte has 1st-class buses departing at 1:30pm for Guatemala City and 2:30pm for Flores (both US\$18). This shaves up to an hour off the journey times.

Minibuses for Puerto Barrios (US\$2.50, two hours) leave when full from the roadside opposite Tijax Express.

Atitrans' shuttle minibus operates from their office on the highway. Shuttles to Antigua cost US\$37, to Copán Ruinas US\$30 and Guatemala City US\$30 with a minimum of four passengers in each case. Otitours and Tijax Express offer much the same.

Fuente del Norte buses leave for El Estor (US\$1.30, 1½ hours, 43km) from the San Felipe and El Estor turnoff in the middle of town, hourly from 7am to 4pm.

*Colectivo lanchas* go down the Río Dulce (from the new dock) to Livingston, usually requiring eight to 10 people, charging US\$12 per person. The trip is beautiful and there are often several tourlike halts along the way (see p183). If everyone wants to get there as fast as possible, it takes one hour without stops. Boats usually leave from 9am to about 2pm.

### The Road to Flores

North across the bridge is the road into El Petén, Guatemala's vast jungle province. It's 208km to Santa Elena and Flores, and another 71km to Tikal.

The entire stretch of road from the Carr al Atlántico to Santa Elena has been paved, so it's a smooth ride all the way from Río Dulce to the Tikal ruins.

The forest here is disappearing at an alarming rate, falling to the machetes of subsistence farmers. Sections are felled and burned off, crops are grown for a few seasons until the fragile jungle soil is exhausted, then the farmer moves deeper into the forest to slash and burn anew. Cattle ranchers have contributed to the damage, as has the migration of Guatemalans from the cities to El Petén.

### Mariscos

Mariscos is the principal town on the lake's south side. Ferries from here used to be the main access to El Estor and the north side of

the lake, but since a road was built from Río Dulce to El Estor, Mariscos has taken a back seat. As a result, **Denny's Beach** (☎ 2337 4946; VHF channel 63; www.dennysbeach.com; campsite US\$4, hammock US\$2, cabaña per person US\$5-10), 10 minutes by boat from Mariscos, is a good place to get away from it all.

It offers tours, hiking and swimming, and host full-moon parties. When you arrive in Mariscos, radio them to pick you up. Otherwise, hitch a ride with a *cayuco* (dugout canoe) at the market for US\$1.30 or go to Shop-n-Go and hire a speedboat for US\$13, fine if you're a group. Karlinda's is another place to stay in Mariscos; it has a restaurant and offers lake tours.

### El Castillo de San Felipe

The fortress and **castle** (admission US\$2.80; ☎ 8am-5pm) of San Felipe de Lara, about 3km west of the bridge, was built in 1652 to keep pirates from looting the villages and commercial caravans of Izabal. Although it deterred the buccaneers a bit, a pirate force captured and burned the fortress in 1686. By the end of the next century, pirates had disappeared from the Caribbean and the fort's sturdy walls served as a prison. Eventually, the fortress was abandoned and became a ruin. The present fort was reconstructed in 1956.

Today, the castle is protected as a park and is one of the lake's principal tourist attractions. In addition to the fort, the site has a large park, with barbecue/picnic areas, and you can swim in the lake.

Near the Castillo, **Hotel Don Humberto** (☎/fax 7930 5051; s/d US\$8/11; (P)) has basic rooms with big beds and good mosquito netting. It's nothing fancy, but more than adequate for a cheap sleep.

San Felipe is on the lakeshore, 3km west of Río Dulce. It's a beautiful 45-minute walk between the two, or colectivo pickups provide transportation for US\$0.50, running about every half-hour. In Río Dulce pickups stop at the corner of the highway and the road to El Estor; in San Felipe they stop in front of Hotel Don Humberto, at the entrance to El Castillo.

Boats coming from Livingston will drop you in San Felipe if you ask them. The Río Dulce boat trips usually cruise by El Castillo. Some will let you get out and visit the castle. Or you can come over from Río Dulce by private launch for US\$8.

### Finca El Paraíso

On the lake's north side, between San Felipe and El Estor, the **Finca El Paraíso** (☎ 7949 7122; admission US\$1.30) is a popular day trip from Río Dulce and other places around the lake. At the *finca*, which is a working ranch, you can walk to an incredibly beautiful spot in the jungle where a wide, hot waterfall drops about 12m into a clear, deep pool. You can bathe in the hot water, swim in the cool pool or duck under an overhanging promontory and enjoy a jungle-style sauna. Also on the *finca* are several interesting caves and good hiking. You can rent bungalows for US\$25 per double.

The *finca* is on the Río Dulce-El Estor bus route, about one hour (US\$0.90) from Río Dulce and 30 minutes (US\$0.60) from El Estor. The last bus in either direction passes around 4:30pm to 5pm.

### El Estor

Gorgeously sited and rarely visited, this small town looks over the Lago de Izabal to the Sierra de las Minas. It's most often used as a staging point for visits to the **Bocas del Polochic**, a highly biodiverse wildlife reserve at the west end of the lake, but is also a gateway for the difficult but possible back route to Lanquín and Cobán.

#### ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

El Estor is an easily negotiable town. Buses from Río Dulce terminate at Parque Central, on whose east side is **Café Portal** (☎ 6:30am-10pm), which provides excellent information, tours and transportation. **Banrural** (cnr 3a Calle & 6a Av; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) changes US dollars and American Express traveler's checks. The **municipal police** (cnr 1a Calle & 5a Av) are near the lakeshore.

The Asociación Femenina Q'eqchi' sells clothes, blankets and accessories made from traditional cloth woven by the association's members. To find it go two blocks north along 5a Av from Parque Central, then two blocks west. All profits benefit the women involved in the program.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

**Hotel Central** (☎ 949 7497; 5a Av; s/d with bathroom US\$7/10; (P)) This hotel provides rooms with fan at the northeast corner of Parque Central.

**Restaurante Típico Chaabil** (☎ 7949 7272; west end 3a Calle; r with bathroom per person US\$10; (P)) Although they go a bit heavy on the log-cabin feel, these

rooms are the best deal in town. Get one upstairs for plenty of light and good views. The restaurant here, on a lovely lakeside terrace, cooks up delicious food, such as *tapado* (the Garífuna seafood and coconut stew; US\$8). The water here is crystal clear and you can swim right off the hotel's dock.

**Hotel Vista al Lago** (☎ 7949 7205; 6a Av 1-13; s/d with bathroom US\$10/20) Set in a classic, historic building down on the waterfront, this place has plenty of style, although the rooms themselves are fairly ordinary. Views from the upstairs balcony are superb.

**Café Portal** (Parque Central; mains US\$3-5) Serves a broad range of fare with some vegetarian options.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

For information on buses from Río Dulce, see p175. The schedule from El Estor to Río Dulce is hourly, 6am to 4pm.

The road west from El Estor to Panzós and Tzurú to Tactic, south of Cobán, has a bad reputation for highway holdups and robberies, especially around Tzurú. We do not recommend it, but a bus leaves El Estor's Parque Central at 1am heading for Cobán (US\$7, six hours) where there are many buses to Lanquín. A safer, slower way of getting to Lanquín is by taking the truck that leaves El Estor's Parque Central at 9am for Cahabón (US\$2, four to five hours), and then a bus or pickup straight on from Cahabón to Lanquín the same day. This route is not recommended in the reverse direction because the truck leaves Cahabón about 4am, meaning you have to spend the preceding night in impoverished Cahabón, where things can get dodgy after dark.

There are no public boat services between El Estor and other lake destinations. Private *lanchas* can be contracted, although this can be pricey. Ask at your hotel.

### PUERTO BARRIOS

pop 62,700

The country becomes even more lush, tropical and humid heading east from La Ruidosa junction toward Puerto Barrios. Port towns have always had a reputation for being slightly dodgy, and those acting as international borders doubly so. Perhaps the town council wants to pay homage to that here. Or perhaps the edgy, slightly sleazy feel is authentic. Either way, for foreign visitors, Puerto Barrios

is mainly a jumping-off point for boats to Punta Gorda (Belize) or Livingston, and you probably won't be hanging around.

The powerful United Fruit Company owned vast plantations in the Río Motagua valley. It built railways (whose tracks still run through the middle of town) to ship produce to the coast. Puerto Barrios was built early in the 20th century to put that produce onto ships sailing for New Orleans and New York. Laid out as a company town, Puerto Barrios has long, wide streets arranged neatly on a grid. Many of its Caribbean-style wood-frame houses are on stilts.

### Orientation & Information

Its spacious layout means you must walk or ride further in Puerto Barrios to get from place to place. It's 800m from the bus terminals in the town center to the Muelle Municipal (Municipal Boat Dock) at the end of 12a Calle, from which passenger boats depart.

**Banco Industrial** (7a Av btwn 7a & 8a Calles; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) changes US dollars and traveler's checks and has a Visa ATM. **Banco Reformador** (8a Av btwn 9a & 10a Calles; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) changes US dollars only and has a MasterCard ATM.

The **immigration office** (cnr 12a Calle & 3a Av; ☎ 24hr) is a block from the Muelle Municipal. Come here for your entry or exit stamp if you're arriving from or leaving for Belize. If you're heading to Honduras, you get your exit stamp at another immigration office on the road to the border.

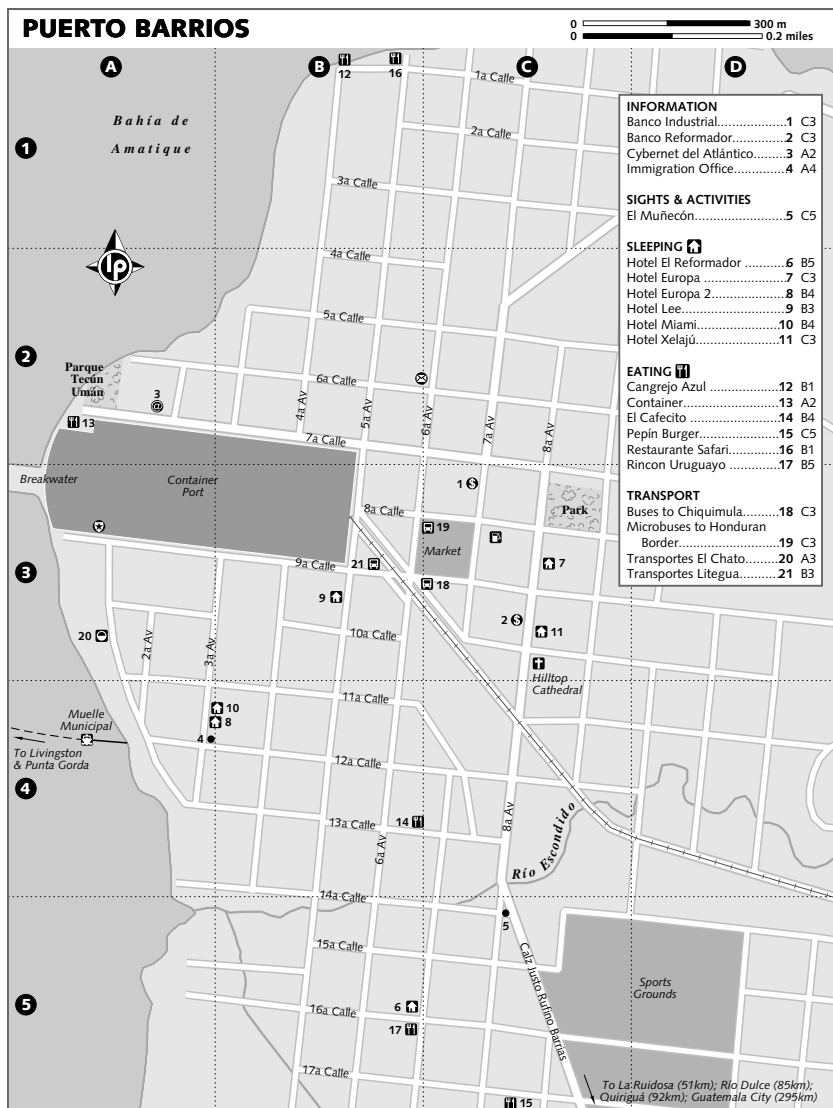
Go online at **Cybernet del Atlántico** (7a Calle; per hr US\$0.80), west of 2a Av.

**El Muñecón**, at the intersection of 8a Av, 14a Calle and the Calz Justo Rufino Barrios, is a statue of a dock worker; it's a favorite landmark and monument in the town.

### Sleeping

**Hotel Xelajú** (☎ 7948 0482; 8a Av btwn 9a & 10a Calles; s/d US\$5/8, with bathroom US\$8/12) The Xelajú is right in the town center, facing the market, but it's secure: no rooms are let after 10pm and *'señoritas de clubes nocturnos'* are not allowed. It has clean fan-cooled rooms and its own generator for when the electricity fails.

**Hotel Lee** (☎ 7948 0685; 5a Av btwn 9a & 10a Calles; s/d US\$5/9, with bathroom US\$8/14) This is a friendly, family-owned place close to the bus terminals. The rooms are a bit cramped but clean, and have fans, TV, drinking water and Chinese art.



**Hotel Miami** (☎ 7948 0537; 3a Av btwn 11a & 12a Calles; s/d US\$5.50/8, with air-con US\$12/24; (P) (♿)) Not bad if you want to save your pennies to spend on other things... otherwise a bit grim.

**Hotel Europa** (☎ 7948 0127; 8a Av btwn 8a & 9a Calles; s/d US\$7/12; (P)) Not quite up to the standards of the Europa 2, the Europa scrapes in thanks to their quiet rooms and firm beds.

**Hotel Europa 2** (☎ 7948 1292; 3a Av btwn 11a & 12a Calles; s/d US\$8/10; (P)) The best of the budget options in the port area, this hotel just 1½ blocks from the Muelle Municipal is run by a friendly family and has clean rooms (with fan and TV), arranged around a parking courtyard.

**Hotel El Reformador** (☎ 7948 0533; reformador@intelnet.net.gt; cnr 7a Av & 16a Calle; s/d US\$13/18.50, with

air-con US\$22/28; (P) (♿)) Like a little haven away from the hot busy streets outside, the Reformador offers big, cool rooms set around leafy patios. The rooms with air-con lead onto wide interior balconies. There is a restaurant here.

## Eating

**Peppin Burger** (17a Calle btwn 8a & 9a Aves; snacks from US\$2; (♿) closed Tue) Come here for an almost mind-boggling array of snacks, fajitas, good-value burgers and more serious meals on an open-air upstairs terrace.

**El Cafecito** (13a Calle 6-22; mains US\$4-10; (♿) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This sweet little air-conditioned spot whips up some of the most interesting food in town – Portuguese dishes such as *feijoda* (stewed beans, pork, beef, chicken and other stuff; US\$6) and a good range of seafood and sandwiches.

**Rincon Uruguayo** (cnr 7a Av & 16a Calle; mains US\$4-12; (♿) lunch & dinner) Being that the concepts of ‘big’ and ‘juicy’ are so rarely applied to Guatemalan steak, this outdoor eatery comes as a relief. Chorizo, BBQ chicken and *chivitos* (steak sandwiches) are also available.

**Container** (7a Calle; snacks US\$3; (♿) lunch & dinner) The oddest café in town – made from two shipping containers, with fine bay views, thatched huts out over the water and plenty of cold, cold beer. It’s at the western end of the street.

**Restaurante Safari** (☎ 7948 0563; cnr 5a Av & 1a Calle; seafood US\$6.50-10; (♿) 10am-9pm) The town’s most enjoyable restaurant is on a thatch-roofed, open-air platform right over the water about 1km north of the town center. Locals and visitors alike love to eat and catch the sea breezes here. It serves excellent seafood of all kinds including the specialty *tapado* (that great Garífuna casserole); chicken and meat dishes are less expensive (US\$3 to US\$6). There’s live music most nights. If it’s full, the Cangrejo

Azul next door offers pretty much the same deal, in a more relaxed environment.

## Getting There & Away

### BOAT

Boats depart from the Muelle Municipal at the end of 12a Calle.

A ferry departs for Livingston every day at 10am and 5pm; the trip takes 1½ hours and costs US\$2. From Livingston, it leaves for Puerto Barrios at 5am and 2pm. Get to the dock from 30 to 45 minutes early to make sure you get a seat.

Smaller, faster *lanchas* depart from both sides whenever there are a dozen passengers; they take 30 minutes and cost US\$4.50.

Most of the movement from Livingston to Puerto Barrios is in the morning, returning in the afternoon. From Livingston, your last chance may be the 2pm ferry, especially during the low season when fewer travelers are shuttling back and forth.

### BUS & MINIBUS

**Transportes Litagua** (☎ 7948 1172; cnr 6a Av & 9a Calle) leaves for Guatemala City (US\$7, five to six hours, 295km), via Quiriguá and Río Hondo, 15 times between 1am and noon, and at 4pm. *Directo* services avoid a half-hour detour into Morales.

Buses to Chiquimula (US\$4, 4½ hours), also via Quiriguá, leave every half-hour, 4am to 4pm, from the east side of the 6a Av and 9a Calle corner.

For Río Dulce, take a Chiquimula bus to La Ruidosa junction (US\$1, 50 minutes) and change to a bus or minibus (US\$1, 35 minutes) there.

### TAXI

Most cabs charge around US\$3 for ridiculously short rides around town.

## GETTING TO HONDURAS

Minibuses leave Puerto Barrios for the Honduras frontier (US\$1.30, 1¼ hours) every 20 minutes from 5:30am to 6pm, from 6a Av outside the market. The paved road to the border turns off the CA-9 at **Entre Ríos**, 13km south of Puerto Barrios. Buses and minibuses going in all directions wait for passengers at Entre Ríos, making the trip from the border fairly easily, whichever direction you are traveling in. Minibuses from Puerto Barrios stop en route to the border at Guatemalan immigration, where you might have to pay US\$1.30 for an exit stamp. Think of it as one last tip to Guatemalan officialdom. Honduran entry formalities may leave you US\$1 to US\$3 lighter.

See p386 for information on crossing the border from Honduras.

For information on crossing via Copán, Honduras, see p170.

## PUNTA DE MANABIQUE

This promontory to the north of Puerto Barrios is being slowly and carefully developed for ecotourism by the conservation group, **Funday** (☎ 7948 0435; www.guate.net/fundaymanabique; 17a Calle, Puerto Barrios). As well as sporting Guatemala's best Caribbean beaches, the area offers endless bird-watching, hiking, sport fishing and other nature-based activities. **El Saraguat** (per person US\$9), a simple lodge, has been constructed and serves simple, good meals. You can arrange tours of the area from here. For transport information and to make reservations, contact Funday.

## LIVINGSTON

pop 17,000

Quite unlike anywhere else in Guatemala, this largely Garífuna town is fascinating in itself, but also an attraction for a couple of good beaches, and its location at the end of the river journey from Río Dulce.

Unconnected by road from the rest of the country (the town is called 'Buga' – mouth – in Garífuna, for its position at the river mouth), boat transport is (logically) quite good here, and you can get to Belize, the cayes, Honduras and Puerto Barrios with a minimum of fuss.

The Garífuna (Garinagu, or Black Carib) people of Livingston and southern Belize are the descendants of Africans brought to the New World as slaves. They trace their roots to the Honduran island of Roatán, where they were forcibly settled by the British after the Garífuna revolt on the Caribbean island of St Vincent in 1795. From Roatán, the Garífuna people spread out along the Caribbean Coast, from Belize to Nicaragua. Intermarrying with Carib Indians, as well as with Maya and shipwrecked sailors of other races, they've developed a distinct culture and language incorporating African, *indígena* and European elements.

Town beaches are largely disappointing, as the jungle comes to the water's edge. Those beaches that do exist are often clogged with vegetation and unsafe for swimming, thanks to contaminated water. Safe swimming is possible at Los Siete Altares (p184) and Playa Blanca.

### Orientation & Information

After half an hour you'll know where everything is. The **immigration office** (Calle Principal; ☎ 6am-7pm) issues entry and exit stamps for travelers ar-

riving direct from or going direct to Belize or Honduras. Outside their normal hours, you can knock at any time. Leaving Guatemala by boat, travelers pay US\$10 exit tax.

Email services (US\$3 per hour) are offered by **Labug@net** (Calle Principal) and at the **Happy Fish** (Calle Principal), a restaurant.

**Banrural** (Calle Principal; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) changes US dollars and traveler's checks. Several private businesses do, too.

Laundry service is available at Hotel Casa Rosada.

### Sights

The **Museo Multicultural de Livingston** (☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun; admission US\$2), upstairs on the municipal park in front of the public dock, has some excellent displays on the history and culture of the area, focusing on the ethnic diversity, with Garífuna, Q'eqchi, Hindu and ladino cultures represented. While you're here check out the open-air alligator enclosure in the park.

The best beach in the area is **Playa Blanca** (admission US\$2), around 12km from Livingston. This is privately owned and you need a boat to get there (see below).

Use mosquito repellent and other precautions, especially in the jungle; mosquitoes near the coast carry malaria and dengue fever.

### Dangers & Annoyances

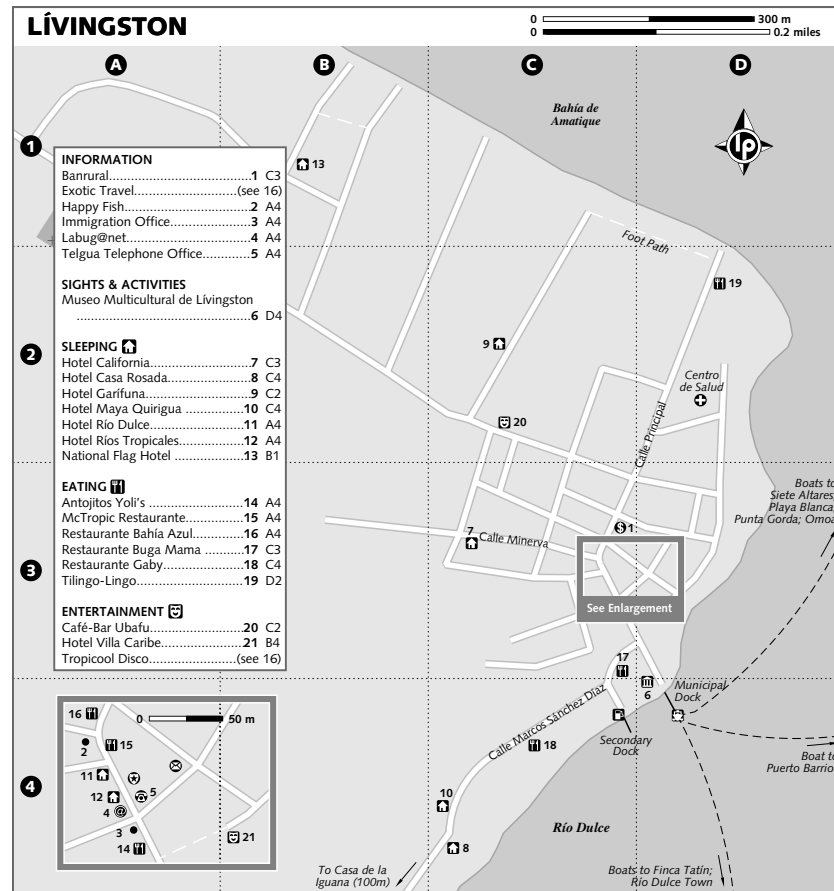
Livingston has its edgy aspects and a few hustlers operate here, trying to sweet-talk tourists into 'lending' money, paying up-front for tours that don't happen. Take care with anyone who strikes up a conversation for no obvious reason on the street or elsewhere.

Like many coastal places in Guatemala, Livingston is a *punte* (bridge) for northbound drug traffic. There's little in the way of turf wars – the industry is fairly stable – but there are some big-time players around and a lot of money at stake. Keep your wits about you.

The beach between Livingston and the Río Quehueche, and Siete Altares had a bad reputation for some years, but locals 'took care' of the troublemakers (we don't really want to know details). It now makes a fine walk, with some great swimming at the end of it. You can go independently or as part of a tour.

### Tours

**Exotic Travel** (☎ 7947 0048; www.bluecaribbeanbay.com; Restaurante Bahía Azul, Calle Principal) A well-organized operation with several good trips. Its popular



Ecological Tour/Jungle Trip takes you for a walk through town, out west up to a lookout and on to the Río Quehueche, where you take a half-hour canoe trip down to Playa Quehueche. Then you walk through the jungle to Los Siete Altares (The Seven Altars; see p184), a series of freshwater falls and pools about 5km northwest of Livingston. Hang out there for a while then walk down to the beach and back along it to Livingston. The trip costs US\$10 including a box lunch. This is a great way to see the area, and the friendly local guides also give you a good introduction to the Garífuna people who live here.

Another tour goes by boat first to the Seven Altars, then on to the Río Cocolí where you can swim, and then on to Playa Blanca for two

or three hours. This trip goes with a minimum of six people and costs US\$13.

They also offer day trips to the **Cayos Sapodillas** (or Zapotillas), well off the coast of southern Belize, where there is great snorkeling (US\$40 plus US\$10 to enter the cays plus US\$10 exit tax) and to Punta de Manabique for US\$16 per person. A minimum of six people is needed for each of these trips.

### Festivals & Events

**Semana Santa** (Easter week) Packs Livingston with merry-makers.

**Garífuna national day** (November 26) Celebrated with a variety of cultural events.

**Virgin of Guadalupe** (December 12) Celebrations dedicated to Mexico's patron saint.

## GETTING TO PUNTA GORDA, BELIZE

A *lancha* of **Transportes El Chato** (☎ 9948 5525; 1a Av btwn 10a & 11a Calles) departs from the Muelle Municipal in Livingston at 10am daily for Punta Gorda, Belize (US\$18, one hour), arriving in time for the noon bus from Punta Gorda to Belize City. Tickets are sold at El Chato's office, which is 1½ blocks from the *muelle* (pier). The return boat leaves Punta Gorda at 4pm.

The Belizean-owned *Mariestela*, operated by **Requena's Charter Services** (☎ 501-722 2070; 12 Front St, Punta Gorda) departs for Punta Gorda from the same pier daily at 2pm (US\$18, one hour). Buy your tickets on the boat.

Before boarding you also need to get your exit stamp at the nearby immigration office.

## Sleeping

Don't sleep on the beach in Livingston – it isn't safe.

**Hotel Maya Quirigua** (☎ 7947 0674; Calle Marcos Sánchez Díaz; s/d US\$3/6, with bathroom US\$4.50/9) Run by a friendly family, the basic rooms here are good enough for the price. There's a shady garden area and good views from the rooftop. Downstairs rooms are a bit grim.

**Hotel Río Dulce** (☎ 947 0764; Calle Principal; r per person US\$4, with bathroom US\$6) This authentic Caribbean two-story wood-frame building has bare but clean rooms, in various colors, with fans. The wide verandas are great for watching the street life and catching a breeze, and the food in the restaurant below is superb.

**Casa de la Iguana** (☎ 7947 0064; Calle Marcos Sánchez Díaz; dm US\$4.50, s/d with bathroom US\$8/13) Five minutes' walk from the main dock, this newcomer has some of the best-value cabins in the country. They're clean, wooden affairs, with simple but elegant decoration. Happy hour here rocks on and you can camp for US\$2 per person.

**Hotel California** (☎ 7947 0178/6; Calle Minerva; s/d with bathroom US\$6/8) Down a quiet street, the California offers good, basic rooms on the 2nd floor (ones on the first floor are a little stuffy). There's an OK restaurant and some shady places to hang out.

**National Flag Hotel** (☎ 7947 0247; Barrio San José; s or d with bathroom US\$8) The big tiled rooms here are an excellent deal, even if the location is a bit remote. There are good views from the shady rooftop terrace.

**Hotel Garifuna** (☎ 7947 0183; Barrio San José; s/d with bathroom US\$7/10) About a five-minute walk from the main street, the big breezy rooms are a solid budget choice. Beds are good, bathrooms are spotless and the folks are friendly.

**Hotel Ríos Tropicales** (☎ 7947 0158; www.mctropic.com; Calle Principal; s/d US\$7/14, with bathroom US\$13/25) The Ríos Tropicales has a variety of big, well-

screened rooms facing a central patio which has plenty of hammocks and chillout space. Rooms with shared bathroom are bigger, but others are better decorated.

**Hotel Casa Rosada** (☎ 7947 0303; www.hotelcasa rosada.com; Calle Marcos Sánchez Díaz; r US\$20) The Casa Rosada (Pink House) is an attractive place to stay right on the river, 500m upstream from the main dock; it has its own pier where boats will drop you if you ask. The charming little wooden cabins are jammed up against each other, so there's not much privacy, but the garden area is pretty and the restaurant has great views out over the water. The shared bathrooms are very clean. Also available are a laundry service and tours.

## Eating

Food in Livingston is relatively expensive because most of it (except fish and coconuts) must be brought in by boat. There's fine seafood here and some unusual flavors for Guatemala, including coconut and also curry. *Tapado*, a rich stew made from fish, shrimp, shellfish, coconut milk and plantain, spiced with coriander, is the delicious local specialty. A potent potable is made by slicing off the top of a green coconut and mixing in a healthy dose of rum. These *coco locos* hit the spot.

**Antojitos Yoli's** (Calle Principal; items US\$0.50-2) This is the place to come for baked goods. Especially recommended is the coconut bread and pineapple pie.

**Restaurante Gaby** (Calle Marcos Sánchez Díaz; mains US\$3-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) For a good honest feed in underwhelming surrounds, you can't go past Gaby's. She serves up the good stuff – lobster, *tapado*, rice and beans and good breakfasts at good prices. The *telenovelas* (TV soap operas) come free.

**McTropic Restaurante** (Calle Principal; mains US\$4-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Some of the best value

seafood dishes in town are on offer at this laid-back little place. Grab a table streetside for people watching and sample some of their good Thai cooking.

**Tilingo-Lingo** (Calle Principal; mains US\$5-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) An intimate little place down near the beach. They advertise food from 10 countries and make a pretty good job of it, with the Italian and East Indian dishes being the standouts.

**Restaurante Bahía Azul** (Calle Principal; mains US\$6-12; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The Bahía's central location, happy décor and good fresh food keep it popular. The menu's wide, with a good mix of Caribbean, Guatemalan and Asian influences. They open early for breakfast.

**Restaurante Buga Mama** (Calle Marcos Sánchez Díaz; mains US\$8-11; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Enjoying the best location of any restaurant in town, profits go to the Asociación Ak Tenemit. There's a wide range of seafood and other dishes on the menu, including a very good *tapado* (US\$9). Most of the waiters here are trainees in a community sustainable-tourism development scheme, so service can be sketchy, but forgivable.

## Drinking

Adventurous drinkers should try *guifiti*, a local concoction made from coconut rum, often infused with herbs. It's said to have medicinal as well as recreational properties.

A handful of bars down on the beach to the left of the end of Calle Principal pull in travelers and locals at night (after about 10pm or 11pm). It's very dark down here, so take care. The bars are within five minutes' walk from each other, so you should go for a wander and see what's happening. Music ranges from *punta* to salsa, merengue and electronica. On Fridays things warm up but Saturday is party night – often going till 5am or 6am.

Happy hour is pretty much an institution along the main street, with every restaurant getting in on the act. One of the best is at Casa de la Iguana.

## Entertainment

A traditional Garifuna band is composed of three large drums, a turtle shell, some maracas and a big conch shell, producing throbbing, haunting rhythms and melodies. The chanted words are like a litany, with responses often taken up by the audience. *Punta* is the Garifuna dance; it's got a lot of gyrating hip movements.

Quite often a roaming band will play a few songs for diners along the Calle Principal around dinnertime. If you like the music, make sure to sling them a few bucks. Several places around town have live Garifuna music, although schedules are unpredictable:

**Café-Bar Ubafu** Probably the most dependable. Supposedly has music and dancing nightly, but liveliest on weekends.

**Hotel Villa Caribe** Diners can enjoy a Garifuna show each evening at 7pm.

**Tropicool Disco** Next door to Restaurante Bahía Azul, this is a small mainstream disco, which sometimes pulls a crowd.

## Getting There & Away

Frequent boats come downriver from Río Dulce and across the bay from Puerto Barrios; see those sections, earlier in this chapter, for details. There are also international boats from Honduras and Belize and also a boat that goes direct to Punta Gorda on Tuesdays and Fridays at 7am (US\$20, one hour), leaving from the public dock. In Punta Gorda the boat connects with a bus to Placencia and on to Belize City. The boat waits for this bus to arrive from Placencia before it sets off back for Livingston from Punta Gorda at about 10:30am.

Exotic Travel (p180) operates combined boat and bus shuttles to La Ceiba (the cheapest gateway to Honduras' Bay Islands) for US\$45 per person, with a minimum of six people. Leaving Livingston at 7:30am or earlier will get you to La Ceiba in time for the boat to the islands, making it a one-day trip if you want to (which is nearly impossible to do independently).

If you are taking one of these early international departures, get your exit stamp from immigration in Livingston (see p180) the day before.

## AROUND LIVINGSTON Río Dulce Cruises

Livingston is the starting point for boat rides along the Río Dulce. Passengers enjoy the jungle scenery, swim, picnic and explore the **Biotopo Chocón Machacas**, 12km west along the river.

Almost anyone in Livingston can tell you who's organizing trips upriver. Exotic Travel makes trips daily, as do La Casa Rosada hotel and the Happy Fish restaurant. Many travelers use these tours as one-way transportation to

Río Dulce, paying around US\$11. If you want to return to Livingston the cost is US\$20. It's a beautiful ride through lush scenery, with several places to stop on the way.

Or you can simply walk to the dock and arrange a trip, thereby supporting the many local boat captains. *Generally* speaking, there are two scheduled departures from the public dock, at 9:30am and 1:30pm. The morning trip is often more tourlike, taking up to 2½ hours and the afternoon one is an express service, taking one hour. This is not set in stone, and both cost US\$13.

Shortly after you leave Livingston headed upriver, you'll enter a steep-walled gorge called **Cueva de la Vaca**, its walls hung with great tangles of jungle foliage and bromeliads. Tropical birdcalls fill the air. Just beyond is **La Pintada**, a graffiti-covered rock escarpment. Further on, a thermal spring forces sulfurous water out at the base of the cliff, providing a delightful place for a swim.

Emerging from the gorge, the river eventually widens into **El Golfete**, a lakelike body of water that presages the even vaster Lago de Izabal.

On the north shore of El Golfete is the **Biopoto Chocón Machacas**, a 7600-hectare reserve established to protect the river, mangrove swamps and the manatees that inhabit the waters. A network of 'water trails' provides ways to see the reserve's flora and fauna. A nature trail begins at the visitors center (US\$2.50), winding its way through forests of mahogany, palms and rich tropical foliage. Jaguars and tapirs live in the reserve, although seeing one is unlikely. The walruslike manatees are even more elusive. These huge mammals can weigh up to a ton, yet glide effortlessly beneath the river.

From El Golfete, the boats continue upriver, passing increasing numbers of expensive villas and boathouses, to the village of Río Dulce, where the road into El Petén crosses the river, and to the Castillo de San Felipe on Lago de Izabal (p176).

### Los Siete Altares

The Seven Altars is a series of freshwater falls and pools about 5km (1½-hours' walk) northwest of Livingston along the shore of Bahía de Amatique. It's a pleasant goal for a beach walk and a good place for a picnic and swim. Follow the shore northward to the river mouth and walk along the beach until it meets the

path into the woods (about 30 minutes). Follow this path all the way to the falls.

Boat trips go to the Seven Altars, but locals say it's better to walk there to experience the natural beauty and the Garifuna people along the way. About halfway along, next to the rope bridge is **Gaviotas Restaurant** (mains US\$5-7; ☒ lunch & dinner), serving decent food and ice-cold beers and soft drinks.

### Finca Tatin

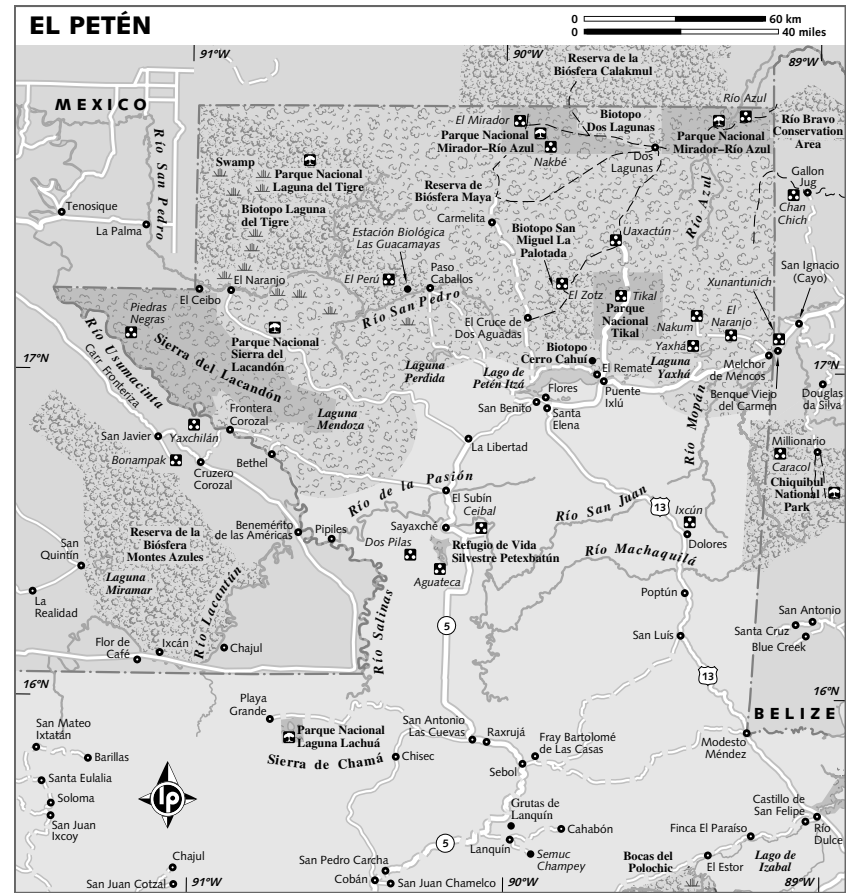
This wonderful, rustic B&B is at the confluence of Ríos Dulce and Tatin, about 10km from Livingston. **Finca Tatin** (☎ 5902 0831; www.fincatatin.centroamerica.com; dm US\$5, s/d US\$8/13, with bathroom US\$15/20) is a great place for experiencing the forest. Four-hour guided walks and kayak trips, some visiting local Q'eqchi' villages, are offered. Accommodation is in individually decorated wood-and-thatched cabins scattered through the jungle. There are trails, waterfalls and endless river tributaries that you can explore with one of the *cayucos* (dugout canoes) available for guest use (US\$10 per day). Guided night walks through the jungle offer views of elusive nightlife, and cave tours are good for swimming and soaking in a natural sauna. You can walk to Livingston from here in about four hours, or take a kayak and they'll come pick you up (US\$13).

*Lanchas* traveling between Río Dulce and Livingston (or vice-versa) will drop you here. It costs around US\$4 from Livingston, 20 minutes away. Or the *finca* may be able to send its own *lancha* to pick you up at Livingston (per person US\$4, minimum two people).

## EL PETÉN

Once synonymous with bad roads and impassible jungle, this region has been tamed over the years. Ever since the Maya exodus in the 9th century AD, this has been Guatemala's least-populated region, but continued government efforts to populate it have been hugely successful. In 1950 barely 15,000 people lived here. Now the number is more like 500,000. It's no surprise that most people you meet were born elsewhere.

The regional superstar is, of course, Tikal, but many visitors are far more blown away by 'lesser' ruins such as Yaxhá and the massive, largely unexcavated sites at El Mirador and Nakbé.



In 1990 the Guatemalan government established the one-million-hectare Maya Biosphere Reserve, which includes most of northern El Petén. The Guatemalan reserve adjoins the vast Calakmul Biosphere Reserve in Mexico and the Río Bravo Conservation Area in Belize, forming a reserve of over two million hectares.

Many visitors linger in Poptún, a small town 113km southeast of Santa Elena that has been a popular backpacker layover for years.

### GETTING THERE & AROUND

The roads leading into El Petén have now all been paved, so travel is fast and smooth. Unfortunately, improved access has encouraged the migration of farmers and ranchers from other areas, increasing the pressure on

resources and leading to even more deforestation in a region whose forests were already disappearing at an alarming rate.

The Guatemalan government has developed the adjoining towns of Flores, Santa Elena and San Benito, on the shores of Lago de Petén Itzá, into the region's tourism base. Here you'll find an airport, hotels and other services. A few small hotels and restaurants are at Tikal, but other services there are limited.

### POPTÚN

pop 19,500 / elevation 540m

Poptún is about halfway between Río Dulce and Flores, and makes a good stopover en route to Tikal, especially if you're coming via Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas.



Most buses and minibuses stop on the main road through town: Fuente del Norte buses stop by the Shell station; minibuses to San Luis, 16km south, go from the next corner south, and minibuses to Flores start half a block further along. **Banco Industrial** (5a Calle 7-98; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) has a Visa ATM and changes US dollars and Visa and American Express traveler's checks. One block along 5a Calle, **Banrural** (☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) has a MasterCard ATM and changes US dollars and American Express traveler's checks.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Finca Ixobel** (☎ 5892 3188; www.fincaixobel.com; camping per person US\$3, dm US\$4, tree houses & bungalows s US\$10-17, d US\$13-30; P ☎) This friendly, relaxed 400-acre spot offers tent sites, *palapas* for hanging hammocks, beds and good home-made meals with veggie options galore. Swimming, horseback riding, camping trips, inner tubing on the river and a famous, thrilling cave trip (which even includes bodysurfing rapids) are all organized on a daily basis, for a reasonable charge.

Meals here are excellent, including the all-you-can-eat buffet dinner for US\$7. After 9pm many people move on to the pool bar, where reasonably priced cocktails and other drinks are served. Volunteer opportunities exist for bilingual English-Spanish speakers; volunteers get free room and board.

The turnoff for the *finca* is marked on Hwy 13. In the daytime, you can ask the bus or

minibus driver to let you off there; it's a 15-minute walk to the *finca*. At night, or if you don't feel like making the walk, get off the bus in Poptún and take a taxi for US\$4. It's not advisable to walk to the *finca* at night – it's an isolated spot. When you leave Finca Ixobel, most buses will stop on the highway to pick you up, but not after dark. The *finca* offers shuttles to Flores for US\$5.50. Shuttles coming from Flores should drop you at the gate, but check first.

**Hotel Izalco** (☎ 7927 7372; 4a Calle 7-11; s/d US\$5.50/11, with bathroom US\$7/14) Small but clean rooms with TV and good mosquito netting. Some of those with bathroom don't have a fan. And you want a fan.

**Hotel Posada de los Castellanos** (☎ 7927 7222; cnr 4a Calle & 7a Av; s/d with bathroom US\$7/14) In Poptún town, this hotel has average rooms with TV, arranged around a shady courtyard.

### Getting There & Away

Bus departures from Poptún include the following:

**Flores/Santa Elena** (two hours, 113km) Fuente del Norte buses (US\$3) go every hour or two almost around the clock; minibuses (US\$3.50) leave about every 30 minutes from 6am to 6pm.

**Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas** (US\$6, five hours, 100km) One bus departs at 10am from the market area. If you want to push on from Las Casas to Lanquín the same day, try getting a Guatemala City-bound bus as far as Modesto Méndez (also called Cadenas), 60km south on Hwy 13, and changing there to a westbound bus or minibus to Las Casas.

**Guatemala City** (US\$7 to US\$10.50, six to seven hours, 387km) Fuente del Norte buses go about every 30 minutes from 5:30am to midnight.

**Río Dulce** (US\$3.25 to US\$4, two hours, 99km) Fuente del Norte buses run about every 30 minutes from 5:30am to midnight.

### FLORES & SANTA ELENA

pop Flores 23,700, Santa Elena 29,000 / elevation 110m

Flores is spectacularly located on an island in Lago de Petén Itzá. Small hotels and restaurants line the lakeside streets, meaning you don't have to shell out the big bucks to get a room with some awesome views. It does have a slightly twee, built-up edge to it, though, and many Tikal-bound shoestringers opt for the natural surrounds and tranquility of El Remate (p193), just down the road.

A 500m causeway connects Flores to the lakeshore town of Santa Elena, where you'll find banks, supermarkets and buses. Adjoining Santa Elena to the west is San Benito (population 22,000). There's not really much for the average traveler here, unless you're up for a night of slumming it in one of the town's numerous cantinas. The three towns form one large settlement that is usually referred to simply as 'Flores.'

### History

Flores was founded on a *petén* (island) by the Itzáes after their expulsion from Chichén Itzá. They named the place Tayasal. Hernán Cortés peaceably dropped in on King Canek of Tayasal in 1524 on his way to Honduras. Only in March 1697 did the Spaniards finally bring Tayasal's Maya forcibly under their control.

At the time of conquest, Flores was perhaps the last major functioning Maya ceremonial center; it was covered in pyramids and temples, with idols everywhere. The God-fearing Spanish soldiers destroyed these buildings, and no trace remains.

Tayasal's Maya fled into the jungle and may have started anew, giving rise to stories of a 'lost' Maya city; some believe this is El Mirador, near the Guatemala-Mexico border.

### Orientation

The airport is on the eastern outskirts of Santa Elena, 2km from the causeway connecting Santa Elena and Flores. Most buses arrive and depart from the new bus terminal 1km south of the causeway.

### Information

#### EMERGENCY

**Hospital San Benito** (☎ 7926 1459)

**Policía Nacional** (☎ 7926 1365)

#### INTERNET ACCESS

**Flores.Net** (Map p188; Av Barrios, Flores; per hr US\$1.30)

**Internet Petén** (Map p188; Calle Centroamérica, Flores; per hr US\$1.60; ☎ 8am-10pm)

**Naomi's Café** (Map p188; Calle Centroamérica, Flores; per hr US\$1.80)

#### LAUNDRY

**Mayan Princess Travel Agency** (Map p188; Calle 30 de Junio, Flores; ☎ 8am-8pm) US\$3.30 to wash and dry a load.

#### MONEY

**Banquetzal** (☎ 7am-noon & 2-5pm) Located at the airport; changes US dollars and traveler's checks.

**Banrural** (Map p188) Just off Parque Central in Flores; changes US dollars and traveler's checks.

Other banks are on 4a Calle in Santa Elena. Banks that change US dollars and American Express US-dollar traveler's checks include: **Banco Agromercantil** (Map p191; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Has a MasterCard ATM. **Banco Industrial** (Map p191; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Has a Visa ATM.

Many travel agencies and places to stay will change US dollars, and sometimes traveler's checks, at poor rates.

**San Juan Travel** (Map p188; ☎ 926 0041/2, 926 2146; Playa Sur, Flores) Also changes Belizean dollars and Mexican pesos, and give Visa, MasterCard, Diner's Club and American Express cash advances. Also at 2a Calle, Santa Elena.

#### POST

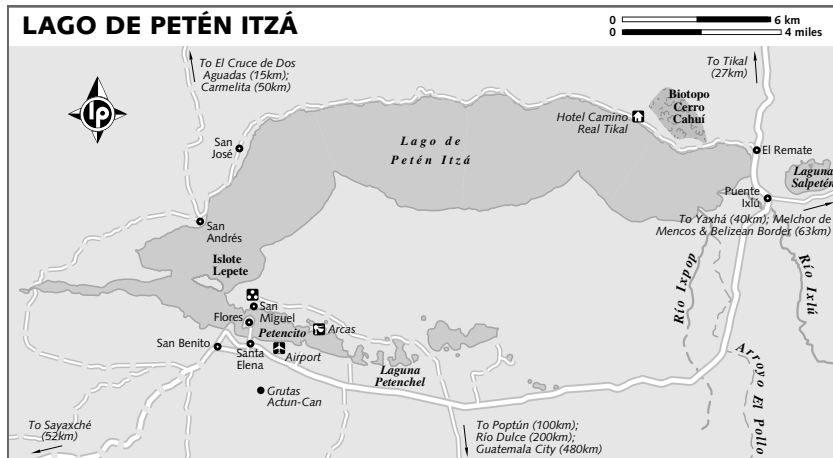
**Post office** Flores (Map p188; Av Barrios); Santa Elena (Map p191; 4a Calle east of 7a Av)

#### TELEPHONE

**Martsam Travel** (Map p188; ☎ /fax 926 3225; Calle 30 de Junio, Flores) Offers phone and fax services.

#### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Asociación Alianza Verde** (☎ /fax 926 0718; www.alianzaverde.org) This association, dedicated to sustainable, responsible, low-impact tourism in the Maya Biosphere Reserve runs Cincaop. It also publishes *Destinación Petén*. **Cincaop** (Map p188; Centro de Información Sobre la Naturaleza, Cultura y Artesanía de Petén; Petén Nature, Culture & Handicrafts Information Center; ☎ 926 0718;



### FLORES

**INFORMATION**

1 Banrural.....	2 Cincap & Asociación Alianza Verde.....	3 Flores.Net.....	4 Internet Petén.....	5 Mayan Princess Travel Agency.....	6 Municipalidad.....	7 Naomi's Café.....	8 ProPetén.....	9 San Juan Travel.....	10 Hostel los Amigos.....	11 Hotel Casa del Lacandón.....	12 Hotel Casablanca.....	13 Hotel Itzá 2.....	14 Hotel La Unión.....	15 Hotel Mirador del Lago.....	16 Hotel Petenchel.....	17 Hotel Santa Rita.....	18 Mayab Hotel.....	19 Mesa de los Maya.....	20 Jalapeños.....	21 La Luna.....	22 La Villa del Chef.....	23 Restaurante Peche's.....	24 Restaurante & Pizzería Picasso.....	25 Restaurante/Bar Las Puertas.....	26 Suico Café.....	27 Adictos.....	28 El Trópico.....	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37
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**INFORMATION**

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**EATING**

1 Café Yax-ha.....	2 Capitán Tortuga.....	3 Cool Beans.....	4 Hacienda del Rey.....	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37
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**SLEEPING**

1 Hospedaje Doña Goya.....	2 Hospedaje Doña Goya 2.....	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37
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**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

1 Martsam Travel..... (See 23)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37
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**DRINKING**

1 Adictos.....	2 El Trópico.....	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37
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**TRANSPORT**

1 Boats to San Andrés & San José.....	2 Boats to Santa Elena.....	3 Línea Dorado/Mundo Maya.....	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37
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mercadeo@peten.net; Parque Central, Flores; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-9pm) Has interesting displays on archaeological sites, conservation areas and the culture of El Petén. It also sells local handicrafts and has an information desk, where you can ask about visits to some of the region's remoter natural and archaeological sites.

**Inguat** (☎ 7926 0533; ☎ 7am-noon & 3-5pm) At the airport.

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**

Several agencies offer trips to archaeological sites, shuttle minibuses and other services.

**Martsam Travel** (Map p188; ☎ /fax 7926 3225; www.martsam.com; Calle 30 de Junio, Flores) This is a well-established, well-organized agency with a particularly wide range of services.

**San Juan Travel** (Map p188; Calle 30 de Junio; ☎ 7926 0041; sanjuant@internetdetelgua.com.gt; 2a Calle, Santa Elena & Playa Sur, Flores) Runs various shuttles and tours, and has the most regular service to Tikal and Palenque.

**Sights & Activities**

The limestone caves of **Grutas Actun-Can** (admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-5pm), also called La Cueva de la Serpiente (Cave of the Serpent), holds no serpents, but the cavekeeper may give you the rundown on the cave formations, which suggest animals, humans and various scenes. Bring a flashlight and adequate shoes – it can be slippery. Explorations take 30 to 45 minutes. At the cave entrance is a shady picnic area.

Actun-Can is a good goal for a long walk from Santa Elena. Head south on 6a Av past the Telgua office. About 1km from the center of Santa Elena, turn left, go 300m and turn right at the electricity generating plant. Go another 1km to the site. A taxi costs US\$3.

**Volunteering**

The **Estación Biológica Las Guacamayas** (p203), in the Parque Nacional Laguna del Tigre, and the rehabilitation center at **Arcas** (Asociación de Rescate y Conservación de Vida Silvestre; ☎ /fax 5476 6001; www.arcasguatemala.com), about 12km east of Santa Elena, both offer the chance of volunteer work with wildlife. At Las Guacamayas you pay US\$9 per day for the first two weeks, US\$8 per day the third week and US\$7 per day the fourth week, and provide your own food. If you're interested contact **ProPetén** (Map p188; Proyecto Petenero para un Bosque Sostenible; ☎ 7926 1370; www.propeten.org; Calle Central, Flores; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), the Guatemalan NGO that owns the station. At Arcas you pay US\$110 per week including food.

**Sleeping FLORES**

**Hostel los Amigos** (Map p188; ☎ 5584 8795; www.amigo-shostel.com; Calle Central; dm US\$3.50; ☎ ) Flores' one true hostel, with eight-bed dorms and hammocks on offer, this could be a disaster, but the place has such a cool atmosphere that it all hangs together. Nightly bonfires, happy hours, good food – you know the deal...

**Hospedaje Doña Goya** (Map p188; ☎ 7926 3538; hospedajedonagoay@yahoo.com; Calle Unión; dm US\$3.50, s/d US\$8/11, with bathroom US\$11/13) This family-room guesthouse is one of the best budget choices in town and often full as a result. The beds are comfortable, the water's hot and there's a roof terrace with a palm-thatched shelter and plenty of hammocks from which to enjoy lake views. The eight-person dorms are spacious and clean.

**Hospedaje Doña Goya 2** (Map p188; ☎ 7926 3538; hospedajedonagoay@yahoo.com; Calle Unión; dm/s/d US\$3.50/8/11, with bathroom US\$11/13) Doña Goya's second effort is even better than her first – there's a definite jungle theme running through this one, with banisters made to look like climbing vines. Rooms are good-sized and spotless, most of them with some sort of view.

**Hotel Mirador del Lago** (Map p188; ☎ 7926 3276; s/d with bathroom US\$6/8) Compared to what else is on offer for these prices on the island, this is a good deal. Rooms are bare but functional, and upstairs they catch good afternoon breezes.

**Hotel Casablanca** (Map p188; ☎ 5699 1371; Playa Sur; s/d with bathroom US\$7.50/13) The first hotel you reach coming off the causeway is also one of the best in the budget game – simple, spacious rooms and a great terrace for lake-gazing.

**Hotel Petenchel** (Map p188; ☎ 7926 3359; s/d with bathroom US\$7.50/13) Eight rooms set around a lush little courtyard just off the causeway. The rooms are spacious, with firm beds. In the event that El Petén ever experiences a chilly night, have no fear – showers here are superhot.

**Hotel Casa del Lacandón** (Map p188; ☎ 7926 4359; Calle Unión; s/d US\$8/13) If you can get one of the upstairs rooms at the back, this is one of the best budget deals in town. Rooms have a couple of beds, a clothes rack (!) and windows with sweeping views of the lake.

**Mayab Hotel** (Map p188; ☎ 7926 4094; mcestra@gmail.com; Calle 30 de Junio; s/d US\$12/16; ☎ ) Decent-sized rooms with cable TV and hot showers. The real bonus here is the upstairs balcony that

overlooks the lake and the back gate, leading directly to the shoreline.

**Mesa de los Maya** (Map p188; ☎ /fax 7926 1240; mesamayas@hotmail.com; s/d US\$15/20, with air-con US\$5 extra; 🍴) The Mesa's one of the stalwarts in the Flores hotel scene – it's been around (nearly) forever and they know what they're doing. Rooms are smallish but well decorated, with good touches like reading lamps and pleasant paint jobs.

Three more budget hotels with respectable, fan-cooled rooms:

**Hotel Itzá 2** (Map p188; ☎ 7926 3654; Av La Reforma; s/d with cold-water bathroom US\$6/8)

**Hotel Santa Rita** (Map p188; ☎ 7926 3224; Calle 30 de Junio; s/d with bathroom US\$7/12) Smallish rooms with shared balconies and a couple of good hangout areas.

**Hotel La Unión** (Map p188; ☎ 7926 3584; Calle Unión; s/d US\$8/13, with view US\$16)

## SANTA ELENA

**Hotel Continental** (Map p191; ☎ 7926 0095; 6a Av; s/d US\$5/9, with fan, bathroom & TV US\$9/12; 🍴 🍷) A 51-room hotel south of Calz Virgilio Rodríguez Macal, with friendly reception staff, the Continental has a range of rooms on three floors along a courtyard painted in vaguely refreshing shades of blue and green. Bathrooms are good and clean, but there's no hot water.

**Hotel San Juan** (Map p191 ☎ 7926 2146; 2a Calle; s/d from US\$6/8, with bathroom US\$9/11) Another cheap Santa Elena hotel, but less attractive.

**Hotel Posada Santander** (Map p191 ☎ 7926 0574; 4a Calle; s/d with bathroom US\$6/9.50) A simple, spotless and friendly family-run hostelry in a convenient but loud location. The rooms are definitely secure (there are bars on the windows and the TVs) and have cold-water bathrooms. The attached *comedor* serves good basic meals for US\$2.

**Hotel Sac-Nicté** (Map p191 ☎ 7926 0092, 926 1731; 1a Calle; s/d from US\$9/11) The rooms here are tolerably clean and will do in a pinch. They all have bathroom and fan, and those upstairs have small balconies from which you might just glimpse the lake. Staff will pick you up free from the airport, where the hotel has a desk.

## Eating

On the menu at many places is a variety of local game, including *tepezcutintle* (paca, a rabbit-sized jungle rodent), *venado* (venison), *armadillo*, *pavo silvestre* (wild turkey) and *pescado blanco* (white fish). You may want to avoid dishes that might soon jump from the menu to the endangered species list.

## FLORES

**Cool Beans** (Map p188; Calle 15 de Septiembre; mains US\$3-6; 🍴 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) An earthy sort of place with a thatched roof and hammocks. Good coffee, decent breakfasts and tasty snacks are what's on offer here. You can just make out the lake by peering through the lush garden down the back. Be warned – the kitchen closes at 9:01pm sharp.

**La Villa del Chef** (Map p188; Calle Unión; mains US\$3-6; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Go out the back (keep going) to reach the rustic little deck built out over the water in this newish place with a varied menu. You can choose from a good selection of Arabic, seafood, Guatemalan and international dishes. Don't miss the 6pm happy hour.

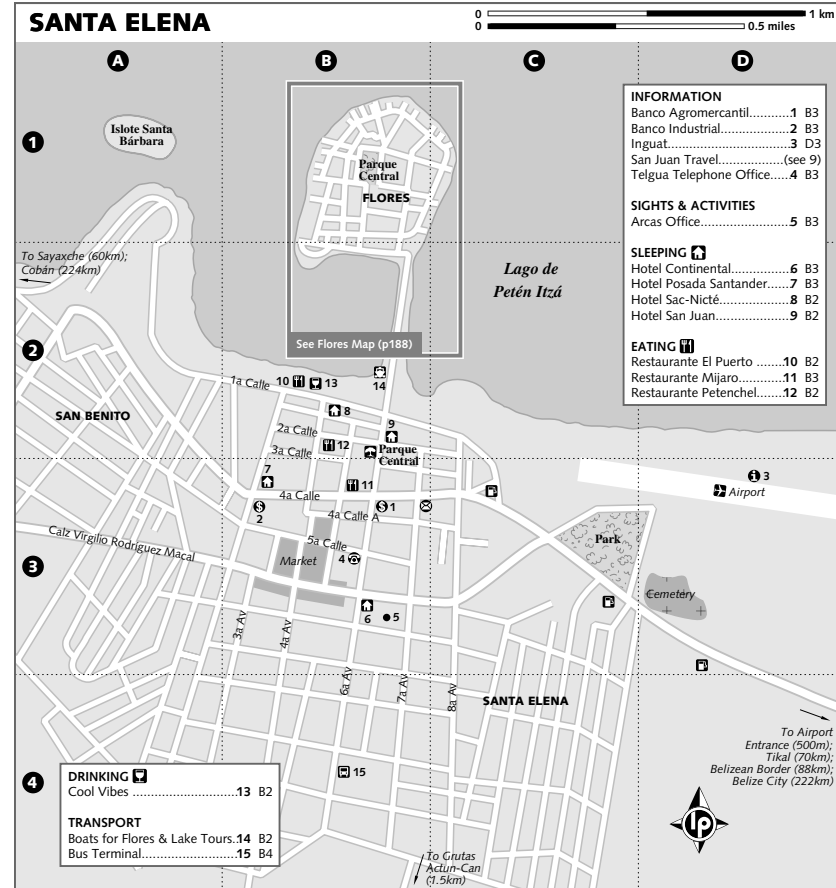
**Capitán Tortuga** (Map p188; Calle 30 de Junio; mains US\$3.50-7; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A long, barn-like place stretching down to a small lakeside terrace, 'Captain Turtle' serves large plates of a wide variety of tasty food – pizzas, steaks, chicken, pasta, salads, sandwiches, tacos – at medium prices. Big tour groups turn up here from time to time.

**Café Yax-ha** (Map p188; Calle 15 de Septiembre; mains US\$4-5; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) Literally wallpapered with photos and articles relating to archaeology and Maya sites, this café-restaurant serves up the standard range of dishes. What's really special here is the prehispanic menu items and Itzá dishes – the spicy chicken with yuca (US\$4) come recommended.

**Restaurante & Pizzería Picasso** (Map p188; Calle 15 de Septiembre; pizza US\$4-6; 🍴 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Still going strong after all these years, this Italian-owned pizzeria does the best pizzas in town, with artwork on the walls courtesy of you-know-who and a cool little courtyard area.

**Jalapeños** (Map p188; Calle 30 de Junio; mains US\$4-10; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Maybe you don't need any more Mexican food, but if you do, this is the place – airy and breezy, serving all your (Tex) Mex faves with a couple of international dishes thrown in. The zucchini chicken in creamy sauce with black olives (US\$7) is one good example.

**La Luna** (Map p188; cnr Calle 30 de Junio & Calle 10 de Noviembre; mains US\$7-11; 🍴 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) In a class by itself, this very popular restaurant cultivates a classic tropical ambience, with potted palms to catch the breeze from the whirling overhead fans. The food is continental and



delectable, with innovative chicken, fish and beef dishes the likes of which you'll be hard-pressed to find anywhere else in Guatemala. There are also good pasta and vegetarian options, such as falafel, salad and rice, for US\$4 to US\$5.

**Restaurante/Bar Las Puertas** (Map p188; ☎ cnr Calle Central & Av Santa Ana; mains US\$8-9; 🍴 8am-late Mon-Sat) This popular restaurant and bar serves good, if pricey, food. There's live music some nights (mainly on weekends). The *camarones a la oriental* (prawns served with vegetables and rice) are a treat. For something cheaper the Las Puertas has 10 ways of doing spaghetti and nine types of salad. Round it off with a crepe (US\$2). Breakfasts (US\$3 to US\$4) are good here, too.

**Hacienda del Rey** (Map p188; Calle 30 de Junio; mains US\$8-15; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) One of the more atmospheric restaurants on the island (except for their terrible radio selection), this place does Argentinean-style steaks. There's also a range of tacos and snacks (US\$2 to US\$3) in case you're just here for the US\$1 beer deal.

More cheap eats in Flores? No problem.

**Food stalls** (Parque Central; tacos & burritos US\$1) A good place to dine cheap on *antojitos* (snacks).

**Restaurante Peche's** (Map p188; Playa Sur; mains US\$3.50-4.50; 🍴 4am-10pm) Inexpensive plates of meat, rice, tortillas and salad.

**Suico Café** (Map p188; Calle 15 de Septiembre; mains US\$4-6; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Japanese food in El Petén? The Japanese owners take a fair stab at your faves (miso soup, tempura, sushi).

**SANTA ELENA**

**Restaurante Petenchel** (Map p191; 2a Calle 4-20; mains US\$3-7) This little place (and its sister across the road) is trying hard enough – there are checked tablecloths and a wide selection of dishes including Chinese, ceviches, pastas and steak.

**Restaurante Mijaro** (Map p191; 4a Calle; mains US\$3.50-4.25) Cool off at this friendly *comedor* on the main street, which has fans not only inside but also in its little thatch-roofed garden area. They do good long *limonadas* (lime-juice drink) and snacks like sandwiches and burgers (US\$1.30 to US\$2) as well as weightier food.

**Restaurante El Puerto** (Map p191; 1a Calle 2-15; mains US\$5-8; ☺ lunch & dinner) With its lakefront position, this open-air beer barn–steak house serves up a mean steak and packs out weekends when the Cool Vibes club next door fires up.

**Drinking & Nightlife**

Flores doesn't exactly jive at night but there are a couple of places to hang out. The terrace overlooking the lake at **Hotel La Unión** (Map p188; Calle Unión) is a magnificent spot watch the sun go down over a Cuba Libre (US\$1) or a piña colada (US\$2). Flores' little *Zona Viva* (night-life zone) is a strip of bars along the Playa Sur. **El Trópico** (Map p188; Playa Sur) is a popular place to start, and if you're up for dancing **Adictos** (Map p188; Playa Sur) was the place to be at time of writing. Nearly all of the lakeside restaurants have afternoon happy hours, a great way to unwind and watch the sun go down.

**Cool Vibes** (Map p191; 1a Calle 2-25; ☺ 7pm-1am Thu-Sat) This open-air bar-dance club was Santa Elena's hot spot at the time of writing. And it is kind of fun to be out shaking your thing in the fresh air, lakeside.

**Entertainment**

Movies are shown at **Las Puertas** (US\$1.50) every night. There are occasional archaeological/cultural lectures at Café Yax-ha.

Locals gather in the cool of the evening for long drinks, snacks and relaxation in Parque Central, where a marimba ensemble plays some nights.

**Getting There & Away**  
**AIR**

The airport at Santa Elena is usually called Flores airport and sometimes Tikal airport. TACA is the only airline with regularly sched-

uled flights between here and the capital, charging US\$127/204 one way/return. Two Belizean airlines, Tropic Air and Maya Island Air, each fly twice a day from and to Belize City, both charging US\$103 each way for the one-hour trip.

Contact numbers at Flores airport:

**Inter/Grupo TACA** (☎ 7926 1238)

**Maya Island Air** (☎ 7926 3386)

**Tropic Air** (☎ 926 0348)

**BUS & MINIBUS**

In Santa Elena, buses of **Fuente del Norte** (☎ 7926 0517), **Transportes María Elena, Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya** (☎ 7926 1788) and **Transportes Rosita** (☎ 7926 1245) all stop at the main bus terminal. Flores has a second office of **Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya** (☎ 7926 3649; Playa Sur), where its buses also pick up passengers.

Santa Elena's bus terminal is also used by the chicken buses of Transportes Pinita and Transportes Rosío and *microbuses* (minibuses) to El Remate, Melchor de Mencos, Poptún, El Naranjo and Sayaxché. Buses and Minibuses to San Andrés and San José go from 5a Calle just west of the market. Buses of **San Juan Travel** (☎ 7926 0041) leave from its office on 2a Calle, Santa Elena.

Bus and minibus departures include the following.

**International**

**Belize City** (Four to five hours, 220km) Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya (US\$15.50) leaves at 5am and 7am, returning from Belize City at 2pm and 5pm. San Juan Travel (US\$20) goes at 5am, returning from Belize City at 9:30am and 4:30pm. These buses to Belize City all connect with boats to Cayo (Caye) Caulker and Ambergris Caye. It's cheaper but slower from Flores to take local buses to the border and on from it (see details for Melchor de Mencos below).

**Bethel (Mexican border)** (US\$4, four hours, 127km) Fuente del Norte departs at 5am; Pinita goes at 5am, 8am, noon and 1pm. Returning, Fuente del Norte leaves Bethel at 4pm and Pinita at 5am, noon and 2pm.

**Chetumal (Mexico)** (seven to eight hours, 350km) Via Belize City Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya (US\$23) leaves at 6am, returning from Chetumal at 2pm. San Juan Travel (US\$25) goes at 5am, with departures for Flores from Chetumal at 9:30am and 4:30pm. Check Belizean visa regulations before you set off.

**La Técnica (Mexican border)** (US\$6, five hours, 140km) Pinita leaves at 5am and 1pm, and starts back from La Técnica at 4am and 11am.

**Melchor de Mencos (Belizean border)** (two hours, 100km) Minibuses (US\$3.50) go about every hour from

5am to 6pm; Transportes Rosita buses (US\$2.50) go at 5am, 11am, 2pm, 4pm and 6pm; a Pinita bus (US\$3) goes at 8am. See p201 for more information on crossing the border here.

**Palenque (Mexico)** See Shuttle Minibus, below.

**Domestic**

**Cobán** (US\$6.50, six hours, 245km) Transportes Rosío leaves the market bus stop at 10:30am. Or take a bus or minibus to Sayaxché, from where a bus leaves for Cobán at 10am. (See also the Shuttle Minibus section, below.)

**El Naranjo (Río San Pedro)** (US\$4, four hours, 151km) Minibuses go about every hour from 5am to 6pm.

**El Remate** (US\$2, 40 minutes, 29km) Minibuses go about hourly from 6am to 1pm, and a few times between 1pm and 6pm. Buses and minibuses to/from Melchor de Mencos will drop you at Puente Ixlú junction, 2km south of El Remate.

**Esquipulas** (US\$11, 10 hours, 440km) Transportes María Elena goes at 6am, 10am and 2pm via Chiquimula (US\$9, nine hours).

**Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas** (US\$5.50, five hours, 178km) Transportes Rosío departs the market at 10:30am.

**Guatemala City** (eight to 10 hours, 500km) Fuente del Norte has 29 departures from 3:30am to 11pm, costing US\$10 to US\$12 except for the 10am and 9pm buses (US\$19) and the 2pm, 8pm and 10pm departures (US\$15); Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya has deluxe buses at 10am and 9pm (US\$30) and an *económica* (US\$16) at 10pm; Transportes Rosita goes at 7pm (US\$8) and 8pm (US\$11).

**Poptún** (two hours, 113km) Take a Guatemala City-bound Fuente del Norte bus (US\$3) or a minibus (US\$3.60) leaving about every 30 minutes from 5am to 6pm.

**Puerto Barrios** Take a Guatemala City-bound Fuente del Norte bus and change at La Ruidosa junction, south of Río Dulce.

**Río Dulce** (4½ hours, 212km) Take a Guatemala City-bound bus with Fuente del Norte (US\$8) or Línea Dorada (US\$11.50/22 *económica*/deluxe).

**San Andrés** (US\$1, 30 minutes, 20km) Buses and minibuses about hourly from 5am to 5pm.

**San José** (US\$1, 45 minutes, 25km) Buses and minibuses about hourly from 5am to 5pm.

**Sayaxché** (US\$2, 1½ hours, 60km) Minibuses about every 30 minutes from 5am to 6pm; Pinita buses go at 11am, 2pm and 2:30pm.

**Tikal** See Shuttle Minibus, following.

**SHUTTLE MINIBUS**

**San Juan Travel** (☎ 7926 0041; sanjuant@internetdelgua.com.gt); Flores (Map p188; Playa Sur) Santa Elena (Map p191; Hotel San Juan, 2a Calle) operates shuttle minibuses to Tikal (US\$4/6 one-way/round-trip, 1½ hours each way). They leave hourly from 5am

to 10am and usually at 2pm. Most hotels and travel agencies can book these shuttles for you and the vehicles will pick you up where you're staying. Returns leave Tikal at 12:30pm, 2pm, 3pm, 4pm, 5pm and 6pm. If you know which round-trip you plan to be on, ask your driver to hold a seat for you or arrange a seat in a colleague's minibus. If you stay overnight in Tikal and want to return to Flores by minibus, it's a good idea to reserve a seat with one of the drivers when they arrive in the morning. Outside the normal timetable, you can rent a whole minibus for US\$35.

San Juan also does shuttles to Cobán (US\$20), Palenque (Mexico; US\$30) and Corozal (the border crossing for Bonampak, Mexico; US\$25).

**Getting Around**

A taxi from the airport to Santa Elena or Flores costs US\$2. Tuk tuks will take you anywhere between or within Flores and Santa Elena for US\$0.80. La Villa del Chef (p190) rents mountain bikes for US\$6 for up to four hours and US\$8 for four to 12 hours.

*Lanchas* making tours around Lago de Petén Itzá depart from the Santa Elena end of the causeway. Colectivo boats to San Andrés and San José, villages across the lake, depart from San Benito, on the west side of Santa Elena and alongside Hotel Santana in Flores (US\$0.40 if the boat leaves full, US\$8 for one passenger). You can also contract the *lancheros* for lake tours; bargain hard.

**EL REMATE**

The closest decent accommodation to Tikal can be found in this enchanting village on the shores of Lago de Petén Itzá. It's a mellow little place – two roads, basically – much more relaxed and less built up than Flores. Most hotels here are set up for swimming in – and watching the sun set over – the lake.

El Remate is known for its wood carving. Several handicrafts shops on the lakeshore opposite La Mansión del Pájaro Serpiente sell local handicrafts and rent canoes, rafts and kayaks.

From El Remate an unpaved road snakes around the lake's northeast shore to the Biotope Cerro Cahuí, the luxury Hotel Camino Real Tikal and on to the villages of San José and San Andrés, on the northwest side of the lake. It's possible to go all the way around the lake by road.

With their newfound prosperity, Rematecos have built a *balneario municipal* (municipal beach) just off the highway; several cheap pensions and small hotels have opened here as well.

### Sights & Activities

At the northeast end of Lago de Petén Itzá, about 43km from Santa Elena and 3km from the Flores–Tikal road, the **Biotopo Cerro Cahui** (admission US\$2.50; ☎ 6:30am–dusk) covers 651 hectares of subtropical forest. Within are mahogany, cedar, ramón, broom, sapodilla and cohune palm trees, as well as many species of lianas and epiphytes, these last including bromeliads, ferns and orchids. The hard wood of the sapodilla was used in Mayan temple door lintels, some of which have survived from the Classic period to our own time. Chicle is still sapped from the trees' innards.

Among the many animals within the reserve are spider and howler monkeys, ocelots, white-tailed deer, raccoons, armadillos, numerous species of fish, turtle and snake, and *Crocodylus moreletti* – the Petén crocodile. Depending upon the season and migration patterns, you might see kingfishers, ducks, herons, hawks, parrots, toucans, woodpeckers and the beautiful ocellated (Petén) turkey, which resembles a peacock.

A network of loop trails starts at the road and goes uphill, affording a view of the lake and Lagunas Salpetén and Petenchel. A trail map is at the entrance.

The admission fee includes the right to camp or sling your hammock under small thatched shelters inside the entrance. There are toilets and showers, but El Remate is the closest place to get supplies.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Sak-Luk** (☎ 5494 5925; main road; dm/hammock/bungalow per person US\$2/3/4) This little slice of hippy heaven offers huts, dorms and hammocks in adobe constructions scattered around a lush hillside. There's a good restaurant offering Italian and vegetarian dishes and they can organize jungle treks and trips to the Biotopo Cerro Cahui.

**Mon Ami** (☎ 7928 8413; www.hotelmonami.com; North road; dm US\$5 d with bathroom US\$15–25) Along the north shore road (1200m from the main Tikal road), this place has a good balance of wild jungle and French sophistication. The restaurant (mains US\$3.25 to US\$4.25, crepes

US\$2) serves good French and Guatemalan food in a peaceful palm-thatched, open-walled area. Try the *carne al vino* (meat cooked in wine) with rice and tomato salad, or the big *ensalada francesa* (French salad).

**Hostal Hermano Pedro** (s/d with bathroom US\$7/14) Set in a great two-story wood and stone house 20m off to the right from the main road. The basic, spacious rooms here are how budget hotels should be – clean, simple and comfortable, with just a couple of frills.

**Casa Mobega** (☎ 7909 6999; dm US\$7.50) Fairly bursting with character, this secluded little spot has a collection of two-story open-walled thatched houses spread out over a hillside. Bathrooms are shared and beds have mosquito nets.

**Restaurante Cahui** (mains US\$4–6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) While most people eat in their hotels here, this is a popular option. People come for the big, wholesome meals and stay for the lake views from the big wooden deck overlooking the water and the extensive wine and beer list.

### Getting There & Around

El Remate is linked to Flores by a public minibus service (see p192).

A minibus leaves El Remate at 5:30am for Tikal, starting back from Tikal at 2pm (US\$4 round-trip). Any El Remate accommodations can make reservations. Or you can catch one of the shuttles or regular minibuses passing through from Flores to get to Tikal. They normally charge US\$2.50 per person. For Melchor de Mencos on the Belizean border, get a minibus or bus from Puente Ixlu, 2km south of El Remate.

For taxis, ask at Hotel Sun Breeze or Hotel Don Juan. A one-way ride to Tikal or Flores costs about US\$18.

### TIKAL

Towering pyramids poke above the jungle's green canopy to catch the sun. Howler monkeys swing noisily through the branches of ancient trees as brightly colored parrots and toucans dart from perch to perch in a cacophony of squawks. When the complex warbling song of some mysterious jungle bird tapers off, the buzz of tree frogs fills the background and it will dawn on you that this is, indeed, hallowed ground.

Certainly the most striking feature of **Tikal** (☎ 2361 1399; admission US\$7; ☎ 6am–6pm) is its

steep-sided temples, rising to heights of more than 61m. But Tikal is different from Copán, Chichén Itzá, Uxmal and most other great Maya sites because it is deep in the jungle. Its many plazas have been cleared of trees and vines, its temples uncovered and partially restored, but as you walk from one building to another you pass beneath the dense rainforest canopy. Rich, loamy smells of earth and vegetation, a peaceful air and animal noises all contribute to an experience not offered by other Maya sites.

You can, if you wish, visit Tikal in a day trip from Flores or El Remate. You can even make a (literally) flying visit from Guatemala City in one day, using the daily flights between there and Flores airport. But you'll get more out of Tikal if you spend a night here, enabling you to visit the ruins twice and to be here in the late afternoon and early morning, when other tourists are rare and wildlife more active.

### History

Tikal is set on a low hill above the surrounding swampy ground – which might be why the Maya settled here around 700 BC. Another reason was the abundance of flint, used to make clubs, spearheads, arrowheads and knives. Flint could also be exported in exchange for other goods. Within 200 years, the Maya of Tikal had begun to build stone ceremonial structures, and by 200 BC a complex of buildings stood on the site of the North Acropolis.

### CLASSIC PERIOD

The Great Plaza was beginning to assume its present shape and extent two thousand years ago. By the dawn of the early Classic period, about AD 250, Tikal had become an important, heavily populated religious, cultural and commercial city. King Yax Moch Xoc, whose reign began around AD 230, founded the ruling dynasty.

Under King Great Jaguar Paw (who ruled in the mid-4th century), Tikal adopted a new, brutal method of warfare used by the rulers of Teotihuacán in central Mexico. Rather than meeting their adversaries in hand-to-hand combat, the army of Tikal encircled their enemy and killed them by throwing spears. This first use of 'air power' among the Maya of Petén enabled Tikal to conquer Uaxactún and become the dominant kingdom in the region.

By the middle of the Classic period, during the mid-6th century, Tikal sprawled over 30 sq km and had a population of perhaps 100,000. In 553 Lord Water ascended to the throne of Caracol (in southwestern Belize), and by 562, using the same warfare methods learned from Tikal, conquered and sacrificed Tikal's king. Tikal and other Petén kingdoms suffered under Caracol's rule until the late 7th century.

### TIKAL'S RENAISSANCE

Around 700 a powerful king named Moon Double Comb (682–734), also called Ah Cacau (Lord Chocolate), 26th successor of Yax Moch Xoc, ascended Tikal's throne. He restored not only its military strength, but also its primacy as the Maya world's most resplendent city. He and his successors were responsible for building most of the surviving temples around the Great Plaza. He was buried beneath the staggering height of Temple I.

Tikal's greatness waned around 900, part of the mysterious general collapse of lowland Maya civilization.

No doubt the Itzáes, who occupied Tayasal (now Flores), knew of Tikal in the late post-Classic period (1200–1530). Perhaps they even came to worship at the shrines of their old gods. Spanish missionary friars left brief references to these jungle-covered structures, but these writings moldered in libraries for centuries.

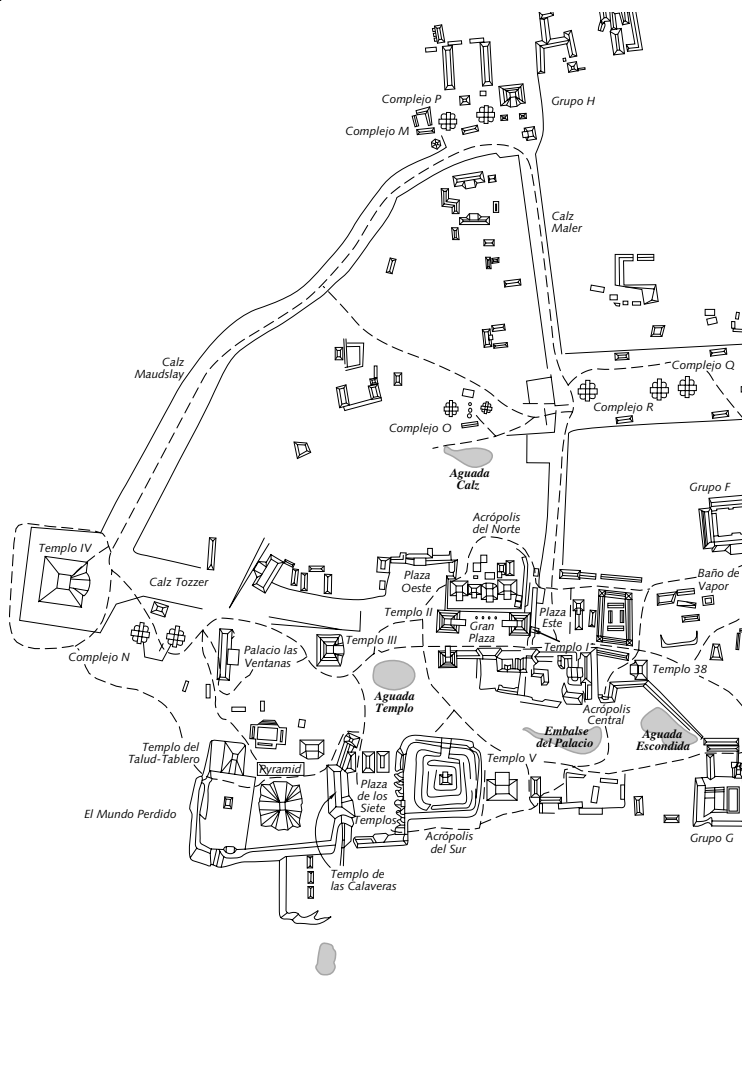
### REDISCOVERY

It wasn't until 1848 that the Guatemalan government sent an expedition, under Modesto Méndez and Ambrosio Tut, to visit the site. In 1877 Dr Gustav Bernoulli of Switzerland visited Tikal and removed lintels from Temples I and IV to Basel, where they are still on view in the Museum für Völkerkunde.

Scientific exploration at Tikal began with the arrival of English archaeologist Alfred P Maudslay in 1881; others who continued his work include Teobert Maler, Alfred M Tozzer and RE Merwin. Tozzer worked at Tikal from the beginning of the century until his death in 1954. Tikal's inscriptions were studied and deciphered by Sylvanus G Morley.

Since 1956 archaeological research and restoration has been carried out by the University of Pennsylvania and the Guatemalan Instituto de Antropología e Historia. In the mid-1950s an airstrip was built to make access

## TIKAL



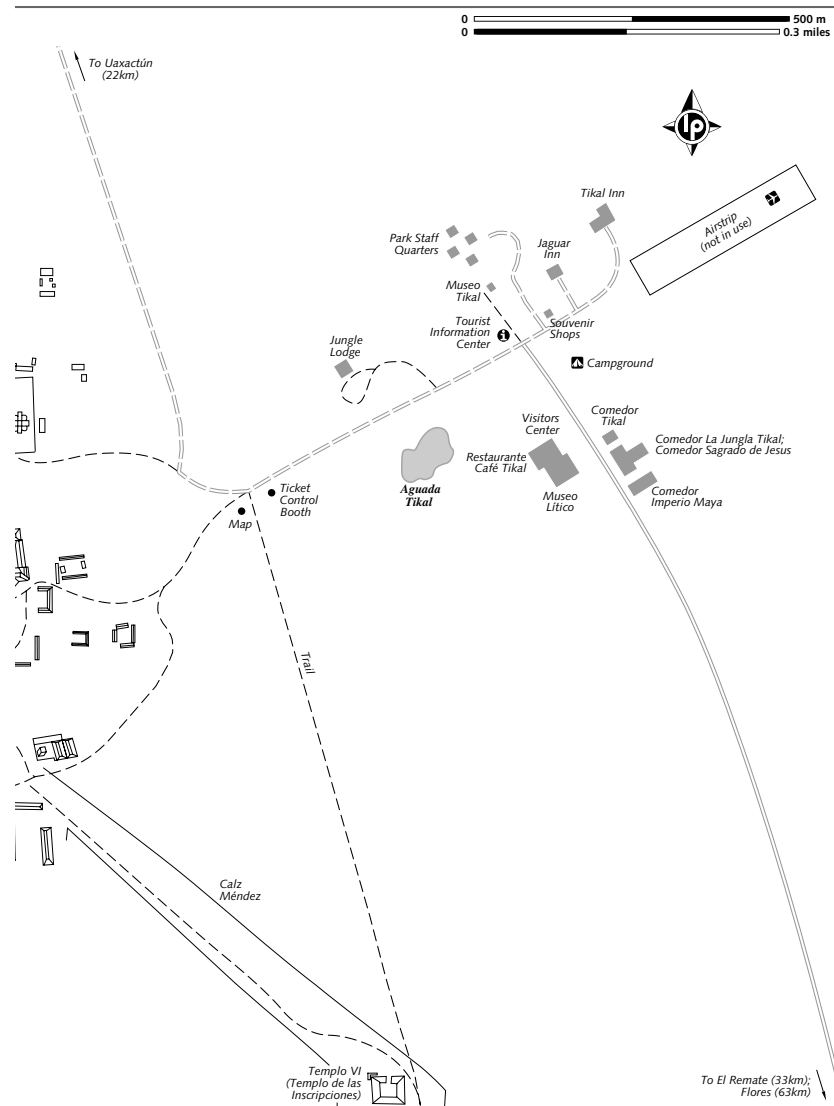
easier. In the early 1980s the road between Tikal and Flores was paved, and direct flights abandoned. Tikal National Park was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1979.

### Orientation & Information

The 550-sq-km Parque Nacional Tikal contains thousands of separate ruined structures.

The central area of the city occupied about 16 sq km, with more than 4000 structures.

The road from Flores enters the national park 17km south of the ruins. The gate opens at 6am. Here you pay the entrance fee; if you enter after about 3pm, your ticket should be stamped with the following day's date, making it valid for that next day, too. Multilingual guides are



available at the visitors center (US\$50 for a half-day tour for up to five people). These guides always display their accreditation carnet, listing the languages they speak.

Near the visitors center are Tikal's three hotels, a camping area, a **tourist information center** (8am-4pm), a few small comedores, a post office, a police post and two museums. From the

visitors center it's a 1.5km walk (20 to 30 minutes) southwest to the Gran Plaza. To visit all the major building complexes, you must walk at least 10km, so wear comfortable shoes.

It's a good idea to wear shoes with good rubber treads that grip well. The ruins here can be very slick from rain and organic material, especially during the wet season. Bring plenty of

water, as dehydration is a real danger if you're walking around in the heat. Please don't feed the *pisotes* (coatis; a tropical mammal related to a raccoon) that wander about the site.

The Jaguar Inn will exchange US dollars and traveler's checks at a poor rate.

## Exploring the Site

### GREAT PLAZA

Follow the signs to reach the Great Plaza. The path enters the plaza around **Temple I**, the Temple of the Grand Jaguar, built for King Moon Double Comb. The king might have worked out the plans himself, but it was erected above his tomb by his son, who succeeded to the throne in 734. Burial goods included 180 beautiful jade objects, 90 pieces of bone carved with hieroglyphs, and pearls and stingray spines, used for ritual bloodletting. At the top of the 44m-high temple is a small enclosure of three rooms covered by a corbeled arch. The lofty roof comb was originally adorned with reliefs and bright paint, perhaps symbolizing the 13 realms of the Maya heaven.

Since at least two people tumbled to their deaths, the stairs up Temple I have been closed. Don't fret: the views from **Temple II** just across the way are nearly as awe-inspiring. Temple II was once almost as high as Temple I, but now measures 38m without its roof comb.

The **North Acropolis**, while not as impressive as the twin temples, is of great significance. Archaeologists have uncovered about 100 structures dating as far back as 400 BC. The Maya rebuilt on top of older structures, and the many layers, combined with the elaborate burials, added sanctity and power to their temples. Look for the two huge, powerful wall masks, uncovered from an earlier structure. The final version of the Acropolis, as it was around AD 800, had more than 12 temples atop a vast platform, many of them the work of King Moon Double Comb.

On the plaza side of the North Acropolis are two rows of stelae. Although hardly as impressive as those at Copán or Quiriguá, these served the same purpose: to record the great deeds of the kings of Tikal, to sanctify their memory and to add 'power' to the surrounding structures.

### CENTRAL ACROPOLIS

On the south side of the Great Plaza, this maze of courtyards, little rooms and small temples is thought by some to have been a residential palace for Tikal's nobility. Others believe the tiny

rooms might have been used for sacred rites, as graffiti found within suggests. Over the centuries the room configuration was repeatedly changed, indicating perhaps that this 'palace' was in fact a residence changed to accommodate different groups of relatives. A century ago, one part of the acropolis, called Maler's Palace, provided lodgings for archaeologist Teobert Maler when he worked at Tikal.

### WEST PLAZA

The West Plaza is north of Temple II. On its north side is a large late-Classic temple. To the south, across the Tozzer Causeway, is Temple III, 55m high. Yet to be uncovered, it allows you to see a temple the way the last Tikal Maya and first explorers saw them. The causeway leading to Temple IV was one of several sacred ways built among the complexes, no doubt for astronomical as well as aesthetic reasons.

### SOUTH ACROPOLIS & TEMPLE V

Due south of the Great Plaza is the South Acropolis. Excavation has just begun on this 2-hectare mass of masonry. The palaces on top are from late-Classic times, but earlier constructions probably go back 1000 years.

Temple V, just east of the South Acropolis, is 58m high and was built around AD 700. Unlike the other great temples, this one has rounded corners and one tiny room at the top. The room is less than a meter deep, but its walls are up to 4.5m thick. Restoration of this temple started in 1991.

### PLAZA OF THE SEVEN TEMPLES

This plaza is on the other side of the South Acropolis. The little temples, clustered together, were built in late-Classic times, though the structures beneath go back at least a millennium. Note the skull and crossbones on the central temple (the one with the stela and altar in front). On the plaza's north side is an unusual triple ball court; another, larger version of the same design stands just south of Temple I.

### EL MUNDO PERDIDO

About 400m southwest of the Great Plaza is El Mundo Perdido (The Lost World), a complex of 38 structures surrounding a huge pyramid. Unlike the rest of Tikal, where late-Classic construction overlays earlier work, El Mundo Perdido holds buildings of many different periods. The large pyramid is thought to be pre-Classic with some later repairs and renovations, the

Talud-Tablero Temple (or Temple of the Three Rooms) is an early Classic structure, and the Temple of the Skulls is late-Classic.

The pyramid, 32m high and 80m along its base, had huge masks flanking each stairway but no temple structure at the top. Each side displays a slightly different architectural style. Tunnels dug by archaeologists reveal four similar pyramids beneath the outer face; the earliest (Structure 5C-54 Sub 2B) dates from 700 BC, making the pyramid the oldest Maya structure in Tikal.

### TEMPLE IV & COMPLEX N

Complex N, near Temple IV, is an example of the 'twin-temple' complexes popular during the late-Classic period. These complexes are thought to have commemorated the completion of a *katum*, or 20-year cycle in the Maya calendar. This one was built in 711 by King Moon Double Comb to mark the 14th *katum* of *baktun* 9. (A *baktun* is about 394 years.) The king is portrayed on Stela 16, one of Tikal's finest.

Temple IV, at 64m, is Tikal's highest building. It was completed about 741, in the reign of King Moon Double Comb's son. A series of steep wooden steps and ladders take you to the top.

### TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS (TEMPLE VI)

Compared to Copán or Quiriguá, Tikal sports relatively few inscriptions. The exception is this temple, 1.2km southeast of the Great Plaza. On the rear of the 12m-high roof comb is a long inscription; the sides and cornice of the roof comb bear glyphs as well. The inscriptions give us the date AD 766. Stela 21 and Altar 9, standing before the temple, date from 736. Badly damaged, the stela has now been repaired.

### NORTHERN COMPLEXES

About 1km north of the Great Plaza is **Complex P**. Like Complex N, it's a late-Classic twin-temple complex that probably commemorated the end of a *katum*. **Complex M**, next to it, was partially torn down by late-Classic Maya to provide material for the causeway – now named after Alfred Maudslay, who is most widely known for his photographs of Central American ruins – that runs southwest to Temple IV.

**Complexes Q and R**, about 300m due north of the Great Plaza, are late-Classic twin-pyramid complexes. Complex Q is perhaps the best

example of the twin-temple type, as it has been mostly restored. Stela 22 and Altar 10 are excellent examples of late-Classic Tikal relief carving, dated 771.

**Complex O**, due west of these complexes on the west side of the Maler Causeway, has an uncarved stela and altar in its north enclosure. The point of stelae was to record happenings – why did this one remain uncarved?

### MUSEUMS

Tikal has two museums. The **Museo Lítico** (Museum of Stone; admission US\$1.30; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun), the larger of the two, is in the visitors center. It houses a number of stelae and carved stones from the ruins. Outside is a large model showing how Tikal looked around AD 800. The photographs taken by Alfred P Maudslay and Teobert Maler of the jungle-covered temples in various stages of discovery in the late 19th century are particularly striking.

The **Museo Tikal** or **Museo Cerámico** (Museum of Ceramics; admission US\$1.30; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun) is near the Jaguar Inn. It has some fascinating exhibits, including the burial goods of King Moon Double Comb, carved jade, inscribed bones, shells, stelae, ceramics and other items recovered from the excavations.

### Bird-Watching

Around 300 bird species (migratory and endemic) have been recorded at Tikal. Early morning is the best time to go; even amateurs will have their share of sightings. Ask at the visitors center about early-morning and late-afternoon tours. Bring binoculars, tread quietly and be patient and you'll probably see some of the following birds:

- tody motmots, four trogon species and royal flycatchers around the Temple of the Inscriptions
- two oriole species, collared aracaris, and keel-billed toucans in El Mundo Perdido
- great curassows, three species of woodpecker, crested guans, plain chachalacas and three species of tanager around Complex P
- three kingfisher species, jacanas, blue herons, two sandpiper species and great kiskadees at the Tikal Reservoir near the entrance; tiger herons in the huge ceiba tree along the entrance path
- red-capped and white-collared manakins near Complex Q; emerald toucanets near Complex R

**WARNING**

The Temple of the Inscriptions is remote, and there have been incidents of robbery and rape of single travelers and couples in the past. Though safety has been greatly improved at Tikal, ask a guard before you make the trek out here, or come in a group.

**Hiking**

The Sendero Benilj'a'a, a 3km trail with three sections, begins in front of the Jungle Lodge. Ruta Monte Medio and Ruta Monte Medio Alto (both one hour) are accessible year-round. Ruta Monte Bajo (35 minutes) is accessible only in summer. A short interpretive trail called El Misterio de la Vida Maya (The Mystery of Maya Life) leads to the Great Plaza.

**Tours**

All the hotels can arrange guided tours of the ruins, as well as tours to other places in the region. Day tours from Flores/Santa Elena (US\$45 to US\$65 per person) can be arranged through Martsam Travel (p189).

**Sleeping**

The days of bribing a guard and sleeping on top of Temple IV are gone – if you are caught in the ruins after hours, you'll be escorted out, for security reasons. Nowadays, the best way to catch solitude and get an early glimpse of the wildlife is to camp at the entrance.

Other than camping, there are a few places to stay at Tikal. Most are booked in advance by tour groups. It may be best to stay in Flores or El Remate and visit Tikal on day trips.

On the other hand, staying at Tikal enables you to relax and savor the dawn and dusk, when most of the jungle fauna can be observed.

There's no need to make reservations if you want to stay at Tikal's **campground** (per person US\$4) opposite the visitors center. This is a large, grassy area with a clean bathroom block, plenty of space for tents and *palapa* shelters for hanging hammocks.

**Jaguar Inn** (☎ 7926 0002; www.jaguartikal.com; camping per person US\$3.25, hammocks per person US\$5; s/d US\$33/53; P ♻️ 🚰) Although the little duplex bungalows here are kinda jammed together, it still makes a decent and (relatively) cheap

sleep in the park. Hammocks on the little porches are a bonus, but nobody's likely to get excited about paying US\$6 for an hour of internet. If you don't have a tent, you can rent one for US\$6.50 per person. The electricity goes off at 9pm.

**Jungle Lodge** (☎ 7861 0446; www.junglelodge.guatemala.com; s/d US\$35/40, with bathroom US\$69/86; P ♻️ 🚰) By far the sweetest of the accommodation options in the park, these mostly self-contained bungalows are well spaced throughout the jungly grounds. There's a swimming pool, large garden grounds, and a restaurant-bar with breakfast for US\$5 and lunch or dinner for US\$10.

As you arrive in Tikal, look on the right-hand side of the road to find the little *comedores*: **Comedor Imperio Maya**, **Comedor La Jungla Tikal**, **Comedor Tikal**, and **Comedor Sagrado de Jesús** (all ☎ 5am-9pm). Comedor Tikal seems to be the most popular. These *comedores* offer rustic and agreeable surroundings and are run by local people serving huge plates of fairly tasty food at low prices. Chicken or meat dishes cost around US\$4.50, pasta and burgers a little less.

Picnic tables beneath shelters are located just off Tikal's Gran Plaza, with soft-drink and water peddlers standing by, but no food is sold. If you want to spend all day at the ruins without having to make the 20- to 30-minute walk back to the *comedores*, carry food and water with you.

**Getting There & Away**

For details of transportation to and from Flores and Santa Elena, see p192. Coming from Belize, you could consider taking a taxi from the border to Tikal for around US\$50. Otherwise, get a bus to Puente Ixlu, sometimes called El Cruce, and switch to a northbound minibus or bus for the remaining 36km to Tikal. Note that there is little northbound traffic after lunch. Heading from Tikal to Belize, start early in the morning and get off at Puente Ixlu to catch a bus or minibus eastward. Be wary of shuttles to Belize advertised at Tikal – these have been known to detour to Flores to pick up passengers!

**UAXACTÚN**

Uaxactún (wah-shahk-*toon*), 23km north of Tikal along a poor, unpaved road through the jungle, was Tikal's political and military rival in late pre-Classic times. It was eventually

conquered by Tikal's King Great Jaguar Paw in the mid-4th century, and was subservient to its great southern sister for centuries thereafter.

When you arrive, sign your name at the guard's hut (at the edge of the derelict airstrip). About halfway down the airstrip, roads go off to the left and to the right to the ruins.

Villagers in Uaxactún live in houses lined up along the airstrip. They make a living by collecting chicle, *pimienta* (allspice) and *xate* (*sha-tay*; a frond exported for floral arrangements) from the surrounding forest.

**Ruins**

The pyramids at Uaxactún were uncovered and stabilized to prevent further deterioration; they were not restored. White mortar is the mark of the repair crews, who patched cracks to keep out water and roots. Much of the work on the famous **Temple E-VII-Sub** was done by Earthwatch volunteers in 1974.

Turn right from the airstrip to reach Groups E and H, a 15-minute walk. Perhaps the most significant temple here is E-VII-Sub, among the earliest intact temples excavated, with foundations going back perhaps to 2000 BC. It lay beneath much larger structures, which have been stripped away. On its flat top are sockets for poles that would have supported a wood-and-thatch temple.

About 20 minutes-walk to the northwest of the runway you'll find Groups A and B. At **Group A** early excavators sponsored by Andrew Carnegie cut into the temple sides indiscriminately, looking for graves, occasionally using dynamite. This process destroyed many temples, which are now being reconstructed.

If you are visiting Uaxactún from Tikal, no fee is charged. But if you are going to Uax-

actún without stopping to visit Tikal, you still have to pass through the Parque Nacional Tikal and will have to pay a US\$3 Uaxactún-only fee at the park entrance.

Tours to Uaxactún can be arranged at hotels in Tikal. The Jungle Lodge (opposite) has a trip departing at 8am daily and returning at 1pm, costing US\$60 for one to four people.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Aldana's Lodge** (camping per person US\$2.50, r per person US\$4) To the right off the street leading to Grupos B and A, Aldana's has alternative, cheaper accommodations, but has erratic water supplies. It offers tours to other sites. Camping using their equipment costs US\$3 per person.

**Campamento, Hotel & Restaurante El Chidero** (☎ /fax 7926 1095; camping US\$5, s/d US\$14/17) On the north side of the airstrip, this place has 10 small and very basic rooms with good mattresses and mosquito-netted ceilings and windows. It does the best food in town (US\$6 for soup and a main course with rice). Accommodation prices are very negotiable. Also here is a small museum with shelves full of Maya pottery from Uaxactún and around. Staff can organize trips to more remote sites such as El Mirador, Xultún, Rio Azul, Nakkbé and La Muralla.

A few basic *comedores* also provide food: Comedor Uaxactún is the most popular.

**Getting There & Away**

A Pinita bus supposedly leaves Santa Elena for Uaxactún (US\$3) at 1pm, passing through Tikal about 3pm to 3:30pm, and starting back for Santa Elena from Uaxactún at 6pm. But its schedule is rubbery and it can arrive in Tikal any time up to about 5pm and in Uaxactún up to about 6:30pm. During the rainy season (from May to October, sometimes extending

**GETTING TO SAN IGNACIO, BELIZE**

It's 100km from Flores to **Melchor de Mencos**, the Guatemalan town on the border with Belize. See p192 for information on bus services to the border and also on more expensive services going right through to **Belize City** and **Chetumal, Mexico**.

The road to the border diverges from the Flores-Tikal road at **Puente Ixlu** (also called El Cruce), 27km from Flores. It continues paved until about 25km short of the border. The stretch between Puente Ixlu and the border has been the scene of a few highway robberies.

There should be no fees at the border for entering or leaving Guatemala, and none for entering Belize. There are money changers at the border with whom you can change sufficient funds for immediate needs.

See p249 for information on crossing the border from Belize.



into November), the road from Tikal to Uaxactún can become pretty muddy: locals say it is always passable but a 4WD vehicle might be needed during the wet.

If you're driving, the last chance to fill your fuel tank as you come from the south is at Puente Ixlú, just south of El Remate. A taxi from El Remate to Uaxactún and back, including waiting time, should cost about US\$60; bargain hard.

From Uaxactún, unpaved roads lead to other ruins at El Zotz (about 30km southwest), Xultún (35km northeast) and Río Azul (100km northeast).

## SAYAXCHÉ & CEIBAL

Sayaxché, on the south bank of the Río de la Pasión, 61km southwest of Flores, is the closest town to nine or 10 scattered Maya archaeological sites, including Ceibal, Aguaceta, Dos Pilas, Tamarindito and Altar de

Sacrificios. Otherwise, for travelers it's little more than a transportation halt between Flores and Cobán.

Minibuses and buses from Santa Elena stop on the north bank of the Río de la Pasión. Frequent ferries (US\$0.15 for pedestrians, US\$2 for cars) carry you across to the town.

**Banoro** (☎) 9am–4pm Mon–Fri, 10am–1pm Sat), just up the main street from Hotel Guayacán, changes US dollars and traveler's checks.

**Hotel Yaxkin** (☎) 7928 6429; s/d with bathroom US\$7.50/15) has surprisingly big rooms in a brick and concrete wonderland 50m up from the boat landing. Try to get one away from the front as the street noise is formidable.

**Café del Río** (mains US\$3–5; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) is the most atmospheric place to eat in town and is actually across the river on the big wooden dock built out over the water. Forget about the US\$0.50 return trip and enjoy the wholesome food, sweet breeze and icy beer.

Restaurant Yaxkin, a couple of doors from Hotel Mayapán, is typical of the few other eateries in town: basic, family-run and inexpensive.

## Ceibal

Unimportant during the Classic period, Ceibal grew rapidly thereafter, attaining a population of perhaps 10,000 by AD 900. Much of the growth might have been due to immigration from what is now Chiapas, in Mexico, because the art and culture of Ceibal seems to have changed markedly during this period. The post-Classic period saw the decline of Ceibal, after which its low ruined temples were quickly covered by thick jungle.

Ceibal is not one of the most impressive Maya sites, but the journey to Ceibal is among the most memorable. A two-hour voyage on the jungle-bound Río de la Pasión brings you to a primitive dock. After landing you clamber up a rocky path beneath gigantic trees and vines to reach the archaeological zone.

Smallish temples, many still (or again) covered with jungle, surround two principal plazas. In front of a few temples, and standing seemingly alone on jungle paths, are magnificent, intact stelae. Exploring the site takes about two hours.

See p189 for travel agents who offer tours to Ceibal. Otherwise, talk to any of the boatmen in Sayaxché. They charge around US\$46 per boatload, round-trip including waiting time. You should hire a guide to see the site, as some of the finest stelae are off the plazas in the jungle. Most *lancheros*, conveniently, also serve as guides.

If you wish, you can get to Ceibal cheaper by land: get any bus, minibus or pickup heading south from Sayaxché on Hwy 5 (toward Raxrujá and Chisec) and get off after 9km at Paraíso (US\$0.80), from which a dirt track leads 8km east to Ceibal. You might have to walk the last 8km. In the rainy season this stretch may not be passable.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

See p192 for details of minibuses and buses from Flores. The round-trip schedule is similar.

Southbound from Sayaxché, buses and minibuses leave at 5am, 6am, 10am and 3pm for Cobán (US\$7, five hours). Most, if not all of these go via Raxrujá and Sebol, not via Chisec. Other minibuses and buses go just to Raxrujá (US\$3.50), about hourly from 7am to

3pm. For Chisec, you can change in Raxrujá or at San Antonio Las Cuevas. Vehicles may start from the southern riverbank or they may start from the Texaco station opposite Hotel Guayacán.

For river transportation, talk to any of the boatmen on the riverbank, or to **La Gaviota Tours** (☎) 7928 6461), with an office 200m to the left of where boats dock. A trip all the way down the Río de la Pasión to Benemérito de las Américas (Mexico), with stops at the ruins of Altar de Sacrificios and Guatemalan immigration at Pipiles, should cost between US\$130 and US\$180.

## REMOTE MAYA SITES

Several sites of interest to archaeology buffs and adventurous travelers are open for limited tourism. Few can be visited without a guide, but many businesses in Flores and Santa Elena offer trips to sites deep in the jungle. Few of these tours offer anything approaching comfort, and you should be prepared for buggy, basic conditions.

The ceremonial site of **Yaxhá**, on the lake of the same name, is about 48km east of El Remate. Scholars believe it may have been a vacation spot for Maya nobility during the Classic period. The ruins here include a large plaza and two temples. A ruined observatory sits on Topoxté island in the middle of the lake.

**El Zotz** is about 25km west of Tikal. Zotz means 'bat,' and you'll encounter plenty on a trek here. Among the many unexcavated mounds and ruins is Devil's Pyramid, which is so tall that you can see the temples of Tikal from its summit. Trips to El Zotz can be extended to include a trek to Tikal.

**El Perú**, 62km northwest from Flores in the Parque Nacional Laguna del Tigre, lies along the Scarlet Macaw Trail. The trek starts in Paso Caballos and continues by boat along the Río San Pedro. Several important structures here have been dated to between AD 300 and 900. Archaeologists believe El Perú was an important commercial center.

Another destination in Parque Nacional Laguna del Tigre that is sometimes combined with El Perú trips is the **Estación Biológica Las Guacamayas** (Scarlet Macaw Biological Station) on the Río San Juan. This is a scientific station surrounded by rain forest, where among other things scarlet macaws and white tortoises are observed.

## GETTING TO CHIAPAS (MEXICO)

The only route with regular transportation connections is via **Bethel** or **La Técnica** on the eastern (Guatemalan) bank of the Río Usumacinta and **Frontera Corozal** on the Mexican bank. See p192 for details of bus services to and from Bethel and La Técnica and shuttle minibus services all the way through to **Palenque**. Guatemalan immigration is in Bethel: bus drivers to La Técnica will normally stop and wait for you to do the formalities in Bethel.

It's cheaper and quicker from La Técnica than from Bethel, but crossing at La Técnica means a longer bus journey on the Guatemalan side. Minibuses (US\$5, three hours) leave Frontera Corozal for Palenque at about 5am, 10am, noon and 3pm.

If you want to stay in the Usumacinta area, perhaps to visit the Maya ruins at **Yaxchilán** on the Mexican side of the river, the riverside **Posada Maya** (☎) 7861 1799; s/d/tr US\$9/18/28), 1km outside Bethel, has a great location and comfortable thatched bungalows, plus tent and hammock shelters. Boats from Bethel to Yaxchilán cost between US\$15 and US\$25 per person for four to 12 people, round-trip.

See p249 for information on crossing the border from Mexico.

## Other Routes

You can also cross into Mexico by boat down the Río de la Pasión from **Sayaxché** to **Benemérito de las Américas** or down the Río San Pedro from **El Naranjo** to **La Palma**. But there are no regular passenger services on either river and you will probably have to rent a boat privately for around US\$80 on the Río San Pedro or US\$100-plus on the Río de la Pasión. Both trips take around four hours. La Palma has transportation connections with Tenosique, Tabasco, from where minibuses leave for **Palenque** up to 5:30pm. Benemérito has good bus and minibus connections with Palenque. Both Sayaxché and El Naranjo have bus and minibus connections with **Flores** (see p192).

A possible alternative on the Río San Pedro route is to get a boat from El Naranjo only as far as **El Ceibo**, on the border, for around US\$30. From El Ceibo there are a few buses on to Tenosique (US\$3, 1½ hours), the last one leaving about 5:30pm. Mexico has no immigration facilities at Benemérito or El Ceibo: you have to get your passport stamped at Frontera Corozal or Tenosique or, failing that, in Palenque.

El Naranjo, Tenosique and Benemérito all have a few basic accommodations.

**LOCAL VOICES – NORA LÓPEZ, LABORATORY DIRECTOR, THE MIRADOR PROJECT**

One of the major archaeological excavations being undertaken in Guatemala is at El Mirador, a remote Maya site in El Petén (see below). Buried in jungle for centuries, the importance of this megacity is only just starting to be understood. We caught up with Nora López to find out how the dig's going.

- **What's special about El Mirador?** For one thing, it's huge. We're still mapping, but it looks like El Mirador occupied 23 sq km. Around the city were others such as Nakbé and Florida, connected by stone 'highways' that are up to 23km long. Altogether, we're looking at an area of around 2000 sq km. Another is that, because there wasn't much water near the site, hydraulic irrigation systems were used to grow crops needed to feed so many workers.
- **What's the most exciting thing you've found?** Plenty of little things. Small things contribute to the big picture. I'm interested in bones, so I like finding burials, even though it implies more work. Once a body is uncovered we have to work around the clock or else it can get damaged by weather or stolen by thieves.
- **How do you see the relation between tourism and archaeology?** It can be excellent, but it has to be managed. What you see at more popular sites is a lot of damage – crowds trampling things and not understanding what they're looking at. If you keep the groups small, visitors can be informed and educated. Mass tourism doesn't really do anything but provide photo opportunities.

*As told to Lucas Vidgen*

**El Mirador** is buried within the furthest reaches of the Petén jungle, just 7km from the Mexican border. A trip here involves an arduous 60km trek in primitive conditions. The metropolis at El Mirador flourished between 150 BC and AD 150, when it was abandoned for mysterious reasons. The site holds the tallest pyramid ever built in the Maya world: El Tigre is over 60m high, and its base covers 18,000 sq meters. Its twin, La Danta (Tapir), although technically smaller, soars higher because it's built on a rise. There are hundreds of buildings at El Mirador, but almost everything is still hidden beneath the jungle.

This trip is not for the faint of heart. For more on this incredible site, see the September, 1987 *National Geographic* article 'An Early Maya Metropolis Uncovered: El Mirador.' This is the most thorough mainstream investigative report ever written about the site.

a bathroom, TV and, in hot parts of the country, a fan.

Unless otherwise specified, the bathroom facilities offered at accommodations are shared.

Room rates often go up in touristy places during Semana Santa (Easter week), Christmas to New Year's and July to August. Semana Santa is the major Guatemalan holiday week of the year, and prices can rise by anything from 30% to 100% on the coast, in the countryside – anywhere Guatemalans go to relax – as well as in such international-tourism destinations as Antigua. At this time advance reservations are a must.

Room rates are subject to two large taxes – 12% IVA (value-added tax) and a 10% tax to pay for the activities of the Guatemalan Tourism Institute (Inguat). All prices in this book include both taxes.

**BOOK ACCOMMODATIONS ONLINE**

For more accommodations reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com). You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

## GUATEMALA DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATIONS

This chapter's accommodations coverage includes places where a typical double (room for two people) costs US\$20 or less. Doubles under about US\$10 are generally small, dark and not particularly clean. A typical US\$20 double should be clean, sizable and airy, with

Camping can be a hit-or-miss affair, as there are few designated campgrounds and safety is rarely guaranteed. Where campsites are available, expect to pay from US\$3 to US\$5 per night.

Travelers attending Spanish school have the option of living with a Guatemalan family. This is usually a pretty good bargain – expect to pay between US\$35 and US\$60 per week for your own room, shared bathroom, and three meals daily except Sunday. It's important to find a homestay that gels with your goals. Some families host several students at a time, creating more of an international hostel atmosphere than a family environment.

### ACTIVITIES

#### Caving

Guatemala attracts cavers from all over the world. The limestone area around Cobán is particularly riddled with cave systems whose true extents are far from known. The caves of Lanquín (p167) are open for tourist visits. There are also exciting caves to visit from Finca Ixobel (p186), near Poptún.

#### Climbing & Hiking

Guatemala's volcanoes are irresistible challenges, and many of them can be climbed in one day from Antigua or Quetzaltenango. There's further great hill country in the Ixil Triangle and the Cuchumatanes mountains north of Huehuetenango, especially around Todos Santos.

The Lago de Atitlán is surrounded by spectacular trails (p116), although robberies here have made some routes inadvisable. Hikes of several days are perfectly feasible, and agencies in Antigua, Quetzaltenango and Nebaj can guide you. In the Petén jungles, hikes to remote archaeological sites such as El Mirador and El Perú (opposite) offer an exciting challenge.

#### Cycling

There's probably no better way to experience the highlands than by bicycle. Panajachel, Quetzaltenango and Antigua, in particular, are the best launch points, with agencies offering trips and/or equipment.

#### Horseback Riding

Opportunities for a gallop, trot or even a horse trek are on the rise. Antigua, Santiago Atitlán, and El Remate all have stables.

### Water Sports

You can dive inside a volcanic caldera at Lago de Atitlán (p128), raft the white-water of the Río Cahabón near Lanquín, sail from the yachtie haven of Río Dulce, and canoe or kayak the waterways of Monterrico, Livingston, or the Bocas del Polochic or Punta de Manabique.

### Wildlife & Bird-Watching

Few national parks and reserves have many tourist facilities, but they do have lots of wildlife- and bird-watching.

Fine bird-watching locales in the Petén jungles include Tikal (p194), El Mirador (opposite), Cerro Cahuí (p194), Laguna Petexbatún and (for scarlet macaws) Las Guacamayas biological station (p203).

Elsewhere, the wetlands of Bocas del Polochic, Punta de Manabique and Monterrico, the Río Dulce and Laguna Lachuá national parks and the Biotopo del Quetzal (p162) also provide lots of avian variety.

Mammals are more elusive but you should see several species at Tikal. Monkey fans will also be happy at the Reserva Natural Atitlán (Panajachel; p116), the Bocas del Polochic (p176) and Cerro Cahuí (p194).

### BOOKS

For more in-depth information, grab a copy of Lonely Planet's *Guatemala* guide.

*Guatemalan Journey*, by Stephen Benz, is another one to enjoy while you're in Guatemala. It casts an honest and funny modern traveler's eye on the country. So does Anthony Daniels' *Sweet Waist of America*, also published as *South of the Border: Guatemalan Days*, where the medic author pinpoints some of the country's quirky contradictions.

In *Sacred Monkey River*, Christopher Shaw explores by canoe the jungle-clad basin of the Río Usumacinta, a cradle of ancient Maya civilization along the Mexico–Guatemala border – a great read.

*Bird of Life, Bird of Death*, by Jonathan Evan Maslow, subtitled 'A naturalist's journey through a land of political turmoil,' tells of the author's searches for the resplendent quetzal ('bird of life') – which he found increasingly endangered, while the zopilote (vulture; 'bird of death') flourished.

See p33 for suggested books on the Maya and p723 for travel literature selections that cover Guatemala and surrounding countries.

## BUSINESS HOURS

Guatemalan shops and businesses are generally open from 8am to noon and 2pm to 6pm, Monday to Saturday, but there are many variations.

Banks typically open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday (again with variations), and 9am to 1pm Saturday. Government offices usually open 8am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Official business is always best conducted in the morning.

## CLIMATE

Although Guatemala is officially the 'Land of Eternal Spring,' temperatures can be freezing at night in the highlands. In the dry season – from late October to May – the highlands are warm and delightful, but even then, nights are never hot.

Guatemala's coasts are tropical, rainy, hot and humid. Temperatures often reach 32°C to 38°C (90°F to 100°F), and the humidity abates only slightly in the dry season. On the Caribbean side, rain is possible any time. Cobán has about one month of dry weather (April), though you can catch some less-than-soggy spells between November and March.

The vast jungle lowland of El Petén has a tropical climate that is seasonally hot and humid or hot and dry. December and January are the coolest months, while March and April are like hell on earth.

For climate charts see p723.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Drunk, alone, lost, late at night and loaded with cash is the stupidest way to walk around Guatemala. And pretty well most combinations of the above items are kind of stupid. A lot of people come here and do stuff that they would never do back home. Sometimes they get away with it. Sometimes it backfires. Use your intuition and chances are you'll stay out of trouble.

That said, no-one could pretend that Guatemala is a very safe country. The daily papers are full of gory stuff that Guatemalans do to each other every day. Thankfully for travelers, a lot of it is gang violence and they keep it to themselves.

Rapes and murders of tourists do happen occasionally. The two most frequently reported types of nasty incident involving tourists are highway robberies (when a vehicle is stopped and its occupants relieved of their

### LOSIN' IT

For such a poor country, it's surprising how few scams there actually are in operation in Guatemala. Really the only ones you have to worry about are the old classics (eg someone sprays ketchup or some other sticky liquid on your clothes, then an accomplice appears to help you clean up the mess who robs you in the process). Other methods of distraction, such as dropping a purse or coins, or someone appearing to faint, are also used by pickpockets and bag snatchers.

Markets are good hunting grounds for pickpockets all across the country, and you should be on your guard in all crowds, particularly when you're weighed down with baggage and distracted.

belongings) and robberies on walking trails. For a scary litany of recent incidents, visit the website of Guatemala City's **US embassy** (<http://usembassy.state.gov/guatemala>) and click on 'Recent Crime Incidents Involving Foreigners.' Further, marginally less alarming, information is on the website of the **US Department of State** ([www.ds-osac.org](http://www.ds-osac.org)) and the website of the **UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office** ([www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)).

Vehicles carrying tourists, such as shuttle minibuses and buses along heavily touristed routes, seem to be a prime target for highway robbery. On this basis, some people argue that chicken buses are the most risk-free way to travel, but chicken buses are certainly not exempt from holdups.

Robberies against tourists on walking trails tend to occur in isolated spots on well-known walks. Some trails around the Lago de Atitlán and on Volcán Agua outside Antigua are particularly notorious (see p113).

The Tikal archaeological site, Volcán Pacaya and Cerro de la Cruz (Antigua), all the scenes of several incidents not so long ago, have become, for now, safer because of increased police and ranger presence designed to protect tourism.

A third danger category is pickpocketing, bag-snatching, bag-slitting and the like in crowded bus stations, buses, streets and markets, but also in empty, dark city streets.

Hiking on active volcanoes obviously has an element of risk. Get the latest story before you head out. In the wet season, go up

volcanoes in the morning before rain and possible thunderstorms set in. A Canadian tourist was killed by lightning on Volcán Pacaya in 2002.

There have been a few bizarre incidents in which foreign visitors have been unjustly suspected of malicious designs on Guatemalan children. In 2000 a Japanese tourist comforting a crying child, and his driver, were killed in Todos Santos by crowds inflamed by rumors of satanists at large in the area. A woman taking photographs of children in a town near Cobán was nearly murdered by a hysterical crowd apparently afraid that she wanted children's organs for transplant operations.

Be careful not to put yourself in any situation that might be misinterpreted. Any crowd can be volatile, especially when drunk or at times of political tension.

For more information on dangers and annoyances, see p724.

## Reporting a Robbery or Theft

After a theft you may need a statement from the police for your insurance company. Tell them: '*Yo quisiera poner una acta de un robo*' (I'd like to report a robbery). This should make it clear that you merely want a piece of paper and aren't going to ask the police to do anything active.

## DISABLED TRAVELERS

Guatemala is not the easiest country to negotiate with a disability. Although many sidewalks in Antigua have ramps and cute little inlaid tiles depicting a wheelchair, the streets are cobblestone, so the ramps are anything but smooth and the streets worse!

Many hotels in Guatemala are old converted houses with rooms around a courtyard that is wheelchair accessible. The most expensive hotels have facilities such as ramps, elevators and accessible toilets. Transportation is the biggest hurdle for disabled travelers: travelers in a wheelchair might consider renting a car and driver, as buses will prove especially challenging, due to lack of space.

**Mobility International USA** ([www.miusa.org](http://www.miusa.org)) advises disabled travelers on mobility issues, runs exchange programs (including in Guatemala) and publishes some useful books. Also worth consulting are **Access-Able Travel Source** ([www.access-able.com](http://www.access-able.com)) and **Accessible Journeys** ([www.disabilitytravel.com](http://www.disabilitytravel.com)).

**Transitions** (☎ 7832 4261; [transitions@guate.net](mailto:transitions@guate.net); Colonia Candelaria 80, Antigua) is an organization aiming to increase awareness and access for disabled persons in Guatemala.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Embassies & Consulates in Guatemala

All of the following are embassies in Guatemala City:

**Belize** (☎ 2367 3883; [embelguate@yahoo.com](mailto:embelguate@yahoo.com); 5a Av 5-55, Zona 14, Europlaza 2, Office 1502)

**Canada** (☎ 2363 4348; [gtmla@international.gc.ca](mailto:gtmla@international.gc.ca); 8th fl, Edificio Edyma Maritima, 13a Calle 8-44, Zona 10)

**El Salvador** (☎ 2360 7660; [emsalva@intel.net.gt](mailto:emsalva@intel.net.gt); Av Las Américas 16-46, Zona 13)

**Germany** (☎ 2364 6700; [embalemana@intelnet.net.gt](mailto:embalemana@intelnet.net.gt); Edificio Plaza Maritima, 20a Calle 6-20, Zona 10)

**Honduras** (☎ 2366 5640; [embhond@intelnet.net.gt](mailto:embhond@intelnet.net.gt); 19a Av 'A' 20-19, Zona 10)

**Mexico** (☎ 2420 3400; 2a Av 7-57, Zona 10)

**Spain** (☎ 2379 3530; [embaespa@terra.com.gt.es](mailto:embaespa@terra.com.gt.es); 6a Calle 6-48, Zona 9)

**UK** (☎ 2367 5425/6/7/8/9; [embassy@intelnet.net](mailto:embassy@intelnet.net); 11th fl, Torre Internacional, 16a Calle 00-55, Zona 10)

**USA** (☎ 2326 4000; [www.usembassy.state.gov/guatemala](http://www.usembassy.state.gov/guatemala); Av La Reforma 7-01, Zona 10)

### Guatemalan Embassies & Consulates Abroad

You'll find a full list of Guatemala's embassies and consulates at [www.minex.gob.gt/sistemaprotocolo/protocolos/cmisiones.asp](http://www.minex.gob.gt/sistemaprotocolo/protocolos/cmisiones.asp). The following listings are embassies, unless otherwise noted:

**Australia** Consulate (☎ 02-9327 7348; 5 Weldodon Lane, Woolahra, Sydney 2025)

**Canada** (☎ 613-233 7237; [embguate@ottawa.net](mailto:embguate@ottawa.net); 130 Albert St, Suite 1010, Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5G4)

**France** (☎ 01 42 27 78 63; [embguaf@easynet.fr](mailto:embguaf@easynet.fr); 73 rue de Courcelles, Paris 75008)

**Germany** (☎ 228-358 609; [embaguete\\_bonn@compuserve.com](mailto:embaguete_bonn@compuserve.com); Zietenstrasse, 16, 5300 Bonn 2)

**Japan** (☎ 03-34001830; fax 03-3400 1820; 38 Kowa Bldg, Rm 905, 4-12-24 Nishi-Azabu, 106-0031, Tokyo)

**Mexico** Mexico City (☎ 55-5540 7520; [meroldan@iserve.net.mx](mailto:meroldan@iserve.net.mx); Av Explanada 1025, Lomas de Chapultepec, 11000); consulate in Chetumal (☎ 983 832 30 45; Av Independencia 326); consulate in Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas (☎ 962 628 01 84; 5a Calle Oriente s/n entre 1a & 3a Norte); consulate in Comitán, Chiapas (☎ 963 632 04 91; fax 963 632 26 69; 1a Calle Sur Poniente 26); consulate in Tapachula, Chiapas (☎ 962 625 63 80; 3a Av Norte 85); also consulates in Puebla and Tijuana.

**Netherlands** (☎ 355 7421; PO Box 10224, 7301 GE, Apeldoorn)

**Spain** (☎ 913 44 14 17; embespaña@minex.gob.gt; Calle Rafael Salgado 3, 100 derecha, 28036, Madrid)  
**UK** (☎ 020-7351 3042; embgranbretana@minex.gob.gt; 13 Fawcett St, London SW10 9HN)  
**USA** (☎ 202-745 4952/53/54; www.guatemala-embassy.org; 2220 R St NW, 20008, Washington DC) Consulates in Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles (www.guatemala-con.sulate.org), Miami, New York and San Francisco (www.sconsulguate.org).

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Events of national significance include the following:

**El Cristo de Esquipulas** (January 15) This superdevout festival in Esquipulas brings pilgrims from all over Central America to catch a glimpse of the Black Christ housed in the Basilica.

**Semana Santa** (March/April; Holy Week, the week leading up to Easter Sunday) Statues of Jesus and Mary are carried round the streets of towns all round the country, followed by devout, sometimes fervent, crowds, to mark Christ's crucifixion. The processions walk over and destroy *alfombras* (elaborate carpets of colored sawdust and flower petals). The week peaks on Good Friday.

**Fiesta de la Virgen de la Asunción** (August) Peaking on August 15, this is celebrated with folk dances and parades in Tactic, Sololá, Guatemala City and Jocotenango.

**Día de Todos los Santos** (All Saints' Day; November 1) Sees giant kite festivals in Santiago Sacatepéquez and Sumpango, near Antigua, and the renowned horse races in Todos Santos.

**Quema del Diablo** (The Burning of the Devil; December 7) Starts at around 6pm throughout the country when everyone takes to the streets with their old garbage, physical and psychic, to stoke huge bonfires of trash. This is followed by impressive fireworks displays.

## FOOD & DRINK

*Desayuno chapín*, or Guatemalan breakfast (*chapín* is a local term for Guatemalans), is a large affair involving (at the least) eggs, beans, fried plantains, tortillas and coffee. Anywhere tourists go, you'll also find a range of other breakfasts on offer, from light continental-style affairs to US-style bacon, eggs, *panqueques* (pancakes), cereals, fruit juice and coffee. Breakfast is usually eaten between 6am and 10am.

Travelers attempting an Atkins diet may have to put it on hold for the duration. Guatemala is carbohydrate heaven – don't be surprised if your plate has rice, potatoes and corn and is served up with a healthy stack of tortillas.

Lunch is the biggest meal of the day and is eaten between about noon and 2pm. Eateries usually offer a fixed-price meal of several courses called an *almuerzo* or *menú del día*, which might include from one to four courses and is usually great value. A simple *almuerzo* might consist of soup and a main course featuring meat with rice or potatoes and a little salad or vegetables, or just a *plato típico*: meat or chicken, rice, beans, cheese, salad and tortillas.

*La cena* (dinner) is, for Guatemalans, a lighter version of lunch, usually eaten between about 7pm and 9pm. Even in cities, few restaurants will serve you much after 10pm. In rural areas, sit down no later than 8pm to avoid disappointment. In local and village eateries, supper might be the same as breakfast: eggs, beans and plantains. In restaurants catering to tourists, dinner might be anything from pepper steak to vegetarian Thai curry.

On the coast, seafood is the go. In Livingston make sure you try the delicious coconut and seafood stew called *tapado*. Elsewhere, your fish or shrimp is generally fried, but you can always specify it be cooked differently – *con ajo* (with garlic). These plates generally come with salad, fries and tortillas. Also good is *caldo de mariscos*, a seafood stew that generally contains fish, shrimp and mussels.

## Alcoholic Drinks

Breweries were established in Guatemala by German immigrants in the late 19th century, but they didn't bring a heap of flavor with them. The two nationally distributed beers are Gallo (*gah-yoh*, rooster) and Cabro (goat). The distribution prize goes to Gallo – you'll find it everywhere – but Cabro is darker and more flavorful. Moza is the darkest local beer, but its distribution is limited. Brahma, the Guatemalan-produced version of the Brazilian Brahma beer is preferred by many foreigners (and some locals) and is becoming more widely available.

*Ron* (rum) is one of Guatemala's favorite strong drinks, and though most is cheap in price and taste, some local products are exceptionally fine. Zacapa Centenario is a smooth, aged Guatemalan rum made in Zacapa. It should be sipped slowly, like fine cognac. Ron Botrán Añejo, another dark rum, is also good. Cheaper rums such as Venado are often mixed with soft drinks to make potent but cooling drinks such as the Cuba Libre of rum and

Coke. On the coast you'll find *cocos locos*, green coconuts with the top sliced off and rum mixed with the coconut water.

*Aguardiente* is a sugarcane firewater that flows in cantinas and on the streets, and gets you drunk hard and fast. Look for the signs advertising Quetzalteca Especial. This is the *aguardiente* of choice.

*Ponche* is a potent potable made from pineapple or coconut juice and rum, served hot.

## Nonalcoholic Drinks

Although Guatemala grows some of the world's richest coffee, a good cup is only generally available in top-end restaurants and some tourist restaurants and cafés, because most of the quality beans are exported. If you're really picky, ask if it's *de la maquina* (from the machine). *Té negro* (black tea), most often made from bags, is usually drinkable. Herbal teas are much better. *Té de manzanilla* (chamomile tea), common on restaurant and café menus, is a specific remedy for queasy gut.

*Jugos* (fresh fruit and vegetable juices), *licuados* (milkshakes) and *aguas de frutas* (long, cool, fruit-flavored water drinks) are wildly popular and with good reason: they rock. Many cafés and eateries offer them, and almost every village market and bus terminal has a stand with a battalion of blenders. The basic *licuado* is a blend of fruit or juice with water and sugar. A *licuado con leche* uses milk instead of water.

*Limonada* is a delicious thirst-quencher made with lime juice, water and sugar. Try a *limonada con soda*, which adds a fizzy dimension, and you may have a new drink of choice. *Naranja* is the same thing made with orange juice.

On the coast, the most refreshing non-alcoholic option is a green coconut – you'll see them piled up roadside. The vendor simply slices the top off with a machete and sticks a straw in. If you've never drunk green coconut juice, you have to give it a go – it's delicious!

*Agua pura* (purified water) is widely available in hotels, shops and restaurants. Salvavida is a universally trusted brand. You can order safe-to-drink carbonated water by saying '*soda*.'

Soft drinks as a whole are known as *aguas* (waters). If you want straight, unflavored water, say '*agua pura*,' or you may be asked '*¿Qué sabor?*' ('What flavor?').

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Few places in Latin America are outwardly gay-friendly, and Guatemala is no different. Technically, homosexuality is legal for persons 18 years and older, but the reality can be another story, with harassment and violence against gays too often poisoning the plot. Guatemala City and Quetzaltenango have a small community of transvestite streetwalkers who are often the victims of violent assault. Don't even consider testing the tolerance for homosexual public displays of affection here.

Although Antigua has a palatable – if subdued – scene, affection and action are still kept behind closed doors; there are mixed reports on how public displays go down. In Guatemala City, Genetic and Ephebus (both p98) are the current faves. Quetzaltenango's Palalife Klishe (p143) is surprisingly liberal, with a good, mixed scene and weekly drag shows. In large part, though, gays traveling in Guatemala will find themselves keeping it low-key and pushing the twin beds together.

The websites the **Gully** (www.thegully.com) and **Gay.com** (www.gay.com) have some articles and information relevant to Guatemala.

## HOLIDAYS

The main Guatemalan holiday periods are Semana Santa (Easter Week), Christmas-New Year's and July and August. During Semana Santa room prices rise in many places and it's advisable to book accommodations and transportation in advance.

Guatemalan public holidays:

**New Year's Day** January 1

**Easter** (Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday inclusive) March/April

**Labor Day** May 1

**Army Day** June 30

**Assumption Day** (Día de la Asunción) August 15

**Independence Day** September 15

**Revolution Day** October 20

**All Saints' Day** November 1

**Christmas Eve afternoon** December 24

**Christmas Day** December 25

**New Year's Eve afternoon** December 31

## INTERNET ACCESS

Most medium-sized towns have cybercafés, with fairly reliable connections. Internet café's typically charge less than US\$1 per hour.

If you're traveling with a notebook or handheld computer, be aware that your modem may not work once you leave your

home country. The safest option is to buy a reputable 'global' modem before you leave home, or buy a local PC-card modem if you're spending an extended time in any one country. A second issue is the plug: Guatemala uses 110V, two-pronged, flat plugs like those found in the USA. Third, unless you're sporting a completely wireless system, you'll have to hunt down a hotel room with a phone jack to plug into – or find a jack you can use somewhere else.

If you really want to travel with a laptop, consider using a local ISP, unless you use an international server with access numbers in Guatemala such as AOL or CompuServe.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Gringo's Guide** ([www.thegringosguide.com](http://www.thegringosguide.com)) Useful info on the country's main travel destinations.

**Guatemala** ([www.visitguatemala.com](http://www.visitguatemala.com)) Moderately interesting official site of Inguat, the national tourism institute.

**Lanic Guatemala** (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/guatemala>) The University of Texas' magnificent set of Guatemala links.

**La Ruta Maya Online** ([www.larutamayaonline.com](http://www.larutamayaonline.com)) Reasonably useful mixed bag.

## LEGAL MATTERS

Police officers in Guatemala are sometimes part of the problem rather than the solution. The less you have to do with the law, the better.

Whatever you do, don't get involved in any way with illegal drugs: don't buy or sell, use or carry, or associate with people who do – even if the locals seem to do so freely. As a foreigner you are at a distinct disadvantage, and you may be set up by others. Drug laws in Guatemala are strict and, although enforcement may be uneven, penalties are severe. If you do get caught buying, selling, holding or using drugs, your best first defense might be to suggest you and the officer 'work things out.' Tricky.

## MAPS

The best overall country map for travelers is International Travel Maps' *Guatemala* (1:500,000), costing around US\$10 in Guatemala. The cheaper *Mapa Turístico Guatemala*, produced locally by Intelimapas, tends to be the most up-to-date on the state of Guatemala's roads, many of which have been newly paved in recent years. It also includes plans of many cities. Inguat's *Mapa Vial*

*Turístico* is another worthwhile map. Guatemala City, Antigua, Panajachel and Quetzaltenango all have bookstores selling some of these maps: see city sections. For 1:50,000 and 1:250,000 topographical sheets of all parts of Guatemala, head to the Instituto Geográfico Nacional (p89).

## MEDIA

Among Guatemala's many Spanish language newspapers are **La Prensa Libre** ([www.prensalibre.com](http://www.prensalibre.com)), **El Siglo Veintiuno** ([www.sigloxxi.com](http://www.sigloxxi.com)) and **La Hora** ([www.lahora.com.gt](http://www.lahora.com.gt)). El Quetzalteco is Quetzaltenango's thrice-weekly newspaper.

*USA Today*, the *Miami Herald* and the *Los Angeles Times* are sold in luxury hotels and some city and airport bookstores in the region. *Newsweek* and *Time* are also sometimes available.

## MONEY

Guatemala's currency, the quetzal (Q; pronounced ket-*sahl*), has been fairly stable in the region of Q8=US\$1 for several years. The quetzal is divided into 100 centavos.

You'll find ATMs (cash machines, *cajeros automáticos*) for Visa/Plus System cards in all but the smallest towns, and there are MasterCard/Cirrus ATMs in many places too, so one of these cards is the best basis for your supplies of cash in Guatemala. In addition, many banks give cash advances on Visa cards, and some on MasterCard. You can pay for many purchases with these cards and with American Express cards.

If you don't have one of these cards, a combination of American Express US-dollar traveler's checks and a limited amount of US cash is the way to go. Take some of these as a backup even if you do have a card. Banks all over the country change US-dollar cash, and many of them change US-dollar traveler's checks too. American Express is easily the most recognized traveler's check brand.

In many places you can make payments with US dollars, and a few places will accept traveler's checks. Currencies other than the US dollar are virtually useless in any form, although a small handful of places will now change cash euros.

Banks generally give the best exchange rates on both cash and traveler's checks. If you can't find an open bank, you can often change cash (and occasionally checks) in travel agencies, hotels or shops.

Some towns suffer from change shortages: always try to carry a stash of small bills.

A 10% tip is expected at restaurants. In small *comedores* tipping is optional, but follow the local practice of leaving some spare change. Tour guides are generally tipped around 10%, especially on longer trips.

## Exchange Rates

The table shows currency exchange rates at the time this book went to press.

Country	Unit	Quetzals (Q)
Australia	A\$1	6.70
Canada	C\$1	7.40
euro zone	€1	10.70
Japan	¥100	6.40
New Zealand	NZ\$1	6.10
UK	UK£1	15.80
USA	US\$1	7.90

## PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography is a sensitive subject in Guatemala. Always ask permission before taking portraits, especially of Maya women and children. Don't be surprised if your request is denied. Indigenous children make a habit of requesting payment (usually one quetzal) in return for posing. In certain places, such as the church of Santo Tomás in Chichicastenango, photography is forbidden. Maya ceremonies (should you be so lucky to witness one) are off-limits for photography unless you are given explicit permission. If local people make any sign of being offended, you should put your camera away and apologize immediately, both out of respect and for your own safety. Never take photos of army installations, men with guns or other sensitive military subjects.

## POST

The Guatemalan postal service was privatized in 1999. Generally, letters take eight to 10 days to travel to the US and Canada and 10 to 12 days to reach Europe. Almost all cities and towns (but not villages) have a post office where you can buy stamps and send mail. A letter sent to North America costs around US\$0.40 and to anywhere else around US\$0.50.

The Guatemalan mail system no longer holds *poste restante* or general delivery mail. The easiest and most reliable way to receive mail is through a private address. American

Express offices will hold mail for card members and people using their traveler's checks. It is important to address mail clearly: the last lines should read 'Guatemala, Centro América.'

## RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

By spending money in small, local businesses, staying for extended periods, volunteering and interacting with 'everyday' people, you have the potential to have a positive effect on Guatemala.

Readers should be aware that, while Guatemala certainly uses its Maya heritage to decorate hotel rooms and as eye candy on tourism posters, there is a history of serious neglect of indigenous people. A recent study showed that government spending per capita is lowest in the departments which have the highest indigenous population.

You can do your bit by buying handicrafts directly from the makers or at cooperatives. Many language schools claim to help the local population. Unfortunately, this has become something of a marketing gimmick, and there are some operators who do no such thing – make some independent inquiries before swallowing what they tell you wholesale.

There are many worthwhile NGOs working to improve the situation. You'll find contact details, p213.

Drugs are everywhere in Guatemala, and ridiculously cheap when compared to the prices back home. Be aware that many younger Guatemalans see travelers as role models, and don't understand that the wild behavior that they see is (sometimes) just vacation madness. The other side of it is that, sadly, selling drugs to tourists is much more profitable than just about any other profession, so by being a customer you may be contributing to somebody's decision to drop out of school and become a full-time dealer.

## STUDYING

Guatemala is celebrated for its many language schools. A spot of study here is a great way not only to learn Spanish but also to meet locals and get an inside angle on the culture. Many travelers heading down through Central America to South America make Guatemala an early stop so that they can pick up the Spanish skills they need for their trip.

Guatemalan language schools are a lot cheaper than those in Mexico, but few people

go away disappointed. There are so many schools to choose from that it's essential to check out a few of them before choosing. It's not hard to see whether a school is professional and well organized, or whether its teachers are qualified and experienced.

Antigua is the most popular place to study, with about 75 schools. Quetzaltenango, the second-most popular, attracts a more serious type of student; Antigua has a livelier students' and travelers' social scene. San Pedro La Laguna and Panajachel on the Lago de Atitlán both have a handful of language schools, and if you'd like to learn Spanish while hanging out in a remote mountain town, there are schools in Todos Santos and Nebaj. On average, schools charge US\$110 to US\$120 for four hours of one-on-one classes five days per week plus accommodations with a local family.

You can start any day at many schools, any week at all of them, and study for as long as you like. Decent schools offer a variety of elective activities from salsa classes to movies to volcano hikes. Many schools offer classes in Mayan languages as well as Spanish.

## TELEPHONE

Guatemala has no area or city codes. Calling from other countries, dial the international access code, ☎ 00 in most countries, then the Guatemala country code, ☎ 502, then the eight-digit local number. The international access code from Guatemala is ☎ 00.

Many towns and cities frequented by tourists have privately run call offices where you can make local and international calls for reasonable rates. If the telephone connection is by internet, the rates can be very cheap (US\$0.15 per minute to the USA, US\$0.25 to Europe), but line quality is unpredictable. Calling from a hotel is the most expensive way of telephoning.

A number of companies provide public phone services. The most common street phones, found all over Guatemala, are those of Telgua, for which you need to buy a Telgua phone card (*tarjeta telefónica de Telgua*) from shops and kiosks. Card sales points may advertise the fact with red signs saying *'Ladatel De Venta Aquí.'* The cards come in denominations of 20, 30 and 50 quetzals: you slot them into a Telgua phone, dial your number, and the display will tell you how much time you have left.

Unless it's an emergency, don't use the black phones placed strategically in tourist towns that say 'Press 2 to call the United States free!' This is a bait and switch scam; you put the call on your credit card and return home to find you have paid between US\$8 and US\$20 per minute.

Telgua street phones bear instructions to dial ☎ 147 110 for domestic collect calls and ☎ 147 120 for international collect calls. The latter number is usually successful for the USA and Canada, less so for the rest of the world.

Cell phones are widely used. If you want to rent one in Guatemala, try **Guatemala Ventures** (☎ /fax 7832 3383; 1a Av Sur 15) in Antigua, **Xelapages** (☎ 7761 4395; 4a Calle 19-48) in Quetzaltenango or **Digital Mundo Celular** (☎ 5614 2731; 13a Calle 8-16, Zona 1) in Guatemala City.

Prepaid cell phones are cheap – you can pick up a basic model for around US\$20 (often with your first US\$15 worth of calls free), then buy cards pretty much everywhere to stock it up. Buying a local chip and using your own phone is an option, but compatibility issues (plus the risk of loss/theft) prevent most people from doing so.

Public fax service is available in most sizable towns: look for 'Fax' signs outside shops and offices.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

Guatemala's national tourism institute, **Inguat** ([www.visitguatemala.com](http://www.visitguatemala.com)), has information offices in Guatemala City, Antigua, Panajachel, Quetzaltenango and Flores; a few other towns have departmental, municipal or private-enterprise tourist information offices. See city sections for details. Inguat operates a free 24-hour tourist information and assistance line; call ☎ 1-801 464 8281.

The Guatemalan embassies in the USA, Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the UK can provide some tourist information.

## VISAS & DOCUMENTS

Citizens of the USA, Canada, EU countries, Norway, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Israel and Japan are among those who do not need visas for tourist visits to Guatemala. On entry into Guatemala you will normally be given a 90-day stay (the number 90 will be written on the stamp in your passport). This can normally be extended for a further 90 days at the **Departamento de Extranjería** (Foreigners' Office; ☎ 2411 2411; 6a Av 3-11, Zona 4, Guatemala City; ☎ 8am-

2:30pm Mon-Fri), on the second floor of the Inguat headquarters. For an extension take with you *one* of the following:

- a credit card with a photocopy of both of its sides
- an air ticket out of Guatemala with a photocopy
- US\$500 worth of traveler's checks

The extension will normally be issued in the afternoon of the working day after the day you apply.

Citizens of Iceland, South Africa and eastern European countries are among those who do need visas to visit Guatemala. Inquire at a Guatemalan embassy well in advance of travel.

Visa regulations are subject to change and it's always worth checking them with a Guatemalan embassy before you go.

In 2006 Guatemala joined the CA-4, a Central American trade agreement, designed to facilitate the movement of people and goods between Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras. The bad news for travelers is that on entering the CA-4 region, you now get 90 days for the entire region, meaning that after the original 90 days and one extension, you have to leave (officially for 72 hours). From Guatemala the logical exits are Mexico and Belize. For more information on the CA-4, see p733.

## VOLUNTEERING

If you really want to get to the heart of Guatemalan matters and you've altruistic leanings, consider volunteer work. Volunteering

is rewarding and exposes foreigners to the rich and varied local culture typically out of reach for the average traveler. Opportunities abound, from caring for abandoned animals and kids to tending fields. Travelers with specific skills such as nurses, doctors or teachers are particularly encouraged to investigate volunteering in Guatemala.

Most volunteer posts require basic or better Spanish skills and a minimum time commitment. Depending on the position and the organization, you might have to pay for room and board for the duration of your stay. Before making a commitment, you might want to talk to past volunteers and read the fine print associated with the position.

Some excellent sources of information on volunteer opportunities are Proyecto Mosaico Guatemala and AmeriSpan Guatemala, both in Antigua (see p109), and EntreMundos, based in Quetzaltenango (see p141). Many language schools have close links to volunteer projects and can introduce you to the world of volunteering.

## WOMEN TRAVELERS

Women should encounter no special problems traveling in Guatemala. In fact, solo women will be pleasantly surprised by how gracious and helpful most locals are. The primary thing you can do to make it easy for yourself while traveling here is to dress modestly. Modesty in dress is highly regarded, and if you practice it you will usually be treated with respect.

Specifically, shorts should be worn only at the beach, not in town, and especially not in

### VOLUNTEERING: OUR TOP PICKS

There are a wealth of volunteering opportunities available in Guatemala. A lot of them center on education and environmental issues. Here are a few off-beat ones that may appeal to many travelers:

**AIDG** ([www.aidg.org](http://www.aidg.org)) Works with Guatemalan engineers to provide renewable energy solutions for rural villages, and offers volunteer installation projects.

**Ak' Tenamit** ([www.aktenamit.org](http://www.aktenamit.org)) Grass-roots organization working to promote ecotourism around the Río Dulce area.

**Arcas** ([www.arcasguatemala.com](http://www.arcasguatemala.com)) Works to protect the endangered sea turtle population on the southern coast. Also has projects in El Petén.

**EntreMundos** ([www.entremundos.org](http://www.entremundos.org)) Produces a bimonthly newspaper and acts as a bridge between volunteers and NGOs.

**Ix Canaan** ([www.ixcanaan.org](http://www.ixcanaan.org)) A community library and literacy project in El Remate in El Petén.

**Proyecto Payaso** ([www.proyectopayaso.org](http://www.proyectopayaso.org)) A traveling clown troupe specializing in community AIDS awareness and education.

the highlands. Skirts should be at or below the knee. Wear a bra, as going braless is considered provocative. Many local women swim with T-shirts over their swimsuits; in places where they do this, you might want to follow suit to avoid stares (and sunburn).

Women traveling alone can expect plenty of attempts by men to talk to them. Often they are just curious and not out for a foreign conquest. It's up to you how to respond, but there's no need to be intimidated. Consider the situation and circumstances (on a bus is one thing, on a barstool another) and stay confident. Try to sit next to women or children on the bus if that makes you more comfortable. Local women rarely initiate conversations, but usually have lots of interesting things to say once the ball is rolling.

Nasty rumors about Western women kidnapping Guatemalan children for a variety of sordid ends have all but died down. Still,

women travelers should be cautious around children, especially indigenous kids.

Although there's no need to be paranoid, the possibility of rape and assault does exist. Use your normal traveler's caution – avoid walking alone in isolated places or through city streets late at night, and don't hitchhike.

### **WORKING**

Some travelers find work in bars, restaurants and places to stay in Antigua, Panajachel or Quetzaltenango, but the wages are just survival pay. Río Dulce is the place to go if you're looking to crew on a boat around the Caribbean or north to the States.

If you are considering working here, bear in mind that the job you take could probably go to a Guatemalan, and the argument that 'they come to my country and take our jobs' is a particularly relevant one.