

Central Pacific Coast



Stretching from the rough and ready port city of Puntarenas to the tiny town of Uvita on the shores of Bahía Drake, the central Pacific coast is home to both wet and dry tropical rain forests, sun-drenched sandy beaches and a healthy dose of rare wildlife. On shore, national parks protect endangered animals, such as the squirrel monkey and the scarlet macaw, while off-shore waters are home to migrating whales and pods of dolphins.

With so much biodiversity packed into a small geographic area, it's no wonder the central Pacific coast is often thought of as Costa Rica in miniature. Given its close proximity to San José and the Central Valley, and its well-developed system of paved roads, the region has traditionally served as a weekend getaway for sun-worshippers, tree-huggers and fishermen.

Sadly, the picture isn't entirely rosy, especially given the fierce battle between the forces of development and conservation that is playing out in the region. Up and down the entire coast, towering residential blocks, gated communities and endless condo developments are transforming the coastline into a vast suburb of moneyed North American and European expats. The sad result is that a region once favored by Tico holidaymakers is now starting to look more and more like a foreign enclave.

These days, it's frustrating to see rampant construction along the coastline with seemingly few plans for sustainable development. However, it's important to see the bigger picture, namely the stunning nature that first put the central Pacific coast on the map. Although at times it can be hard to look beyond the towering cranes, spotting a troop of monkeys swinging through the canopy will quickly renew your faith in the natural beauty of Costa Rica.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Watching squirrel monkey troops scamper along the beaches at **Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio** (p353)
- Listening to squawking pairs of rare scarlet macaws flying overhead at **Parque Nacional Carara** (p323)
- Surfing the breaks at **Dominical** (p359), **Playa Hermosa** (p339) and **Matapalo** (p358)
- Spotting pods of breaching humpback whales at **Parque Nacional Marino Ballena** (p365)
- Clambering up the canopy platforms at **Hacienda Barú National Wildlife Refuge** (p359)



History

Prior to the tourism boom in Costa Rica, the central Pacific coast – particularly the Quepos port area – was historically one of the country's largest banana-producing regions. However, in response to the 1940 banana blight that affected most of Central America, the United Fruit Company (also known as Chiquita Banana) introduced African palms to the area. Native to West Africa, these palms are primarily cultivated for their large, reddish fruits, which are pressed to produce a variety of cooking oils.

Although the banana blight finally ended in the 1960s, the palm plantations were firmly entrenched and starting to turn a profit. Since palm oil is easily transported in tanker trucks, Quepos was able to close its shipping port in the 1970s, which freed up resources and allowed the city to invest more heavily in the palm-oil industry. In 1995, the plantations were sold to Palma Tica, which continues to operate the plantations today. With the exception of commercial fishing and tourism, the palm-oil plantations serve as the primary source of employment in the Quepos area.

In more recent years, this stretch of the Pacific has grown increasingly popular with the North American package-holiday crowd, as it's easy to squeeze in a one-week retreat and be back to work on Monday. Unable to resist the draw of paradise, a good number of baby boomers nearing retirement have also begun snatching up beachfront property.

As a result, beach towns like Jacó that were once the exclusive enclaves of vacationing Tico families are now quickly being colonized by American-style strip malls, gated communities and 4x4 car dealerships. Foreign investment blessed this region with continuous development and solid infrastructure, though Ticos are starting to wonder if they will soon feel like tourists in their own backyard.

Things are indeed changing quickly, and it's difficult to say which interests will win out in the end. A new marina at Quepos will bring in a larger volume of tourists visiting Costa Rica on cruise ships, though it's difficult to imagine that the authenticity of the coastal fishing villages and palm-oil plantations could ever be lost.

Climate

West of the Cordillera Central, rains fall heavily during the months between April and November. The hillsides are particularly lush

and green during this time, while in summer (December to March) little rain falls, leaving the countryside dry and barren looking.

Parks & Reserves

The central Pacific is home to a number of parks and reserves, including the most-visited national park in Costa Rica.

Hacienda Barú National Wildlife Refuge (p359)

A small reserve that encompasses a range of tropical habitats, and is part of a major biological corridor that protects a wide range of species.

Parque Nacional Carara (p323)

Home to no less than 400 different species of birds, including the rare scarlet macaw, which is amazingly a commonly sighted species in the park.

Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio (p353)

The pristine beaches, rain forest-clad mountains and dense wildlife never fail to disappoint in Costa Rica's most toured national park.

Parque Nacional Marino Ballena (p365)

This is a vitally important marine park, which is the country's premier destination for both whale- and dolphin-watching.

Getting There & Around

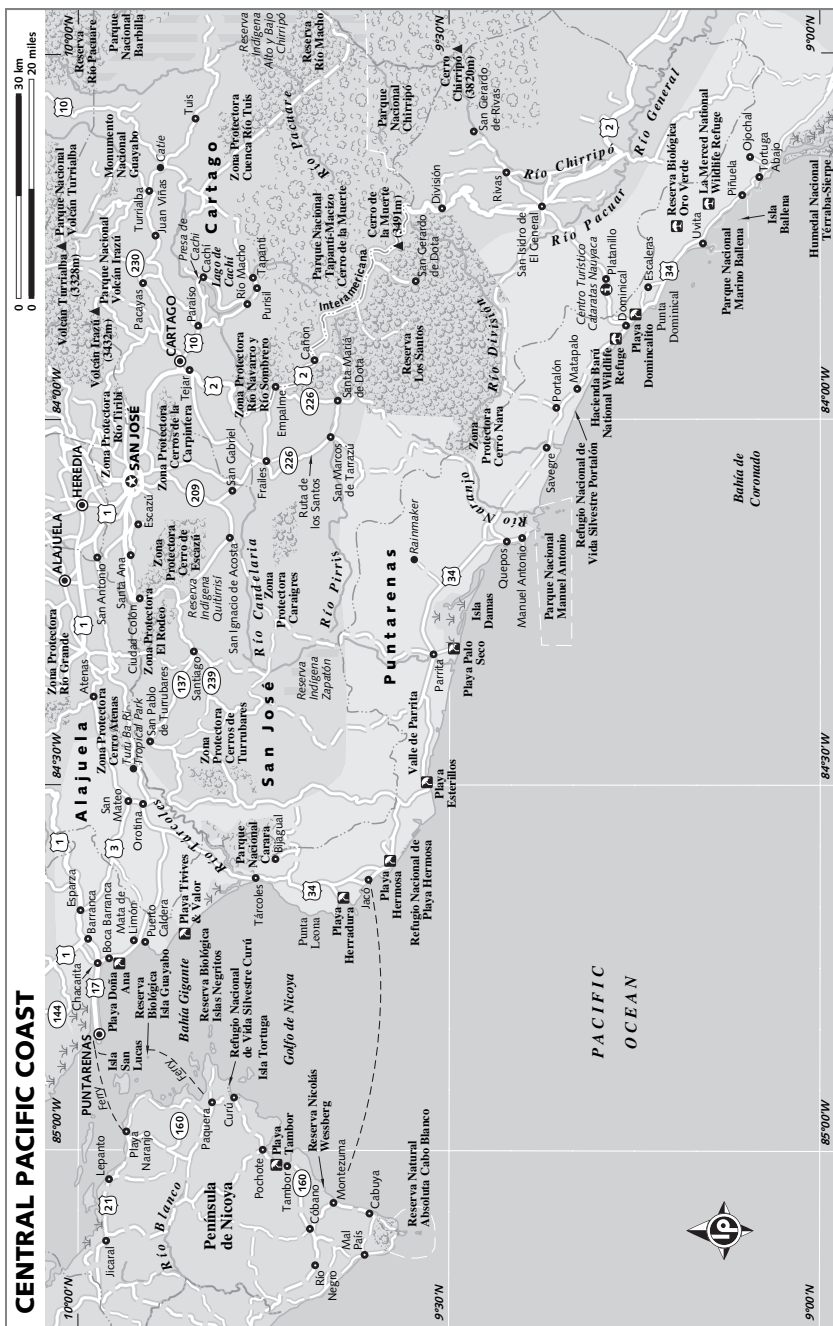
The best option for exploring the coast in-depth is to have your own form of private transportation. With the exception of the unpaved stretch of road between Quepos and Dominical, the central Pacific coast has some of the country's best roads.

Major cities and towns along the coast, such as Puntarenas, Jacó, Quepos, Dominical and Uvita, are serviced by regular buses. Generally speaking, public transportation is frequent and efficient, and is certainly more affordable than renting a car.

Both **NatureAir** (www.natureair.com) and **Sansa** (www.sansa.com) service Quepos, which is the base town for accessing Manuel Antonio. Prices vary according to season and availability, though you can expect to pay a little less than US\$75 for a flight from San José or Liberia.

PUNTARENAS TO QUEPOS

This increasingly populated stretch of coastline extends from the maritime port of Puntarenas, a historic shipping hub that has fallen on harder times, to the booming town of Quepos, which is a gateway to



Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio. Centered on the epicenter of ‘gringolandia,’ namely the North American colony of Jacó, this region is experiencing rapid growth and development in response to wave upon wave of foreign investment. However, while there are some places where foreigners outnumber Ticos by a long shot, others are home to little more than forested hillsides, wilderness beaches and large concentrations of remarkable wildlife.

PUNTARENAS

Port cities the world over have a reputation for polluted waters, seedy environs and slow decay, which is pretty much a good way to sum up Costa Rica’s gateway to the Pacific. As the closest coastal town to San José, Puntarenas has long been a popular escape for landlocked Ticos, especially since it takes just a few hours to reach here from San José and surrounding environs. However, although the town council has done a commendable job in cleaning the beaches and renovating the boardwalk, it’s hard to escape the feeling that you’re bathing and/or sunning yourself in a container yard.

In the years to come, visitor numbers to Puntarenas will likely drop, as the new San José–Orotina Hwy (see p326) pulls the traffic further south. In the meantime, Puntarenas is struggling to reap the benefits of increased tourism, though sadly failing to capture the interest (or the dollars) of foreign investors. With that said, the city’s ferry terminal does serve as a convenient way to access the more pristine beaches further south in southern Nicoya, though few travelers are keen to spend any more of their time here than it takes to get on and off the boat.

History

Prior to the mid-20th century, Puntarenas was the largest and most significant open-water port in Costa Rica. Some of the finest coffees to grace European tables and coffee cups were carried to the continent on Puntarenas-registered freighters, and the steady flow of capital back into the city transformed Puntarenas into the ‘Pearl of the Pacific.’ However, after the construction of the railway leading from the Central Valley to Puerto Limón in 1890, the establishment

FIVE AGAINST THE SEA

In January 1988 five fishermen from Puntarenas set out on a trip that was meant to last seven days. Just five days into the voyage, their small vessel was facing 30ft waves triggered by northerly winds known as El Norte. Adrift for 142 days, they would face sharks, inclement weather, acute hunger and parching thirsts. They were finally rescued – 7200km away – by a Japanese fishing boat. *Five Against the Sea* by American reporter Ron Arias recounts in gripping detail the adversities they faced and how they survived.

of a more direct shipping route to Europe initiated the city’s decline in importance, though Puntarenas did manage to remain a major port on the Pacific coast.

Orientation

Situated at the end of a sandy peninsula (8km long but only 100m to 600m wide), Puntarenas is Costa Rica’s most significant Pacific coastal town, and is just 110km west of San José by paved highway. The city has 60 calles (streets) running north to south, but only five avenidas (avenues) running west to east at its widest point. As in all of Costa Rica, street names are largely irrelevant, and landmarks are used for orientation (see p537).

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Coonatramar (☎ 2661 9011, 2661 1069; cnr Calle 31 & Av 3; per hr US\$1.50; ☎ 8am–5pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Monseñor Sanabria (☎ 2663 0033; 8km east of town)

MONEY

The major banks along Avenida 3, to the west of the market, exchange money and are equipped with 24-hour ATMs.

Banco de San José (cnr Av 3 & Calle 3) is connected to the Cirrus network.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Puntarenas tourism office (Catup; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri) Opposite the pier on the 2nd floor above the Bâncredito. It closes for lunch.



Sights & Activities

La Casa de la Cultura (☎ 2661 1394; Av Central btwn Calles 3 & 5; 🕒 10am-4pm Mon-Fri) has an art gallery with occasional exhibits as well as a performance space offering seasonal cultural events. Behind the Casa is the **Museo Histórico Marino** (☎ 2661 5036, 2256 4139; admission free; 🕒 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sun). The museum describes the history of Puntarenas through audiovisual presentations, old photos and artifacts.

The **Puntarenas Marine Park** (adult/child under 12yr US\$7/1.50; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) has an aquarium that showcases manta rays and other creatures from the Pacific. The park sits on the site of the old train station and has a tiny splash pool, snack bar, gift shop and information center.

You can stroll along the beach or the aptly named **Paseo de los Turistas** (Tourist's Stroll), a pedestrian boulevard stretching along the southern edge of town. Cruise ships make day visits to the eastern end of this road, and a variety of **souvenir stalls** and *sodas* (lunch counters) are there to greet passengers.

For information on sights around Puntarenas, see p322.

Tours

Coonatramar (☎ 2661 9011, 2661 1069; www.coonatramar.com; cnr Av 3 & Calle 31) can organize tours to the islands in and around Bahía Gigante as well as fishing charters. Prices vary depending on the size of your party and the nature of your trip.

Festivals & Events

Puntarenas is one of the seaside towns that celebrate the **Fiesta de La Virgen del Mar** (Festival of the Virgin of the Sea) on the Saturday closest to July 16. Fishing boats and elegant yachts are beautifully bedecked with lights, flags and all manner of fanciful embellishments as they sail around the harbor, seeking protection from the Virgin as they begin another year at sea. There are also boat races, a carnival, and plenty of food, drink and dancing.

Sleeping

There's no shortage of accommodation in Puntarenas, though like most port cities the world over, finding a secure place that doesn't charge by the hour isn't always an easy proposition. However, we have tried to list places that we would be comfortable

narrowest portion of the peninsula, this somewhat historic yacht club caters to members of both local and foreign yachters as well as the public. Considering that wealthy yachters are fairly discerning when it comes to accommodation, rooms at the club are surprisingly plain. However, Cocal is a vastly different world than Puntarenas, especially since the grounds are home to an attractive maritime-themed restaurant-bar as well as a luxurious pool. If you're traveling in a group, the modern villas can easily accommodate a gaggle of five yachties.

Hotel Tioga (☎ 2661 0271; Paseo de los Turistas btwn Calles 17 & 19; d standard/deluxe/balcony incl breakfast from US\$65/85/100; 📶 🚰 🚿) Opened in 1959, this is the most established hotel in Puntarenas, and arguably the best place in the city to lie down for the night. Prices vary according to the room, though it's worth spending a few extra dollars for the larger ones, which have sweeping views of the sea. However, you really can't go wrong as all of the rooms feature modern amenities and generally good vibes.

Hotel y Apartotel Alamar (☎ 2661 4343; cnr Paseo de los Turistas & Calle 31; d/tr/q standard US\$75/95/115, d/q apt US\$125/150; 📶 🚰 🚿) If you're looking for a bit more space to stretch your legs, this upmarket hotel (for Puntarenas at least) offers enormous family-style rooms and apartments at surprisingly affordable prices. Rooms are all spotless, with attractive tiled floors and tropical flourishes scattered about, while apartments have fully equipped kitchens with everything you could want to whip up a feast. As family fun is the theme of the Alamar, there are two pools (one for kiddies) where guests congregate.

Eating

The cheapest food is available in the small stands and restaurants near the Pali supermarket. This area is also inhabited by sailors, drunks and prostitutes, but it seems raffish rather than dangerous – during the day, at least. Restaurants along the Paseo de los Turistas are, predictably, filled with *turistas* (tourists).

There's a row of fairly cheap *sodas* on the beach by the Paseo de los Turistas, between Calle Central and Calle 3. They are good for people-watching, and serve snacks and non-alcoholic drinks. You'll also find a collection of Chinese restaurants on Avenida 1 east of the church.

bringing our own mother to, so you can sleep easy knowing that there won't be any unwanted midnight visitors.

Hotel Cabezas (☎ 2661 1045; Av 1 btwn Calles 2 & 4; s/d from US\$12/22; 📶) In a city where most hotels charge by the hour, this no-nonsense budget option is an excellent choice. Pastel-painted rooms have functional overhead fans and screened windows, which means you'll sleep deeply without needing air-con. Although you certainly shouldn't leave your valuables strewn about, this hotel is fairly safe and secure.

Gran Hotel Imperial (☎ 2661 0579; Paseo de los Turistas btwn Calles Central & 2; s/d from US\$14/24; 📶) Well situated near the bus stations, this dilapidated and rickety wooden structure still manages to retain a little Old World charm. Cavernous rooms (some with spacious balconies) are cool and clean, and have subtle colonial flourishes, such as wooden furniture and dated paintings to help set the atmosphere. A beer cooler of Imperial (Costa Rica's favorite beer) greets you when you enter.

Costa Rica Yacht Club (☎ 2661 0784; s/d from US\$35/45, villa with air-con US\$115; 📶 🚰 🚿) Some 3km east of downtown in Cocal at the

La Casona (cnr Av 1 & Calle 9; casados US\$3-6) This bright yellow house is marked with a small, modest sign, but it's an incredibly popular lunch spot, attracting countless locals who jam onto the large deck and into the interior courtyard. Portions are heaped, and soups are served in bathtub-sized bowls – bring your appetite.

Restaurant Kaite Negro (☎ 2661 2093; cnr Av 1 & Calle 17; dishes US\$2-9) On the north side of town, this rambling restaurant is popular with locals, and serves good seafood and a good variety of tasty *bocas*. If you really want to see the place swinging, the open-air courtyard comes to life on weekends with live music and all-night dancing.

La Yunta Steakhouse (☎ 2661 3216; Paseo de los Turistas btwn Calles 19 & 21; meals US\$6-10) Your culinary mecca for every imaginable cut of meat has professional service, great ocean views and enough hunks of dead animal to arouse your doctor's anger.

Drinking & Entertainment

Entertainment in the port tends to revolve around boozing and flirting, though the occasional cultural offering does happen at La Casa de la Cultura (see p320). If you're looking for the more traditional liquid entertainment, do as the Ticos do and head for the countless bars that line Paseo de los Turistas. A time-honored spot for shaking some booty is **Capitán Moreno's** (Paseo de los Turistas at Calle 13), which has a huge dance floor right on the beach. Another popular spot is **El Oasis del Pacífico** (cnr Paseo de los Turistas & Calle 5), which has a lengthy bar and a warehouse-sized dance floor. Hey – it's not Cancún, but you can definitely have a bit of fun here if you go with the right mindset.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Car and passenger ferries bound for Paquera and Playa Naranjo depart several times a day from the **northwestern dock** (Av 3 btwn Calles 31 & 33). (Other docks are used for private boats.) If you are driving and will be taking the car ferry, arrive at the dock early to get in line. The vehicle section tends to fill up quickly and you may not make it on. In addition, make sure that you have purchased your ticket from the walk-up ticket window *before* driving onto the ferry. You will not be admitted onto the boat if you don't already have a ticket.

Schedules are completely variable, change seasonally (or even at whim), and can be affected by inclement weather. Check with the ferry office by the dock for any changes. Many of the hotels in town also have up-to-date schedules posted.

To Playa Naranjo (for transfer to Nicoya and points west), **Coonatramar** (☎ 2661 1069; northwestern dock) has several daily departures (passenger/car US\$3/10, two hours).

To Paquera (for transfer to Montezuma and Mal País), **Ferry Peninsular** (☎ 2641 0118; northwestern dock) also has several daily departures (passenger/car US\$3/10, two hours).

BUS

Buses for San José depart from the large navy-blue building on the north corner of Calle 2 and Paseo de los Turistas. Book your ticket ahead of time on holidays and weekends.

Buses for other destinations leave from across the street, on the beach side of the paseo.

Jacó US\$1.50, 1½ hours, 5am, 11am, 2:30pm and 4:30pm.

Liberia US\$2, two hours, 4:40am, 5:30am, 7am, 8:30am, 9:30am, 11am, 2:30pm and 3pm.

Nicoya, Santa Cruz & Filadelfia US\$2.75, three to five hours, 6am and 3:45pm.

Quepos US\$3, 3½ hours, 5am, 11am, 2:30pm and 4:30pm.

San José US\$2.50, 2½ hours, every hour from 4am to 9pm.

Santa Elena, Monteverde US\$2.50, three to four hours, 1:15pm and 2:15pm.

Getting Around

Buses marked 'Ferry' run up Avenida Central and go to the ferry terminal, 1.5km from downtown. The taxi fare from the San José bus terminal in Puntarenas to the northwestern ferry terminal is about US\$2.

Buses for the port of Caldera (also going past Playa Doña Ana and Mata de Limón) leave from the market about every hour and head out of town along Avenida Central.

AROUND PUNTARENAS

The road heading south from Puntarenas skirts along the coastline, and a few kilometers out of town you'll start to see the forested peaks of the Cordillera de Tilaran in the distance. Just as the port city fades into the distance, the water gets cleaner, the air crisper and the vegetation more lush. At this point, you should take a deep breath and heave a sigh of relief – the Pacific coastline gets a whole lot more beautiful as you head further south.

About 8km south of Puntarenas is **Playa San Isidro**, the first 'real' beach on the central Pacific coast. Although this is popular with beachcombers from Puntarenas, surfers prefer to push on 4km south to **Boca Barranca**, which boasts what is reportedly the third-longest left-hand surf break in the world. Conditions here are best at low tide, and it is possible to surf here year-round. However, be advised that there aren't much in the way of services out here, so be sure that you're confident in the water and seek local advice before hitting the break.

Just beyond the river mouth is a pair of beaches known as **Playas Doña Ana & El Segundo**, which are relatively undeveloped and have an isolated and unhurried feel to them. Surfers can find some decent breaks here, too, though like Playa San Isidro, they are more popular for Tico beachcombers on day trips from Puntarenas, especially during weekends in high season. Day-use fees for the beach are US\$1.50/0.75 per adult/child and the beach is open 8am to 5pm. There are snack bars, picnic shelters and changing areas, and supervised swimming areas.

The next stop along the coast is **Mata de Limón**, a picturesque little hamlet that is situated on a mangrove lagoon, and locally famous for its birding. If you arrive during low tide, flocks of feathered creatures descend on the lagoon to scrounge for tasty morsels. Mata de Limón is divided by a river, with the lagoon and most facilities on the south side.

The major port on the Pacific coast is **Puerto Caldera**, which you pass soon after leaving Mata de Limón. There aren't any sights here (unless you've ever wondered what a container yard looks like), and the beach is unremarkable unless you're a surfer, in which case there are a few good breaks to be had here (though be careful as the beach is rocky in places).

Buses heading for Caldera Port depart hourly from the market in Puntarenas, and can easily drop you off at any of the spots listed above. If you're driving, the break at Boca Barranca is located near the bridge on the Costanera Sur (South Coastal Highway), while the entrance to Playa Doña Ana and El Segundo is a little further south (look for a sign that says 'Paradero Turístico Doña Ana.') Also, the turnoff for Mata de Limón is located about 5.5km south of Playa Doña Ana.

TURU BA RI TROPICAL PARK & AROUND

The **Turu Ba Ri Tropical Park** (☎ 2250 0705; www.turubari.com; adult/student US\$60/55; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a collection of botanical gardens reflecting each of the topographic zones native to Costa Rica. As you walk along impeccably manicured trails, you'll pass through palm forests, pasture lands, herbariums, cactus fields, bamboo groves, bromeliad gardens, orchid beds and a loma canopy. The gardens are accessed by an aerial cable car, which is included in the price of admission.

If you're an adrenaline junkie, there is also a canopy tour (adult/student US\$60/55) that has you swinging through the trees, as well as opportunities for horseback riding and rock climbing. If you're traveling with the little ones, they'll be content for hours either playing in the two hedge mazes or checking out the exhibits in the reptile house.

Although there is no accommodation in the park, there is a wonderfully intimate bed and breakfast in the nearby town of San Pablo de Turrubares, namely **Ama Tierra** (☎ 2419 0110; www.amatierra.com; s/d with breakfast US\$127/149; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎). Accommodation is in a handful of warm and wooden *casetas* that are scattered along landscaped trails and manicured gardens, though the highlight is its onsite holistic center, yoga studio and organic restaurant. If you're interested in detoxing the body and clearing the mind, Ama Tierra offers a number of multiday packages that are dedicated to improving your well-being. San Pablo de Turrubares is located approximately 10km east of Orotina on the road to Santiago de Puriscal – once in town, follow signs for the B&B.

The park is easily accessed by buses from Orotina (US\$0.50, 30 minutes), which depart at 5:30am, noon and 4:30pm. However, most tourists organize private transportation to the park either from Puntarenas or San José. If you're driving, look for a road to the east, just south of Orotina signed 'Coopebaro, Puriscal.' This road goes over an Indiana Jones-worthy wooden suspension bridge to the park. The park is about 9km beyond the bridge, and half the road is paved.

PARQUE NACIONAL CARARA

Straddling the transition between the dry forests of Costa Rica's northwest and the sodden rain forests of the southern Pacific lowlands,

GARABITO

The area encompassed by Parque Nacional Carara (see p323) was once home to a legendary indigenous hero, a local *cacique* (chief) named Garabito. Commanding a vast area from the Golfo de Nicoya to the Central Valley, he led a fierce struggle against the Spanish.

A favorite tactic of the Spanish to weaken native resistance was to decapitate tribal leadership – literally. In 1560, the Guatemalan high command dispatched a military force to arrest Garabito. The wily chieftain used the forest to elude capture, but the Spanish managed to seize his wife, Biriteka, as a hostage. Garabito countered by having one of his followers dress up as the chieftain who allowed himself to be captured. While the camp celebrated catching who they thought was Garabito, the real Garabito escaped with his wife.

Garabito's ploy, however, was the exception. The more common fate of captured *caciques* was to star in an imperial morality play. In Act One, the shackled chief sat through a trial at which his numerous transgressions against God and king were expounded. The chief responded to the charges, then was sentenced to death. In Act Two, a public execution was staged, whereby the guilty chief had his eyes and tongue cut out, was shot with a crossbow, was beheaded with an axe, had his severed head displayed on a pike, and finally had his body burned to ashes. The End.

this **national park** is a biological melting pot of the two. Acacias intermingle with strangler figs, and cacti with deciduous kapok trees, creating a heterogeneity of habitats with a blend of wildlife to match. The significance of this national park cannot be understated – surrounded by a sea of cultivation and livestock, it is one of the few areas in the transition zone where wildlife finds sanctuary.

Carara is also the famed home to one of Costa Rica's most charismatic bird species, namely the scarlet macaw. While catching a glimpse of this tropical wonder is a rare proposition in most of the country, macaw sightings are virtually guaranteed at Carara. And of course, there are more than 400 other avian species flitting around the canopy, as well as Costa Rica's largest crocodiles in the waterways – best to leave your swim trunks at home!

Orientation

Situated at the mouth of the Río Tárcoles, the 5242-hectare park is only 50km southeast of Puntarenas by road or about 90km west of San José via the Orotina highway. The dry season from December to April is the easiest time to go, though the animals are still there in the wet months. March and April are the driest months. Rainfall is almost 3000mm annually, which is less than in the rain forests further south. It's fairly hot, with average temperatures of 25°C/77°F to 28°C/82°F – but it's cooler within the rain forest. An umbrella is important in the wet season and occasionally needed in the dry

months. Make sure you have insect repellent. According to the park rangers, the best chance of spotting wildlife is at 7am when the park opens.

Dangers & Annoyances

Increased tourist traffic along the Pacific coast has unfortunately resulted in an increase in petty theft. Vehicles parked at the trailheads are routinely broken into, and although there may be guards on duty, it is advised that drivers leave their cars in the lot at the Carara ranger station and walk along the Costanera Sur for 2km north or 1km south. Also, be sure to travel in a group and don't carry unnecessary valuables as muggings are reported here occasionally. Alternatively, park beside the Restaurante Ecológico Los Cocodrilos (see opposite).

Sights

With the help of a hired guide, it's possible to visit the archaeological remains of various indigenous **burial sites** located within the park, though they're tiny and unexciting compared to anything you might see in Mexico or Guatemala. At the time of the Europeans' arrival in Costa Rica, these sites were located in an area inhabited by an indigenous group known as the Huetar (Carara actually means 'crocodile' in the Huetar language). Unfortunately, not much is known about this group, as little cultural evidence was left behind. Today, the few remaining Huetar are confined to several small villages in the Central Valley. For

more on the area's indigenous history, see boxed text Garabito, opposite.

If you're driving from Puntarenas or San José, pull over to the left immediately after crossing the Río Tárcoles bridge, also known as **Crocodile Bridge**. If you scan the sandbanks below the bridge, you'll have a fairly good chance of seeing as many as 30 basking crocodiles. Although they're visible year-round, the best time for viewing is low tide during the dry season. Binoculars help a great deal.

Crocodiles this large are generally rare in Costa Rica as they've been hunted vigorously for their leather. However, the crocs are tolerated here as they feature prominently in a number of wildlife tours that depart from Tárcoles. And of course, the crocs don't mind as they're hand-fed virtually every day. Please people, we're asking you nicely – don't feed the animals.

Activities

WILDLIFE-WATCHING

The most exciting bird for many visitors to see, especially in June or July, is the brilliantly patterned scarlet macaw, a rare bird that is common to Parque Nacional Carara. Their distinctive call echoes loudly through the canopy, usually moments before a pair of these soaring birds appears against the blue sky. If you're having problems spotting them, it may help to inquire at the ranger's station, which keeps tabs on where nesting pairs are located.

Dominated by open secondary forest punctuated by patches of dense, mature forest and wetlands, Carara offers some superb birding. Over 400 different species of birds inhabit the reserve, though your chances of spotting rarer species will be greatly enhanced with the help of an experienced guide. Some commonly sighted species include orange-billed sparrow, five kinds of trogons, crimson-fronted parakeet, blue-headed parrot, golden-naped woodpecker, rose-throated becard, gray-headed tanager, long-tailed manikins and rufous-tailed jacamar (just to name a few!).

Birds aside, the trails at Carara are home to several mammal species, including red brocket, white-tailed deer, collared peccary, monkey, sloth and agouti. The national park is also home to one of Costa Rica's largest populations of tayra, a weasel-like animal that scurries along the forest floor. And, although most travelers aren't too keen on stumbling

upon an American crocodile, some truly monstrous specimens can be viewed from a safe distance at the nearby Crocodile Bridge (see left).

HIKING

Some 600m south of the Crocodile Bridge on the left-hand side is a locked gate leading to the **Sendero Laguna Meándrica** trail. This trail penetrates deep into the reserve and passes through open, secondary forest and patches of dense, mature forest and wetlands. About 4km from the entrance is Laguna Meándrica, which has large populations of heron, smoothbill and kingfisher. If you continue past the lagoon, you'll have a good chance of spotting mammals and the occasional crocodile, though you will have to turn back to exit.

Another 2km south of the trailhead is the **Carara ranger station** (admission US\$8; ☎ 7am-4pm), where you can get information and enter the park. There are bathrooms, picnic tables and a short nature trail. Guides can be hired for US\$15 per person (two minimum) for a two-hour hike. About 1km further south are two loop trails. The first, **Sendero Las Arceas**, is 1.2km long and can be combined with the second, **Sendero Quebrada Bonita** (another 1.5km). Both trails pass through primary forest, which is characteristic of most of the park.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping is not allowed, and there's nowhere to stay in the park. As a result, most people come on day trips from neighboring towns and cities such as Jacó (p328).

Restaurante Ecológico Los Cocodrilos (☎ 2428 9009; d from US\$24) Located on the north side of the Río Tárcoles bridge, this is the nearest place to stay and eat. Rooms are unexciting, though it's a cheap and convenient base for getting to the park before the tour buses arrive. Its restaurant has meals for US\$4 to US\$6, and is extremely popular with travelers stopping to check out the crocodiles. It is open from 6am to 8pm. If you're nervous about leaving your car at the trailhead, there is secure parking here in a guarded lot.

Getting There & Away

There are no buses to Carara, but any bus between Puntarenas and Jacó can leave you at the entrance. You can also catch buses headed north or south in front of the Restaurante

SUPERHIGHWAY TO THE COAST

Regardless of which side of the development-conservation debate you gravitate toward, both sides can agree that the story of a sleepy little town being turned into a booming international city is something of a cliché here in Costa Rica. Indeed, places like Jacó and Tamarindo were little more than beach villages a decade ago, though today they're international destinations that are slowly being transformed by waves upon waves of foreign investment.

Although the question regarding where and when the next great destination will spring up is a popular one in Costa Rica, it's a good bet that it might be the relatively unknown coastal town of Orotina. Of course, if a town lies near the terminus of a proposed superhighway linking San José to the central Pacific coast, it doesn't take a professional gambler or a math whiz to tell you that the odds are in your favor.

As of early 2008, the Costa Rican government was well underway in its plans to construct a new superhighway between San José and the Caldera Port. When the much-anticipated road is finished in 2011 (or possibly before), Orotina will be a mere 45-minute drive from the capital (it's currently two hours' drive sans traffic).

The town will also emerge as the major gateway to destinations further south along the coast, such as Jacó, Dominical and Quepos. And, considering that Orotina is already linked to the Interamerican Hwy, which grants easy access to the Nicoya peninsula, the superhighway to the coast will be the final spoke in the transport link between the capital of San José and Guanacaste.

And, if you're still not convinced that change is on the horizon, all you need to do is look at the numbers. Ten years ago, a square meter of land in Orotina cost US\$60, though the going rate as of early 2008 was well over US\$500. Of course, the land is being sold off in bulk and snatched up for a lot less than this amid reports that large Korean, Chinese and Israeli developers are unfurling plans to create vast office parks and commercial centers.

Even tax officials in Orotina are batting their eyes in confusion. According to figures printed in the *Tico Times* newspaper, property tax revenues have been soaring through the roof. A few years back, annual property tax revenues in Orotina were no more than US\$30,000, though the canton collected a whopping US\$134,800 in 2007. In fact, much of this money was the result of the 1.5% transfer tax that must be paid every time property is bought and sold.

Of course, all of this brings about the one simple question that fails to get asked so often in Costa Rica: is Orotina ready for change? Depending on who you ask, be it aspiring realtors and businesspeople or farmers and small-business owners, you will get drastically different answers. However, one thing is for certain: infrastructure in terms of water, electricity and sewage is still years behind the intended development boom.

Fortunately, the municipality in Orotina is aware of these hurdles, and has announced on several occasions that it is working hard to devise a zoning plan that addresses all of these fundamental concerns. With that said, there are a fair share of skeptics about that are beginning to wonder whether the cliché of a sleepy little town being turned into a booming international city mirrors reality just a little too often.

Ecológico Los Cocodrilos. This may be a bit problematic on weekends, when buses are full, so go midweek if you are relying on a bus ride. If you're driving, the entrance to Carara is right on the Costanera and is clearly marked.

TÁRCOLES & AROUND

The small, unassuming town of Tárcoles is little more than a few rows of houses strung along a series of dirt roads that parallel the ocean. As you'd imagine, this tiny Tico town

isn't exactly a huge tourist draw, though the surrounding area is perfect for fans of the superlative, especially if you're interested in seeing the country's tallest waterfall and its largest crocodiles. Here, intrepid hikers can penetrate virgin forest in search of remote swimming holes and ample wildlife, while aspiring crocodile hunters can get an up-close and personal view of these exquisite predators. Seek local advice to ensure the water is crocodile free before you take a dip.

Orientation

About 2km south of the Carara ranger station is the Tárcoles Lapoff to the right (west) and the Hotel Villa Lapas turnoff to the left. To get to Tárcoles, turn right and drive for 1km, then go right at the T-junction to the village.

Sights & Activities

A 5km dirt road past Hotel Villa Lapas leads to the primary entrance to the **Catarata Manantial de Agua Viva** (☎ 8831 2980; admission US\$10; 🕒 8am-3pm), which is a 200m-high waterfall and claims to be the highest in the country. From here, it's a steep 3km climb down into the valley, though there are plenty of benches and viewpoints where you can rest. Be sure to keep an eye out for the beautiful, but deadly, poison-dart frog as well as the occasional scarlet macaw. The falls are more dramatic in the rainy season when they're fuller, though the serene rain-forest setting is beautiful any time of year. At the bottom of the valley, the river continues through a series of natural swimming holes where you can take a dip and cool off. A camping area and outhouse are located at the bottom. Local buses between Orotina and Bijagual can drop you off at the entrance to the park.

Although the man at the top of the waterfall might tell you that he operates the only entrance to Manantial de Agua Viva, you can also access the trails by heading 2km further up the road to the 70-hectare **Jardín Pura Vida** (☎ 2637 0346; admission US\$15; 🕒 8am-5pm) in the town of Bijagual. Although it costs a few more dollars here to enter the waterfall, the admission price also includes access to a private botanical garden that is impeccably manicured, and offers great vistas of Manantial de Agua Viva cascading down the side of a cliff. There is a small restaurant on the grounds, and you can also arrange horse riding and tours through the area.

Before leaving Jardín Pura Vida, be sure to stop by the small kiosk near the parking lot to say hi to Lauri and Howard, a charming American-South African couple who roast small batches of Tarrazu coffee under the brand name **Costa Rica Coffee Roasting Company**. Lauri and Howard will delight in explaining the intricacies of the coffee-roasting process, and they certainly know how to make a powerful brew. Lauri and Howard live in Jacó, and are the owners of a delightful guesthouse called Sonidos del Mar (p336).

Tours

If you want to get the adrenaline pumping, check out a crocodile tour on the mudflats of the Río Tárcoles. Bilingual guides in boats will take you out in the river for croc spotting and some hair-raising croc tricks. And you know it's going to be good when the guide gets out of the boat and into the water with these massive beasts – it's *Crocodile Hunter* without the Australian accent. Both **Crocodile Man** (☎ 2637 0426; crocodileman@hotmail.com) and **Jungle Crocodile Safari** (☎ 2637 0338; www.junglecrocodilesafari.com) have offices in Tárcoles. The tours leave from town or you can arrange for them to pick you up at your hotel.

Unfortunately, although the tours are definitely a spectacle to behold, it's frustrating to watch the crocodiles being hand-fed by the tour guides. Furthermore, several travelers report that these tours may not be worth it if you've already been to Tortuguero (p458). Tours usually cost US\$25 per person for two hours.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation in the Tárcoles area is limited to the pricey Hotel Villa Lapas. However, if you don't have the cash (or the interest) to stay at this all-inclusive resort, there is a good variety of hotels and hostels in nearby Jacó (p333).

Hotel Villa Lapas (☎ 2221 5191; www.villalapas.com; all-inclusive from US\$200; 📞 🍷 🍷 🍷) Located on a private reserve comprised both of secondary rain forest and expansive tropical gardens, this all-inclusive resort is a classy retreat for anyone who wants their ecofun served up in a fruity cocktail with an umbrella on top. With a modest number of rooms housed in an attractive Spanish colonial-style lodge, guests can unwind in relative comfort in between guided hikes, birding trips, canopy tours and the obligatory soak in the infinity pool. If this kind of luxury is your cup of shade-grown coffee, then check out the website as discounted packages are available if you book in advance.

Getting There & Away

There are no buses to Tárcoles, but any bus between Puntarenas and Jacó can leave you at the entrance. If you're driving, the entrance to the town is right on the Costanera and is clearly marked. If you're staying at Hotel Villa Lapas, then it's possible to arrange a

BIG SPLURGE: HOTEL VILLA CALETAS

Located on the tiny headland of Punta Leona about halfway between Tárcoles and Jacó on the Costanera, the **Hotel Villa Caletas** (☎ 2637 0505; www.hotelvillacaletas.com; r US\$165-425; 📍 🚗 🚲) is one of only eight hotels in all of Costa Rica belonging to the 'Small Distinctive Hotels of Costa Rica Group' – from the moment you enter the property you'll understand why.

Since it's perched high on a dramatic hillside, you'll first have to navigate a 1km-long serpentine driveway adorned with cacti and Victorian lanterns. The drive will be worth it as upon entering the property, you'll be rewarded with panoramic views of the Pacific coastline. But, what makes the hotel truly unique is its fusion of architectural styles, incorporating elements as varied as tropical Victorian, Hellenistic and French colonial. Unlike most luxury hotels, Villa Caletas is solely comprised of 35 units, each sheltered in a tropical garden and dense foliage that gives the appearance of total isolation. The interiors of the rooms are individually decorated with art and antiques, but nothing is nearly as magnificent as the views you'll have from your room. There is also a French-influenced restaurant, an inviting infinity pool and a private 1km trail leading to the beach.

Even if you're not staying at the hotel, it's worth stopping by to have a drink at the amphitheatre, which is built according to Grecian specifications and is carved into the hillside facing the ocean. For a few dollars, you will be rewarded with what may be the best Pacific sunset you've ever seen.

pick-up from either San José or Jacó with an advance reservation.

PLAYA HERRADURA

Until the mid-1990s, Playa Herradura was a rural, palm-sheltered beach of grayish-black sand that was popular mainly with campers. In the late 1990s, however, the beach was thrown into the spotlight when it was used as the stage for the movie *1492*. As with all things 'discovered,' rapid development ensued, and soon Playa Herradura had a marina, several condominium complexes and one of the most expensive hotels in the country, namely the Los Sueños Marriott Beach & Golf Resort. Today, the beach is starting to look like one giant construction site, and few people aside from local Ticos and rich North American investors are keen on spending much time here.

The **Los Sueños Marriott Beach & Golf Resort** (☎ 2630 9000; www.lossuenosresort.com; r from US\$250; 📍 🚗 🚲 🚲) is a US\$40 million hotel, marina and condo project that has completely transformed this once-secluded bay into Costa Rica's most exclusive destination for the rich and powerful. The centerpiece of the project is a 250-berth yacht marina that unfolds onto a lush golf course, upscale shopping center, resort hotel and multimillion-dollar residential development.

The entire Spanish colonial complex is the epitome of unchecked luxury and hedonism,

though many concerned conservationists are quick to use Los Sueños as an example of a future where economic interests crush environmental aims. With that said, the experience of staying here is something along the lines of a night in Dubai – it certainly lacks any amount of Costa Rican authenticity.

The Herradura turnoff is on the Costanera Sur, 3.5km north of the turnoff to Jacó. From here, a paved road leads 3km west to Playa Herradura. There are frequent local buses (US\$0.75, 20 minutes) connecting Playa Herradura to Jacó.

JACÓ

Few places in Costa Rica generate as broad a range of opinions and emotions as the beach town of Jacó. In one camp, you have the loyal surfing contingent, resident North American expats and international developers who bill Jacó as the ultimate central Pacific destination, and one of the country's most rapidly developing cities. Truth be told, the surfing is excellent, the restaurants and bars are cosmopolitan, and a skyline of future high-rise apartments and luxury hotels is rapidly being constructed.

However, there is also another camp of dissatisfied tourists, concerned environmentalists and marginalized Ticos who would urge you to steer clear of Jacó, and make an effort to spread the word to others. Again, truth be told, there is a burgeoning drug and prosti-

tution problem, questions of sustainability and the fear that Ticos will be priced out of their homes.

Like all cases concerning the delicate balance between conservation and development, Jacó is steeped in its fair share of controversy. However, it's probably best to ignore the hype and the stereotypes alike, and make your own decisions about the place. Although the American-style cityscape of shopping malls and gated communities may be off-putting to some, it's impossible to deny the beauty of the beach and the surrounding hillsides, and the consistent surf that first put the beach on the map is still as good as it ever was.

History

Jacó has a special place in the hearts of Ticos as it is the quickest ocean-side escape for landlocked denizens of the Central Valley. Many josefinos recall fondly the days when weekend shuttle buses would pick up beach-seekers in the city center and whisk them away to the undeveloped Pacific paradise of Jacó. With warm water, year-round consistent surf, world-class fishing and a relaxed, beachside setting, it was hard to believe that a place this magical was only a short bus ride away from San José.

The secret got out in the early 1990s when Canadians on package tours started flooding Jacó, though for the most part tourism remained pretty low-key. Things picked up a bit in the late 1990s when surfers and anglers from North America and Europe started visiting Costa Rica en masse, though Jacó remained the dominion of Central Valley Ticos looking for a little fun and sun. However, things changed dramatically as soon as retiring Baby Boomers in search of cheap property began to colonize this once tiny Costa Rican beach town.

In only a few years time, Jacó became the most rapidly developing town (some would argue city) in all of Costa Rica. Plots of land were subdivided, beachfronts were cleared, hillsides were leveled and almost overnight Jacó became the exclusive enclave of moneyed expats. Ticos were happy that development brought coveted Western institutions like paved roads and fast-food restaurants, but as the initial flash of cash and glitz started to fade, some began to wonder if they had inadvertently sold the door mat beneath their feet.

Truth be told, it's hard to know where the future of Jacó lies. Optimists point out

that the town is simply experiencing growing pains, and argue that the drugs and prostitution will subside just as soon as the infrastructure stabilizes and the town residents begin to clamp down on illicit vices. However, pessimists are quick to retort that wealth attracts opportunism, especially of the illicit kind, and that the problems in Jacó are just getting started. Regardless of which camp you fall into, one thing is for certain, all of Costa Rica is casting a watchful eye on Jacó, and will ultimately point to the city as an example of either unchecked development gone awry, or a success story of wealth creation.

Orientation

Playa Jacó is about 2km off the Costanera, 3.5km past the turnoff for Herradura. The beach itself is about 3km long, and hotels and restaurants line the road running behind it. The areas on the northern and southern fringes are the most tranquil and attractive, and are the cleanest.

In an effort to make foreign visitors feel more at home, the town has placed signs with street names on most streets. These names are shown on the map, but the locals continue to use the traditional landmark system (see boxed text What's That Address?, p537).

Information

Jacó is relatively expensive, and during the high season it's jam-packed with tourists, so reservations are recommended, especially around the winter holidays.

There's no unbiased tourist information office, though several tour offices will give information. Look for the free monthly *Jacó's Guide*, which includes tide charts and up-to-date maps, or go to www.jacoguide.com. The free monthly magazine *Central Pacific Way* has information on tourist attractions up and down the coastline.

Banco de San José (Map p332; Av Pastor Díaz, north of Calle Cocal; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Has a Cirrus ATM open during bank hours on the 2nd floor of the Il Galeone shopping center.

Banco Popular (Map p332; Av Pastor Díaz at Calle La Central) Exchanges US dollars and traveler's checks.

Books & Stuff (Map p332; Av Pastor Díaz btwn Calles Las Olas & Bohío) Has books in several languages as well as US newspapers.

Mexican Joe's (Map p332; Av Pastor Díaz btwn Calles Las Olas & Bohío; per hr US\$0.75; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat,

10am-8pm Sun) The best place to check email; has multiple computers with high-speed connections and air-con.

Red Cross (Map p332; ☎ 2643 3090; Av Pastor Díaz btwn Calles Hicaco & Las Brisas) Medical clinic.

Dangers & Annoyances

Aside from occasional petty crime such as pick-pocketing and breaking into locked cars, Jacó is certainly not a dangerous place by any stretch of the imagination. However, the high concentration of wealthy foreigners and comparatively poor Ticos has resulted in a thriving sex and drug industry. It is almost guaranteed that at some point during your stay in Jacó, you will be approached by a dealer and/or a pimp, whether you're looking for it or not.

We're not your mother, and it's entirely up to you how you want to spend your time in Costa Rica. Assuming the working girl is over 18 (which is not always a given), prostitution is 100% legal in Costa Rica. However, before you start flashing the Benjamins and expecting to score, you might want to check out the boxed text, opposite. In regards to drugs, you also might want to familiarize yourself with

the law, and the repercussions of breaking it (see Got Drugs, will Travel, p334), before puffing away at a seemingly innocent joint.

Activities

SWIMMING

Jacó is generally safe for swimming, though you should avoid the areas near the estuaries, which are polluted. Be advised that the waves can get crowded with beginner surfers who don't always know how to control their boards, so be smart and stay out of their way. Riptides do occasionally occur (see boxed text, p278), especially when the surf gets big, so enquire about local conditions and keep an eye out for red flags marking the paths of rips.

SURFING

Although the rainy season is considered best for Pacific coast surfing, Jacó is blessed with consistent year-round breaks. Although more advanced surfers head further south to Playa Hermosa, the waves at Jacó are strong, steady and a lot of fun. Jacó is also a great place to start a surf trip as it's easy to buy and sell boards here. If you're looking to rent a board

GIRLS GONE WILD

Jacó is rife with stories of girls gone wild, but none are as scandalous as those surrounding *Las Dormilonas* or the Sleepyheads, three prostitutes whose exploits were splashed across the tabloids in early 2008. According to law enforcement officials who broke the case, the three women normally charged US\$200 per 'session,' though decided to lure three men at once by offering a discount price of only US\$500.

Here is where things get interesting: instead of actually performing the dirty deed, the women instead drugged the men with massive quantities of benzodiazepine (commonly known as Valium), and then robbed them blind while they were sleeping. All told, the three women had racked up nearly US\$80,000 from only 15 victims (mostly rich gringos) prior to being arrested.

Although it's hard not to be impressed by their highly lucrative scam, their arrest is no laughing matter as it highlights Jacó's worsening image problem, as well as the naiveté of some of the city's resident expats and sex tourists. Interestingly, some of the suspected women were engaged, perhaps they were just making a bit of extra cash to put toward their big day!

for the day, shop around as the better places will rent you a board for US\$15 to US\$20 for 24 hours, while others will try to charge you a few dollars per hour.

There are too many surf shops to list, and it seems like every store in town does ding repair and rents long boards. Six-time national surf champion Alvaro Solano runs the highly respected **Vista Guapa Surf Camp** (Map p330; ☎ 2643 2830, in the USA 409-599 1828; www.vistaguapa.com), which comes recommended by readers. Weekly rates including full board start at around US\$800.

SURFCASTING

Several shops in town rent fishing gear and sell bait for a few dollars each, and there are plenty of spots along the beach where you can crack a beer and try your luck. Surfcasting is extremely popular with locals, so dust off your Spanish vocab and strike up a conversation or two.

HIKING

A popular local pastime is following the trail up Miro's Mountain, which winds through primary and secondary rain forest, and offers spectacular views of Jacó and Playa Hermosa. The trail actually leads as far as the Central Valley, though you only need to hike for a few kilometers to reach the viewpoint. Note that the trailhead is unmarked, so ask a local to point it out to you.

HORSE RIDING

Readers have reported incidents of horse abuse in Jacó, specifically operators using malnourished and mistreated animals. However, one recommended company is **Discovery Horseback**

Tours (☎ 8838 7550; www.horseridecostarica.com; from \$60), which is run by an English couple, and offers an extremely high level of service and professionalism.

KAYAKING

If you're interested in organizing kayaking and sea canoeing trips that include snorkeling excursions to tropical islands, contact **Kayak Jacó Costa Rica Outriggers** (☎ 2643 1233; www.kayakjaco.com), which offers a wide variety of customized day and multiday trips.

CANOPY TOURS

In Jacó there are two competing companies offering similar products: **Canopy Adventure Jacó** (☎ 2643 3271; www.adventurecanopy.com; tours US\$55) and **Waterfalls Canopy Tour** (☎ 2632 3322; www.waterfallscanopy.com; tours US\$55).

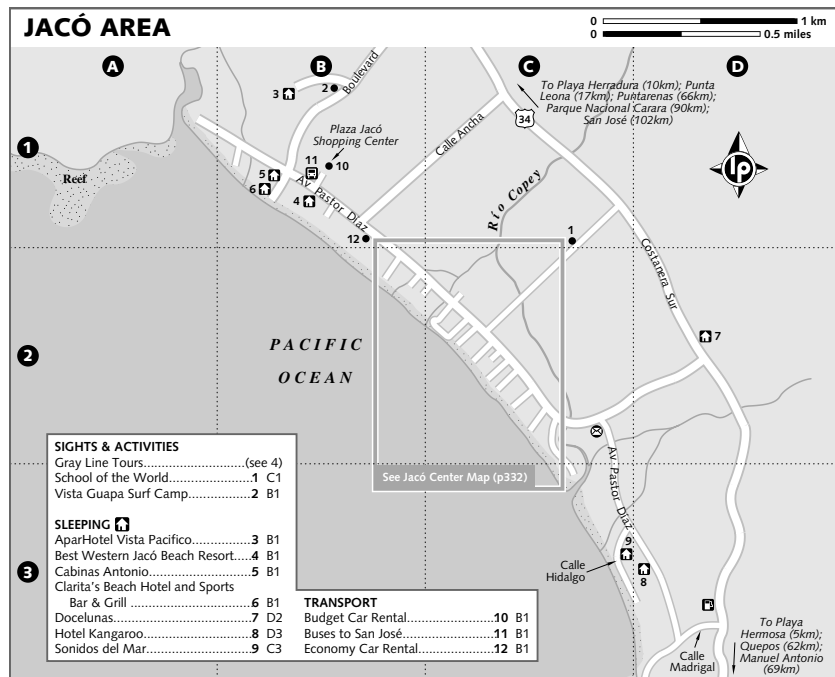
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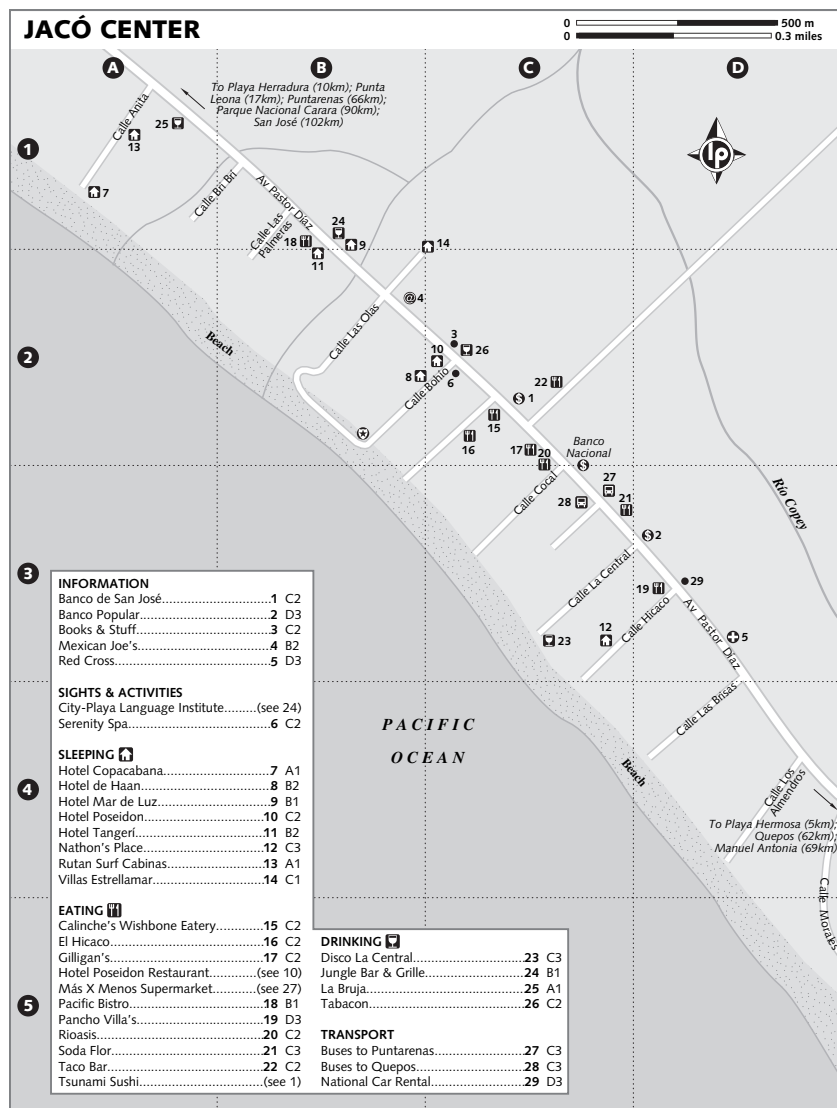
A branch of the exceedingly professional **Serenity Spa** (Map p332; ☎ 2643 1624; Av Pastor Díaz, east of Calle Bohío) offers the full range of spa services.

Courses

City-Playa Language Institute (Map p332; ☎ 2643 2123; www.spanishschool-costarica.com; Av Pastor Díaz btwn Calle Las Palmeras & Calle Las Olas) offers inexpensive courses in Spanish for as little as US\$80 per week.

School of the World (Map p330; ☎ 2643 1064; www.schooloftheworld.org; 1-4 week packages US\$645-2045; 📍) is a popular school and cultural-studies center offering classes in Spanish, surfing, art and photography. The sweet new building also houses a café and art gallery. Rates include kayaking and hiking field trips and





onsite lodging. Spanish and surfing are the most popular programs.

Tours

Tours around the area include visits to Parque Nacional Carara (from US\$45) as well as longer-distance trips around the country. Another popular destination is Isla Damas –

you can organize tours here or in Quepos, further south. Isla Damas is not 100% an island, but the tip of a pointed mangrove forest that juts out into a small bay just south of Parrita. During high tide, as the surrounding areas fill with water, this point becomes an island – offering an incredible opportunity for birders and other wildlife watchers. Boating

tours can be arranged from Jacó for around US\$65 per person, but more avid adventurers can opt for a sea-kayaking expedition with Amigo Tico Complete Adventure Tours in Quepos (p343).

Virtually every shop, hotel and restaurant in town books tours, as Jacó operates on a lucrative commission-based system. As you'd imagine, it's hard to actually know who is greasing whose palms and who is actually running tours, though usually it all works out – assuming you use your judgment and book from places that look reliable. Needless to say, you shouldn't book anything from touts on streets, and if an offer from a vendor seems too good to be true, then most likely it is.

One long-standing agent that receives good reviews from readers is **Gray Line Tours** (Map p330; ☎ 2220 2126; www.graylinecostarica.com; Best Western, Av Pastor Díaz), which books tours throughout the country as well as private inter-city transportation.

Sleeping

The center of town, with its many bars and discos, can mean that noise will be a factor in where you choose to stay. The far northern and southern ends of town have more relaxed and quiet accommodations. Reservations are highly recommended on weekends in the dry-season and become critical during Easter and the week between Christmas and New Year's Eve.

The rates given are high-season rates, but low-season rates could be as much as 30% to 40% lower. If you plan on a lengthy stay (more than five days), ask about long-term rates. Hotels below are listed from north to south.

BUDGET

There is no shortage of cheap budget hotels scattered around the Jacó area, though we constantly receive reports from travelers of theft from accommodations in Costa Rica. With that said, sometimes it's worth spending a few extra dollars for the safety and peace of mind that comes with having a secure room. In keeping with this theme, we list places that meet our high standards; however, you should always be vigilant about locking up your valuables (even at top-end places), and never give anyone a reason to wonder what you're keeping inside your room.

Rutan Surf Cabinas (Map p332; ☎ 2643 3328; www.cabinasrutan.com; Calle Anita; dm & r per person US\$11-

15; ☎ ☎ ☎) Formerly known as Chuck's Cabinas, this location has proudly served the international surf community for years. Now under Californian ownership, and sporting a new name and a fresh look and feel, Rutan Surf Cabinas is the best-valued accommodation in town. Don't let the rock-bottom prices fool you – dorms and rooms of varying sizes and shapes feature tile floors, solid mattresses and plenty of decorative flourishes, though the same vibes that first put this place on the map are still in heavy supply.

Cabinas Antonio (Map p330; ☎ 2643 3043; cnr Av Pastor Díaz & Boulevard; r from US\$15; ☎ ☎) Something of an institution among shoestrings and local Tico families, this clutch of cabins at the northern end of Jacó is one of the best deals in town. Fairly uninteresting rooms are certainly nothing to write home about, but they are clean and cozy, and come with private cold showers and cable TV. And of course, when you're just steps from the surf, it's hard to be too fussy about your surroundings.

Nathon's Place (Map p332; ☎ 8355 4359; www.nathons.com; Calle Hicaco; dm/d/tr US\$10/25/30; ☎ ☎ ☎) The cheapest proper hostel in town, this surfer shack radiates good vibes thanks to the charismatic owner and manager, self-proclaimed 'Texas guitar-legend Nathon Dees.' In keeping with the good-times theme, Nathon dishes out plenty of surf advice alongside killer tunes. The building is fairly basic, but it's hard not to have a good time here when you're surrounded by like-minded travelers.

MIDRANGE

Jacó is chock-a-block with midrange hotels, and our brief list is by no means comprehensive. However, we have tried to select places that have a certain je ne sais quoi, while still offering safety, security and comfortable surroundings to slightly more discerning travelers.

Clarita's Beach Hotel and Sports Bar & Grill (Map p330; ☎ 2643 3327; www.claritashotel.com; western end of Boulevard; r US\$25-65; ☎ ☎ ☎) Straddling the border between budget and midrange accommodation, Clarita's attracts a broad range of guests with varying wallet sizes, though everyone can quickly agree that the beachfront location is difficult to top. Basic rooms with cutesy flourishes are a bargain at US\$25, especially if you can sleep easy with just a fan at night, while more expensive rooms come with 'luxuries,' such as hot-water shower, cable TV

GOT DRUGS, WILL TRAVEL

Drugs are plentiful in Costa Rica, and a good number of tourists would never give a second thought to lighting up a joint on the beach (or, more recently, blowing a line of coke in a discotheque). However, drugs are 100% illegal in Costa Rica, and if you are charged with possession you can be fined and imprisoned depending on the severity of the offense. There are currently foreigners serving out terms, and occasionally a big drug bust will make the headlines. The bad news is that there is little that your embassy can do on your behalf. The good news is that as far as Latin American penal systems are concerned, there are places a hell of a lot worse than a Costa Rican prison.

The reality is that most police officers would rather collect a bribe or confiscate a joint and smoke it themselves than send a bunch of backpackers to jail. Unlike other destinations on the hippie trail, like Morocco, Thailand and India, Costa Rica has a squeaky-clean, ecofriendly image that it needs to uphold, and the last thing the tourist board wants is the mugs of a bunch of American teenagers plastered on the front page of *USA Today*. However, things are changing rapidly, and as more gringos start packing their bags and heading to Costa Rica, you can expect that the supply will meet the demand.

The main problem with the market in Costa Rica right now is that a greater number of hard drugs are becoming readily available for purchase. On beaches with a growing international scene like Jacó and Tamarindo, it's possible to buy just about any drug on any street corner in any language. The drug of choice in the bars is quickly becoming cocaine, and although there's no guarantee you're actually getting ecstasy, backpackers are popping pills in the clubs like they were Tic-Tacs.

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

The moral of the story is that at some point during your travels in Costa Rica, there is a good chance that you will be offered drugs. And there's a good chance that if you're reading this right now, you might say yes. So, remember to use your judgment, consider the consequences and don't say that we didn't warn you.

and air-con. The attached sports bar and grill is a fun and friendly open-air joint that serves up your typical beer and nachos fare.

Hotel Kangaroo (Map p330; ☎ 2643 3351; www.hotel-kangaroo.com; dm US\$12, d with/without air-con US\$45/35; 📶 🚰 🚿 🚻) This much-loved hostel, which is located just 100m from one of the quietest and most beautiful strips of sand, is seriously chilled out thanks to the pair of French surfers who run the place. Vibrant rooms here are draped in Nepali prayer flags and adorned with huge dream catchers, and come with either fan or air-con depending on your budget. Extra amenities include free breakfast, 24-hour free internet, a shared kitchen and a refreshing pool (check out the awesome mural!). If you're arriving by bus, the owners will pay for a taxi from the center of town.

Hotel de Haan (Map p332; ☎ 2643 1795; www.hoteldehaan.com; Calle Bohío; dm/d/tr US\$12/35/45; 📶 🚰 🚿 🚻) This Dutch/Tico outpost is one of the top

budget bets in town, and is perennially popular with backpackers from around the world. Freshly tiled rooms with steamy hot-water showers are clean and secure, and there's a shared kitchen with fridge, a pool and free internet around the clock. The highlight of the property, however, is the upstairs balcony where you can congregate with fellow backpackers, and swap travel stories over a few cans of Imperial until the wee hours of the morning.

AparHotel Vista Pacífico (Map p330; ☎ 2643 3261; www.vistapacifico.com; top of the hill off Boulevard; d incl breakfast from US\$55, additional person US\$10; 📶 🚰 🚿 🚻) Located on the crest of a hill just outside Jacó, this Canadian-run hotel is an absolute gem that is worth seeking out. The views of the coastline from here are phenomenal, particularly at sunset when you'll have panoramic vistas of a fiery sky, and the mountain-top location also means that it's a few degrees

cooler (and a whole lot quieter) than neighboring Jacó. Homey rooms of varying sizes and shapes cater to all budgets, and are made all the better by the warm and caring hosts – there is even a BBQ pit where you can grill up some killer eats while chatting up other guests.

Hotel Poseidon (Map p332; ☎ 2643 1642; www.hotel-poseidon.com; Calle Bohío; d from US\$65; 📶 🚰 🚿 🚻) It's hard to miss the huge Grecian wood carvings that adorn the exterior of this small European-run hotel. On the inside, sparkling rooms are perfectly accented with elegant furniture and mosaic tiles, though the highlight of the property is the elegant open-air restaurant that specializes in fresh fish – it's one of the best spots in town. There's a pool, with a convenient swim-up bar, as well as a small Jacuzzi for getting to know your neighbors.

Hotel Copacabana (Map p332; ☎ 2643 1005; www.copacabanahotel.com; Calle Anita; r from US\$70; 📶 🚰 🚿 🚻) This three-story resort hotel gets good marks for offering a variety of rooms and suites to meet the size and needs of your party. If you're traveling either by yourself or with your significant other, fairly modern standard rooms are well priced considering the hotel's convenient beachfront location and rich offerings of amenities, including an attractive pool and hot tub. Of course, the hotel really packs in the value with its larger suites that come equipped with well-stocked kitchenettes and spacious private balconies from where you can get a personal view of the Pacific sunset.

Villas Estrellamar (Map p332; ☎ 2643 3102; www.estrellamar.com; eastern end of Calle Las Olas; r US\$65, 1-/2-bedroom villa US\$71/111; 📶 🚰 🚿 🚻) While the spacious rooms at the Estrellamar are certainly good value considering they boast massive bathrooms and private balconies, it really is worth paying the small bit of extra cash for your own personal villa. Depending on the size of your party, you can choose from one- and two-bedroom villas that have full kitchens and plenty of space for stretching out after a day out at the beach or a night out on the town. Regardless of which accommodation option you choose, be sure to take a relaxing swing in the hammock pavilion, and keep an eye out for the huge iguanas that live on the grounds and feed off the mango tree.

Hotel Mar de Luz (Map p332; ☎ 2643 3259; www.marde luz.com; Av Pastor Díaz btwn Calles Las Palmeras & Los Olas; d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$75/80/95; 📶 🚰 🚿 🚻) This adorable little hotel with Dutch-inspired

murals of windmills and tulips has tidy and attractive air-con rooms that are perfect for a little family fun in the sun. Since it can be difficult sometimes to appease the little ones, the friendly Dutch owners (who also speak Spanish, English, German and Italian) offer two swimming pools, several BBQ grills and plenty of useful information on how to best enjoy the area. The owners are also extremely committed to fighting drugs and prostitution in Jacó, and are at the forefront of an admirable campaign to clean up the city.

TOP END

Jacó is in the midst of going upscale, though it's still going to be a few years before some of the proposed top-end resorts and hotels open up to the tourist masses. In the meantime, however, there are a number of all-inclusive-style resorts and a few boutique hotels and guesthouses where your dollars can buy you a nice slice of luxury.

Hotel Tangerí (Map p332; ☎ 2643 3001; www.hotel-tangeri.com; Av Pastor Díaz btwn Calles Las Palmeras & Las Olas; r from US\$120, villa from US\$180; 📶 🚰 🚿 🚻) This low-key resort complex is smack-dab in the middle of it all, but surprisingly manages to remain tranquil despite the ensuing craziness surrounding it. The tropical-infused grounds are extremely well manicured, and home to no less than three pools where you can soak up the rays while floating the daylight away. Rooms are fairly standard, though they do boast ocean views and are brightened up a bit by the colorful linens. However, if you have a bit of extra cash to burn, larger villas with full kitchens are certainly worth the splurge, and help you make the necessary transition to resort living.

Best Western Jacó Beach Resort (Map p330; ☎ 2643 1000; www.bestwestern.com; Av Pastor Díaz btwn Boulevard & Calle Ancha; r from US\$125; 📶 🚰 🚿 🚻) Despite whatever preconceived notions you may have about the Best Western, this particular establishment in the famous American chain is the original full-service beach resort in Jacó. With that said, dark and dingy rooms are certainly showing their age, though you can't beat the impressive grounds, convenient beach access and the laundry-list of resort activities on offer. Of course, these days gringos prefer to bed down in some of the newer top-end resorts, though the Best Western does attract a loyal Tico-family following. If you're planning on

spending the night here, it pays to check the internet for special discount rates.

Docelunas (Map p330; ☎ 2643 2277; Costanera Sur; d/junior ste incl breakfast US\$130/150; P ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Situated in the foothills across the highway, 'Twelve Moons' is a heavenly mountain retreat consisting of only 20 rooms sheltered in a pristine landscape of tropical rain forest. Each teak-accented room is intimately decorated with original artwork that's available for purchase, and the luxurious bathrooms feature double sinks and bathtubs. Yoga classes are given daily, there's a full spa that uses the hotel's own line of beauty products and you can dip in a free-form pool that's fed by a waterfall. The open-air restaurant serves everything from marlin *ceviche* (raw but well-marinated seafood) to vegan delicacies. To reach the hotel, make a left off the Costanera between the two entrances for Playa Jacó.

Sonidos del Mar (Map p330; ☎ 2643 3924, 2643 3912; www.sonidosdelmar.com; Calle Hidalgo; house US\$250; P ☎ ☎) Howard and Lauri, a South African-American couple, will welcome you to their guesthouse as if you were family. And, when you see their house, you'll wish you were! Set within a mature garden at the bend of a river, 'Sounds of the Ocean' may be one of the most beautiful guesthouses in Costa Rica. Lauri is a skilled artist and a collector who has lovingly filled each room with original paintings, sculptures and indigenous crafts. The house itself is impeccable, incorporating stylistic elements such as vaulted Nicaraguan hardwood ceilings and black, volcanic rock showers. Guests have free use of kayaks and surfboards, and the beach is only 50m away. Full spa services are also available. The house can accommodate up to six people, and cheaper weekly and monthly rates are available.

Eating

Plenty of restaurants busily cater to the crowds, and new ones open (and close) every year. Hours can fluctuate wildly, especially in the rainy season, so it's best to eat early. Generally speaking, the quality of fare in Jacó is surprisingly good, which shouldn't be too much of a surprise as gringos have a reputation as being finicky eaters! To be fair though, there are still a few local spots that have weathered the storm of change, and the city does boast the most eclectic offering of international cuisine on the central Pacific coast.

Soda Flor (Map p332; Av Pastor Díaz, north of Calle La Central; casados US\$3-5) This Jacó institution is a perennial favorite of locals and budget travelers alike. Remarkably, the menu hasn't changed in years despite the fact that nearly every other place in town is now offering everything from sushi to sirloin. Food is fresh, tasty, cheap and 100% Costa Rican, which is a good thing, as portions here are huge.

Pancho Villa's (Map p332; cnr Av Pastor Díaz & Calle Hicaco; dishes US\$4-8) The greasy food here certainly isn't gourmet by any stretch of the imagination, but you'll probably end up here since the kitchen is open until the wee hours. It's also located downstairs from a rowdy club, so you know you're bound to see some interesting characters hanging about.

Taco Bar (Map p332; mains US\$5-10) As the sign advertises, this is your place for 'Fish, Shakes + Salads.' Smoothies here come in gargantuan 1L sizes, and the salad bar has over 20 different kinds of exotic and leafy combinations. And of course, there's the obligatory fish taco, which may be one of the planet's greatest food combinations.

Rioasis (Map p332; cnr Calle Cocal & Av Pastor Díaz; pizza US\$6-10) There's pizza, and then there's *pizza* – this much-loved pizzeria definitely falls into the latter category, especially considering that there are more than 30 different kinds of pies on the menu. Of course, considering that each one emerges from an authentic wood-fired oven, and is topped with gourmet ingredients from both Costa Rica and abroad, you really can't go wrong here.

Calinche's Wishbone Eatery (Map p332; Av Pastor Díaz, south of Calle Bohío; meals US\$6-12) Overseen by the charming Calinche, this is the most famous restaurant in town, and has been so for years and years. The eclectic menu includes pizza, pitas, stuffed potatoes, pan-seared seabass and tuna-sashimi salads, though its justifiable fame comes from the fact that everything is quite simply fresh, delicious and good value.

Gilligan's (Map p332; Av Pastor Díaz, north of Calle Cocal; breakfast US\$3-5, mains US\$8-12) The best place in town if you're feeling homesick for your mom's meatloaf, though you'll be equally happy if you turn up for breakfast and find yourself sitting in front of a short stack of pancakes or French toast. After all, sometimes it's OK to momentarily forget your surroundings and dig into a bit of comfort food.

Tsunami Sushi (Map p332; Av Pastor Díaz, north of Calle Cocal; sushi US\$8-15) If you've got a hankering for raw fish, don't miss Tsunami, a modern and lively restaurant that serves up an exquisite assortment of sushi, sashimi and Californian-style rolls. The Far East may be a long way away, but the nearby Pacific is home to some seriously tasty sports fish, such as dolphin fish, tuna and wahoo.

Pacific Bistro (Map p332; Av Pastor Díaz, south of Calle Las Palmeras; mains US\$8-15) This deservedly popular

place is run by a gourmet chef from California who specializes in Pan Asian-style fusion dishes. Whether you're partial to Indonesian-style noodles and fiery Thai curries, or more refined Japanese soba and fish fillets topped with exotic Chinese sauces, one thing is for certain: this gem of a restaurant really hits the spot, especially if you've been craving fine Asian cuisine.

Hotel Poseidon Restaurant (Map p332; ☎ 2643 1642; Calle Bohío; dishes US\$10-20) One of the most

LOSE TUMMY, SAVE MONEY

The concept of medical tourism isn't new to Costa Rica, especially since Americans have grown accustomed to seeking medical care overseas in light of soaring medical costs at home. Indeed, the concept is brilliantly conceived, especially since it's possible to save money on expensive treatments while simultaneously enjoying a foreign holiday.

Medical tourists in Costa Rica are typically interested in cosmetic surgical practices, such as tummy tucks, breast implants, face lifts and other elective procedures that generally aren't covered by domestic insurance policies. Furthermore, these procedures on average cost 40% to 70% less outside the US, especially given that Costa Rican doctors aren't required to carry large malpractice insurance plans.

Historically, medical tourism destinations in Costa Rica were Jacó, Tamarindo and San José, though the flow of wealth into the country has brought this lucrative industry elsewhere. In fact, there are currently a large number of upscale hotels throughout the country that advertise all-inclusive medical tourism package deals alongside traditional ecotourism!

Given this ever-expanding industry, it's surprising to find in Costa Rica an increasing number of medical tourists, a good number of which fall outside the traditional target bracket, namely aging wealthy Americans. The medical tourism industry has also started targeting image-conscious Europeans hailing from countries with socialized medical systems, as well as younger travelers who have a bit of disposable cash to burn.

Needless to say, the issue regarding the merits of increased medical tourism in Costa Rica is just as complicated as any of the others facing the country. On one hand, hospitals in Costa Rica certainly operate at a much lower cost than comparative institutions overseas, and the standard of medical care throughout the country is certainly rising. However, the safety and quality of cosmetic procedures in comparison to more developed countries remains the principle issue of concern in most peoples' minds.

Supporters of an expanded medical tourism industry in Costa Rica point out that the medical system in America is limited by expensive human resources and medical supplies, a high demand for services and the ever-present fear of litigation. They also point out that Costa Rican doctors and nurses are among the best-trained medical professionals in Latin America, and that the growing demand has allowed for increased investment in the industry.

Of course, regardless of how much money it's possible to save on an elective procedure, at the end of the day it's impossible to argue that medical standards and training in Costa Rica are at par with more developed countries. Furthermore, there is little recourse in the event that a procedure goes wrong, and it's worth pointing out that cosmetic surgery can be fatal if improperly performed.

As with anything involving the safety and security of your body, it pays to always exert common sense. Regardless of what you may read and hear, you should only go through with something if you have 100% confidence in the skills and reputation of the medical service provider. Conduct detailed research, ask for references and most importantly don't rush into anything. After all, you only have one body, and there are plenty of ways to enjoy it in Costa Rica that don't involve a surgeon's scalpel.

sophisticated restaurants in town, the specialty here is fresh seafood served up with an Asian flare. Sauces are inventive, the staff professional and the atmosphere upscale yet relaxing. A good bet for top-quality food and refined European-style dining that consistently receives good marks from travelers.

our pick El Hicaco (Map p332; ☎ 2643 3226; dishes US\$15-30) Generally regarded as the top dining experience in Jacó, it's hard not to be impressed by the innovative offerings at this ocean-side spot brimming with casual elegance. Although the menu is entirely dependent on seasonal offerings, both from the land and the sea, the specialty of the house is seafood, prepared with a variety of special sauces highlighted by Costa Rica's tropical produce.

If you're counting your colones, or just prefer to skip out entirely on the restaurant scene, self-caters go ga-ga at the Western-style **Más X Menos** (Map p332; Av Pastor Díaz), which is pronounced 'mas por menos' and means 'more for less.' Más X Menos has an impressive selection of fresh produce, local and international culinary items and a surprisingly good outdoors section.

Drinking & Entertainment

Jacó is something of a wasteland in regards to cultural offerings, but it's a great place to get hammered and do something you'll most likely regret in the morning. There are several dance clubs, though in this fast-changing town, it's worth asking around to find the latest hot spots. Be advised that a good portion of Jacó nightlife revolves around prostitution, so be wary of suddenly being the most attractive guy in the bar.

All of these places (unless otherwise stated) are located on Avenida Pastor Díaz and only cross-street information is provided.

Tabacon (Map p332; at Calle Bohío) Definitely one of the more respectable night spots in town – there's a good chance there will be live music here on most nights of the week.

Jungle Bar & Grille (Map p332; south of Calle Las Palmeras) The second-story terrace gives you a good vantage point for sizing up your prey, which is a good thing as this place can turn into a meat market.

La Bruja (Map p332; south of Calle Anita) This old standby offers a mellow atmosphere for downing a few beers. Try the Maudite – it's the best beer you'll ever taste.

Disco La Central (Map p332; Calle La Central) This disco sets the volume at 11, whether or not there's anyone on the dance floor, though good fun can be had here if you're properly inebriated prior to walking in.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Travelers are increasingly taking advantage of the jet-boat transfer service that connects Jacó to Montezuma. Several boats per day cross the Golfo de Nicoya, and the journey only takes about an hour. At US\$30 it's definitely not cheap, but it'll save you about a day's worth of travel. Reservations can be made at most tour operators in town. It's a beach landing, so wear the right shoes.

BUS

Buses for San José (US\$2.50, three hours) stop at the Plaza Jacó mall (Map p330), north of the center, and depart at 5am, 7:30am, 11am, 3pm and 5pm.

The bus stop for other destinations is opposite the Más X Menos supermarket (Map p332). (Stand in front of the supermarket if you're headed north; stand across the street if you're headed south.) Buses to Puntarenas (US\$1.50, 1½ hours) depart at 6am, 9am, noon and 4:30pm. Buses to Quepos (US\$2, 1½ hours) depart at 6am, noon, 4:30pm and 6pm. These are approximate departure times since buses originate in Puntarenas or Quepos. Get to the stop early!

Getting Around

BICYCLE & SCOOTER

Several places around town rent bicycles, mopeds and scooters. Bikes usually cost about US\$3 an hour or US\$8 a day, though prices can change depending on the season. Mopeds and small scooters cost from US\$35 to US\$50 a day (many places ask for a cash or credit card deposit of about US\$200).

CAR

There are several rental agencies in town, so shop around for the best rates.

Budget (Map p330; ☎ 2643 2665; Plaza Jacó mall; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-4pm Sun)

Economy (Map p330; ☎ 2643 1719; Av Pastor Díaz, south of Calle Ancha; ☎ 8am-6pm)

National (Map p332; ☎ 2643 1752; Av Pastor Díaz at Calle Hicaco; ☎ 7:30am-6pm)

GOING TOPLESS?

Though it's the cultural norm for European women and American college girls on spring break, going topless is heavily frowned upon in Costa Rica. This of course shouldn't be surprising as more than 75% of Ticos are practicing Catholics. Sure, if you bare it all the guys on the beach will hoot and holler, but remember Costa Rican beaches are often frequented by families. If the temptation to get a little extra sun is too much to bear, please be considerate and move to an isolated stretch of sand. And remember, if you're spending your spring break in Costa Rica, be generous with the sunscreen.

Just for the record, there is one place in the central Pacific where topless sunbathing is tolerated, namely La Playita in Manuel Antonio. However, it's worth mentioning that this beach is predominantly a pick-up scene for gay men on vacation – for more information, see p348.

TAXI

Taxis to Playa Hermosa from Jacó cost about US\$3 to US\$5. To arrange for a pick-up, call **Taxi 30-30** (☎ 2643 3030), or negotiate with any of the taxis along Avenida Pastor Díaz.

PLAYA HERMOSA

While newbie surfers struggle to stand up on their boards in Jacó, a few kilometers south seasoned veterans are thrashing their way across the faces of monster waves at Playa Hermosa. Regarded as one of the most consistent breaks in the country, Playa Hermosa serves up some serious surf, though you really need to know what you're doing in these parts as the huge waves and strong rip tides here are unforgiving.

If you don't think you can hack it with the aspiring pros, you might want to give this beach a miss. However, consider stopping by in August when local and international pro surfers descend on Hermosa for the annual **surf competition**. Dates vary, though the event is heavily advertised around the country, especially in neighboring Jacó.

The following places to stay and eat are listed from north to south.

The most famous hotel on Playa Hermosa is **Terraza del Pacífico** (☎ 2643 3222; www.terrazadelpacifico.com; r/stg from US\$100/160; ☎ ☎ ☎), which has prime beachfront property overlooking some seriously killer breaks. Of course, with Spanish colonial accents, spacious tile-floored rooms and a whole list of impressive amenities, this Hermosa establishment is strictly for upscale surfers.

If your wallet is a bit thinner, then head a bit further south to **Brisa del Mar** (☎ 2643 2076; d US\$35-50; ☎ ☎), a Floridian-run hotel that is decidedly more budget friendly. Brisa del Mar has a few rooms of varying size with air-con,

private hot shower and cable TV, as well as a communal kitchen where you can self-cater while saving a few extra bucks.

For a bit more European flair, head further south to the **Costanera B&B** (☎ 2643 1942; d ind breakfast US\$35-55; ☎ ☎), an Italian-run B&B that boasts a slightly more sophisticated ambience. Five rooms of various sizes and shapes have vaulted wooden ceilings and beachfront terraces, though the real highlight is the authentic pasta served in the onsite restaurant each evening.

Further south still is **Las Olas Hotel** (☎ 2643 3687; www.lasolashotel.com; r US\$35-60; ☎ ☎), a distinctive three-story A-frame building home to the awesome 'skybox room.' If heights aren't your thing, you can also rent one of several beachside bungalows that come equipped with kitchenettes, and sleep several people comfortably.

If you're looking for a quick bite between sets, the **Jungle Surf Café** (dishes US\$3-5; ☎ 7am-3pm & 6-10pm Thu-Tue) is a local institution that offers everything from burritos to kebabs, though locals swear by the seriously gourmet fish tacos.

Located only 5km south of Jacó, Playa Hermosa can be accessed by any bus heading south from Jacó. As a result, most travelers choose to stay in Jacó since there is a better variety of accommodations, and taxis (with surf racks) are abundant (see left).

PLAYA ESTERILLOS

Just 22km south of Jacó is this beautiful stretch of gray sand, which can easily be reached by short side-roads from the Costanera. Although the beach is relatively undiscovered and little visited, there are a few great surf spots here, which should be evident once you see the small groups of surfers camping

underneath the trees at the northern edge of the beach.

For anyone not keen on exposing themselves to the elements, there's always the longstanding **Pelican Hotel** (☎ 2778 8105; www.pelicanhotelcr.com; r from US\$65; P ♿ ♿ ♿), a homey, beachfront spot that has a handful of rustic rooms, and is only steps away from the surf. And of course, there are plenty of hammocks onsite – perfect for lounging – as well as free surfboards, body boards and bikes for guests.

If it's possible for you to stretch your budget for a night or two, do not miss the chance to stay at the brand-new **Ourpick Xandari by the Pacific** (☎ 2778 7070; www.pelicanhotelcr.com; villa US\$235-370; P ♿ ♿ ♿ ♿), a visually stunning resort that is aiming to put Playa Esterillos on the map. There is no shortage of attractive resorts along this stretch of the Pacific, but what makes Xandari so unique is the incredible architectural scheme that is evident from the moment you step foot on the property. Each individually designed villa encompasses a range of intriguing design elements including wooden-lattice ceilings, sheer walls of glass framing private gardens, concrete-poured furniture done up with custom leather work and impossibly intricate mosaic tile-work. As if all of this wasn't enough to make you postpone your onward travel plans, there is also an onsite restaurant specializing in gourmet and organic healthy fare, as well as an immaculate palm-fringed infinity pool that faces out toward the crashing surf. Welcome to paradise, where you can check in any time you like, but it's damn hard to leave!

The Playa Esterillos area can be a little confusing to navigate as there are three towns with access to the beach: Esterillos Oeste, Esterillos Centro and Esterillos Este. These towns are all off the Costanera about 22km, 25km and 30km southeast of Jacó, respectively, and can all be reached by any bus heading south from Jacó.

PARRITA

Parrita, a bustling town on a river of the same name, is home to a tremendous palm oil processing plant. If the wind is blowing right, the plant can be smelled from several kilometers away, though the odor is somewhat pleasant if you're a fan of fried foods. Although palm oil doesn't have the immediate

recognition as olive oil perhaps, the product finds its way into just about everything, from Snickers bars and french fries to baked goods and snack foods.

While you're driving through the area, watch the workers in the fields on the sides of the road as the **palm oil** industry is a fascinating one. In terms of day-to-day maintenance, workers spend hours keeping the palms clear of insects, which is accomplished by clearing growth on the forest floor and applying poison to the trunks. In addition, fronds must be regularly clipped in order to encourage fruit growth and to provide easy access to the pod. Workers must also collect mature pods and transport them to processing plants where the fruits are separated and pressed. This last step is perhaps most evident in the huge big-rig trucks stacked full of reddish fruit that come flying down this relatively poor stretch of the Costanera – be careful if you're on the road out there!

The primary reason for visiting Parrita (aside from learning about palm oil!) is to visit **Playa Palo Seco**, a quiet, unhurried gray-sand beach located near mangrove swamps that provide good opportunities for birding. A 6km dirt road connects the eastern edge of town to the beach. Another popular excursion is to visit **Isla Damas**, which is actually the tip of a mangrove peninsula that becomes an island at high tide. Most people arrive here on package tours from Jacó and Quepos, though you can hire a boat to bring you to and from the island for around US\$5.

If you're looking to stay on Playa Palo Seco, **Beso del Viento B&B** (☎ 2779 9674; d/q US\$70/150; P ♿) has four modest but comfortable apartments for rent that have private tiled bathrooms, fully stocked kitchens and breezy grounds. Kayaks, bikes and horses can be rented if you're interested in exploring this off-the-beaten-path area. The French owners are extremely warm and accommodating, and go out of their way to make guests feel more like visiting family.

Parrita is about 40km south of Jacó, and can be reached by any bus heading south from Jacó. After Parrita, the coastal road dips inland through more African palm-oil plantations on the way to Quepos. If you're driving, the road is a mix of a badly potholed pavement and stretches of dirt, with several rickety one-way bridges.

RAINMAKER AERIAL WALKWAY

Rainmaker was the first **aerial walkway** through the forest canopy in Central America, though it is still regarded as one of the region's best. From its tree-to-tree platforms, there are spectacular panoramic views of the surrounding primary and secondary rain forest, as well as occasional vistas out to the Pacific Ocean. The reserve is also home to the full complement of tropical wildlife, which means that there are myriad opportunities here for great birding as well as the occasional monkey sighting.

Tours with naturalist guides leave hotels in Manuel Antonio and Quepos daily except Sunday; reservations can be made at most hotels or by calling the **Rainmaker office** (☎ in Quepos 2777 3565; www.rainmakercostarica.org). Standard tours cost US\$65 and include a light breakfast and lunch, though there are also birding (US\$90) and night tours (US\$60) available. Binoculars are invaluable for watching wildlife, as are water and sun protection for staying hydrated and sunburnt free.

Rainmaker also offers opportunities for volunteers to participate for two weeks to one month in one of the four departments needed to run and preserve the project. There are also opportunities to work with local schools and various community outreach programs. Fees are US\$1250 for a two-week placement and US\$2400 for one month.

From the parking lot and orientation area, visitors walk up a beautiful rain-forest canyon with a pristine stream tumbling down the rocks. A wooden boardwalk and series of bridges across the canyon floor lead to the base of the walkway. From here, visitors climb several hundred steps to a tree platform, from which the first of six suspension bridges spans the treetops to another platform. The longest span is about 90m, and the total walkway is about 250m long. At the highest point, you are some 20 stories above the forest floor.

In addition, there are short interpretive trails that enable the visitor to identify some of the local plants, and some long and strenuous trails into the heart of the 2000-hectare preserve. Keep your eye out for poison-dart frogs, which are very common along the trails!

A large colorful sign marks the turnoff for Rainmaker on the Costanera at the northern end of Pocaes (10km east of Parrita or 15km west of Quepos). From the turnoff, it is 7km to the parking area.

QUEPOS & MANUEL ANTONIO

The sleepy, provincial town of Quepos never had ambitions of being anything more than a community of fishermen, merchants and plantation workers. However, as the international spotlight began to shine on nearby Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio, Quepos suddenly found itself with an opportunity to cash in on something even more lucrative than fish and palm oil: tourism. With rain-forested hills sweeping down to the sea, Manuel Antonio is a stunning destination worthy of the tourist hype, while decidedly more relaxed Quepos is admirably maintaining its roots despite increased foreign investment.

Note that this section is divided into Quepos proper, the road from Quepos to Manuel Antonio, the village of Manuel Antonio and the national park itself.

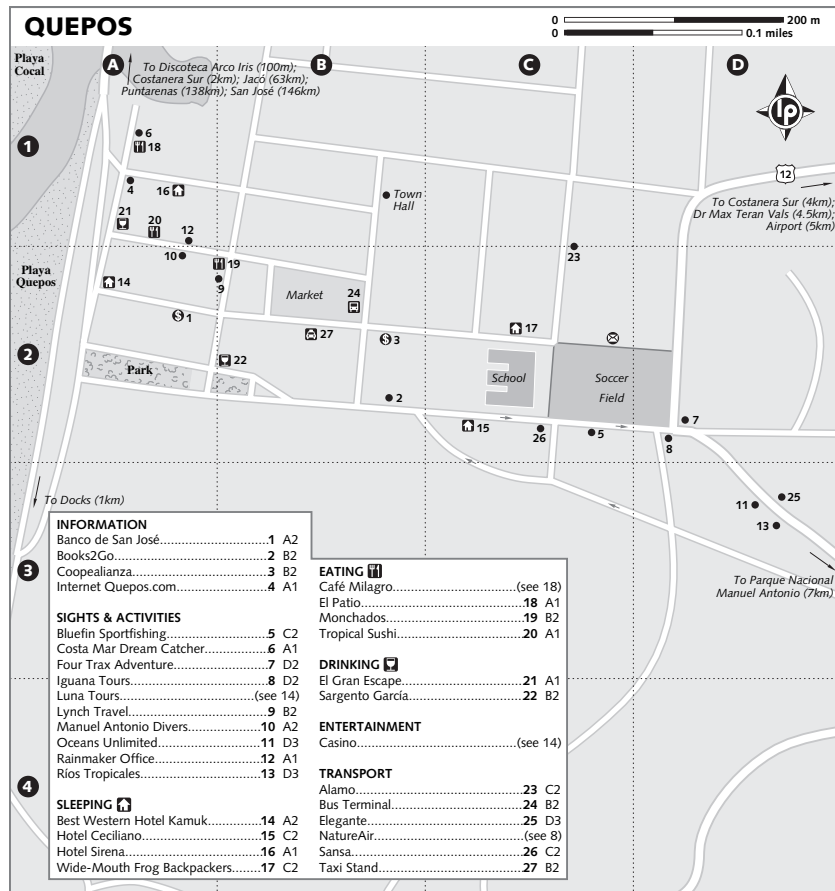
QUEPOS

Located just 7km from the entrance to Manuel Antonio, the small town of Quepos serves as the gateway for the national park, as well as a convenient base for travelers in need of goods and services. While a good number of visitors to Manuel Antonio prefer to stay outside of Quepos, accommodation is generally cheaper in town, though you will need to organize transportation to the national park and the beaches.

However, Quepos can be an appealing place to stay, especially since it exudes an attractive small-town charm that is absent from much of the central Pacific coast. Although the tourism boom is rapidly transforming the Manuel Antonio area, Quepos remains a relatively authentic Tico town that provides a more low-key alternative to the tourist-packed gringo trail beyond.

History

This town's name was derived from the indigenous Quepoa, a subgroup of the Borucas, who inhabited the area at the time of the Conquest. As with many indigenous populations, the Quepoa declined because of European diseases and slavery. By the end of the 19th century, no pure-blooded Quepoa were left, and the area began to be colonized by farmers from the highlands.



Quepos first came to prominence as a banana-exporting port in the early 20th century, though crops declined precipitously in subsequent decades due to disease and labor issues (underpaid workers had the gall to demand raises). African oil palms, which currently stretch toward the horizon in dizzying rows around Quepos, soon replaced bananas as the major local crop, though unfortunately they generated a lot less employment for the locals.

But the future is looking bright for locals as tourists are coming to Manuel Antonio by the boatload, and the construction of the new marina in the next few years means that cruise liners will no longer have to dock at Puntarenas. More visitors means more jobs in

the area's rapidly expanding tourist market, though the question of sustainability and the need for balanced growth is weighing heavy on most people's minds. The Pez Vela Marina is scheduled to open by this book's publication, but it is too early to tell what effect this will have on this humble town.

Information BOOKSHOP

Books2Go (☎ 2777 1754, 8371 3476; tours2go@racsas.co.cr; internet per hr US\$2; ☎ 10am-6pm) Susan runs a quaint little bookshop that also serves as a traveler's meeting place. You can post messages, store your bags, burn photos onto CDs, check the internet, or just hang out and read a good book. Susan also books tours in the area, and guarantees that she has the lowest prices around.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Quepos.com (per hr US\$2; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) You can check email here on several computers with decent connections.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Dr Max Teran Vals (☎ 2777 0200) A hospital that provides emergency medical care for the Quepos and Manuel Antonio area. It's on the Costanera Sur en route to the airport. However, this hospital doesn't have a trauma center and seriously injured patients are evacuated to San José.

MONEY

Banco de San José and Coopealianza both have 24-hour ATMs on the Cirrus and Plus systems. Other banks will all change US dollars and traveler's checks.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Quepolandia (www.quepolandia.com) The latest happenings are listed in this free English-language monthly magazine, found in many of the town's businesses.

Dangers & Annoyances

The town's large number of easily spotted tourists has attracted thieves. In response, the Costa Rican authorities have greatly increased police presence in the area, but travelers should always lock hotel rooms and never leave cars unattended on the street – use guarded lots instead. The area is far from dangerous, but the laidback atmosphere should not lull you into a false sense of security.

In addition, women should keep in mind that the town's bars attract rowdy crowds of plantation workers on weekends. So walking around town in your swimsuit will most certainly garner the wrong kind of attention.

Note that the beaches in Quepos are polluted and not recommended for swimming. Go over the hill to Manuel Antonio instead.

Activities

SPORTFISHING

Sportfishing is big in the Quepos area. Offshore fishing is best from December to April, when sailfish are being hooked. Some of the main charter outfits are listed following. Not all charters have offices in Quepos, so it's usually best to call ahead. If you don't have a reservation, any hotel in the area can help put you in contact with a charter outfit. You can expect to pay upwards of US\$1000 to hire out a boat for the day.

Bluefin Sportfishing (☎ 2777 1676, 2777 2222; www.bluefinsportfishing.com) Across from the soccer field.

Costa Mar Dream Catcher (☎ 2777 0725; www.costa marsportfishing.com) Next to Cafe Milagro.

Luna Tours (☎ 2777 0725; www.lunatours.net) In Best Western Hotel Kamuk.

DIVING

The dive sites are still being developed in the Quepos and Manuel Antonio area, though the following operators have both been recommended by readers. The dive sights are away from the polluted beaches, so water pollution is not a problem when diving.

Manuel Antonio Divers (☎ 2777 3483; www.manuelantonioudivers.com)

Oceans Unlimited (☎ 2777 3171; www.oceansunlimitedcr.com)

Tours

There are numerous reputable tour operators in the Quepos area.

Amigo Tico Complete Adventure Tours (☎ 2777 2812; www.puertoquepos.com) Offers a range of tours, including rafting, walks in national parks, mountain biking and fishing. A full day of rafting on the Savegre is US\$95 and this outfit also offers boat and kayaking tours of Isla Damas. Amigo Tico doesn't have an office in Quepos; book by phone or through your hotel.

Four Trax Adventure (☎ 2777 1825; www.fourtraxadventure.com) Four-hour ATV tours are US\$95 per person.

Iguana Tours (☎ 2777 1262; www.iguanatours.com) An adventure-travel shop offering river rafting, sea kayaking, horse rides, mangrove tours and dolphin-watching excursions.

Lynch Travel (☎ 2777 1170; www.lynchtravel.com) From airline reservations to fishing packages and rain-forest tours, this travel shop has it all.

Rios Tropicales (☎ 2777 4092; www.riostropicales.com) The venerable Costa Rican rafting company has an office in Quepos.

Sleeping

Staying in Quepos offers a cheaper alternative to the sky-high prices at many lodges on the road to Manuel Antonio. It can also be more convenient, as all the banks, supermarkets and bus stops are in Quepos. Reservations are recommended during high-season weekends and are necessary during Easter and the week between Christmas and New Year's Eve.

For more accommodation options, see the Quepos to Manuel Antonio section, p347 as well the Manuel Antonio Village section, p352.

X MARKS THE SPOT

Locals have long believed that a treasure worth billions and billions of dollars lies somewhere in the Quepos and Manuel Antonio area waiting to be discovered. The lore was popularized by the English pirate John Clipperton, who befriended the coastal Quepoa during his years of sailing to and from the South Pacific. Clipperton's belief stemmed from a rumor that in 1670, a number of Spanish ships laden with treasure escaped from Panama City moments before it was burned to the ground by Captain Henry Morgan. Since the ships were probably off-loaded quickly to avoid being raided at sea, a likely destination was the San Bernadino de Quepo Mission, which had a strong loyalty to the Spanish crown.

John Clipperton died in 1722 without ever discovering the legendary treasure, and the mission closed permanently in 1746 as most of the Quepoa had succumbed to European diseases. Although the ruins of the mission were discovered in 1974, they were virtually destroyed and were long since looted. However, if the treasure was indeed as large as it's described in lore, then it is possible that a few gold doubloons could still be lying somewhere, waiting to be unearthed.

with potted plants and original artwork, and is highlighted by a quaint tiki bar overlooking a tranquil swimming pool.

Best Western Hotel Kamuk (☎ 2777 0379; www.kamuk.co.cr; r from US\$85; P ♻️ 🚰) This upmarket Quepos stalwart bears the somewhat stale Best Western brand name, though in reality the Hotel Kamuk is a surprisingly refreshing historic building that provides excellent value. The Best Western label ensures that service is professional from check-in to check-out, though once you get past reception, the hotel is anything but American in ambiance. In fact, the core of the hotel is a winding wooden staircase that fans out to breezy hallways adorned with colonial flourishes. Rooms are a bit on the small side, though they're equipped with modern amenities, and you can always head to the attractive pool or Western-style restaurant if you want a bit more breathing space. If you're planning on staying here, check the internet as discount rates are sometimes available.

Eating

For a small Tico town (albeit on the edge of a major tourist attraction), Quepos is home to a surprising number of international eateries.

For more eating options, see the Quepos to Manuel Antonio section, p351 as well the Manuel Antonio Village section, p352.

Café Milagro (dishes US\$2-5; ☎ 6am-10pm Mon-Fri) Serving some of the country's best cappuccino and espresso, this is a great place to perk up in the morning – try the *perezoso* (lazy or a sloth), which is a double espresso poured into a large cup of drip-filter coffee. Or, if you want to simply relax and read the English-language newspapers that are available, you

can indulge in a baked good or a freshly made deli sandwich.

Monchados (dishes US\$7-12; ☎ 5pm-midnight) Something of a Quepos institution, this long-standing Mex-Carib spot is always bustling with dinner-goers who line up to try traditional Limónese dishes and Mexican standards. Food here is eclectic, innovative and never bland, a theme that is also reflected in the vibrant decorations and fairly regular live music.

Tropical Sushi (rolls US\$1-3; ☎ 5-10pm) Quepos has gone cosmopolitan – for authentic Japanese (yes, the sushi chef is from Japan!), try this colorfully decorated restaurant, which has an all-you-can-eat special for just US\$15. If you're a purist, you can stick to the tuna sashimi spreads, though it's worth venturing out a bit and sampling some of the local Costa Rican-style rolls.

El Patio (mains US\$8-15; ☎ 6am-10pm) This Nuevo Latino spot is adored by locals and tourists alike, in part because its menu changes daily yet never fails to entice and surprise. The unspoken rule here is fresh and local, which means that meats, seafood and produce are always of the highest quality, and always prepared in a way that highlights their natural flavors. If you're a fan of tapas, sample a few dishes here, though go slow, and enjoy your meal over a few glasses of imported wine.

Drinking & Entertainment

Nightlife in Quepos is a good blend of locals and travelers, and it's cheaper than anything you'll find in the Manuel Antonio area. If you are looking for something a bit more sophisticated, however, it's easy enough to jump in a taxi.

The fishermen-friendly **El Gran Escape** (☎ 2777 0395; ☎ 6am-11pm) is good for a beer and chit-chat, as is the American-themed **Sergento García** (☎ 2777 2960; ☎ 9am-11pm). If you feel like giving away your cash, there's the casino at the Best Western Hotel Kamuk, and the industrial-sized **Discoteca Arco Iris** (☎ 10pm-late), north of town, brings out the locals with thumping dance beats.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

Both **NatureAir** (www.natureair.com) and **Sansa** (www.sansa.com) service Quepos, which is the base town for accessing Manuel Antonio. Prices

vary according to season and availability, though you can expect to pay a little less than US\$75 for a flight from San José or Liberia. Flights are packed in the high season, so book (and pay) for your ticket well ahead of time and reconfirm often.

Lynch Travel (☎ 2777 1170; www.lynchtravel.com) can book charter flights to and from the Quepos area.

The airport is 5km out of town, and taxis make the trip for US\$3 to US\$5 (depending on traffic).

BUS

All buses arrive and depart from the main terminal in the center of town. Buy tickets for San José well in advance at the **Transportes Morales ticket office** (☎ 2777 0263; ☎ 7-11am & 1-5pm Mon-Sat, 7am-1pm Sun) at the bus terminal. Buses from Quepos depart for the following destinations:

Jacó US\$1.50, 1½ hours, 4:30am, 7:30am, 10:30am and 3pm.

Puntarenas US\$3, 3½ hours, 8am, 10:30am and 3:30pm.

San Isidro, via Dominical US\$3, three hours, 5am and 1:30pm.

San José (Transportes Morales) US\$4, four hours, 5am, 8am, 10am, noon, 2pm, 4pm and 7:30pm.

Uvita, via Dominical US\$4, 4½ hours, 10am and 7pm.

Getting Around**BUS**

Buses between Quepos and Manuel Antonio (US\$0.25) depart roughly every 30 minutes from the main terminal between 6am and 7:30pm, and less frequently after 7:30pm. The last bus departs Manuel Antonio at 10:25pm. There are more frequent buses in the dry season.

CAR

The following car-rental companies operate in Quepos; reserve ahead and reconfirm to guarantee availability:

Alamo (☎ 2777 3344; ☎ 7:30am-noon & 1:30-5:30pm)

Elegante (☎ 2777 0115; ☎ 7:30am-5pm Mon-Fri)

TAXI

Colectivo taxis between Quepos and Manuel Antonio will usually pick up extra passengers for about US\$0.50. A private taxi will cost about US\$5. Call **Quepos Taxi** (☎ 2777 0425/734) or catch one at the taxi stand south of the market.

Our pick **Wide-Mouth Frog Backpackers** (☎ 2777 2798; www.widemouthfrog.org; dm US\$9, d with/without bathroom US\$34/24; P ♻️ 🚰 🚿) This backpacker outpost is run by a welcoming British-New Zealand couple who are determined to make their little spot one of the best accommodations in Costa Rica – and so far, they've done everything right. Brightly tiled rooms are centered on an inviting pool with plenty of lounge chairs where backpackers can congregate and swap stories. There's also a communal kitchen with a huge dining area, a TV lounge with a free DVD rental library and free internet. But what makes this place so memorable is the generally good vibes that radiate throughout the premises, especially in the evenings when everyone unwinds and lets loose over a few drinks.

Hotel Ceciliano (☎ 2777 0192; d from US\$25; P) There is no shortage of budget hotels in Quepos catering primarily to Tico travelers, though this family-friendly spot gets good marks for its comfortable rooms and welcoming owners. Although the Ceciliano isn't the newest hotel on the block, everything here is kept spic-and-span, and the welcoming staff ensure that Costa Rican hospitality reigns true during the entirety of your stay.

Hotel Sirena (☎ 2777 0572; www.lasirenahotel.com; s/d/tr US\$55/65/75; P 🚰) This intimate boutique hotel is a warm and welcome addition to the Quepos scene, and is easily the best midrange option in town. Whitewashed walls with soft pastel trim are subtly lit by blue Tiffany lamps, which give the hotel a soothing, Mediterranean ambience that is a world away from the rough-and-ready Quepos street scene. The hotel is also perfectly accented

HOW TO KNOW IF A BUSINESS IS REALLY ECOFRIENDLY

Ecotourism means big business in Costa Rica, and sometimes it can seem like every hotel, restaurant, souvenir stall, bus company, surf shop and ATV tour operator is claiming to be a friend and protector of Mother Earth. It's certainly easy to dupe your average package tourist with business cards printed on recycled paper and a bunch of tree-frog stickers plastered on an office wall, but sometimes in Costa Rica it's difficult even for the discerning traveler to know whether a business is truly 'eco.' Sure, you didn't cut down a single tree when you built your canopy tour, but can you explain why your gray water trickles down the hillside into the stream below?

The guiding principle behind ecotourism is striking a balance between the positive and negative impacts of tourism, specifically traveling in a manner that is sensitive to the conditions of your destination while simultaneously minimizing negative impacts on the environment. Unfortunately, the problem is that it is becoming increasingly popular for destinations to label themselves as 'ecodestination,' yet there are no universal guidelines dictating exactly what it means to be 'eco.' However, there are various environmental, economic and sociocultural aspects of running an ecofriendly business that every traveler should be aware of.

Since most ecotourism destinations are located in areas where the natural environment is relatively untouched, it is important for a business to adhere to strict conservation guidelines. At the bare minimum, an ecofriendly business should participate in recycling programs, effectively manage their wastewater and pollutants, implement alternative energy systems, use natural illumination whenever possible and maintain pesticide-free grounds using only native plants. When it is possible, a business should also participate in environmental conservation programs as well as be an active member of regional or local organizations that work on solving environmental problems.

The economics of an ecotourist destination is a major issue concerning tourists, local communities and developers as the misdistribution of economic benefits generated by a business can have harmful consequences on the sustainability of an area. This is especially important as tourists are increasingly interested in visiting the most undeveloped areas possible, which is a problem as the individuals living in these locales are relatively removed from the greater economy. An ecofriendly business can address these realities by hiring a majority of its employees from the local population, associate with locally owned businesses, provide places where native handicrafts can be displayed for sale, serve foods that support local markets and use local materials and products in order to maintain the health of the local economy.

The sociocultural aspect of ecotourism refers to the ability of a community to continue functioning without social disharmony as a result of its adaptation to an increased volume of tourists. Although tourism contributes to the loss of cultural integrity, it can also alleviate poverty and help maintain natural resources that might otherwise be exploited. An ecofriendly business can achieve these goals by fostering indigenous customs; protecting sites of historical, archaeological and/or spiritual importance; educating visitors about local customs and practices; regulating the tourist flow to indigenous areas; and, when possible, donating a portion of profits to the local community.

Tourism will never be a completely harmless venture, but there are ways of minimizing its damage and distributing its benefits to local communities. Travel responsibly, think green and be critical the next time you see the word 'eco.'

as it is lined with the vast majority of tourist-oriented hotels, restaurants and shops in the Quepos and Manuel Antonio area.

Although competition for the tourist dollar is fierce, generally speaking there is an extremely high-standard of service in these parts. With that said, the area isn't cheap, but if you shop around and avoid the obvious tourist traps, your cash will go a long

way. And, there are truly are some world-class hotels and restaurants here where you can bed down and dine out in the lap of luxury.

Orientation

Note that the road to Manuel Antonio is steep, winding and very narrow. Worse, local bus drivers love to careen through at high velocities, and there are almost no places to pull over in the event of an emergency. At all times, you should exercise caution and drive and walk with care, especially at night.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Cantina Internet Café (per hr US\$2)

El Chante Internet (per hr US\$2)

MONEY

Banco Promerica (☎) 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Has a 24-hour ATM on the Cirrus network and can exchange US dollars.

TOURIST INFORMATION

La Buena Nota (☎ 2777 1002; buennota@racsa.co.cr; Manuel Antonio) A good source of tourist information for this area.

Rafiki Safari Lodge (☎ 2777 2250; www.rafikisafari.com) The booking and information office for this lodge (p357) offers white-water rafting, horseback riding, hiking and birding tours.

Sights & Activities

You can relax after a day's activities at the **Serenity Spa** (☎ 2777 0777, ext 220; Si Como No hotel), a good place for couple's massages, sunburn-relief treatments, coconut body scrubs and tasty coffee.

Also belonging to the Si Como No hotel and situated just across the street is **Fincas Naturales** (www.butterflygardens.co.cr; admission US\$15), a private rain-forest preserve and butterfly garden. About three dozen species of butterfly are bred here. The garden has a sound-and-light show at night (US\$40 per person) and is surrounded by nature trails.

Amigos del Rio (☎ 2777 1084; www.adventuremanuelantonio.com) runs white-water rafting trips for all skill levels on the Savegre and Naranjo rivers. Prices vary depending on the size of the party and the nature of your trip.

Courses

Escuela de Idiomas D'Amore (☎ 2777 1143, in the USA 310-435 9897, 262-367 8589; www.escoladamore.com) has

Spanish immersion classes at all levels; local homestays can be arranged. Two-week classes without/with homestay start at US\$845/995, though significant discounts are available for longer periods of study. This institute comes recommended by a large number of readers for its high level of service and professionalism.

Sleeping

This stretch of winding, forested road has mostly top-end hotels, but there are a few midrange and budget options as well. High-season rates are provided throughout, and reservations are a must for weekends. Low-season rates can be as much as 40% lower in some hotels. Hotels listed here are in the order they're passed traveling from Quepos to Manuel Antonio.

For more accommodation options, see the Quepos section, p343 as well the Manuel Antonio Village section, p352.

Hotel Plinio (☎ 2777 0055; www.hotelplinio.com; d with/without air-con US\$75/65, 2-/3-story ste US\$85/110, jungle house US\$100; ☎ ☎ ☎) This cozy hotel is nestled on the verdant edge of the rain forest, and is the perfect retreat from all of your stresses. Rooms have super-high ceilings, which create a tranquil, relaxed atmosphere. Larger suites are two and three stories tall, and have great polished-wood decks for lounging, while groups of up to five can live it up in the jungle house. The grounds boast 10km of trails into the forest, where you'll find a 17m-high lookout tower (open to the public).

Mimo's Hotel (☎ 2777 2217; www.mimoshotel.com; d US\$65, junior ste US\$85; ☎ ☎ ☎) Run by a delightful Italian couple, this whitewashed and wood-trimmed hotel has spacious, clean, terra-cotta-tiled rooms that are positively lit up with bright, colorful murals. Highlights here include the palm-fringed swimming pool, a fiber-optically lit Jacuzzi and restaurant-bar serving Italian-influenced dishes. The owners speak half a dozen languages, and can share with you a wealth of knowledge about Costa Rica.

Hotel Mono Azul (☎ 2777 2572; www.monozul.com; s/d/tr from US\$55/60/65, child under 12yr free; ☎ ☎ ☎) This is a great family option as the entire hotel is decorated with animal murals and rain-forest paraphernalia, not to mention the three pools and games room. You'll also sleep well at night knowing that your money is going to a good cause. The Mono Azul is home to 'Kids Saving the Rainforest' (KSTR), started by

QUEPOS TO MANUEL ANTONIO

From the port of Quepos, the road swings inland for 7km before reaching the beaches of Manuel Antonio Village and the entrance to the national park. The serpentine road passes over a number of hills awash with picturesque views of forested slopes leading down to the palm-fringed coastline. Of course, this narrow stretch of road isn't exactly pristine and idyllic

GAY GUIDE TO MANUEL ANTONIO

For jet-setting gay men the world over, Manuel Antonio is regarded as something of a dream destination...

Homosexuality has been decriminalized in Costa Rica since the 1970s, which is indeed a rarity in machismo-fueled conservative Central America. As a result, gays and lesbians have had Costa Rica on their travel wish-list for decades, though the blossoming gay scene in Manuel Antonio is unlike any other in the country.

It's not hard to understand why Manuel Antonio first started attracting gay men, especially since the area is stunningly beautiful, and has long attracted liberal-minded and tolerant individuals. The area also has a burgeoning artist community, a sophisticated restaurant scene and one of the country's few nude beaches.

So, without further adieu, here is your concise gay guide to Manuel Antonio:

Sights & Activities

During the daylight hours, the epicenter of gay Manuel Antonio is the famous **La Playita** (Map p349), one of the few beaches in Costa Rica where nude sunbathing and skinny dipping are tolerated. Although there are a few women here, who come to sunbathe topless in relative safety and comfort, La Playita is a playful pick-up scene for gay men on the prowl.

Sleeping

Manuel Antonio's most famous gay-friendly spot is **La Plantación** (Map p349; ☎ 2777 1332, 2777 1115, in the USA & Canada 800-477 7829; www.bigrubys.com; r from US\$149; (P) (♿) (♿) (♿)), part of the international 'Big Ruby's' hotel network. If you're a gay man, welcome to paradise! The sophisticated and all-together impeccable rooms at 'the Plantation' are cool, light and spacious, with regal bathrooms, unforgettable views and highly memorable mosquito nets romantically draped over king-sized beds. And, let's not forget the pool and clothing-optional sundeck where you can chat up fabulous men from around the world while sipping on an expertly crafted cocktail.

Eating & Drinking

The nearby Hotel Casitas Eclipse is home to the **our pick Restaurant Gato Negro** (Map p349; ☎ 2777 0408, 2777 1738; dishes US\$12-35), one of the glitziest restaurants in Manuel Antonio. Although dinner here comes with a huge price tag, it's one of the hippest spots in the area to be seen out and about. And, it's worth pointing out that the European-influenced food is consistently flawless, and every detail from the presentation of the meat to the thickness of the sauce is simply perfect. The upstairs bar at the 'Black Cat' is also consistently packed with stylish gay men, so dress your best and be ready to impress.

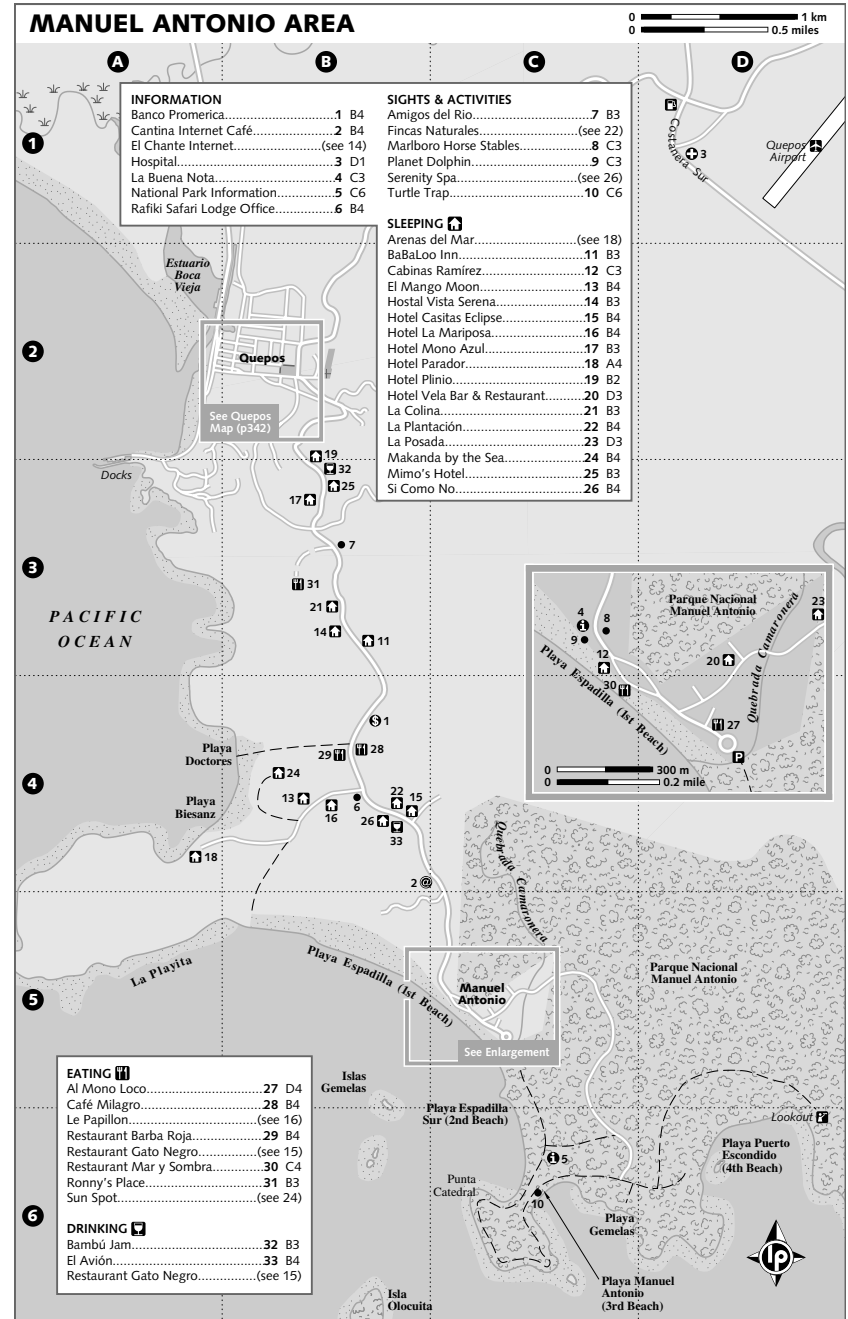
two local schoolchildren who were concerned about the endangered *mono titi* (Central American squirrel monkey) – 10% of hotel receipts are donated to the organization.

La Colina (☎ 2777 0231; www.lacolina.com; r with breakfast US\$59-95; (P) (♿) (♿)) This pleasant B&B is tucked away in a peaceful, forest setting that's almost as magnificent as the ocean views you'll have from your room.

our pick Hostel Vista Serena (☎ 2777 5162; www.vistaserena.com; dm/d US\$12/50; (P) (♿)) In an area that is hopelessly overpriced, it's a relief to find such a great budget hostel. Perched scenically on a quiet hillside, this memorable hostel allows guests to enjoy spectacular, ocean sunsets from a hammock-filled terrace.

Unsurprisingly, most travelers find themselves getting stuck here for longer than they planned, especially when you can spend your days hiking down from the hostel through a farm to a remote wilderness beach. Catering to the needs of the backpacker, Vista Serena offers spic-and-span white-tiled dorms with shared bathroom, a communal kitchen and a TV lounge, as well as affordable private rooms for couples who want a bit more privacy. Sonia and her son Conrad, the super-helpful Tico owners, speak fluent English.

BaBaLoo Inn (☎ 2777 3461; www.babalooinn.com; d standard/king US\$89/145; (P) (♿) (♿)) This American-run establishment offers standard rooms overlooking a lush, tropical garden with a private



balcony. However, we're partial to the larger king rooms featuring dramatic ocean views, a comfortable sitting area, oversized beds and showers, a small kitchenette and enough room for a family of four. All rooms come with small extras, like a fully stocked mini-bar and DVD players, which means that there is plenty to do on a rainy day.

Hotel Casitas Eclipse (☎ 2777 0408, 2777 1738; www.casitaseclipse.com; standard/ste/casita from US\$125/170/300; P ♻️ 🚰) The soothing curves of this architecturally arresting, pure-white complex hint at the beauty within. The hotel consists of nine attractive, split-level houses spread around three swimming pools. The bottom floor of each house is an enormous junior suite, while the upper floor is a standard room with private terrace. These have a separate entrance but a staircase (with lockable door) combines the two and, *voilà*, you have a sumptuous casita sleeping five.

El Mango Moon (☎ 2777 5323; www.mangomoon.net; r US\$150-350; ♻️ 🚰) This intimate boutique hotel is run by an American couple, though it obviously has a woman's touch – there are fresh flowers in every corner of the property, luxurious linens on all the beds and heavenly bathrooms with steaming hot water. The rooms also face out onto a crystal-blue bay, which you can hike down to on the hotel's private trail. True to its boutique label, service here is extremely personalized and overwhelmingly accommodating, which makes for an all-round memorable stay.

Hotel Parador (☎ 2777 1411, in the USA 800-648 1136; www.hotelparador.com; r US\$185-950; P ♻️ 🚰) This hotel, which was created for admirers of lavish excess – a la *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* – is a 68-room, 10-suite complex, complete with a private helicopter landing pad, outdoor and indoor Jacuzzis, infinity pools with swim-up bars, a European-style spa and health club, tennis courts, minigolf etc (you get the idea!). Splendiferous rooms ranging from huge to ridiculously huge, are, needless to say, absurdly posh and brimming with every conceivable amenity.

Si Como No (☎ 2777 0777, in the USA 800-237 8201; www.sicomono.com; r US\$190-310, child under 6yr free; P ♻️ 🚰) This flawlessly designed hotel is an example of how to build a resort while maintaining your environmental sensibility. Rooms are insulated for comfort and use energy-efficient air-con units; water is recycled into the landscape, and solar-heating

panels are used to heat the water. The rooms feature picture windows and balconies, so you'll never feel closed in from the surrounding rain forest.

Hotel La Mariposa (☎ 2777 0355/456; www.lamariposa.com; r from US\$205-440; P ♻️ 🚰) This internationally acclaimed hotel was the area's first luxury accommodation, so unsurprisingly it snatched up the best view of the coastline. Fifty-seven pristine rooms of various sizes are elegantly decorated with hand-carved furniture – big spenders should check out the penthouse suite, which has a Jacuzzi on the terrace facing out toward the sea. This hotel was recently listed in the book *1000 Places to See Before you Die*, principally for the immaculate gardens and world-class views that hug every corner of the property.

Arenas del Mar (☎ 2777 2777; www.arenasdelmar.com; r from US\$220-580; P ♻️ 🚰) The newest luxury accommodation in the Manuel Antonio area is this visually arresting hotel and resort complex, which has the privilege of being one of only eight hotels belonging to the prestigious 'Small Distinctive Hotels of Costa Rica.' Despite the extent and breadth of the grounds, there are no more than 40 rooms on the premises, which ensures an unmatched level of personal service and attention. Arenas del Mar, which has won numerous ecotourism awards since its inception, was designed to incorporate the beauty of the natural landscape. In short, the overall effect is breathtaking, especially when you're staring down the coastline from the lofty heights of your private open-air Jacuzzi.

our pick Makanda by the Sea (☎ 2777 0442; www.makanda.com; studio/villa incl breakfast US\$265/400; P ♻️ 🚰) Even in a destination as upscale as Manuel Antonio, Makanda stands alone in a class of its own. The entire hotel is solely comprised of six villas and five studios, which give Makanda an air of intimacy and complete privacy. Villa 1 (the largest) will take your breath away – the entire wall is open to the rain forest and the ocean. The other villas and studios are air-conditioned and enclosed, though draw upon the same minimalist, Eastern-infused design schemes. The grounds are also home to a beautiful infinity pool and Jacuzzi, both offering superb views out to sea, as well as a series of flawless Japanese gardens that you can stroll through and reflect on the beauty of your surroundings. And, if you're still not impressed, you can access a private

QUINTESSENTIAL EATS & DRINKS

The Quepos and Manuel Antonio area is home to some of the country's most spectacular restaurants and bars. With that said, choosing the best of the best is no easy task, though the following top picks are recommended simply for their unique atmosphere.

- **our pick El Aviación** (☎ 2777 3378; dishes US\$5-7) This unforgettable airplane bar was constructed from the body of a 1954 Fairchild C-123. Here is where the story gets interesting – the plane was originally purchased by the US government in the '80s for the Nicaraguan Contras, but it never made it out of its hangar in San José because of the ensuing Iran-Contra scandal that embroiled Oliver North and his cohorts in the US government. (The plane is lovingly referred to as 'Ollie's Folly.') In 2000 the enterprising owners of El Aviación purchased it for US\$3000, and then proceeded to cart it piece by piece to Manuel Antonio. It now sits on the side of the main road, where it looks as if it had crash-landed into the side of the hill. It's a great spot for a beer, guacamole and a Pacific sunset, and on evenings in the dry season there is live music.
- **Ronny's Place** (☎ 2777 5120; mains US\$5-12; ☎ 7:30am-10pm) Head 800m west from the main drag, on the good, well-signed dirt road opposite Manuel Antonio Experts – it's worth the trip as the view here won't disappoint. Ronny, the bilingual Tico owner, has worked hard to make his reststop a favorite of locals and travelers alike. Feast on a big burger or some fresh seafood, and then wash down your meal with some of the best sangría in the country while enjoying views of two pristine bays and 360° of primitive jungle. While plenty of places along this stretch of road boast similar views, nowhere else can you enjoy them in such a laidback and carefree surrounding.
- **Sun Spot** (☎ 2777 0442; Makanda by the Sea; dishes US\$10-25) OK, so your budget won't allow you to stay at Makanda by the Sea, though trust us – it's worth checking out the exclusive little poolside restaurant here for its breathtaking rain-forest and ocean views. The kitchen whips up delicious seafood, sandwiches and salads, though the real reason you're stopping by is to soak up the atmosphere of one of the most beautiful hotels on the Pacific coast. After all, just because you can't afford to lie down in the lap of luxury doesn't mean you can't sit on it from time to time.
- **our pick Le Papillon** (☎ 2777 0355/456; Hotel La Mariposa; lunch US\$10-20, dinner US\$20-40) The featured restaurant at Manuel Antonio's landmark luxury hotel is perfectly perched to take in daily sunset over the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. As you'd imagine, you're paying for the view at this world-class institution, though when the sun dips below the horizon and lights up the sky, you'll stop caring about the price. The food is largely continental cuisine that takes advantage of Costa Rica's rich bounty of fresh seafood and tropical produce – if you're pinching your pennies, the lunch menu is a good deal.

beach by taking the 552 steps down the side of the mountain – bliss!

Eating & Drinking

Many hotels mentioned earlier have good restaurants open to the public. Reservations are recommended in the high season.

For more eating options, see the Quepos section, p344 as well the Manuel Antonio Village section, p352.

Café Milagro (breakfast US\$3-4, sandwiches US\$4-6) The sister café to the one in Quepos is an obligatory stop on the way to the park as its coffee is pure, black gold. Breakfast and sandwiches are reasonably priced and filling, and will put that extra spring in your

step, which you'll certainly need once you hit the trails.

Restaurant Barba Roja (☎ 2777 0331; dishes US\$8-15; ☎ 4-10pm Mon, 10am-10pm Tue-Sun) A longstanding Manuel Antonio institution, the Barba Roja has undergone several changes over the years, though currently offers an excellent mix of American standards with a bit of Mexican flair. After a long day on the trails, recoup over a heaping bowl of nachos and a smooth but potent margarita.

Bambú Jam (Hotel Mirador del Pacífico) Although most nightlife in Manuel Antonio tends to involve a quiet cocktail or beer in the hotel bar, this is a popular music and drinking spot, especially on Friday nights when there are live

bands and plenty of guests looking to unwind on the dance floor.

Getting Around

Many visitors who stay in this area arrive by private or rented car. Drive carefully on this narrow, steep and winding road – and keep an eye out for pedestrians. There’s no shoulder, so everyone walks in the street.

Buses between Manuel Antonio and Quepos (US\$0.25) operate up and down the main road and run every 30 minutes between 6am and 7:30pm, and less frequently after 7:30pm. The last bus departs Manuel Antonio at 10:25pm.

Collective taxis between Quepos and Manuel Antonio will usually pick up extra passengers for about US\$0.50. A private taxi will cost about US\$5 – call **Quepos Taxi** (☎ 2777 0425/734).

MANUEL ANTONIO VILLAGE

Here’s an analogy for you – Mainstreet USA is to Walt Disney World as Manuel Antonio Village is to the national park (minus the mouse ears, of course!). Run the tourist gauntlet of roadside vendors selling stuffed monkeys (Made in China) and commemorate your trip to the rain forest with a tree-frog sarong (Hecho en Guatemala). Indeed, things have certainly changed in Manuel Antonio, so if you’re coming here expecting deserted beaches frequented by hundreds of monkeys, you’re in for a surprise.

Of course, the tourist hordes descend on this tiny village with good reason – it marks the entrance to Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio, one of the country’s most stunningly beautiful national parks. True, it may be getting increasingly difficult to have a quiet moment to yourself, though the environs here truly are stunning. And, if you can convince those around you to keep their voices down, you really can get up close and personal with some marvelous wildlife.

Information

La Buena Nota (☎ 2777 1002; buennota@racsa.co.cr), at the northern end of Manuel Antonio Village, serves as an informal information center. It sells maps, guidebooks, books in various languages, English-language newspapers, beach supplies and souvenirs; it also rents body boards. You can inquire here about guesthouses available for long-term stays.

Look for a free copy of the English-language *Quepolandia*, which details everything to see and do in the area.

Sights & Activities

There’s a good beach near the entrance to the park, namely **Playa Espadilla**, though you need to be wary of rip currents (for more information see boxed text, p278). There are however some lifeguards working at this beach, though not at the others in the area. At the far western end of Playa Espadilla, beyond a rocky headland (wear sandals) is **La Playita**, a gay beach frequented primarily by young men and offering nude sunbathing (use lashings of sunscreen). This point is inaccessible one hour before and after the high tide, so time your walk well or you’ll get cut off. Don’t be fooled – you do not need to pay to use the beaches as they’re outside the park.

Snorkeling gear, body boards and kayaks can be rented all along the beach at Playa Espadilla. If you’re looking to surf, the gentle ankle-slappers here are perfect for getting your sea legs, and **Manuel Antonio Surf School** (☎ 2777 4842) and **Monkey Surf** (☎ 2777 5240) both have kiosks near the beach.

Steve Wofford at **Planet Dolphin** (☎ 2777 2137; www.planetdolphin.com; Cabinas Piscis) offers dolphin- and whale-watching tours; starlight sailing cruises are also available. Outings start at US\$65 for four hours, including lunch and snorkeling. The Tico-run **Marlboro Horse Stables** (☎ 2777 1108) rents horses, and can organize trips through the rain forest.

White-water rafting and sea kayaking are both popular in this area – see p343 for details of companies that offer these and other options.

Sleeping & Eating

The village of Manuel Antonio is the closest base for exploring the national park, though reservations are a must for the high season, especially on weekends, and lengthy advance planning is needed for Easter week.

For more accommodation options, see the Quepos section, p343 as well the Quepos to Manuel Antonio section, p347.

For more eating options, see the Quepos section, p344 as well the Quepos to Manuel Antonio section, p351.

Cabinas Ramirez (☎ 2777 5044; 1 per person US\$10, camping per person US\$3; (P)) In the real estate game, there’s only three simple rules: location, loca-

tion and location. Taking this theme to heart, Cabinas Ramirez offers budget accommodation that is literally steps from the beach, and within easy walking distance of the national park. Of course, the entire property is somewhat reminiscent of a trailer park, and the nearby disco may discourage sleep, though what do you expect for 10 bucks a night!

Hotel Vela Bar & Restaurant (☎ 2777 0413; www.velabar.com; s/d US\$40/50; (P) (S)) The Hotel Vela is primarily known in these parts for its justifiably famous bar and restaurant, which serves up some of the freshest seafood in the Manuel Antonio area. Meals cost between US\$7 and US\$15. But, the Hotel Vela is also a surprisingly affordable spot to post up for a night or two – rooms here are fairly basic, but it’s hard to beat the price considering that you can literally wake up, have your morning coffee and stroll over to the entrance to the national park before your caffeine perk sets in.

La Posada (☎ 2777 1446; www.laposadajungle.com; bungalows US\$115-225; (P) (S)) Your private jungle bungalow can accommodate you and several of your friends, though you might have some furry visitors as – quite literally – you’re on the edge of the national park. From the comfort of your fully equipped home away from home, which is jam-packed with modern amenities, including a fully stocked kitchen, you can view wildlife as it scurries across your front yard (or across your rooftop in the middle of the night!).

Al Mono Loco (casados US\$6) Just north of the rotunda, Al Mono Loco sits under a thatched rancho (small house or house-like building) and serves Tico and international specialties. If you find yourself up early, and can’t bare to hit trails without a good breakfast, look no further – the *gallo pinto* here really hits the spot in the wee hours of the morning.

Restaurant Mary Sombra (casados US\$3-5, fish dinners US\$6-10) This seriously chilled-out beach bar isn’t exactly the most gourmet spot on the block, but you can’t beat the feeling of eating next to the sea. On weekends, however, the restaurant turns into a discotheque that’s pretty much the most happening spot in the town.

Getting There & Away

Buses depart Manuel Antonio for San José (US\$4, four hours) at 6am, 9:30am, noon and 5pm. These will pick you up in front of your hotel if you are on the road to flag them down or from the Quepos bus terminal, after which

there are no stops. Buy tickets well in advance at the Quepos bus terminal. This bus is frequently packed and you will not be able to buy tickets from the driver. Buses for destinations other than San José also leave from the main terminal in Quepos, see p345.

PARQUE NACIONAL MANUEL ANTONIO

Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio was declared a national park in 1972, preserving it (with minutes to spare) from being bulldozed and razed to make room for a crucial development project – namely an all-inclusive resort and beachside condominiums. Although Manuel Antonio was enlarged to its present-day size of 1625 hectares in 2000, it remains the country’s second-smallest national park. Of course, as one of Central America’s top tourist destinations, you’re going to have to share your idyllic spot of sand with the rest of the camera-clicking hordes.

With that said, Manuel Antonio is absolutely stunning, and on a good day at the right time, it’s easy to convince yourself that you’ve died and gone to a coconut-filled paradise. The park’s clearly marked trail system winds through rain-forest backed tropical beaches and rocky headlands, and the views across the bay to the pristine outer islands are unforgettable. And, as if that wasn’t enough of a hard sell, add to the mix iguanas, howlers, capuchins, sloths and squirrel monkeys, which may be the gosh-darn cutest little fur balls you’ve ever seen.

Orientation & Information

Visitors must leave their vehicles in the parking lot near the park entrance; the charge is US\$3. However, the road here is very narrow and congested and it’s suggested that you leave your car at your hotel and take an early-morning bus to Manuel Antonio and then walk in. The **park entrance** (admission US\$7; ☎ 7am-4pm Tue-Sun) is a few meters south of the rotunda. Count your change as many tourists complain about being ripped off. Here you can hire naturalist guides to take you into the park; see Tours p354.

To reach the entrance, you’ll have to wade through the Camaronera estuary, which can be anywhere from ankle to thigh deep, depending on the tides and the season. However, in an impressive display of opportunism, there are boaters here to transport you 100m for the small fee of US\$1.

SAVING THE SQUIRREL MONKEY

With its expressive eyes and luxuriant coat, the *mono tití* (Central American squirrel monkey) is one of the most beautiful of Costa Rica's four monkey species. Unfortunately, it is also in danger of extinction. Roughly 1500 of these charming animals are left in the Manuel Antonio area, one of their last remaining habitats. Unfortunately, the area is in constant environmental jeopardy due to overdevelopment. To remedy this problem, the folks at **Ascomoti** (Asociación para la Conservación del Mono Titi, Association for the Conservation of the Titi Monkey; ☎ 2224 5703; www.ascomoti.com) have begun to take measures to prevent further decline.

The organization is creating a biological corridor between the hilly Cerro-Nara biological protection zone in the northeast and the Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio, which lies on the Pacific coast. To achieve this, they are reforesting the Río Naranjo, a key waterway linking the two locations. Already more than 10,000 trees have been planted along 8km of the Naranjo. This not only has the effect of extending the monkeys' habitat, but also provides a protected area for other wildlife to enjoy. Scientists at the Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica have mapped and selected sites for reforestation and the whole project is supported financially by business owners in the area. (Ascomoti's website has a list of all of the local businesses supporting this valuable effort.)

If you want to volunteer, Ascomoti is looking for individuals interested in planting trees or tracking monkey troops. Volunteers must be able to devote at least one month. The cost is US\$350 per person per month to cover room and board. Inquire months ahead of your desired travel date as opportunities are not always immediately available.

The ranger station and **national park information center** (Map p349; ☎ 2777 0644) is just before Playa Manuel Antonio. Drinking water is available, and there are toilets, beach showers, picnic tables and a refreshment stand. There is no camping and guards will come around in the evening to make sure that no one has remained behind.

The beaches are often numbered – most people call Playa Espadilla (outside the park) 'first beach,' Playa Espadilla Sur 'second beach,' Playa Manuel Antonio 'third beach,' Playa Puerto Escondido 'fourth beach' and Playa Playita 'fifth beach.' Some people begin counting at Espadilla Sur, which is the first beach in the park, so it can be a bit confusing trying to figure out which beach people may be talking about. Regardless, they're all pristine, and provide ample opportunities for snorkeling or restful sunbathing. There is a refreshment stand on Playa Manuel Antonio.

The average daily temperature is 27°C/80°F and average annual rainfall is 3875mm. The dry season is not entirely dry, merely less wet, so you should be prepared for rain (although it can also be dry for days on end). Make sure you carry plenty of drinking water, sun protection and insect repellent. Pack a picnic lunch if you're spending the day.

Tours

Hiring a guide costs US\$20 per person for a two-hour tour. The only guides allowed in the park are members of Aguila (a local association governed by the park service), who have official ID badges, and recognized guides from tour agencies or hotels. This is to prevent visitors from getting ripped off and to ensure a good-quality guide – Aguila guides are well trained and multilingual. (French-, German-, or English-speaking guides can be requested.) Visitors report that hiring a guide virtually guarantees wildlife sightings.

Sights & Activities

HIKING
After the park entrance, it's about a 30-minute hike to **Playa Espadilla Sur**, where you'll find the park ranger station and information center; watch for birds and monkeys as you walk. West of the station, follow an obvious trail through forest to an isthmus separating Playas Espadilla Sur and Manuel Antonio. This isthmus is called a *tombolo* and was formed by the accumulation of sedimentary material between the mainland and the peninsula beyond, which was once an island. If you walk along Playa Espadilla Sur, you will find a small mangrove area. The isthmus widens into a rocky peninsula, with a forest in the center. A trail leads around the penin-

sula to **Punta Catedral**, from where there are good views of the Pacific Ocean and various rocky islets that are bird reserves and form part of the national park. Brown boobies and pelicans are among the seabirds that nest on these islands.

You can continue around the peninsula to **Playa Manuel Antonio**, or you can avoid the peninsula altogether and hike across the isthmus to this beach. At the western end of the beach, during the low tide, you can see a semicircle of rocks that archaeologists believe were arranged by pre-Columbian Indians to function as a **turtle trap**. (Turtles would swim in during high tide, but when they tried to swim out after the tide started receding, they'd be trapped by the wall.) The beach itself is an attractive one of white sand and is popular for swimming. It's protected and safer than the Espadilla beaches.

Beyond Playa Manuel Antonio, the trail divides. The lower trail is steep and slippery during the wet months and leads to the quiet Playa Puerto Escondido. This beach can be more or less completely covered by high tides, so be careful not to get cut off. The upper trail climbs to a **lookout** on a bluff overlooking Puerto Escondido and Punta Serrucho beyond – a stunning vista. Rangers reportedly limit the number of hikers on this trail to 45.

The trails in Manuel Antonio are well marked and heavily traversed, though there are some quiet corners near the ends of the trails. Off-trail hiking is not permitted without prior consent from the park service.

Watch out for the *manzanillo* tree (*Hippomane mancinella*) – it has poisonous fruits that look like little crab apples, and the sap exuded by the bark and leaves is toxic, causing the skin to itch and burn. Warning signs are prominently displayed beside examples of this tree near the park entrance.

WHITE-WATER RAFTING & KAYAKING

While not as popular as Turrialba (p159), Manuel Antonio is something of an emerging white-water rafting and sea kayaking center. Although you shouldn't expect the same level of world-class runs here as in other parts of the country, there are certainly some adrenaline kicks to be had. For more information, see Tours, p343.

WILDLIFE-WATCHING

Increased tourist traffic has taken its toll on the park's wildlife as animals are frequently driven away or – worse still – taught to scavenge for tourist handouts. To its credit, the park service has reacted by closing the park on Monday and limiting the number of visitors to 600 during the week and 800 on weekends and holidays.

Even though visitors are funneled along the main access road, you should have no problem seeing animals along here, even as you line up at the gate. White-faced capuchins are very used to people, and normally troops feed and interact within a short distance of visitors – they can be encountered anywhere along the main access road and around Playa Manuel Antonio.

DON'T FEED THE MONKEYS! DAMMIT WE'RE SERIOUS!

We at Lonely Planet respect the environment, so you can imagine how irate we become when we hear that tourists (and Ticos alike) are feeding the monkeys their left-over Cheetos. Sure, they're cute, and you may think that you're doing them a favor, but you're not. Really.

Here are a few reasons why:

- Monkeys are susceptible to bacteria transmitted from human hands.
- Irregular feeding leads to aggressive behavior and creates a dangerous dependency.
- Bananas are NOT their preferred food, and can cause serious digestive problems.
- Increased exposure with humans facilitates illegal poaching.

This list could go on and on. Please people, we're on our hands and knees. Don't feed the monkeys, and if you see someone else doing so, be responsible and say something. The problem has become so bad in Manuel Antonio that an initiative has been started in which the names (and sometimes photos) of violators are published in the local press. To report an irresponsible soul, call ☎ 2777 2592.

ANDRES POVEDA ON COSTA RICAN PRIDE

Andres Poveda, the founder of the Costa Rican Hostel Network, has spent the last several years raising the bar for backpacker haunts throughout the country. Over an ice-cold Imperial lager and a bowl of nachos, Andres shared his thoughts on being Costa Rican.

How did you end up owning backpacker hostels? That's a good story, especially since the honest truth is that I always dreamed of becoming a lawyer. As a kid I used to get into a lot of trouble, so I thought that I should probably learn how to properly defend myself! Anyway, after finishing law school and landing a high-powered job with the government, I learned that wearing a suit and dealing with papers wasn't the kind of life that I wanted. So, together with my identical twin brother Adrian, we decided to create a place where travelers could experience the real side of Costa Rica. Today, we are proud of the fact that we are one of the few Costa Rican-owned businesses in this country catering exclusively to backpackers from around the world.

What does it mean to be Costa Rican? If you want to understand what it means to be Costa Rican, all you need to do is spend some time hanging out with us Costa Ricans, or as we prefer to call ourselves, Ticos. I think one of the most infectious qualities of Ticos is that we don't think too much about the future, and instead prefer to have a great time and simply enjoy the moment for what it is. Ticos are also extremely family orientated, which means that we are really quick to treat friends as if they were our own kin. You know, almost immediately upon arriving in this country, travelers are greeted with the words '*pura vida*,' which really is a catch-all phrase for Ticos. Although it directly translates as 'pure life,' *pura vida* really is a philosophy of living that all of us strive to uphold.

What makes Costa Rica so unique? Costa Rica is such a tiny country with only a few million people, so you would think that it would be hard for us to have a strong identity. On the contrary, there are so many unique things about Costa Rica that give us Ticos a strong sense of pride and love for our country. For instance, everyone knows that our country is home to some of the world's most virgin rain forest, and that we haven't had a standing army for decades. To me, however, what makes this country so unique is that we are honest people who work hard for what we have. The reality is that we will never be one of the world's largest economies, though people here are extremely satisfied with their lives, which is why we are so passionate about having fun!

What is the best way for travelers to experience Costa Rica? The great thing about this country is that it has a youthful spirit, so you don't have to be 18 or 21 to have a good time here. In Costa Rica, the great social equalizer is beer, so all you have to do is grab a bottle and just interact with the people around you.

What is the best part of being in the hostel business? The answer is definitely meeting backpackers from all around the world, and knowing that at the end, we are all human beings. When you work in an international environment like a hostel, it's a daily affirmation to learn that we all share the same wants, needs and desires.

What is the most challenging part of the hostel business? Keeping it real, keeping it Costa Rican. This is the way our business has always been, the way it is, and the way that it will always be. Others may be motivated by profit, but for me, it's about sharing my pride in being Tico with every single backpacker that steps foot through the front door.

Costa Rican Hostel Network accommodations: Hostel Pangea (p95), Hostel Toruma (p115), Arenal Backpackers Resort (p236), Monteverde Backpackers (p180) and Tamarindo Backpackers (p273).

You'll probably also hear mantled howler monkeys soon after sunrise and, like capuchins, they can be seen virtually anywhere inside the park and even along the road to Quepos – watch for them crossing the monkey bridges that were erected by several local conservation groups.

Agoutis and coatis can be seen darting across various paths, and both three-toed and two-toed sloths are also common in the park. Guides are extremely helpful in spotting sloths as they tend not to move around all that much.

However, the movements of the park's star animal and Central America's rarest primate, namely the Central American squirrel monkey, are far less predictable. These adorable monkeys are more retiring than capuchins, though they are occasionally seen near the park entrance in the early morning, they usually melt into the forest well before opening time. With luck, however, a troop could be encountered during a morning's walk, and they often reappear in beachside trees and on the fringes of Manuel Antonio Village in the early evening.

Offshore, keep your eyes peeled for pantropical spotted and bottlenose dolphins, as well as humpback whales passing by on their regular migration routes. Other possibilities include orcas (killer whales), false killers and rough-toothed dolphins.

Big lizards are also something of a featured sighting at Manuel Antonio – it's hard to miss the large ctenosaurs and green iguanas that bask along the beach at Playa Manuel Antonio and in the vegetation behind Playa Espadilla Sur. To spot the well-camouflaged basilisk, listen for the rustle of leaves along the edges of the trails, especially near the lagoon.

Manuel Antonio is not usually on the serious birders' trail of Costa Rica, though the bird list is respectable nevertheless. The usual suspects include the blue-gray and palm tanagers, great-tailed grackles, bananaquits, blue dacnises and at least 15 different species of hummingbirds. Among the regional endemics to look out for include the fiery-billed aracaris, black-hooded antshrikes, Baird's trogons, black-bellied whistling-ducks, yellow-crowned night-herons, brown pelicans, magnificent frigate birds,

brown boobies, spotted sandpipers, green herons and ringed kingfishers.

Getting There & Away

The entrance and exit to Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio lies in Manuel Antonio Village – for more information, see p353.

QUEPOS TO UVITA

South of Quepos, the well-trodden Central Pacific gringo trail slowly tapers off, though this certainly shouldn't deter you from pushing on to more far-flung locales. In fact, this stretch of coastline is a great place to get a feel for the Costa Rica of 10 years ago, and if you're an intrepid traveler, you can have your pick of any number of deserted beaches and great surf spots. The region is also home to a great bulk of Costa Rica's African palm oil industry, which should be immediately obvious after the few dozen kilometers of endless plantations lining the sides of the Costanera.

RAFIKI SAFARI LODGE

Nestled into the rain forest, with a prime spot right next to the Río Savegre, the **Rafiki Safari Lodge** (☎ 2777 2250, 2777 5327; www.rafikisafari.com; s/d/ste incl 3 meals US\$168/287/402, child under 5yr free; 📍) combines all the comforts of a hotel with the splendor of a jungle safari – all with a little bit of African flavor. The owners, who are from South Africa, have constructed nine luxury tents on stilts equipped with private bathroom, hot water, private porch and electricity. All units are screened in, which allows you to see and hear the rain forest without actually having creepy-crawlies in your bed. There's a spring-fed pool with a waterslide and ample opportunity for horse riding, bird-watching (more than 350 species have been identified), hiking and white-water rafting. And of course, South Africans are masters on the *braai* (BBQ), so you know that you'll eat well alongside other guests in the rancho-style restaurant.

The entrance to the lodge is located about 15km south of Quepos in the small town of Savegre. From here, a 4WD dirt road parallels the Río Savegre and leads 7km inland, past the towns of Silencio and Santo Domingo,

SO WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH THE ROAD?

About 4km south of Quepos, the paving on the Costanera Sur suddenly stops. Most travelers never give this much thought, though they later scratch their heads when they reach Dominical and realize that the paving starts up again. Curious? So were we.

The reason (are you ready for this one?) is that this stretch of road is owned by the Quepos regional government, and the last thing they want is tourists dividing their time between Manuel Antonio and points further south. Sure, backpackers could care less about a couple of potholes, but most tour buses wouldn't dare proceed. Isn't feudalism great?

Of course, the real losers in this sad state of affairs are the local Ticos who perennially beg the government to pave the road, though the somewhat fortunate consequence is that the overdevelopment of the coastline slows down south of Quepos.

to the lodge. However, if you don't have private transportation, the lodge has an office on the Quepos to Manuel Antonio road (see Map p349), and can arrange all of your transportation.

MATAPALO

Although we don't want to be the ones who let the secret out, Matapalo is one of the best, yet least-known surf destinations on the entire central Pacific coast. With two river mouth breaks, a smattering of reasonably priced accommodation and some wicked, wicked waves, the fact that Matapalo hasn't blown up is a bit of a mystery.

Of course, it's worth pointing out that surfing in Matapalo is not for the inexperienced, especially since the beach is infamous for having some of the country's most dangerous transient rips (for more information on riptides, see boxed text, p278).

Just south of Matapalo are the **Terciopelo Waterfalls**, which are famous for their swimming pools. The falls are located a few kilometers south of Río Hatillo Viejo, though it's best to ask someone to point out the trailhead for you as it's tough to find.

The first hotel you'll see after turning off the Costanera is the German-run **El Coquito del Pacifico** (☎ 2787 5028, 8384 7220; www.elcoquito.com; s/d/tr/q US\$70/80/90/100; 📍 🚽 🚿), which consists of a small batch of bungalows highlighted by their beaming white-washed walls and rustic furnishings. The entire complex is attractively landscaped with shady gardens of almond and mango trees, and centered on an open-air bar and restaurant serving up the obligatory traditional German specialties.

Just down the road on the beach side is **Dos Palmas B&B** (☎ 2787 5037; d US\$60, additional person

US\$5; 📍), a tiny, bright-yellow inn with some of the best views of the crashing surf in town. The owners are a charming Canadian couple, and since there are only two rooms on the premises, you'll feel incredibly welcome from the moment you check-in. Your hosts are also a great source of information on the area, and can help you plan out your next stop along the coast.

The American-owned **Jungle House** (☎ 2787 5005, 2777 2748; www.junglehouse.com; d from US\$65; 📍 🚽) provides the epitome of relaxation, with five polished-wood quarters decorated with a good smattering of rustic knick-knacks. If you're traveling with your better half, the bamboo 'honeymoon' cabin in the back is a large open-air unit with incredible views of the distant hills. Charlie, the friendly owner, is active locally and supports local education initiatives and trash pick-up efforts on the beach.

The most upscale lodging on the beach is **Dreamy Contentment** (☎ 2787 5223; www.dreamycontentment.com; bungalow/house US\$125/200; 📍 🚽), a beautiful, Spanish colonial property with impressive woodworking and towering trees throughout. The bungalows are equipped with functional kitchenettes, though the real star attraction is the main house, which has the kitchen of your dreams, a beachfront veranda and a princely bathroom complete with hot tub.

If you're looking for a bite to eat, **Tico Gringo** (☎ 2787 5023; dishes US\$3-10) is owned by an American expat and his Tica wife who've lived in Matapalo for decades. Seafood, burgers and wings are the standard here, though the real draw is the display of old black-and-white photos of Costa Rica.

Buses between Quepos and Dominical can drop you off at the turnoff to the village; from there it's a couple of kilometers to the beach.

HACIENDA BARÚ NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Located on the Pacific coast 3km northeast of Dominical on the road to Quepos, this **wildlife refuge** (☎ 2787 0003; www.haciendabaru.com; admission US\$6, each subsequent day US\$2) forms a key link in a major biological corridor called 'the Path of the Tapir.' It is comprised of more than 330 hectares of private and state owned land that has been protected from hunting since 1976. The range of tropical habitats that may be observed there include pristine beaches, river banks, mangrove estuaries, wetlands, selectively logged forests, secondary forests, primary forests, tree plantations and pastures.

This diversity of habitat plus its key position in the Path of the Tapir Biological Corridor accounts for the multitude of species that have been identified on Hacienda Barú. These include 351 birds, 69 mammals, 94 reptiles and amphibians, 87 butterflies and 158 species of trees, some of them over 8.5m (27.5ft) in circumference. Ecological tourism provides this wildlife refuge with its only source of funds with which to maintain its protected status, so guests are assured that money spent there will be used to further the conservation of tropical rain forest.

There is an impressive number of guided tours (US\$20 to US\$60) on offer. You can experience the rain-forest canopy in three different ways – a platform 36m above the forest floor, tree climbing and a zip line called 'the Flight of the Toucan.' In addition to the canopy activities, Hacienda Barú offers bird-watching tours, hiking tours, and two overnight camping tours in both tropical rain forest and lowland beach habitats. Hacienda Barú's naturalist guides come from local com-

munities and have lived near the rain forest all of their lives.

For people who prefer to explore the refuge by themselves, there are 7km of well-kept and marked, self-guided trails, a bird-watching tower, 3km of pristine beach, an orchid garden and a butterfly garden.

The **Hacienda Barú Lodge** (d US\$60, additional person US\$10, children under 10yr free) consists of six clean, two-bedroom cabins located 350m from Barú Beach. The red-tile roofed, open-air restaurant (meals US\$6 to US\$10) serves a variety of tasty Costa Rican dishes.

The Quepos–Dominical–San Isidro bus stops outside the hacienda entrance. The San Isidro–Dominical–Uvita bus will drop you at the Río Barú bridge, 2km from the hacienda office. A taxi from Dominical costs about US\$5.

If you're driving, the El Ceibo gas station, 50m north of the Hacienda Barú Lodge, is the only one for a good way in any direction. Groceries, fishing gear, tide tables and other useful sundries are available, and there are clean toilets.

DOMINICAL

With monster waves, a chilled vibe and a reputation for reefer madness, Dominical is the kind of place where travelers get stuck for longer than they intended, so long as the surf's up and the spliff isn't out. Although Dominical is definitely gringo-fied, development is being kept in check by locals and concerned resident expats alike, all of whom are determined to keep the town from becoming the next Jacó. As a result, Dominical is one of the most laidback destinations on the Pacific coast for surfers, backpackers and do-nothings alike.

BATTLING THE BLOOD SUCKERS

Whether you call them skeeters, mozzies or midges, everyone can agree that fending off mosquitoes is one of the most annoying parts of traveling in the tropics. Although the scientific evidence surrounding effective mosquito-bite prevention is circumstantial at best, the following is a list of road-tested combat strategies for battling the blood suckers.

- Wear socks, trousers and a long-sleeve shirt, especially at dusk when mosquitoes feed.
- Eat lots of garlic (not recommended if you're traveling with your significant other).
- Fill your room with the smoke of the ever-present burnable Costa Rican mosquito coils.
- Invest in a good-quality mosquito net, preferably one that has been chemically treated.
- Never underestimate the power of spraying yourself with vast quantities of DEET.

Dominical recalls to mind the mystical 'old Costa Rica,' namely a time when the legions of international tourists had yet to jump onto the ecotourism bandwagon. Indeed, while in Dominical, it's best to just slow down, take things as they come, and try to strike the difficult balance between getting stoked on surf and stoned on pot.

Orientation & Information

Difficult access has spared Dominical from the fate suffered by other beaches on the central Pacific coast. Development remains low-key, the few roads around the village are still dusty and potholed, and the majority of the beach is fronted by forests not fast food.

The main Costanera highway bypasses Dominical; the entrance to the village is immediately past the Río Barú bridge. There's a main road through the village, where many of the services mentioned are found, and a parallel road along the beach.

There are no banking facilities, but San Clemente Bar & Grill will exchange both US dollars and traveler's checks. It has a postal service upstairs.

Dominical Internet (per hr US\$2; ☎ 9:30am-7pm Mon-Sat) Check email here, above the San Clemente Bar & Grill.
Police (☎ 2787 0011)

Dangers & Annoyances

Waves, currents and riptides in Dominical are very strong and many people have drowned here (don't smoke and swim!). Watch for red flags (which mark riptides), follow the instructions of posted signs and swim at beaches that are patrolled by lifeguards.

MOVIES IN THE JUNGLE

Every Friday night, a resident expat named Toby in the nearby town of Escaleras invites locals and travelers to watch his favorite flicks. **Cinema Escaleras** is built on a hilltop with panoramic views of jungle-fronted coastline and features state-of-the-art projection equipment and surround sound. Seriously, this guy loves his movies! Films are shown every Friday at 6pm, and a small donation to pay for the projector bulbs is requested. To get to the cinema, follow the first entrance to Escaleras a few hundred meters up the mountain and look for a white house on the left-hand side.

Because of the heavy-duty party crowd Dominical is attracting, there is a burgeoning drug problem, and some of the bars can get rough at night. A little pot never hurt anyone, but keep in mind that there are much harder drugs getting passed around town these days.

Sights

Just north of the turnoff for Dominical is the junction for San Isidro – if you turn left toward San Isidro and travel for about 10km, you'll see an entrance to the right that leads to **Centro Turístico Cataratas Nauyaca** (☎ 2787 0198, 2771 3187; www.ecotourism.co.cr/nauyacawaterfalls/index.html). This Costa Rican-family owned and operated tourist center is home to a series of wonderful waterfalls that cascade through a protected reserve of both primary and secondary forest.

There's no vehicle access to this tourist center, but you can hire horses for a guided ride to two waterfalls that plunge into a deep swimming hole. With advance notice, a tour can be arranged, including the guided ride, swimming and country meals with the local family. Tours leave at 8am, take six to seven hours and cost US\$40 per person. A campground with dressing rooms and toilets is available. Accommodations in Dominical can also arrange tours to the falls.

Another worthwhile diversion is the aptly named **Parque Reptilandia** (☎ 2787 8007; www.cr.reptiles.com; admission adult/child US\$10/1; ☎ 9am-4:30pm), also located 10km outside of Dominical in the town of Platanillo. If you're traveling with kids who love slick and slimy reptiles, or you yourself just can't get enough of these prehistoric creatures, then don't miss the chance to get face to face with Costa Rica's most famous reptiles. The animal park is home to everything from alligators and crocodiles to turtles and dart frogs. Of course, our favorite section is the viper section, home to such infamous critters as the deadly fer-de-lance. For an added bonus, stop by on Friday for feeding time – we promise you won't be disappointed.

Activities

Dominical owes its fame to its seriously sick point and beach breaks, which attract jet-setting surfers the world over. Conditions here are variable, though in general it pays to have a bit of board experience, as you can really get trashed out here if you don't know what you're doing. With that said, the nearby beach

of Domincalito is a bit more tame for anyone who still has training wheels on their board.

Of course, one great way to get a bit more experience under your belt is by heading to the reader-recommended **Green Iguana Surf Camp** (☎ 8815 3733; www.greeniguanasurfcamp.com). Located on a side road leading to the beach, this camp is run by experienced surfers Jason and Karla Butler, and offers a variety of surf lessons and tours as well as seven- to 10-day surfing camps.

Dominical has emerged as something of a base for day trips to Parque Nacional Corcovado (p416) and Parque Nacional Marino Ballena. Get details at **Southern Expeditions** (☎ 2787 0100; www.dominical.biz/expeditions) at the entrance to the village. The staff can also organize trips to the Guaymí indigenous reserve near Boruca and the tours can be customized to meet your interests.

Courses

Adventure Spanish School (☎ 2787 0023, in the USA & Canada 800-237 730; www.adventurespanishschool.com) runs one-week Spanish-language programs starting at US\$315, without homestay. Private lessons are available, as are discounts for longer periods of study.

Sleeping

Dominical is home to the majority of the area's budget accommodation, while a handful of midrange and top-end places are located on the outskirts of the town. The rates given are for high season, but low-season rates could be as much as 30% to 40% lower.

Note that there are additional accommodation options in the nearby mountaintop village of Escaleras (p362).

IN TOWN

Antorchas Camping (☎ 2787 0307; camping per person US\$5, r from US\$10; ☎) Just a few meters from the beach, this campground is one of the most secure in town, though you should still be extremely diligent about locking up your valuables in the provided lockers. Campers can take advantage of basic amenities, including cold showers and a share kitchen, while more finicky shoestringers can bed down in Spartan dorms for a few extra dollars a night.

Cabinas San Celemete (☎ 2787 0158; bed US\$10-30; ☎) Backpackers gravitate to this classic Dominical spot, which is actually comprised of a variety of different accommodation op-

tions. The highlights of the property are the private beach houses that are just steps from the surf, though more budget conscious travelers can choose from either shiny wooden cabinas or simple dorm rooms at the adjacent Dominical Backpackers Hostel.

Tortilla Flats (☎ 2787 0033; s/d US\$20/30, with air-con US\$30/40; ☎) Another popular option, this budget hotel contains 20-odd rooms of varying shapes and sizes, though all feature hot-water showers as well as hammock-strung patios and terraces – a nice option considering the cheap price tag. The downstairs restaurant can get a bit noisy at night, but on the other hand it serves up one of the town's best breakfasts.

Hotel Domilocos (☎ 2787 0244; s/d US\$30/50; ☎) The newest addition to the Dominical hotel scene is this Italian-run spot, which offers surprisingly swish rooms despite the modest price tag. The orthopedic mattresses are thick and comfortable, the water is hot and steamy and the air-con will make you forget you're in the tropics. And, as if all of this wasn't enough of an incentive to stay here, there's even a plunge pool, a European-influenced restaurant and a mellow cocktail bar.

Hotel DiuWak (☎ 2787 0087; www.diuwak.com; r US\$85-110, ste US\$135-175; ☎) This proper resort complex is the most upscale accommodation in town, though the emphasis is on low-key luxury as opposed to unchecked hedonism. With that said, the grounds surrounding the waterfall-fed pool are palm fringed, which makes for relaxing days of idle laziness, and there are some great onsite amenities, including bars, restaurants, a fitness center and health spa. Inquire about the size of the room as some are larger than others, and can easily accommodate you and a few of your friends.

AROUND DOMINICAL

Albergue Alma de Hatillo B&B (☎ 8850 9034; www.cabinasalma.com; r US\$60; ☎) One of the most loved B&Bs on the entire Pacific Coast, this hidden gem is run by Sabina, a charming Polish woman who has legions of dedicated fans the world over. If you're looking for a quiet base from which to explore the Dominical area, this tranquil spot is home to immaculate cabins spread among several hectares of fruit trees. Guests rave about the organic produce on offer at Sabina's restaurant, as well as the daily yoga classes in her

IT MUST BE THE MONEY

Although you can sometimes get a filling meal in Costa Rica with a pocketful of change, there's no denying that prices are on the rise. Then again, if you don't want to take our word for it, just go ahead and ask anyone at the country's Central Bank.

Starting in 2010, Costa Rica will roll out some seriously big bills, namely in denominations of 20,000 and 50,000 colones. Since a whopping 70% of the cash currently circulating is in 10,000 colones bills, the Central Bank is hoping that the larger denomination bills will result in a more equal distribution of money.

Of course, if you're going to roll out some new currency, then why not add a bit of flash to the cash? Starting in 2010, bills will start to have variable lengths, and there's even talk of switching from cotton fiber to plastic. After all, there's nothing worse than trying to dry out your wallet after a serious surf session!

At the time of writing, a nationwide contest was underway to select the designs that will appear on the faces of the new bills. However, according to the treasury director of the Central Bank, the artwork will incorporate the 'natural riches' of Costa Rica.

Zen-inducing outdoor studio. Alma de Hatillo is located about 6km north of town.

Hotel y Restaurante Roca Verde (☎ 2787 0036; www.rocaverde.net; r US\$85; P ♿ ♻️) Overlooking the beach about 1km south of town, this chic and stylish American-owned hotel is decorated with hardwoods, tile mosaics, festive murals and rock inlays. The 12 tropical-themed rooms are superbly comfortable places to unwind, though the real action takes place in the festive communal areas, which include an open-air bar and infinity pool. On certain nights, the hotel turns into a theater when local theater groups and dancers perform in the hotel lobby.

Eating & Drinking

Soda Nanyoa (dishes US\$2-5) The cheapest eatery in town is consistently packed with hungry surfers snatching up cheap and tasty Costa Rican favorites for a few bucks a plate. After all, you can work up quite an appetite while surfing, which is good as *gallo pinto* (rice and beans) packs quite the caloric punch.

Thrusters Bar (Cabinas Thrusters) The local party people congregate here for beer and skateboarding around the pool tables. Next door is a small sushi bar that's definitely worth checking out, as raw fish and tap beer are a blissful combination indeed.

San Clemente Bar & Grill (dishes US\$3-8) This classic Dominical watering hole complete with broken surfboards on the walls serves up big breakfasts and Tex-Mex dishes. With that said, it's more popular as a place to get tanked with travelers from around the world.

Maracutú (dishes US\$5-10) The self-proclaimed 'world-music beach bar and Italian kitchen' serves up an eclectic culinary offering that is highlighted by some delicious vegetarian and vegan fare. Each night of the week here features a different genre of music, a good amount of which is live.

Restaurant Wachaca (dishes US\$6-12) Regarded as the best restaurant in Dominical, this Limónese-inspired Caribbean spot dishes up innovative cuisine emphasizing fresh fish and tropical flavors. Dishes are served up in an open-air courtyard underneath a giant, old ceiba tree.

Getting There & Away**BUS**

Buses pick-up and drop-off along the main road in Dominical.

Palmar US\$2.50, 2½ hours, 4:30am and 10:30am.

Quepos US\$3, three hours, 7:30am, 8am, 10:30am, 1:45pm, 4pm and 5pm.

Uvita US\$1, one hour, 4:30am, 10:30am, noon and 6:15pm.

TAXI

Taxis to Uvita cost around US\$15, while the ride to San Isidro costs US\$25 and to Quepos is US\$55. Cars can accommodate up to five people and can be hailed in town from the main road.

ESCALERAS

Escaleras, a small community scattered around a steep and narrow dirt loop-road that branches off the Costanera, is famed for its sweeping views of the coastline and the crashing surf. Of course, if you want to make it

up here, you're going to need a 4WD to navigate one of the country's most notoriously difficult roads. Needless to say, the locals weren't kidding when they named the place *escaleras* (staircase). Aside from the scenic views, travelers primarily brave the road to either have a relaxing, mountain retreat in any of the places listed following, or to catch a 'Movie in the Jungle' (see boxed text, p360).

The first entrance to Escaleras is 4km south of the San Isidro turnoff before Dominical, and the second is 4.5km past the first. Both are on the left-hand side of the road and poorly signed.

One of the first places you'll come to along the main road is the **Bellavista Lodge & Ranch** (☎ 3888 0155, in the USA 800-909 4469; www.bellavistalodge.com; r/cabin US\$55/75; P), a remote farm owned by long-time resident Woody Dyer. The lodge itself is in a revamped farmhouse (surrounded by a balcony providing superb ocean views) that contains four shiny-wood rooms with private, solar-heated shower. The grounds are also home to a two-floored private cabin with a full kitchen and living room and enough space to comfortably accommodate six. Rates include breakfast or an evening snack of beer and chips, and there are tasty home-cooked meals (and pies!) available. If you don't have a 4WD, Woody will pick you up in Dominical for a small fee.

About another 1km up the Escaleras road, **Villa Escaleras** (☎ 8823 0509, in the USA 773-279 0516; www.villa-escaleras.com; villa for 4/6/8 people US\$240/280/320; P ♿ ♻️) is a spacious four-bedroom villa accented by cathedral ceilings, tiled floors, colonial furnishings and a palatial swimming pool. Twice-weekly maid service and a wraparound balcony awash with panoramic views make the setting complete. If you're planning on staying here long-term, inquire about discounted weekly and monthly rates.

Located on a different access road that's 1.2km south of the first entrance is **Pacific Edge** (☎ 2531 8000; www.pacificedge.com; cabin/bungalow US\$50/75; P ♿ ♻️). The owners are a worldly North American-British couple who delight in showing guests their slice of paradise. Four cabins are perched on a knife-edge ridge about 200m above sea level, while larger family-friendly bungalows accommodate up to six and have fully stocked kitchen. Of course, if you're not one for cooking, there

is a wonderful onsite restaurant specializing in international cuisine.

Escaleras is best accessed by private vehicle, though any of the accommodations listed previously can arrange a pick-up service with advanced notice. If you're coming for Movies in the Jungle, a taxi from Dominical shouldn't cost more than US\$10.

UVITA

As the most southerly destination on the central Pacific coast, Uvita is the last major population center before entering the country's far-flung corner, namely the Osa peninsula. Of course, this little hamlet just 17km south of Dominical is really nothing more than a loose straggle of farms, houses and *sodas*, which should give you an idea of what Costa Rican beach towns looked like before the tourist boom. With that said, Uvita does serve as the base town for visits to Parque Nacional Marino Ballena, a pristine marine reserve famous for its migrating pods of humpback whales as well as its virtually abandoned wilderness beaches.

Unfortunately, the secret is out about the Brunca coast, and the recent paving of the Costanera Sur has seen an influx of developers and speculators. Real-estate offices are popping up over town, and there is talk of developing the town along similar lines as Dominical, Quepos and even Jacó. However, thus far the pace of development has been extremely slow, which is a hopeful sign that the small-town charm of Uvita will continue unabated, at least for a few more years.

Orientation & Information

The area off the main highway is referred to locally as Uvita, while the area next to the beach is called Playa Uvita and Playa Bahía Uvita (the southern end of the beach).

The beach area is reached through two parallel dirt roads that are roughly 500m apart. The first entrance is just south of the bridge over the Río Uvita and the second entrance is in the center of town. At low tide you can walk out along Punta Uvita, but ask locally before heading out so that you don't get cut off by rising water.

Sights & Activities

Uvita serves as a perfect base for exploring Parque Nacional Marina Ballena (p365), which is home to some truly spectacular beaches

that don't see anywhere near the number of tourists that they should attract. Then again, perhaps this is a good thing as you'll have plenty of space to sprawl out and soak up the sun without having to worry about someone stealing your beach chair.

Surfers passing through the area tend to push on to more extreme destinations further south, though there are occasionally some swells at **Playa Hermosa** to the north and **Playa Colonia** to the south. However, if you've just come from Dominical, or you're planning on heading to Pavones (p439), you might be a bit disappointed with the mild surfing conditions on offer here.

The **Jardín de Mariposas** (admission US\$4; ☎ 8am-4pm) on Playa Uvita (just follow the signs) is a Tico-run outfit raising butterflies for export and education, and this is a good opportunity to get up-close-and-personal with breeds such as the morpho. Go early in the morning when butterflies are at their most active. Admission includes a guided tour.

A few kilometers before Uvita, you'll see a signed turnoff to the left on a rough dirt road (4WD only) that leads 3.5km up the hill (look over your shoulder for great views of Parque Nacional Marino Ballena) to **Reserva Biológica Oro Verde** (☎ 2743 8072, 8843 8833). This private reserve is on the farm of the Duarte family, who have lived in the area for more than three decades. Two-thirds of the 150-hectare property is rain forest and there are guided hikes, horse-riding tours and birding walks (departing at 5am and 2pm).

Opposite the turnoff to Oro Verde is **La Merced National Wildlife Refuge**, a 506-hectare national wildlife refuge (and former cattle ranch) with primary and secondary forests and mangroves lining the Río Morete. Here, you can take guided nature hikes, horseback tours to Punta Uvita and birding walks. You can also stay at La Merced in a 1940s **farmhouse** (r per person incl 3 meals US\$60), which can accommodate 10 people in double rooms of various sizes.

Sleeping & Eating

The main entrance to Uvita leads inland, east of the highway, where you'll find the following places. For more accommodation options, also check out Parque Nacional Marino Ballena (p365).

Toucan Hotel & Hostel (☎ 2743 8140; www.toucanhotel.com; tent US\$5, hammock US\$6, dm US\$10, treehouse

US\$12, d US\$25-30; ☎ ☎ ☎) Located 100m inland of the main highway in Uvita, this is the most popular hostel in Uvita – and with good reason. Run by a delightful family that has made some major changes here in the last few years, the Toucan is home to a variety of accommodations to suit all budgets, from simple tents and hammocks to dormitories, private rooms and the lofty treehouse. Even though the beach is right down the road, most guests never escape the evil clutches of the hammock movie theatre, a spectacular creation that needs to be treated with respect unless you want to defer your future travel plans.

Cabinas Los Laureles (☎ 2743 8235; s/d US\$18/22; ☎) About 200m up the road you'll find this pleasant, locally run spot which has eight clean, polished-wood cabins that are set in a beautiful grove of laurels. If you're looking for a bit of local flavor and authentic Costa Rican hospitality, this is a good choice. The friendly and accommodating family can arrange horse-riding tours and any other activities you might be interested in.

Cascada Verde (☎ 2743 8191; www.cascadaverde.org; dm US\$10, shared loft per person US\$8, r US\$14-16; ☎) About 2km inland and uphill from Uvita, this organic permaculture farm and holistic retreat attracts legions of dedicated alternative lifestyleers, who typically spend weeks here searching for peace of mind and sound body. Accommodation is extremely basic and somewhat exposed to the elements, though there is ample outdoor communal space for yoga and quiet meditation, and you'll sleep deeply at night if you've spent any time here working on the farm. Cascada Verde is also home to a restaurant that serves vegetarian and raw-food specialties that take advantage of produce grown on the property. A taxi here will cost about US\$3 from the highway area.

Balcón de Uvita (☎ 2743 8034; www.exploringcostarica.com/balcon/uvita.html; bungalow US\$62; ☎ ☎) About 1km inland on a 4WD access road across from the gas station and run by a Dutch-Indonesian couple, this secluded spot is home to a lovely collection of rustic, stone-walled bungalows featuring huge, walk-in solar-powered showers. Drawing on the owners' heritages, the restaurant here is highly recommended for its Thai and Indonesian delicacies, as well as a few European standards.

There are a number of small *sodas* on the Costanera in Uvita where you can get a good meal for a few bucks. Of course, most visitors

to the Uvita area are happy to keep eating at **Soda Salem** (casados US\$3-5), a small cantina located across the street from Hotel Tucan – just sit at the counter and ask what's cooking.

Getting There & Away

Most buses depart from the two sheltered bus stops on the Costanera in the main village.

Palmar US\$2, 1½ hours, 4:45am and 10:30am.

San Isidro de El General US\$2, 1½ hours, 6am and 2pm.

San José US\$6, six hours, 5am, 6am and 2pm.

Parque Nacional Marino Ballena is accessed from Uvita either by private vehicle or a quick taxi ride – inquire at your accommodation for the latter.

PARQUE NACIONAL MARINO BALLENA

This stunner of a **marine park** protects coral and rock reefs surrounding Isla Ballena. Although the confines of the marine park are fairly modest, the importance of this area cannot be overstated, especially since it protects migrating humpback whales, pods of dolphins and nesting sea turtles, not to mention colonies of sea birds and several terrestrial reptiles.

Although Ballena is essentially off-the-radar screens of most coastal travelers, this can be an extremely rewarding destination for beach lovers and wildlife watchers alike. The lack of tourist crowds means that you can enjoy a quiet day at the beach – something that is not always possible in Costa Rica. And, with a little luck and a bit of patience, you just might catch a glimpse of a humpback breaching or a few dolphins gliding through the surf.

Orientation & Information

From Punta Uvita, heading southeast, the park includes 13km of sandy and rocky beaches, mangrove swamps, estuaries and rocky headlands. All six kinds of Costa Rican mangrove occur within the park. There are coral reefs near the shore, though they were heavily damaged by sediment run-off from the construction of the coastal highway.

The **ranger station** (☎ 2743 8236; admission US\$3) is in Playa Bahía, the seaside extension of Uvita. While there's a set admission, the guards at the gate will often charge less because of the limited number of visitors. The station is run by Asoparque (Association for the Development of the Ballena Marine National Park), a joint protection effort launched by local businesses

in conjunction with Minae. It has worked hard at installing services, so be considerate and don't litter, cook with driftwood and use biodegradable soap when bathing.

Sights & Activities

The beaches at Marino Ballena are a stunning combination of golden sand and polished rock. All of them are virtually deserted and perfect for peaceful swimming and sunbathing. And, the lack of visitors means you'll have a number of quiet opportunities for good birding.

From the station, you can walk out onto Punta Uvita and snorkel (best at low tide). Boats from Playa Bahía to Isla Ballena can be hired for US\$30 per person for a two-hour snorkeling trip, though you are not allowed to stay overnight on the island.

If you're looking to get under the water, **Mystic Dive Center** (☎ 2788 8636; www.mysticdivecenter.com; Playa Ventanas) is a PADI operation that offers scuba trips in the national park.

There is also some decent surfing near the river mouth at the southern end of Playa Colonia.

WILDLIFE-WATCHING

Although the park gets few human visitors, the beaches are frequently visited by a number of different animal species, including nesting seabirds, bottle-nosed dolphins and a variety of lizards. And, from May to November with a peak in September and October, both olive ridley and hawksbill turtles bury their eggs in the sand nightly. However, the star attractions are the pods of humpback whales that pass through the national park from August to October and December to April.

Scientists are unsure as to why humpback whales migrate here, though it's possible that Costa Rican waters may be one of only a few places in the world where humpback whales mate. There are actually two different groups of humpbacks that pass through the park – whales seen in the fall migrate from California waters, while those seen in the spring originate from Antarctica.

Sleeping & Eating

The park is home to a free campground just 300m from the entrance, which has toilets and showers but no electricity. Keep in mind that the campsite is not secure, so do not leave any valuables lying around inside your tent.

In addition to the accommodations listed here, there are also several other options in nearby Uvita (p363).

Finca Bavaria (☎ 8355 4465; www.finca-bavaria.de; standard/superior US\$75/85; (P) 📍) On the inland side of the road, you'll see a signed dirt road leading to this quaint German-run inn, home to a handful of pleasing rooms with wood accents, bamboo furniture and romantic mosquito-net draped beds. The lush grounds are hemmed by forest, though you can always ascent to the hilltop pool and take in the sweeping views of the open ocean. And of course, there's plenty of great German beer served by the stein.

La Cusinga (☎ 2770 2549; www.lacusingalodge.com; Finca Tres Hermanas; dm incl three meals US\$73, s/d with breakfast US\$107/134; (P) 📍) About 5km south of Uvita is this beachside ecolodge, which is admirably powered by the hydroelectric energy provided by a small stream, and centered on a working organic farm. Accommodation is in simple but functional wooden rooms and dormitories, though guests tend to spend most of their time on boat trips to the national park, hiking and birding on the onsite network of trails, and snorkeling and swimming in the national park. If you work up an appetite, head to the farmhouse and dine on rural Tico-style food that includes locally raised chicken, fresh seafood and organic produce.

Whales & Dolphins Ecolodge (☎ 2770 3557; www.whalesanddolphins.net; d standard/ste US\$105/125; (P) 📍 📍 📍) Located on a hilltop overlooking Playa Hermosa, this understated ecolodge is one of the few top-end accommodations in the area, though its emphasis is on low-key luxury as opposed to overwhelming opulence. Rooms are attractively decorated in tropical motifs, and the entire property is brimming with amenities. However, its main appeal is the stunning location, which provides constant whale-watching opportunities.

our pick **Restaurante Exótica** (☎ 2786 5050; meals US\$10-25) Located in the nearby town of Ojochal, this phenomenal gourmet restaurant is a hidden gem that is worth seeking out. Despite the humble exterior, the menu features a mind-blowing array of internationally inspired dishes, each emphasizing a wide breadth of ingredients that are brought together in masterful combinations. Defying classification, perhaps the best way to describe the food here is simply 'exotic.'

Getting There & Away

Parque Nacional Marino Ballena is accessed from Uvita either by private vehicle or a quick taxi ride – inquire at your accommodation for the latter.

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