

Península de Nicoya



The allure of the Península de Nicoya needs no explanation. Archetypal tropical beaches edge this jungle-trimmed rich coast, whose shores have been imprinted on the memories of the millions of marine turtles who return to their birthplaces to nest. So, too, do travelers descend on these beaches, seeking to witness such magical patterns of nature for themselves. Humans, however, make more of an environmental impact than the leatherbacks do.

Development is the name of the game at the moment, and Nicoya is the high-stakes playing field. That field is in danger of being paved over – is, in fact, in that very process in various parts of the peninsula – but it's difficult to call an outcome. Optimists will point out that Costa Rica is one of the most eco-conscious nations on the planet – President Oscar Arias has grand plans to make the country the first carbon-neutral nation by 2021 – and grassroots community activism led by both Ticos (Costa Ricans) and foreigners is leading to instances of government enforcement of sustainable development. The next moves will require a sustained effort to maintain the peninsula's intrinsic wildness, but we are betting on the Ticos and local expats to rise to the occasion.

Easy accessibility to all this beauty may be to blame for its exploitation, but who can be blamed for wanting to play, beckoned by waves that never seem to close out, tropical forests teeming with wild things, the slow, sane pace of *la vida costarricense* and what lies beyond that next turn down a potholed dirt road?

HIGHLIGHTS

- Catching the morning swell and perfecting afternoon asanas in **Nosara** (p287)
- Taking the gringo trail and observing the contrasts between **Playa Tamarindo** (p270) and mellow **Montezuma** (p304)
- Hiking to the tip of the peninsula at **Reserva Natural Absoluta Cabo Blanco** (p314), Costa Rica's first wildlife park
- Surfing uncrowded breaks at **Playas Grande** (p267), **Avellanas** and **Negra** (p277)
- Kayaking to Isla Chora for a morning snorkel at **Playa Sámará** (p293)
- Forging rivers on the bumpy route to the 'bad country' and good waters of **Mal País** (p310)



History

Following the independence of Central America from Spain, the peninsula (along with northwestern Costa Rica) comprised the bulk of Guanacaste, a province of the newly formed country of Nicaragua. However, on July 25, 1824, Guanacastecos voted to secede and join Costa Rica, creating yet another grievance between Nicas and Ticos (p229). Today, some in the region still hold on to the dream of independence, and it's not uncommon to see the Guanacaste flag flying high – sometimes higher than the national one. Tellingly, the Guanacaste coat of arms states, 'De la Patria por Nuestra Voluntad': literally, 'Of the Country of our Will.'

Climate

The northern Península de Nicoya has one of the driest climates in Costa Rica, with its coastline mostly characterized by dry tropical forest. Moving further south, as the peninsula transitions from dry tropical forest to tropical rain forest, the amount of moisture increases. Rainfall gradually increases during the green season in the southern Nicoya, typically wettest in September and October and making some regions impassible due to dirt roads being washed out and rivers too swollen to ford.

Parks & Reserves

Most of Nicoya's parks and reserves lie along the shoreline, with several stretching out to sea to protect marine turtles and their nesting sites.

Parque Nacional Barra Honda (p286) Best in the dry season, you can go spelunking in the limestone caves of this underground wonderland.

Parque Nacional Marino Las Baulas de Guanacaste (p269) Crucial to the survival of the leatherback turtle, this park protects one of the turtle's major Pacific nesting sites.

Refugio Nacional de Fauna Silvestre Ostional (p292) Olive ridleys nest and sometimes have *arribadas* (mass nestings) at Ostional.

Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Camaronal (p297) This out-of-the-way refuge has good surf and protects the nesting grounds of four marine turtle species.

Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Curú (p302) The small area of this privately owned reserve is an unexpected oasis of diverse landscapes.

Reserva Natural Absoluta Cabo Blanco (p314) Costa Rica's first protected wilderness area is at the southern tip of the Península de Nicoya.

Getting There & Around

Now that more international air traffic flies directly to Liberia, the Península de Nicoya is even easier to access. Small airstrips serving Tamarindo, Nosara, Sámara, Punta Isleta and Tambor are host to daily flights, so you can bypass tough (or impossible) drives on bad roads.

Most popular destinations are served by public buses; Santa Cruz and Nicoya are the region's hubs. Private shuttles run to those destinations not regularly served by public transportation. Sámara and Montezuma are good places to arrange onward travel to more remote places on the southwestern coast.

To drive the roads less traveled, it's mandatory to have a 4WD, but be aware that during the rainy season many roads in the southern peninsula are impassable. Always ask locally about conditions before setting out.

NORTHERN PENINSULA

The northern Nicoya coastline in a snapshot: white-sand beaches, wild green yonder, azure waters. It's no wonder that this is some of the most coveted real estate in the country. What it means when you zoom in is bustling construction of resorts and retirement properties among the trees behind the high-tide line. On the ground it doesn't take super-sharp focus to pick out the high gringo-to-Tico ratio round these parts.

Though the dry forests of the northern peninsula have been cut down over the generations to be transformed into farms and pastureland, these days trees are being felled – more selectively, sure – to put up second homes. Costa Rican lifestyles here have traditionally revolved around the harvest and the herd, but today Ticos live by the tourist season. Each year from December to April, when the snow falls on Europe and North America, Guanacaste experiences its dry season and tourists descend en masse.

While the booming tourism buoys the economy, local Ticos and expats alike are becoming increasingly aware of the tricky balance of development and conservation. But even as construction goes up, the waves keep rolling in and the sun continues to smile on the beaches of the northern peninsula.

The main artery into this region, Hwy 21, runs from Liberia southwards, with coastal access roads branching out from the small towns of Comunidad, Belén and Santa Cruz.

PLAYA DEL COCO

Thirty-seven kilometers west of Liberia and connected by good roads to San José, Playa del Coco is the most easily accessible of the peninsula's beaches. Its name is derived from the cocoa-colored sand that lies between its two rocky headlands, though it can appear, well, dirty. While nearby Tamarindo has become the enclave of moneyed foreigners, Playa del Coco is more the party destination for young Ticos on weekends and the domain of sport-fishers and divers during the week. Though slick development continues its creep, El Coco retains a languid, slightly trashy charm.

Although most travelers either pass through quickly or skip Coco in favor of beaches further south, the town is a growing scuba diving center and a preferred jumping-off point for surfers heading to the celebrated Witch's Rock and Ollie's Point (see p218).

Information

The police station and post office are both on the southeast side of the plaza by the beach. The Banco Nacional, south of the center on the main road into town, exchanges US dollars and traveler's checks. The few people arriving at Playa del Coco by boat will find the *migración* (immigration) office near the Banco Nacional.

Internet Juice Bar (per hr US\$2; ☎ 8am-9pm) Surf the internet, get your laundry done (US\$2 per kg), drink fresh juice (US\$2) or rent a mountain bike (per day US\$8).

Internet Leslie (☎ 2670 0156; per hr US\$1.50;

☎ 7:30am-8pm) Email access and English-language newspapers are available.

Activities

DIVING & SNORKELING

The following agencies are thoroughly recommended.

Deep Blue Diving Adventures (☎ 2670 1004; www.deepblue-diving.com) Inside the Coco Bay Hotel & Casino (Map p258), this outfitter runs two-tank boat dives for US\$70, including snacks.

Rich Coast Diving (☎ 2670 0176, in the USA & Canada 800-434 8464; www.richcoastdiving.com) On the main street, this American-owned dive shop has a trimaran for overnight diving trips.

Summer Salt (☎ 2670 0308; www.summer-salt.com)

This friendly little Swiss-run dive shop has professional, bilingual staff who are as interested in showing you a good time as they are in your safety. Two-tank dive trips are US\$70 with snacks included.

SWIMMING

Travelers are generally dissatisfied with the quality of the beach at Playa del Coco, but it's just a 4km drive or walk along the paved road to Playa Ocotal (p263), which is clean, quiet and perfect for swimming and snorkeling.

SURFING

There's no surf in Playa del Coco, but the town is a jumping-off point for Costa Rica's most legendary surf destinations: Witch's Rock and Ollie's Point, which are inside Parque Nacional Santa Rosa (p218). The best way to reach them is by boat, and boat operators *must* be licensed by Minae (Ministry of Environment and Energy) to enter the park.

Roca Bruja Surf Operation (☎ 2670 0952; www.costaricasurftrips.com) is a local licensed operator, offering an eight-hour tour to both breaks for US\$270 (for up to five people). It also rents boards and runs sportfishing and snorkeling trips.

Several surf shops in Tamarindo (p273) also run trips to Santa Rosa.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Sportfishing, sailing and sea kayaking are other popular activities. Many places will rent sea kayaks, which are perfect for exploring the rocky headlands to the north and south of the beach as well as the nearby beaches.

Papagayo Marine Supply (☎ 2670 0774; papagayo@infoweb.co.cr) has bounteous information and supplies for anglers. Nearby, **R & R Tours** (☎ 2670 0573) offers fishing charters and runs day trips to Parque Nacional Palo Verde (p208) for US\$65.

Festivals

In late January the town hosts a **Fiesta Cívica**, with bullfights, rodeos, dancing and plenty of drinking. But the biggest festival in Coco is the **Fiesta de la Virgen del Mar**, celebrated in mid-July with a vivid religious-themed boat procession in the harbor and a horse pageant.

Sleeping BUDGET

The following lodgings have cold-water showers and fans unless otherwise noted,



and primarily cater to Tico weekenders. It's popular for Ticos to camp near the beach, though you need to be careful as things can get dodgy when the clubs let out.

Camping Chopin (☎ 8391 5998; per person US\$5; **P**) Camping isn't allowed on the beach, but this is the next best thing, and includes bathroom facilities.

Cabinas Jivao (☎ 2670 0431; r per person US\$10; **P**) This is a solid choice as these homey cabinas are super-clean and in a quiet part of town. Each cabina has a private bathroom and a small outdoor deck with a table and hammocks.

Cabinas Marimar (☎ 2670 1212; s/d US\$14/30; **P**) Across the road from the beach are these simple fan-cooled rooms in a wooden stilt building. It's no-frills but friendly, and hey, it's beachfront, baby.

Cabinas Catarino (☎ 2670 0156; cabinascatarino@hotmail.com; r per person US\$15; **P** **🚽**) Conveniently (or inconveniently) located near the discotheque, rooms here were being remodeled when we visited and looked to be cleaning up nicely.

MIDRANGE

Laura's House B&B (☎ 2670 0751; www.laurashouse.net; s/d incl breakfast US\$50/60; **P** **🚽** **📺** **📶**) The eight spotless rooms at this homey B&B overlook a small pool and have wi-fi access and cable TV. The place has a friendly, family vibe and is a short walk to the center of town.

La Luna Azul (☎ 2670 0313; www.la-luna-azul.com; r incl breakfast with/without air-con US\$65/55; **P** **🚽** **📺**) This tiny newcomer has two rooms that share a bath, set in a well-kept garden about 300m from the beach. The owners provide transfers to Liberia airport (US\$30) and generally create a warm atmosphere for their guests.

Pato Loco Inn (☎ 2670 0145; www.costa-rica-beach-hotel-patoloco.com; s/d US\$58/64; **P** **🚽** **📺** **📶**) This small inn is one of Coco's most pleasant places to stay, if you don't mind forgetting you're in Costa Rica. It's run by an American whose daughter has covered the walls with colorful murals. Each room has a design motif and range of amenities depending on your budget, and the bar in front is a welcoming spot to hang with a beer and shoot the breeze with the other (most likely American) guests. The backyard surrounds a pool, and the small restaurant (dishes US\$4 to US\$8) specializes in fresh pastas.

Villa del Sol B&B (☎ 2670 0085; in the USA 866-815 8902, in Canada 866-793 9523; www.villadelcsol.com; s/d/tr

incl breakfast US\$58/70/81; **P** **W** **A** **♿**) This quiet French-Canadian-run place is 1km north of the town center and has a good mix of spotless, well-furnished rooms and studio apartments. There are also six pricey villas that sleep up to 16, though these cater primarily to long-term renters. The hotel is about 100m from the beach, which isn't as crowded at this end.

Flor de Itabo (☎ 2670 0438; www.flordeitabo.com; bungalow US\$58, s/d US\$81/99, apt US\$186-210; **P** **W** **A** **♿**) If you're into sportfishing, this is your spot, as the owners have a reputation for catching big game and can organize expeditions throughout Nicoya and the Pacific coast. All rooms have air-con, satellite TV, phone and fridge, while deluxe rooms also have whirlpool tubs. Apartments, with full kitchens, sleep four or six. There's a restaurant serving Italian and international food, a casino and a bar.

Hotel Coco Palms (☎ 2670 0367; www.hotelcoco.com; s/d US\$75/104; **P** **W** **A** **♿**) This low-key resort hotel has a variety of rooms and apartments with free wi-fi. The hallways are light and airy with high ceilings, but some of the cheaper interior rooms are a little

dark. There's a pleasant outdoor deck and pool, and the small sushi bar (sushi US\$5 to US\$10) and bigger international restaurant keep guests well fed. The great market here sells wine and imported goods in addition to the usual groceries.

Hotel La Puerta del Sol (☎ 2670 0195; hotelosol@sol.racsaco.cr; s/d/tr/ste incl breakfast US\$76/93/122/128; **P** **W** **A** **♿**) A five-minute walk from town, this unpretentiously luxurious Mediterranean-inspired hotel has two large suites and eight huge pastel-color rooms, each with its own private terrace. The well-manicured grounds have a pool and trellis-shaded gym, and the excellent Sol y Luna Restaurant & Bar (see p260) is one of the best eats in town.

TOP END

In addition to the hotels listed here, see also the listings under Playa Ocotal (p263), 4km to the south, and Playa Hermosa (p261), 5.5km to the north.

Casa Vista Azul (☎ 2670 0678; www.hotelvistaazul.com; r incl breakfast US\$105, apt US\$140; **P** **W** **A** **♿**) This new hotel has seven rooms and two apartments, all of which have air-con and pri-

DIVERS DO IT DEEPER

The northern area of the peninsula is one of the best and most easily accessible sites in the country for diving. As beach diving in this area isn't the greatest, dives are made either around volcanic rock pinnacles near the coast, or from a boat further off at **Isla Santa Catalina** (about 20km to the southwest) or **Isla Murciélago** (40km to the northwest, near the tip of Peninsula Santa Elena).

Diving here is not like diving the Caribbean – do not expect to see colorful hard coral on the scale of Belize. Conditions can be mediocre from a visibility standpoint (9m to 15m visibility, and sometimes up to 20m), but the sites make up for it in other ways: namely, their abundant marine life. The richness, variety and sheer number of marine animals is astonishing. This is the place to see large groupings of pelagics, like manta rays, spotted eagle rays, sharks, whales, dolphins and turtles, as well as moray eels, starfish, crustaceans and huge schools of native tropical fish. Most of the dive sites are less than 25m deep, allowing three dives a day. Keep in mind, however, that since February 2006 it is now illegal to swim in close proximity to dolphins and whales.

The Papagayo winds blow from early December to late March and make the water choppy and cooler, cutting down on visibility, especially for the four days around the full moon. June and July are usually the best months for visibility.

Isla Santa Catalina and Isla Murciélago both have a rich variety of marine life living and cruising around these rocky outcrops. Manta rays have been reported from December to late April, and at other times you can expect to spot eagle rays, eels, Cortez angelfish, hogfish, parrot fish, starfish, clown shrimp and other bottom dwellers. The far point of Murciélago is known for its regular sightings of groups of bull sharks, which can be a terrifying sight if you're not an experienced diver. Divers also head to **Narizones**, which is a good deep dive (about 27m), while **Punta Gorda** is an easy descent for inexperienced divers.

The good thing about scuba diving is that the sheer cost of starting and maintaining a dive center discourages fly-by-night operators from setting up shop. As a general rule, though, it's good to feel out a dive shop before paying for a trip – talk to the divemaster, inspect the equipment and make sure you're comfortable with everything before heading out (you should never feel pressured into diving!).

If you haven't been scuba diving before, consider taking a 'Discovery Course,' which costs about US\$125 and will teach you all the basics. If you're interested in getting your Open Water Diver certification, which allows you to dive anywhere in the world, a three- to four-day course is about US\$400. Compared to what these courses can cost in either North America or Europe, this price is a bargain.

vate bathroom and are flooded with light and wide-open ocean views. There's also a breezy rooftop dining area, and the owner can help you arrange tours. To get there, head west off the main road, just south of Flor de Itabo, and follow the signs to Casa Vista Azul.

Rancho Armadillo (☎ 2670 0108; www.ranchoarmadillo.com; d/tr incl breakfast US\$170/232; **P** **W** **A** **♿**) Near the entrance to town, this private estate is on a hillside about 600m off the main road (all paved). The view from the common areas is the best in Playa del Coco, and it's a perfect retreat from the heavily touristed coastline. The seven rooms are light, spacious and nicely decorated with individually crafted furniture. Suites sleep four; some have two bathrooms and two

entrances. There's a pool, outdoor gym and plenty of decorative armadillos, though the location itself makes for a relaxing, meditative stay. The American owners arrange fishing, sailing, diving and surfing trips. Gourmands will enjoy comparing recipes with chef-owner Rick Vogel and using the fully equipped professional kitchen.

Cafe de Playa (☎ 2670 1471, 2670 1621; www.cafedeplaya.com; d incl breakfast US\$197; **P** **W** **A** **♿**) Several elegant rooms at this beach club, adorned with gallery-worthy contemporary art, look on to the pool area and provide easy access to the beach, open-air sushi bar and beachfront restaurant. It's about 15 minutes' walk into the town center, but you may not feel the need to leave.

PLAYA DEL COCO

0 500 m
0 0.3 miles

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TO

- Ocotal Beach Resort (4km), Playa Ocotal (4km)
- Casa Vista Azul (500m)
- Rancho Armadillo (500m)
- Playa Hermosa (5.5km)
- Sardinal (7.5km)
- Santa Cruz (48km)

Eating

Soda Teresita (sandwiches US\$2-4; ☎ lunch & dinner) On the west end of the soccer field, this popular pink *soda* (basic eatery) is your best bet for a *torta* (sandwich) and some chitchat with the locals.

Coco Coffee Company (☎ 2670 1055; mains US\$3-6; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Sat) Next door to Papagayo Seafood, this coffee joint draws the gringos with its siren call of bagels with cream cheese, fresh sandwiches, espresso drinks and tasty homemade pastries.

Jardin Tropical (☎ 2670 0428; mains US\$3-9; ☎ 7am-8:30pm) Also on the soccer field, this well-established, neat and efficient *soda* has a wide selection of menu items, including filling pizzas and freshly caught fish. It's also a great place for a big breakfast by the beach.

Zouk Cafe (☎ 2670 0191; www.zouksantana.com; mains US\$3-10; ☎ 7am-2am; 📺) Most definitely the hippest place to eat in Coco, you won't be surprised to know it's Italian owned. Breakfast offerings include brioche and espresso, and as the day moves on, so goes the menu, with green salads to cool you in the heat of afternoon, and a kitchen serving fusion cuisine late into the night to fuel your second wind at the downstairs bar.

Sushi Playa (☎ 2670 1621, 2670 1471; sushi US\$3.50-7; ☎ 11:30am-2pm & 6:30-10pm) With cool breezes coming off the ocean and the low light of its open-air terrace, the sushi bar at Cafe de Playa has a low-key ambience conducive to properly appreciating the nuances of the *maguro* (tuna) melting on your tongue.

Papagayo Seafood (☎ 2670 0298; mains US\$5-8; ☎ lunch & dinner) Seafood is the name of the game here, clearly, and you can find the day's catch either blackened, pan-fried or a *la veracruzana* (in a tomato, onion and olive sauce) – whichever way, you can't go wrong.

Louisiana Bar & Grill (☎ 2670 0319; mains US\$6-9; ☎ lunch & dinner) Put some heat back into your diet with spicy Cajun classics, including jambalaya, seafood gumbo and po'boys. But if you're not feeling it, you can opt instead for fish cooked a dozen ways – from seared with Asian ginger-sesame sauce to grilled with macadamia pesto. Either way, try to get one of the balcony tables to check out the street scene.

Sol y Luna Restaurant & Bar (Hotel La Puerta del Sol; dishes US\$6-9; ☎ dinner) Dine on authentic Italian pasta while soaking up the Mediterranean

atmosphere at this restaurant at the Hotel La Puerta del Sol (p258). But make sure you save room for a slice of the heavenly homemade tiramisù.

Tequila Bar & Grill (☎ 2670 0741; mains US\$6-11; ☎ noon-11pm) This popular nightspot has traditional (though pricey) Mexican favorites, including burritos, tacos and fajitas, though most people here prefer the margarita liquid dinner, of which there are over 20 varieties.

There's a Super Luperón market for self-caterers, and the well-stocked **Coco Palms Supermercado** (☎ 2670 0367; ☎ 6am-11pm).

Drinking

Playa del Coco has a boisterous mix of Ticos looking to get toasted and sunburned sport-fishers cooling their heels and swapping fish stories. If you're looking for entertainment that doesn't involve drinking, you've gone to the wrong town.

The restaurants surrounding the plaza double as bars, with the Bar El Ancla de Oro being a beachside favorite. The open-air Bar El Roble is preferred by heavy drinkers, while the **Lizard Lounge** (☎ 3pm-2am) attracts a livelier crowd of dancers. It's a nice place to start out the evening with a game of pool, a cocktail and a *boca* (the Costa Rican equivalent of tapas) on the streetside terrace. Tequila Bar & Grill (see above) is the spot for slamming a few pitchers of margaritas, but if you're looking for a more stylish venue, head to **Zouk Santana** (☎ 2670 0191; www.zouksantana.com; ☎ 5pm-2am), where there's an open seating area, dance floor and streetside bar.

Boogie till the break of dawn at **Discoteca CocoMar** (☎ 8pm-2am) on the beach, which is the biggest (and sweatiest) dance-fest around. Keep the party moving at **La Vida Loca** (☎ 2670 0181; ☎ 5pm-2am).

Getting There & Away

All buses arrive and depart from the main stop on the plaza, across from the police station.

Filadelfia, for connection to Santa Cruz US\$0.75, 45 minutes, departs at 11:30am and 4:30pm.

Liberia US\$1.25, one hour, departs at 5:30am, 7am, 9am, 11am, 1pm, 3pm, 5pm and 6pm.

San José (Pulmitan) US\$5.25, five hours, departs at 4am, 8am and 2pm.

A taxi from Liberia to Playa del Coco costs US\$30. Taxis between Playa del Coco and

Playas Hermosa or Ocotol cost between US\$7 and US\$9.

Note that there's no gas station in town; the nearest one is in Sardinal, about 9km inland from Playa del Coco.

PLAYA HERMOSA

If you're looking for the legendary surf beach, see p339. For those of you still with us, Playa Hermosa is a gently curving and tranquil gray-sand beach that stretches for about 2km. Although it's only 7km (by road) north of Playa del Coco, and development is springing up rapidly along this entire coastline, Hermosa feels less dissipated and more dignified than Coco. The hillsides may be up for sale, but they're still pretty green and the locals not so jaded.

If you are keen to get in the water, **Bill Beard's Diving Safaris** (☎ 2453 5044, in the USA & Canada 877-853 0538; www.billbeardcostarica.com) at the Villas Sol Hotel have been scuba diving and snorkeling since 1970. Or **Aqua Sport** (☎ 2672 0050) has boats for fishing, water tours and snorkeling.

From the main road, there is a southern and northern access road leading to Hermosa.

Sleeping

Do it the Tico way and camp for free under a few shady spots near the main beach, but don't expect any facilities.

The second (or northern) entrance to the beach is lined with a variety of hotels and inns should none of the following options pan out.

Iguana Inn (☎ 2672 0065; s/d US\$20/30; 📺) Set 100m back from the beach, this rambling bi-level terra-cotta inn has 10 simple, slightly beat-up rooms with private bathroom, though the price is definitely right. The Tico owners are also super laidback, which makes for a relaxing, worry-free stay.

Cabinas La Casona (☎ 2672 0025; gaviotalouise@hotmail.com; s/d US\$30/45; 📺) The seven cutesy cabinas here with whitewashed rooms, small kitchenettes, TV and private hot-water bathrooms are ideal for self-caterers, and they're just steps from the beach.

Playa Hermosa Inn (☎ 2672 0063; www.costa-rica-beach-hotel.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$45/70; 📺) Centered on a gigantic tree right on the beach, this B&B has a certain decaying appeal to it; though it seemed a bit neglected when we stopped by, it does have character and a quiet, beachfront location. You'll find

it at the end of the dirt road on the left of the northern access road as you head toward the beach.

Hotel El Veleró (☎ 2672 0036, 2672 1017; www.costaricahotel.net; d US\$92; 📺 📺 📺) Just steps from the beach, this resort hotel has 22 spacious and fully equipped rooms decorated with woodwork and colorful bedspreads. The complex has a pool, patio lounge and American-style restaurant and bar, though the real draw is the owner's 38ft sailboat. Guests are invited on a number of cruises through the crystal-blue waters of the Bahía Culebra, including daily sunset cruises (US\$40 per person, minimum four people).

Hotel Playa Hermosa (☎ 2672 0046; www.hotelplayahermosa.com; r US\$99, deluxe s/d US\$134/169; 📺 📺 📺) 'Hermosa' would be the simplest way to describe this lovely hotel after a recent renovation. On the southern end of the beach via the first entrance road, the luxurious rooms are screened by branches and greenery of the property's old-growth trees. The well-appointed rooms, with cable TV, comfortable furniture and a simple, tropical aesthetic, ring around a pool and beautifully landscaped garden. There's wi-fi access in the central area.

Villas Sol Hotel (☎ 2672 0001; www.villassol.com; d US\$212, villa US\$316; 📺 📺 📺) If an all-inclusive resort deal sounds attractive, this hillside is your place. Standard rooms are equipped with everything you'd want, and the views of the gulf are breathtaking. The villas are definitely pricier, but they have three bedrooms, a kitchen and a private pool option, so gather a few of your rich friends and live it up. There are also tennis courts, a restaurant and a bar, and the owners can arrange all types of activities. Bill Beard's Diving Safaris is based here. Credit cards accepted.

Eating & Drinking

Whether you're just passing through Playa Hermosa or spending the night, there are some great spots to eat here. Food and other basic supplies are available at Mini Super Cenizaro, on the paved road into town.

Restaurant Pescado Loco (☎ 2672 0017; mains US\$5-14; ☎ 9am-1am) The 'Crazy Fish' serves up some of the freshest seafood around, including Costa Rican standards like red snapper and *ceviche* (uncooked, marinated seafood), though we got excited about the *pulpo de gallego* (Galician octopus). The restaurant

is between the first and second entrances to Playa Hermosa.

Ginger (☎ 2672 0041; mains US\$15-20; 🍷 dinner Tue-Sun) If you're driving north, look to the hills on the right and you'll see this stunner of an open-air restaurant (it was designed by the famous Costa Rican architect Victor Cañas). The chic ambience, which feels more NYC than CR, is complemented by a gourmet list of Asian- and Mediterranean-inspired tapas.

Monkey Bar (☎ 2672 0267; 🍷 5pm-midnight) For all your liquid needs visit this huge tree house

between the first and second entrances to Playa Hermosa, where you can sip a sundowner to the tune of howlers bleating overhead.

Getting There & Away

There is a daily bus from San José, but you can always take a bus to Liberia and switch there for more frequent buses to Playa Hermosa. A taxi from Liberia costs about US\$15, and a taxi from Coco about US\$5. If you're driving from Liberia, take the signed turnoff to Playa del Coco. The entire road is paved.

THE PAPAGAYO PROBLEM

If anyone reading this right now thinks that Costa Rica is a virtual ecoparadise where environmental conservation always takes precedence over capitalist gains, sit down and listen to the not-so-pretty side of the story.

In the mid-1970s the Costa Rican Tourism Board, known as the ICT (whose slogan, by the way, is 'No Artificial Ingredients'), hatched a long-term development plan for the Gulf of Papagayo, focusing particularly on the Nacascolo peninsula, a tiny, beautiful strip of land that juts out into the Bahía de Culebra. The idea was to use Costa Rica's image as a happy, sloth-hugging tropical wonderland to lure package tourists away from traditional resort destinations, like Cancún.

The project took off during the administration of President Rafael Calderón, who adamantly backed the development proposal. Soon after, the Grupo Papagayo conglomerate was formed, headed by Mexico's Grupo Situr (which was reportedly investing US\$2.5 billion in the project). Although no environmental impact studies were done, the group unveiled plans to raze most of the peninsula's dry tropical forest to make way for 20,000 hotel rooms, two golf courses, a marina, racetrack, athletic center and (of course) condos. Developers never stopped to consider the availability of fresh drinking water, let alone the pre-Columbian archaeological sites that dotted the peninsula.

However, when an independent commission appointed by Calderón expressed concerns that the Papagayo project was, to put it bluntly, an environmental disaster, it really hit the fan. The tourism minister was indicted on charges of corruption, and all of the ICT was embroiled in scandal (it didn't help much that bulldozers were occasionally turning up pre-Columbian sites). In a quick scramble, Calderón seized control of the entire peninsula, while Grupo Papagayo put on a fresh coat of PR paint by changing its name to Ecodesarrollo Papagayo (Papagayo Eco-development). For a quick lesson in what it actually means to be 'eco,' see boxed text How to Know if a Business is Really Ecofriendly, p346.

The company went bankrupt, and development stalled until a group of North American investors seized the straggled remains of the project in 1999, led by Tico developer Alan Kelso. In 2004 the Four Seasons Resort opened up for business, and in 2009 the first phase of the huge 350-slip Marina Papagayo is slated to make its debut. Currently, there are a number of high-end resorts along the bay, but there's new dirt plaguing Papagayo: the human kind. In February 2008, after being investigated by Minae nine months prior for improper waste management, the 300-room Hotel Occidental Allegro Papagayo was shut down by the government for dumping its waste into a nearby estuary and neighboring communities (whose grassroots investigation and protest helped instigate the closure). Soon thereafter, the Occidental Grand Papagayo, another resort owned by the same group, was investigated for allegedly pumping its waste directly into the ocean at Playa Buena, where there's a fragile coral reef offshore.

If you'd like to stay at one of the upscale resorts at Papagayo, do a little environmental investigation of your own before booking something. You can make a positive impact on green development in Costa Rica by creating demand for it, and by putting your hard-earned bucks there when you find it.

Buses to Liberia and San José depart from the main road on the northern end of the beach and make a stop in Sardinal.

Liberia US\$0.75, 1¼ hours, departs at 5:30am, 7am, 9:30am, 11am, 12:30pm, 2:30pm, 4:30pm and 6:30pm.

San José (Empresa Esquivel) US\$5, six hours, departs at 5am.

PLAYA OCOTAL

This small but attractive gray-sand beach with tidal pools on both ends is 4km southwest of Playa del Coco by paved road. Aside from a few privately owned villas (which are mostly rented as vacation houses), there isn't an actual town here, though it's close enough to Coco that you can either drive or take a leisurely stroll here along the road. Although it's a fairly quiet beach, Ocotal can get mobbed on weekends by Ticos looking to escape the Coco scene.

If you feel like diving, **Ocotal Beach Resort** (☎ 2670 0321; www.ocotalresort.com) offers dive packages, such as an eight-day, seven-night deal including accommodations, breakfast, and six days of boat and beach diving (per person US\$1095 based on double occupancy). It also offers fishing charters (it has six boats) and kayak rentals. Complete fishing packages are also available.

Sleeping & Eating

Los Almendros de Ocotal (☎ 2670 1560, 2670 1744; www.losalmendrosrentals.com; studio/apartment US\$60/180/235; 📍 🚗 🚶 🚲) Perched on the hillside just above Playa Ocotal, these apartments are a great deal for self-caterers or longer-term visitors. They're quiet, have superb views, and are well maintained and comfortable. Apartments sleep four, while villas sleep six, and some units have private pools and terraces.

Villa Casa Blanca (☎ 2670 0518; www.hotelvillacasa.blanca.com; d/ste incl breakfast US\$145/163, additional person US\$10; 📍 🚗 🚶 🚲) Between Playa del Coco and Ocotal, this attractive villa is perched on a pleasant hilltop just a few minutes' walk from the beach. The rooms are beautifully decorated with either Victorian motifs or more modern accents. Three honeymoon suites are larger and feature a step-up bathtub and ocean views. The pool has a swim-up bar, and there's wi-fi access. The hotel was for sale when we visited.

Ocotal Beach Resort (☎ 2670 0321; www.ocotalresort.com; s/d incl breakfast from US\$175/200; 📍 🚗 🚶 🚲) This beachside resort on the bay has a relaxed ambience and is a great choice for

divers and sportfishers. There are several swimming pools, tennis courts, and a notable Mediterranean-fusion restaurant whose chef was trained at the Cordon Bleu. Suites (US\$378) are a bit cramped with gigantic beds, but they have ocean views and Jacuzzi tubs, while duplex-style bungalows (US\$175) share small private pools. All rooms include the creature comforts you'd expect.

Father Rooster Bar & Grill (☎ 2670 1246; www.fatherrooster.com; mains US\$5-16; 🍷 11am-11pm) This awesome beachside eatery serves up a good variety of grilled dishes, including fish, snacks and burgers, and you cannot beat the location: sit in the coolness of the restaurant, on the shaded wooden terrace or under the palms on the beach. The bartenders make a good margarita as well as a killer frozen Tica Linda, whose knockout punch is naturally Guaro Cacique.

BEACHES SOUTH OF PLAYA OCOTAL

Although they're next to one another, Playas Pan de Azúcar, Potrero, Flamingo, Brasilito and Conchal have relatively nothing in common. The beaches range from gray sand to white sand to crushed seashells, while the range of development is also a seemingly random pattern.

Although it's tempting to take the 'road' from Sardinal to Potrero, there's a reason why locals call this route the 'monkey trail.' The first 9km of dirt road leading to the small town of Artola isn't so bad, but the second half is pretty brutal, and should only be tackled if you have a 4WD (and after you've talked to a few locals).

If you want to avoid the rough roads, return to the main peninsular highway then head south through Filadelfia and on to Belén (a distance of 18km), from where a paved road heads 25km west to Huacas (where there's a gas station). Then take the road leading north until you hit the ocean at the village of Brasilito. Turn right and head north: you'll pass Playa Flamingo and Bahía Potrero before reaching Playa Pan de Azúcar. If you make a left instead and head south, you will end up at Playa Conchal.

Buses from San José, Liberia or Santa Cruz can also get you to most of the beaches. If you're into sea kayaking, the proximity of the beaches to one another makes for some great day trips.

In the small village of Artola you can take the **Congo Trail Canopy Tour** (☎ 2666 4422; US\$45) if you're looking for adventure *sans* broken axles.

Playa Pan de Azúcar

Although the buses stop at Potrero, those with their own ride (it'd better be a 4WD in the rainy season) can head 3km north on a rough dirt road to 'Sugar Bread Beach,' which derives its name from the crystalline strip of white sand that's protected at both ends by rocky headlands. Difficult access and the lack of cheap accommodations create an atmosphere of total seclusion, and the ocean here is calm, clear and perfect for snorkeling.

Although the beach is fronted by the Hotel Sugar Beach, don't be afraid to walk down to the shore as beaches are public property in Costa Rica.

Luxury at the **Hotel Sugar Beach** (☎ 2654 4242; www.sugar-beach.com; d from US\$145; (P) (B) (Q) (R)) is simple and understated, which is the right approach considering how difficult it is to compete with the natural beauty of the beach. The 22 lovely rooms are brightly painted and entered via elaborately hand-carved wooden doors. Deluxe rooms are slightly larger and have stunning ocean views. There are also four two-bedroom apartments, two beach houses (with two or three bedrooms sleeping 10 to 12) and a small restaurant. But the real reason you're here is to slow down and linger on one of the most isolated beaches in all of Costa Rica.

Bahía Potrero

This stretch of bay is separated from Playa Flamingo by a rocky headland. Although the overdeveloped eyesore that is Playa Flamingo can be seen across the bay, monkeys can still be heard in the trees here. The hillside and shoreline are seeing development, and tourists in quad caravans kick up dust along the roads, but the bay has a decidedly lower-key – and shall we say, classier – scene.

Several undeveloped beaches are strung along the bay. The black-sand beach is **Playa Prieta**, the white-sand beach is **Playa Penca** and **Playa Potrero**, the biggest, is somewhere in between. (These names, it should be noted, are used loosely.) The rocky islet 10km due west of Playa Pan de Azúcar is **Isla Santa Catalina**, a popular diving spot (see boxed text Divers Do

It Deeper, p259). Hotels on the beaches rent water-sports equipment.

There's a small community at **Potrero**, just beyond the northern end of the beach. This is where the bus line ends, and the beaches here don't get the weekend rush found at Brasilito.

SLEEPING & EATING

If you're looking for budget accommodation, consider staying 7km south in Brasilito (p266).

Mayra's (☎ 2654 4213, 2654 4472; camping per person US\$6, s/d US\$18/36; (P)) Right on the southern beach, this friendly, tranquil place has shady camping with beach showers and five rustic rooms with refreshing cold showers, fridge and kitchenette. Mayra is helpful and friendly, and her husband, Álvaro, a retired journalist, is well stocked with stories.

Cabinas Isolina (☎ 2654 4333; www.isolinabeach.com; d/tr/q incl breakfast from US\$64/76/87, d/tr/q villa incl breakfast US\$99/111/134; (P) (B) (Q) (R)) These attractive yellow buildings are set back from the northern end of the beach and completely surrounded by huge bushes of fragrant hibiscus. Rooms have tiled hot showers, cable TV and air-con, while larger villas have two bedrooms and a fully equipped kitchen. There's wi-fi access outside, and the attached restaurant serves up some Tico-Mediterranean specialties.

Bahía Esmeralda (☎ 2654 4480; www.hotelbahiaesmeralda.com; s/d/q incl breakfast from US\$70/81/108, apt/villa US\$157/215; (P) (B) (Q) (R)) A short walk from the beach, this Italian-owned resort offers super-comfortable accommodations at a bargain price. Standard rooms are a little on the small side, though the relaxed atmosphere, pool and excellent Italian restaurant (open for breakfast and dinner, meals from US\$3 to US\$12) more than make up for it. The apartments sleeping up to four have fold-out futons and a kitchen, while larger villas sleep six. Credit cards accepted. The property was for sale at the time of writing.

Bahía del Sol (☎ 2654 4671, 2224 7290; www.potrero.com; d/ste incl breakfast from US\$163/227; (P) (B) (Q) (R)) With a prime beachfront location at Playa Potrero (by the cute baby-turtle sign admonishing quad drivers to stay off the beach), this luxurious resort gets high marks for laidback elegance. Large, tiled rooms and suites have all the amenities you would want (suites include fully equipped kitchens and

private terraces) and surround a lovely garden with a spa area. Out front, there's a pool with waterfall and swim-up bar, and a lawn leading out to the beach is peppered with *palapas* (shelter with a thatched, palm-leaf roof and open sides).

Las Brisas Bar & Grill (☎ 2654 4047; casados US\$3.75) There are a number of *sodas* in Potrero if you're looking for cheap eats, and this local favorite is at the far end of the bay past the village. Villagers pack the joint nightly for *bocas*, beers and brilliant sunsets. The pool table here is probably the most exciting entertainment offering in town.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Many buses begin their route in Potrero on the southeast corner of the soccer field. See Playa Flamingo (p266) for schedules. Ask locally before setting out as not every bus goes all the way into Potrero.

Playa Flamingo

The crescent strip of white sand known as Playa Flamingo is postcard-worthy, which is probably why it was billed decades ago as Costa Rica's most sophisticated beach destination. These days the beach has gone completely upscale, though the scene ain't so pretty. The hills above the bay are lined with private villas and expensive condos, and the area has a reputation for rampant cocaine use, high-end prostitution and more dirty old men than you can shake a cigar at. Package tourists and sportfishers still frequent the old resorts that line the bay, but there are definitely better places to spend your time and money. That said, the white-sand shoreline itself is a blue-flag beach, making it a lovely place to while away a free hour or two.

The original name of the beach was Playa Blanca; it changed its name in the 1950s to coincide with the construction of the area's first major hotel, the Flamingo Beach Resort. Funnily enough, flamingo season here runs from never to never.

Across from the Flamingo Marina Resort, **Banco de Costa Rica** (☎ 2654 4984) can exchange US dollars and traveler's checks. Super Massai, on the main north-south road, is good for all kinds of food supplies and toiletries.

ACTIVITIES

At the entrance to Playa Flamingo, the **Edge Adventure Company** (☎ 2654 4946; www.theedge

adventure.com) has a range of rentals and tours. A two-tank dive is US\$75, and snorkeling gear, bikes and body boards are available for rent. Fishing charters are also available.

Samonique III (☎ 2654 5280, 8388 7870; www.costa-rica-sailing.com) is a 15.5m ketch available for sunset cruises for US\$60 per person (minimum four). Overnight tours are available by arrangement. You can find the office at the Mariner Inn.

Spanish classes are operated by **Centro-Panamericano de Idiomas** (☎ 2265 6306; www.cpi-edu.com; classes with/without homestay US\$415/285), which also has locations in Heredia (p143) and Monteverde (p179), with the opportunity to transfer from campus to campus.

SLEEPING & EATING

Budget options are nonexistent in Playa Flamingo. If you want to visit the beach but save a few bucks, consider staying in nearby Brasilito (p266).

Mariner Inn (☎ 2654 4081; marinerinn@racsa.co.cr; s/d US\$34/45; (P) (B) (Q) (R)) Just next to the marina, the Mariner Inn has a sweet terrace bar with beautiful views of the bay where you can have a cocktail before turning in. Rooms downstairs are on the small side but very comfortable, with air-con, hot water, cable TV and some with fridge.

Guanacaste Lodge (☎ 2654 4494; www.guanacaste.lodge.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$60/70; (P) (B) (Q) (R)) Another affordable option in town is a good choice as the spacious, well-furnished rooms with air-con, cable TV and private hot showers are surrounded by shady, tropical grounds. There's a nice pool, and the attached restaurant (dishes US\$3 to US\$6) has good casados and grilled meats.

Flamingo Beach Resort (☎ 2654 4444; www.resortflamingobeach.com; r US\$120-300; (P) (B) (Q) (R)) The Flamingo is the granddaddy of the area's resorts, with 91 rooms, tennis courts, a pool and a wide restaurant terrace that looks out on the beautiful beach out back. It has a 1950s Vegas look and feel, with no dearth of amenities or gaudy aesthetic.

Marie's (☎ 2654 4136; meals US\$6-24; ☎ 6:30am-9:30pm) One of the longest-established eateries in town has a breezy round dining terrace, and such offerings as yogurt, granola and fruit at breakfast, avocados stuffed with shrimp, and spinach-and-ricotta ravioli. The pancakes, burgers and rotisserie chicken are locally famous.

GETTING THERE & AWAY**Air**

You can fly to Tamarindo (p277), which has regular scheduled flights and is about 8km away by paved road.

Bus

Buses depart from the Flamingo Marina on the point and travel through Brasilito on the way out. Schedules change often, so ask locally about departure times as well as the best place on the road to wait for the bus.

Liberia US\$1.50, two hours, departs at 5:30am and 2:30pm.

San José (Tralapa) US\$6.50, five hours, departs at 2:45am, 9am and 2pm Monday to Saturday, 10:30am on Sunday.

Santa Cruz US\$1.50, one hour, eight buses departs from 5:45am to 10pm.

Playa Brasilito

Brasilito has managed to avoid the overdevelopment that's plagued much of northern Nicoya. It might be that the gray-sand beach here isn't as pretty as nearby strips of palm-fringed white sand, and the lack of resorts and big hotels gives the town a laidback atmosphere. Playa Brasilito is popular with week-ending Ticos and travelers 'in the know,' who are drawn here for the relaxed beach scene, pleasant swimming, cheap accommodations and spectacular Pacific sunsets.

Brasilito Excursions (☎ 2654 4237; www.brasilito.com), which operates out of Hotel Brasilito, can book horseback rides, sunset sails and two-tank dives.

Internet is available (US\$2 per hour) at Rancho Nany.

SLEEPING

The town of Brasilito consists of a few small stores and *sodas*, as well as some great mid-range accommodations.

Cabinas Gloria (☎ 2654 4878; camping adult/child under 6yr US\$3/free, tr US\$50; ☎ ☎ ☎) Run by an amiable Tico named Santos, these spruced-up rooms with air-con, cable TV and free wi-fi are a great deal if you're a traveling trio. This place is definitely a bit upmarket, even though the modest, painted-black sign on the road looks pretty budget. It's 200m south of the plaza.

Cabinas Ojos Azules (☎ 2654 4346; www.cabinasojosazules.com; dm/d US\$5/50; ☎ ☎) The best budget option in town is a somewhat ramshackle collection of rooms featuring big, comfy beds complete with saucy mirrored headboards.

Fancy doubles are upstairs, and simpler downstairs quarters fit up to eight people. All units have private bathrooms with hot water, and there's a small shared kitchen. It's 200m south of the plaza.

Hotel Brasilito (☎ 2654 4237; www.brasilito.com; r with/without air-con US\$47/40; ☎) On the beach side of the plaza, this recommended hotel is the perfect place to slow down and chill out for a few days. The rooms are simple and clean, though you'll scream with joy when you take a steamy shower with some serious pressure. If it's available, splurge for the sea-view room in the front that has a private hammock-strung patio that's ideal for soaking up the sunset, after which you can hang at the popular restaurant. The friendly owners speak German, English, Spanish and French, and will help arrange tours. Credit cards accepted.

Rancho Nany (☎ 2654 4320; d/q US\$50/90; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Between Playas Brasilito and Conchal, Rancho Nany is an impressive Tico-run complex complete with its own internet café, steakhouse, supermarket, swimming pool and cabins. Large rooms here are painted in cheerful tropical colors, and come with cable TV, air-con and warm showers. The hotel is managed by the López family, who have been in the area for four decades.

Conchal Hotel (☎ 2654 9125; www.conchalhotel.com; d incl breakfast US\$90; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Rooms at this recommended hotel are simply stunning – white-washed walls are offset by exposed wooden beams, ceramic tiling and elegant bathrooms. Don't judge it by the characterless terra-cotta wall in front. Simon, the owner, and his staff make every effort to make your holiday comfortable and memorable.

EATING & DRINKING

Indira Bar y Restaurant (☎ 2654 4028; dishes US\$3-10; ☎ lunch & dinner) Come to this large beachfront spot for a great vibe, especially in the evening when its outdoor tables are packed with tourists and locals alike. The *ceviche* here is killer, especially when it's washed down with an Imperial (or four).

Roy's Place (mains US\$3-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) The super-friendly owner of this sweet little *soda* makes the *casados*, *ceviche* and salads taste even better than they would standing alone. Pull up a chair, sip on a *batido* (fruit shake) and watch the day's dramas on the little plaza.

Il Forno Restaurant (☎ 2654 4125; meals US\$5-12; ☎ lunch & dinner) This recommended Italian restaurant is in a romantic garden, and has such delightful menu items as thin-crust pizza, homemade pastas and risottos, and enough fresh eggplant dishes to keep vegetarians happy and healthy.

Outback Jack's Roadkill Café (☎ 2654 5463; mains US\$4-12; ☎ 6am-11pm) A good spot for a beer, this open-air restaurant-bar attached to the Hotel Brasilito looks out on the beach. Though its Ozzie-themed decor would have you believe otherwise, the cuisine is more about international basics with a Tico accent.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses to and from Playa Flamingo travel through Brasilito; see opposite for details.

Playa Conchal

Just 2km south of Brasilito is Playa Conchal, which is widely regarded as *the* most beautiful beach in all of Costa Rica. The name comes from the billions of *conchas* (shells) that wash up on the beach, which are gradually crushed into a coarse sand. The ocean water is an intense turquoise blue, which is indeed a rarity on the Pacific coast. If you have snorkeling gear, this is the place to bust it out.

The beach is bounded on the north by an expansive resort that can make beach access frustratingly difficult. However, it's easy enough to stay in nearby Brasilito (opposite) and then simply walk south along the road for 2km.

Why is it that the most expensive resorts always seem to have the most ridiculous names? With 285 hectares of property, including an over-the-top free-form pool and a championship golf course, it's not like **Paradibus Playa Conchal Beach & Resort** (☎ 2654 4123; www.paradibusplayaconchal.travel; d US\$350-630; ☎ ☎ ☎) really needs a fancy name to compensate for any inadequacies. Guests have got it all here, and everything from the marble columns to the gold-trimmed toothbrush holder is a class act. Needless to say, the whole shebang is about as *un-Costa Rican* as you can get.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

If you're staying in Conchal, it's probably best to catch buses in Brasilito; see opposite for details.

PLAYA GRANDE

From Huacas, the southwesterly road leads to Playa Grande, a beach that's famous among conservationists and surfers alike. By day, the offshore winds create steep and powerful waves, especially at high tide and in front of the Hotel Las Tortugas. By night, an ancient cycle continues to unfurl as leatherback sea turtles bearing clutches of eggs follow the ocean currents back to their birthplace.

Since 1991 Playa Grande has been part of the Parque Marino Las Baulas de Guanacaste (p269), which bars beachfront development to ensure that one of the most important leatherback nesting areas in the world is preserved for future generations. However, this is not to say that Playa Grande is pristine. The park's official boundary ends 50m from the high-tide line, and government agencies have been lax about permitting real estate development that is technically within the boundaries of the park. In 2007, the Supreme Court of Costa Rica restated a 2005 moratorium on all construction within park boundaries; meanwhile, conservation groups are lobbying to prevent development near the central beach, where turtles can still nest undisturbed by lights and the presence of development.

Currently, neat subdivided lots are for sale by the dozen in Playa Grande, and several of the hotels listed here are in a 33-hectare gated community (open to the public). Though Playa Grande is still far from overdevelopment, and the essential wildness and beauty of the place remains largely intact, it will take the continued efforts of concerned conservationists (like Louis Wilson; see the listing for Hotel Las Tortugas, p268) and scrupulous developers to adhere to a high standard of environmental integrity to keep it that way. It's not hyperbolic to say that the survival of the leatherback turtle depends on it.

Although Playa Grande does have a few accommodations near the beach, they are set back from the shoreline and carefully managed to ensure that ambient light is kept to a minimum.

Activities

Surfing is most people's motivation for coming to Playa Grande, and if you don't know how, there are people who will happily teach you.

Frijoles Locos (☎ 2652 9235; www.frijoleslocos.com; ☎ 9am-5pm) On the road into town, the friendly lan and

Corynne Bean rent and sell surfboards (US\$15 to US\$20 per day), give lessons (US\$45 for one person, US\$60 for two), and offer massage therapy and naturopathic treatments.

Matos Films Surf Store (☎ 2652 9227; www.matosfilms.com; ☎ 8am-7pm) This Tico-run surf shop rents surfboards (US\$20 per day), mountain bikes and beach cruisers (US\$10) and has free internet access for customers. You can even do a weekly rental arrangement for US\$100 per week, swapping out boards from their quiver as often as you like.

Playa Grande Surf Camp (below) Gerry and his cohorts will rent you shortboards or longboards (\$20 per day), and show you how to ride 'em.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotels are well signed from the main road into Playa Grande. It's a good idea to bring a flashlight for walking around at night, as the roads are necessarily dark (and uneven!).

Playa Grande Surf Camp (☎ 2653 1074; www.playagrandsurfcamp.com; r per person with/without air-con US\$25/15; P ☎ ☎) Next to El Manglar is this great budget option, run by surfing brothers Gerry and Patrick. The three A-frame cabins with thatch roofs and two stilt cabins (each sleeps four) with private hammock-strung porches all have private bathrooms, and are just steps from the beach. Heads up, surfer girls – some staff here can be a bit overfriendly.

El Manglar (☎ 2653 0952; www.hotel-manglar.com; d standard/deluxe US\$45/70; P ☎ ☎) Near the southern end of the beach is this funky, friendly spot with brightly painted stuccoed rooms and lush, tropical grounds. Standard rooms have private cold showers, while deluxe rooms have hot water and slightly more space.

Villa Baula (☎ 2653 0644, 2653 0493; www.hotelvilla baula.com; d/tr US\$66/77, bungalow with/without air-con US\$138/132; P ☎ ☎) Across from the estuary near the southern end of the beach, this rustic beachfront hotel emits virtually no ambient light at night. All rooms have private hot-water bathrooms, while more expensive bungalows have air-con and optional kitchens. There's an attractive pool, and this end of the beach is much quieter as it's further from the best surfing.

Rip Jack Inn (☎ 2653 0480; www.ripjackinn.com; d/cabina US\$87/111; P ☎ ☎) Just south of Las Tortugas on the inland road, this comfy, convivial inn has a handful of clean, modern rooms with private bathrooms and air-con. There's also a beautiful open-air bar-restau-

rant with stunning ocean views, plus regular yoga classes on offer.

Playa Grande Inn (☎ 2653 0719; www.playagrandeinn.com; r/ste US\$58/87; P ☎ ☎) Around the corner from the Rip Jack Inn, air-conditioned rooms at this laidback place are decked out with polished stained-wood floors, ceilings and walls, and have cable TV and hot water. There's also a cozy bar area and small pool.

Hotel Las Tortugas (☎ 2653 0423; www.lastortugas hotel.com; s/d/ste US\$58/93/140, apt US\$29-116; P ☎ ☎) The owner of this hotel, Louis Wilson, is a local hero as he was instrumental in helping to designate Playa Grande as a national park. Although his hotel is near the beach, it was carefully designed to keep ambient light away from the nesting area, and to block light from development to the north. Eleven spacious rooms with air-con have private bathrooms with hot water, plus thick walls and small windows to enable daytime sleep after a night of turtle-watching. The hotel also has two apartments with kitchens for rent up the hill. Surfboards, body boards, sea kayaks, snorkels and horses can be rented. There's a pool, Jacuzzi and a popular restaurant, and all tours can be arranged.

La Marejada Hotel (☎ 2653 0594; www.lamarejada.com; r US\$81 incl breakfast; ☎ ☎) This new, bamboo-fenced hotel has a few elegantly understated rooms around a small pool area. A palm-shaded common area is strung with hammocks and leads to the Mar Bar in front.

Hotel Bula Bula (☎ 2653 0975; www.hotelbulabula.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$93/128; P ☎ ☎) A few hundred meters inland near the Tamarindo estuary is this recommended hotel, owned by two Americans (one of whom is a professional chef). The rooms are exquisite, with full amenities and original artwork on all the walls, and the landscaped grounds and free-form pool are perfect for relaxing after a hard day of surfing. But one of the biggest draws is The Great Waltini's (dishes US\$9 to US\$16), the onsite restaurant that serves up only the freshest local seafood and some truly excellent grilled meats.

Kike's Place (☎ 2653 0834; www.kikesplace.com; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) On the road into town, take note of Kike's (it's 'KEE-kays,' so's you know), the friendly local bar and restaurant where you can shoot some pool, eat some *ceviche* and let your hair down.

Aside from eating at the hotels, try tasty **Los Malinches** (☎ 2653 0236; mains US\$5-9; ☎ 8am-9pm

Mon-Sat), where you can dine on good, fresh seafood underneath a giant *palapa*. Next door, the **supermercado** (☎ 7:30am-noon & 3-7pm Mon-Sat) sells produce, booze and other staples. It also rents a few cute, clean **cabinas** (s/d US\$20/25) with air-con.

Getting There & Away

There are no buses to Playa Grande. You can drive to Huacas and then take the paved road to Matapalo, followed by a 6km dirt road to Playa Grande. If you don't have your own car and are staying in Playa Grande, call ahead and the hotel owners can arrange for a pickup from the Matapalo turnoff (where the bus from San José can drop you off).

Alternatively, you can cut your travel time in half by catching a boat across the estuary from Tamarindo to the southern end of Playa Grande (around US\$1.25 per person).

PARQUE NACIONAL MARINO LAS BAULAS DE GUANACASTE

Playa Grande is considered one of the most important nesting sites in the entire world for the *baula* (leatherback turtle). In 1991 the entire beach and adjacent land (379 hectares), along with 22,000 hectares of ocean, was designated as Marino Las Baulas National Park. This government act followed a 15-year battle between conservationists and various self-motivated parties, including poachers, developers and tour operators.

However, lest you think that the Costa Rican government was particularly concerned about the welfare of the turtles, the actual impetus for the creation of the national park came from the owner of the Hotel Las Tortugas (see opposite). In fact, the sole stipulation for designating Playa Grande as a protected area was that the beach needed to generate revenue based on tourism. Fortunately, tourists perennially pay the park fees to watch the turtles nest, and local guides ensure that the beach (and their economic livelihood) stays intact.

The ecology of the park is primarily composed of mangrove swamp, and it's possible to find here all of the six mangrove species native to Costa Rica. This habitat is ideal for a caiman and crocodile, as well as numerous bird species, including the beautiful roseate spoonbill. Other creatures to look for when visiting are howler monkey, raccoon, coati, otter and a variety of crab. But, as is to be

expected, the main attraction is the nesting of the world's largest species of turtle, which can weigh in excess of 400kg. Nesting season is from October to March, and it's fairly common for three or four leatherbacks to lay their eggs here on any given night.

The leatherback is critically endangered from overhunting, a lack of protected nesting sights and coastal overdevelopment (beachside lights disorient the turtles when they come up to nest). Despite increased conservation efforts, fewer and fewer leatherbacks are nesting on Playa Grande each year. In 2004 an all-time low of 46 leatherbacks visited the beach, which was a vast departure from the estimated 1000 turtles that nested here in the 1990s. While it's easy to point fingers at developers in Tamarindo, park rangers attribute the decline in nesting turtles to longline commercial fishing, though the construction of high-rise apartments and beachside fast-food joints certainly isn't helping.

In an effort to protect the dwindling leatherback population, park rangers collect the eggs daily and incubate them to increase their chances of survival. Even so, sea turtles must hatch on the beach and enter the water by themselves, otherwise memory imprinting does not occur, and the hatchlings will never return to their birthplace to nest. It's estimated that only 10% of hatchlings will survive to adulthood, though leatherbacks can live over 50 years, and females can lay multiple clutches of eggs during a single nesting season.

During the day, the beach is free and open to all, which is a good thing as the breaks off Grande are fast, steep and consistent. During the nighttime, however, it is only possible to visit the beach on a guided tour, which is also a good thing as it ensures that the nesting cycles of the leatherback will continue unhindered.

Turtle-Watching

The **park office** (☎ 2653 0470; admission incl tour US\$13) is by the northern entrance to Playa Grande. Reservations for turtle-watching can be made up to seven days in advance, and they're highly recommended as there are a limited number of places each evening. If you phone ahead, you will be promised a spot within a week, though there is usually a vacancy within a day or two. You can also show up in the evening as there are frequent no-shows, though this is less likely on weekends and during the busy winter holiday season.

CAMERA SHY

A picture might be worth a thousand words, but sometimes it's better to say nothing at all. Take, for instance, the miracle of birth – who would want to share that with random gawkers and paparazzi? This is not to poke fun of a serious situation. One of the reasons why turtles no longer nest on Playa Tamarindo is that they're extremely sensitive to ambient light. You can see why a string of beachside bars might deter a turtle from laying her clutch of eggs on that particular beach. So at the beaches where endangered turtles still do return to nest, you'll understand why flash photography is strictly verboten.

When you take a turtle tour, the rangers will politely ask that you refrain from photographing or filming the turtles, but we'd just like to underscore the fact that by experiencing it in the moment and not committing it to film, you are helping to maintain a fragile cycle that has renewed itself continually for millions of years.

Many hotels and tourist agencies in Tamarindo can book tours that include transport to and from Playa Grande, admission to the park and the guided tour. The whole package costs about US\$35. If you don't have your own transport, this is the best way to go. When making a reservation, passport numbers and full names are required as this prevents big hotels in Tamarindo from reserving blocks for their guests.

The show kicks off anytime from 9pm to as late as 2am, though there is no guarantee that you will see a turtle – this is nature, not the San Diego Zoo. This also means that you may only have to wait for 10 minutes before a turtle shows up, or you could be there for five hours. A small stand at the exhibit sells snacks and *sodas*, but bring a (thick) book or a deck of cards for entertainment. It could be a very long night – but well worth it. While you're waiting, a good way to begin your tour is with a visit to **El Mundo de la Tortuga** (☎ 2653 0471; admission US\$5; ☎ 4pm-dawn), a small and informative self-guided exhibit about leatherback turtles near the northern end of the park.

To minimize the impact of viewing the turtles, guidelines for the tours are very strict; see boxed text Camera Shy, above. Tourists are not allowed on the beach until the turtles have made it to dry sand. Guards with two-way radios are posted on the beach and they will alert your guide when a turtle is ready for its close-up. As a group, you will be accompanied by a guide to a designated viewing area, though photography, filming or lights of any kind are *not* allowed. Over the span of one to two hours, you can watch as the turtle digs its nest, lays about 150 silver shiny eggs and then buries them in the sand (while grunting and groaning the whole time).

If you're looking for a worthwhile volunteer project, the park office usually accepts volunteers to help monitor and catalog each nesting.

PLAYA TAMARINDO

Well, they don't call it Tamagringo for nothing. Call it what you will, but its accessibility from Liberia and decades-long status as one of Costa Rica's must-stop surf spots has made it the last word for many expats who have settled here, as well as the next wave of non-surfing gringos who have snapped up coastal property like there's no tomorrow – which there may not be, if real estate development continues at the pace it's going. Luckily, Tamarindo residents who care about the community and the ecosystem are attempting to put a stop to the insanely unsustainable construction (see boxed text Saving Tamarindo, opposite for more information). Despite the boutiques on the strip and the condos lining the coast, Tamarindo forms a part of the Parque Nacional Marino Las Baulas de Guanacaste (p269). Visitors have long flocked here for a reason, and the beach and surf themselves retain their inherent allure. But forget about finding any 'real' Costa Rica here – it's more like a slice of San Diego. So drop your pretenses, drop in on some fun waves and drop a few colones worth of Jägermeister shots at one of the beachside bars, because that's why you're in Tamarindo.

Orientation

Once a sleepy fishing village that turned into a little surf town, Tamarindo now channels the spirit of rush hour in southern California on the weekends, when traffic gridlocks along the two-lane main drag. Just before the main

street dead-ends into a cul-de-sac at the southeastern end of the beach, a road branches off to the left and passes the new Plaza Conchal mall. If you turn left again where that road forms a Y, you'll find several hotels along the dirt road. Turn right and you'll be headed for Playa Langosta, where the coast is crowded with condos and villas, a casino resort and a couple of exquisite little inns.

Amazingly, even though Tamarindo is possessed of frozen yogurt, yoga studios and air-conditioned malls, there's no gas station. For that, you'll have to drive 15 paved kilometers to Huacas – from Tamarindo, make a left at the intersection in Villareal, drive to Huacas, hang a right and go up the hill. The gas station is 4km up the road, on the right.

Information

Tourist information is available from any of the tour operators in town, or your hotel. Keep up on the local haps by picking up a copy of the *Tamarindo News*, available all over town or online at www.tamarindonews.com. For a cheerily jaundiced look at the state of modern Tamarindo, pick up a copy of the local zine *Flyswatter*.

BAC San José (☎ 2653 1617; ☎ 8:30am-3:30pm) Has an ATM, and exchanges US dollars and traveler's checks.

Coastal Emergency Medical Service (☎ 2653 0611, 2653 1974; ☎ 24hr) It does house calls! Can you say that about your hometown doc?

Internet Café del Mar (☎ 2653 1740; www.cafedelmarinternet.com; per hr US\$1.50; ☎ 8am-8pm)

Jaime Peligro (☎ 8820 9004; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) A local spot for new and used foreign-

language books and the best Central American CDs and DVDs.

Dangers & Annoyances

The tourist invasion has left Tamarindo with a growing drug (and prostitution) problem. Vendors openly ply their wares (and women) on the main road by the rotunda, and some bars can get rough at closing time.

Theft is a problem. Leave your hotel room locked, use room safes and don't leave valuables on the beach. If you're driving, never leave anything in your car.

Activities**BIKING**

The local expert on mountain biking, distance cycling and repairs is **Blue Trax** (☎ 2653 1705; www.bluetraxcr.com; ☎ 8:30am-6:30pm Mon-Sat). And if multiday mountain-biking tours are not your thing, it can also rent you a beach cruiser (US\$10 per day).

DIVING

Agua Rica Diving Center (☎ 2653 0094; www.aguarica.net), the area's scuba-diving expert, offers snorkeling and an assortment of dives, including diving certification classes.

GOLF

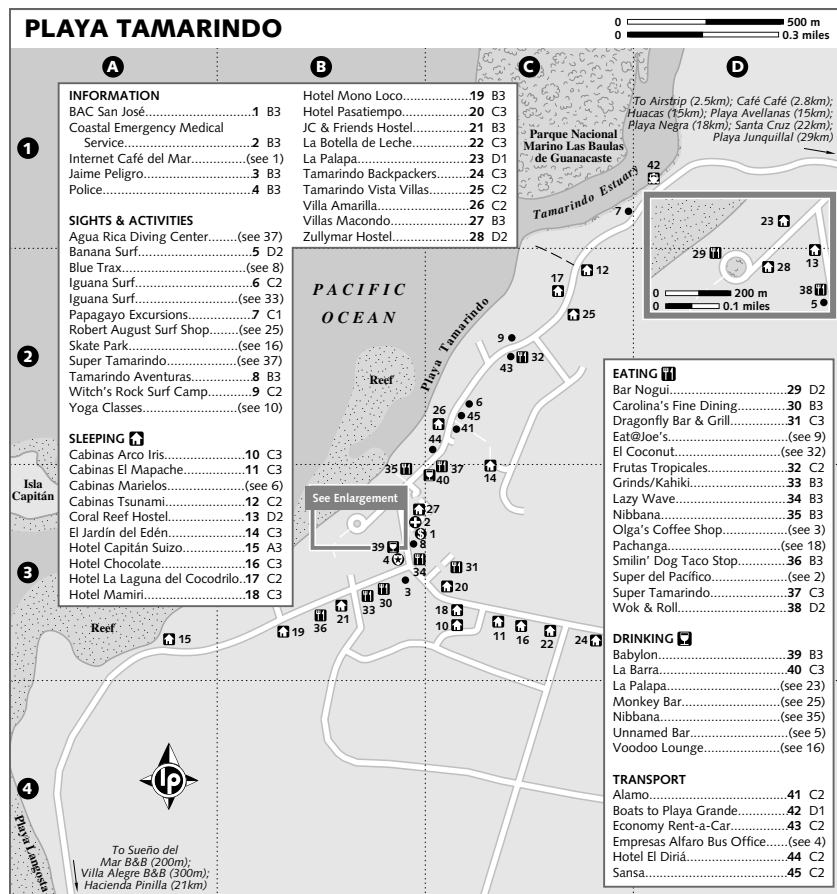
Just outside Tamarindo, near the village of San José de Pinilla, lies a residential development project that boasts one of the finest golf courses in Central America. **Hacienda Pinilla** (☎ 2680 3000; www.haciendapinilla.com) has a 7500yd par-72 course that was designed

SAVING TAMARINDO

The price of blithely disregarding the pressure on Tamarindo's environment is coming due. At the end of 2007, Playa Tamarindo lost its Bandera Azul Ecológica (Ecological Blue Flag) designation, which marked it as a community with high water quality, safety and environmental responsibility. Frankly, it was about time the flag got pulled, as it was an open secret that the water quality had been deteriorating, due in part to appalling practices like a certain hostel draining its raw sewage into open trenches on the street.

Losing the Bandera Azul, and watching the alarming spate of high-density construction rising in the middle of tiny Tamarindo, has raised red flags for local business owners and residents. The town is teetering on the brink of sustainability; if the exploitation of the land continues, Tamarindo not only loses its luster for visitors, but it displaces wildlife, irreparably damages the local ecology and becomes another sad story of greed trumping the well-being of a community. But many in Tamarindo recognize this pivotal moment and are acting up.

At the time of writing, organizers of the **Save Tamarindo Campaign** (www.savetamarindo.com) were putting forward a new urban development plan that would curb high-density development and require stricter government regulation.



by noted architect Mike Young. Greens fees are US\$125/165 per person during the low/high season.

SAILING

For sunset and daylong sailing excursions, book in advance via phone or online with one of the following outfits:

Blue Dolphin Sailing (☎ 2653 0867, 8842 3204; www.sailbluedolphin.com) Reader-recommended trips on Captain Jeff's catamaran include a sunset sail (US\$60) and snorkel-and-sunset sail (US\$75).

Mandingo Sailing (☎ 2653 0623, 8831 8875; www.tamarindosailing.com) Runs a gaff-rigged schooner for sunset cruises (US\$65) and a sleek speedboat for snorkeling trips (US\$50).

SKATEBOARDING

If you happen to have your deck with you, there's a fun little one-bowl **skate park** behind the Voodoo Lounge.

SPORTFISHING

None of the following outfitters have offices, so you'll have to book excursions by phone or online. All practice catch-and-release policies on billfish.

Capullo Sportfishing (☎ 2653 0048, 8829 8891; www.capullo.com) Has a 10.8m custom Topaz and a 6.6m Boston Whaler; both inshore and offshore trips are available for half-day (US\$400 to US\$700) and full-day (US\$525 to US\$1200) charters.

Lone Star Sportfishing (☎ 2653 0101; www.lonestar-sportfishing.com) Bilingual captains Juan Mungia and

Alonso Gonzalez run trips aboard a 9m Palm Beach boat available for half-day/full-day (US\$500/800) charters.

Tantrum Sportfishing (☎ 2653 1020, 8845 8562; www.tamarindofishingcharters.com) Captain Philip Leman has a 7.8m Boca Grande custom sportfisherman available for half-day/full-day (US\$450/725) charters.

SURFING

The most popular wave in Tamarindo is a medium-sized right that breaks directly in front of the Diria Hotel. The waters here are full of virgin surfers learning to pop up, most of whom can't help but play aquatic bumper cars. There is also a good left that's fed by the river mouth, though be advised that crocodiles are occasionally sighted here, particularly when the tide is rising (which is coincidentally the best time to surf). You'll have to get a local to let you in on some of their favorite spots, as we're not going to ruin it for them.

More advanced surfers will appreciate the bigger, faster and less crowded waves at **Playas Langosta** (on the other side of the point), **Avellanas** and **Negra** (p277) and **Junquillal** (p280) to the south, and **Playa Grande** (p267) to the north. Note that the best months for surfing coincide with the rainy season.

A number of surf schools and surf tour operators line the main stretch of road in Tamarindo. Surf lessons hover at around US\$30 for 1½ to two hours and most operators will let you keep the board for a few hours beyond that to practice. All outfits can organize daylong and multiday excursions to popular breaks, rent equipment and give surf lessons.

Banana Surf (☎ 2653 1270; www.bananasurfclub.com; ☎ 8am-6pm) This Argentinean-run outfit has the fairest prices in town on new and used boards, and is reminiscent of the way surf shops used to be (ie before they rented space in shopping malls).

Iguana Surf (☎ 2653 0148; www.iguanasurf.net; ☎ 8am-6pm) Operates a surf taxi service to neighboring beaches (US\$10 per person to Playa Grande, US\$25 per person to Playa Negra). Two locations (at either end of town) conveniently at your service.

Robert August Surf Shop (☎ 2653 0114; rasurfshop@yahoo.com; ☎ 9am-5pm) The august Robert August, having put Tamarindo on the map, now offers his name-brand boards, lessons and surf trips from his shop. Based at Tamarindo Vista Villas.

Witch's Rock Surf Camp (☎ 2653 0239; www.witchsrocksurfcamp.com; ☎ 8am-8pm) Board rentals, surf camps, lessons and regular excursions to Witch's Rock and Ollie's Point are available, though they're pricey. There

are beachside accommodations for surfers who sign up for multiday packages.

YOGA

Daily yoga classes are offered at the Cabinas Arco Iris (p274).

Tours

Boat tours, ATV tours, snorkeling trips and scooter rentals can be arranged through the various tour agencies in town. Many also rent equipment. The most reputable ones include the following:

Brisa del Mar (☎ 8868 0947; pitbest11@gmail.com) A true man of the sea, Pit (pronounced *Pete*) runs personalized tours emphasizing fishing, surfing, snorkeling and coastline cruising. He also speaks English, Spanish and Italian, and is a true entertainer in any language – drop him an email a few days before arriving in town for a good time!

Papagayo Excursions (☎ 2653 0254; www.papagayoexcursions.com) The longest-running outfitter in town organizes a variety of tours, including visits to turtle-nesting sites.

Tamarindo Aventuras (☎ 2653 0108; www.tamarindo-adventures.net; scooters per 4hr US\$25, ATVs per 4hr US\$60, dirt bikes per 4hr US\$34) Also rents water-sports equipment, including kayaks, snorkeling gear and surfboards.

Sleeping

The rates given are high-season rates; low-season rates can be about 25% lower.

BUDGET



Note that we constantly receive complaints about hotels in Tamarindo, so choose your accommodations wisely. All the following hotels have cold water (and you won't mind a bit).

Our pick: La Botella de Leche (☎ 2653 0189; labotelladeleche@racsa.co.cr; dm/s/d US\$10/12/24; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) With a relaxed vibe and over-the-top cow theme, this Argentinean-run spot is highly recommended for its warm and attentive management, fully air-conditioned rooms and dormitories, and quiet location at the eastern edge of town. Facilities include a shared kitchen, surfboard racks, big-screen-TV lounge and free bike use. The lovely owner will even lend you a spare umbrella if you're here in the rainy season!

Tamarindo Backpackers (☎ 8385 3501; www.tamarindobackpackers.com; dm US\$12) At the time of writing, the ribbon was just about to be cut at this soon-to-be all-star backpackers spot, brought to you by the same guys who run Hostel Pangea in San José (p95). With an outdoor

swimming pool, central air-cooled rooms, a fully equipped kitchen and what promises to be a great vibe, you will most likely enjoy yourself here.



JC & Friends Hostel (camping/dm/r per person US\$5/10/14;  ) This newer hostel near Grinds/Kahiki has unique amenities like an indoor pool, camping area and free internet access, but we've heard mixed reports from travelers – it's a bit dark and not the cleanest, but the staff is very friendly and helpful. Hopefully with time they'll work the bugs out.

Cabinas Tsunami (☎ 2653 0280; s/d from US\$18/22;  ) Tsunami houses a lot of longer-stay surfer types, as it's right across from the 50m path to the river mouth. Front rooms are a bit smaller, with that classic concrete-block ambience, while larger rooms in back have fridge and a shared terrace festooned with bougainvillea. There's also a shared outdoor kitchen.



Coral Reef Hostel (☎ 2653 0291; s/d US\$20/30;  ) The 10 rooms here are clean and fairly basic, with shared bathrooms. Though it's on a noisy section of the road, the guys running the place are friendly and offer a variety of services, like surfboard rental, internet access and a BBQ area.

MIDRANGE



All the hotels below have private hot-water bathrooms unless otherwise stated.

Cabinas Marielos (☎ 2653 0141; www.cabinasmarielos.cr.com; d with/without air-con US\$40/30;  ) Rooms at this well-priced place have firm beds, private bathrooms and share a kitchen with the biggest fridge ever. Some of the rooms face the garden, and the place is decorated with Sarchi-style accents.





Cabinas El Mapache (☎ 2653 0882; r with/without air-con US\$40/30;  ) Away from the main road, these colorful, simple cabinas circle a garden with a communal kitchen. The shared patio is hung with hammocks, and all rooms have wi-fi.




Villa Amarilla (☎ 2653 0038; carpen@racsa.co.cr; d with/without bathroom US\$45/30, additional person US\$10;  ) This quaint, French-owned inn is one of the safest beachfront hotels you'll find in Tamarindo. There are four rooms with private bathroom, air-con and cable TV, as well as three cheaper units that have shared hot-water showers. All have a fridge and safe, and share an outdoor kitchen. Credit cards are accepted.



Hotel Mamiri (☎ 2653 0079; www.hotelmamiri.com; s/d US\$36/41, apt US\$59-75;  ) This delightful open-air hotel is decorated with memorabilia from the Italian owners' travels through Asia and Central America. Each room is unique, and some feature attractive volcanic stone tiling on the floors and walls. The relaxed and breezy grounds are strung up with hammocks, and there's a well-equipped communal kitchen for all your self-catering needs. The attached restaurant, Pachanga, is one of the top spots to dine in town.




Zullymar Hostel (☎ 8846 4500; laualbro@yahoo.com; s/d US\$20/50;  ) Not to be confused with the hotel of the same name, this place is located just before the roundabout – it's down a walkway housing spa services and opens on to a pleasant courtyard. Rooms are simple and slightly aged, though tidy, with fridge and private bathroom. There's wi-fi access, laundry, lockers and a communal kitchen.

Hotel Mono Loco (☎ 2653 0238; elmonoloco@racsa.co.cr; d with fan/air-con US\$36/45;  ) This quiet hotel is on the road into Playa Langosta, so you can definitely sleep soundly at night. The hotel itself is a yellow stucco and thatched-roof building that surrounds a beautifully landscaped pool. Bright and airy rooms have cable TV and optional air-con. The onsite restaurant serves reasonably priced Costa Rican fare all day long.

our pick Villas Macondo (☎ 2653 0812; www.villasmacondo.com; s/d/tr US\$41/47/58, s/d/tr with air-con US\$64/76/87, 2-/4-person apt US\$122/169, additional person US\$10;    ) Although it's only 200m from the beach, this German-run establishment is an oasis of serenity in an otherwise frenzied town – it's also one of the best deals around. Beautiful modern villas with private hot showers and hammock-strung patios surround a solar-heated pool and tropical garden, while larger apartments are equipped with cable TV, a full kitchen and air-con. Credit cards accepted.

Cabinas Arco Iris (☎ 2653 0330; www.hotelarcoiris.com; s/d/tr US\$45/50/60, deluxe d/tr/q US\$60/70/80;   ) A cluster of garden cabinas makes up this wonderfully reclusive Italian-owned place. Every unit is simply decorated with bamboo and wood, and its hillside location creates a sense of peace and relaxation. The hotel offers weekday yoga (and occasional martial arts) classes in the shaded 'dojo-gym.' Guests can also use the communal open-air kitchen, and there's wi-fi available.





La Palapa (☎ 2653 0362; www.lapalapa.info; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$70/80/90/100;  ) Despite the attached bar-restaurant being one of the most popular places for a sunset cocktail, this little beachfront hotel is surprisingly quiet and secluded. All six stylish rooms have loft beds, ocean views and big-screen TVs with DVD players, and the terra-cotta-tile floors lead to shaded terraces directly on the beach. Though it's only 20m from the roundabout, the hotel's size makes it feel intimate and relaxed.




Hotel Chocolate (☎ 2653 1311; www.thechocolatehotel.com; r/ste US\$87/105;   ) Up the same road as the 'Milk Bottle' hostel, this sweet little hotel has several well-appointed rooms done up in dark wood and terra-cotta tile floors, with orthopedic mattresses on the beds. Rooms upstairs have higher ceilings and get more light, but all are elegant and comfortable and surround the garden-fringed pool. One suite has a fully equipped kitchen. The lovely young family running the place will make you feel at home.

Hotel La Laguna del Cocodrilo (☎ 2653 0255; www.lalagunadelcocodrilo.com; r US\$87-99, ste US\$151;  ) A beachfront location blesses this charming French-owned hotel, with luxurious, well-kept rooms overlooking either the shady grounds or the ocean and estuary. Adjacent to a crocodile-filled lagoon (hence the name), the hotel has a private trail leading to the beach. There's also a restaurant specializing in seafood, but lovers of pastry will be most delighted with the sublime items from the onsite French bakery. Credit cards accepted.

TOP END





All hotels can arrange tours in the area, and all accept credit cards.

Tamarindo Vista Villas (☎ 2653 0114; www.tamarindovistavillas.com; d/ste incl breakfast from US\$104/185;    ) Perched on a hill overlooking the entrance to Tamarindo, this hotel is one of the most popular places in town for well-to-do travelers, and the 33 rooms and suites have all the amenities (and institutionalized blandness) you associate with the Best Western chain. But, it does have an ocean-view pool, the popular Monkey Bar, a dive shop, the Robert August Surf Shop and a tour desk.





Hotel Pasatiempo (☎ 2653 0096; www.hotelpasatiempo.com; d US\$115-127, ste US\$150, additional person US\$15;   ) This well-established Tamarindo landmark is known for its popular live-music nights at the bar-restaurant, though

it's also a great place to stay. Rooms are awash in tropical-themed murals, and have comfortable beds, modern bathroom, air-con and a private hammock-strung patio. Suites have a living room with fold-out couch, which is perfect if you're traveling with the offspring. Though breakfast isn't included, there's free coffee and pastries offered in the morning.

El Jardín del Edén (☎ 2653 0137; www.jardindel eden.com; d/apt/ste incl breakfast from US\$157/192/256;    ) On a hill overlooking Tamarindo, this luxurious French-run hotel has 36 exquisite rooms, each with a sitting area and private patio or balcony (and some of Tamarindo's best views). Rooms are gorgeously designed according to one of four themes: Balinese, Japanese, African and Tunisian. There are also two apartments (sleeping five) with kitchenette, plus a Jacuzzi, pool with swim-up bar and Mediterranean-inspired bar-restaurant.

Villa Alegre B&B (☎ 2653 0270; www.villaalegre costarica.com; r US\$170-185, villa US\$230, all incl breakfast;    ) This beachside B&B in nearby Playa Langosta has five rooms of various sizes, each decorated with memorabilia from the owners' world travels (you can choose from the Caribbean, USA, California, Guatemala or Mexico rooms). Or stay in the Japan or Russia villas, which are equipped with full kitchens. There's an honor bar, a comfortable guest living room and plenty of games for children. Bounteous breakfasts are served on the deck, and your hosts Barry and Suzy make their home as sunny and welcoming as they are.

our pick Sueño del Mar B&B (☎ 2653 0284; www.sueno-del-mar.com; d US\$195-295, casitas US\$220-240;    ) This stunning Spanish-style posada (country-style inn) in nearby Playa Langosta is run by lovely innkeepers Ashton and Tui, and decorated with handcrafted rocking chairs, hammocks and a cozy living room that's perfect for relaxing with the other guests. The six rooms have four-poster beds, artfully placed crafts and open-air garden showers, while the romantic honeymoon suite has a wraparound window with sea views. There's private beach access beyond the pool and tropical garden, and a priceless, pervasive atmosphere of seclusion and beauty...so, no children under 12 allowed.

Hotel Capitán Suizo (☎ 2653 0075; www.hotelcapitan suizo.com; r with/without air-con US\$227/204, bungalow with/without air-con US\$320/274, additional person US\$47, all incl breakfast;    ) On the southern end

of the beach is this Swiss-run hotel, which belongs to the group of 'Small Distinctive Hotels of Costa Rica.' The 22 rooms and 18 larger, thatched-roof bungalows are decorated with natural stone floors, polished hardwoods and soft, pastel hues. The entire complex is centered on a free-form pool that's shaded by expansive gardens, and all units are just steps from a quiet strip of sand. There's also a six-person beachfront apartment (US\$500).

Eating

You can't have sophisticated modern living without boutique gourmet eateries, so it's unsurprising that Tamarindo has some of the best restaurants in Costa Rica. But be prepared to pay – a cheap meal in this town is about as common as a nesting turtle.

If you're self-catering, the Super Tamarindo is well stocked with international groceries, as is the Super del Pacifico.

Olga's Coffee Shop (☎ 8395 5838; www.olgascOFFEEshop.com; snacks US\$1-3; ☎ 7am-4pm) In a new corner location with floor-to-ceiling windows, this sleek Russian-owned café serves up organic Costa Rican coffee and homemade pastries – the outside terrace is the perfect place to hang in the morning as you let the caffeine do its thing.

Café Café (☎ 2653 1864; mains US\$3-5; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Sat) About 3km outside of town, this super-friendly café is a great place to pick up an espresso, smoothie or panini on your way into or out of town.

Frutas Tropicales (mains US\$2-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) One of the few places you can get a good, inexpensive casado, this friendly spot serves up tasty local food...at a local pace.

Smilin' Dog Taco Stop (mains US\$2.50-7; ☎ lunch & dinner) Those hankering for Mexican grub will appreciate the quality of offerings at this popular eatery while shoestrings will revel in the generous portions and low prices.

Bar Nogui (☎ 2653 0029; mains US\$3-11; ☎ 6am-9:30pm Thu-Tue) This beachside restaurant offers upscale casados with grilled fish, mixed meats and unbelievable shrimp and lobster. It's consistently popular with locals and tourists alike, so come early for dinner or be prepared to wait at the bar for a couple of Imperiales with the rowdy regulars.

Eat@Joe's (☎ 2653 1262; mains US\$4-9; ☎ 7am-late) The best snack in town is at this American-run surf camp, where you can order the fa-

mous 'nachos as big as your ass' (or sushi rolls) while sucking down cold ones on the outdoor deck until 2am.

Wok & Roll (☎ 2653 0156; mains US\$4-10; ☎ noon-9:30pm Mon-Sat) Korean-American owner Kandice routinely inspires fear in local fishermen throughout the Nicoya. She is famous for scrutinizing daily tuna and mahi-mahi catches, and will only buy the freshest of fish. The result: some of the best sushi we've ever eaten. Her woks and Vietnamese spring rolls are also popular.

Grinds/Kahiki (☎ 2653 3816; www.kahikirestaurant.com; mains US\$6-12; ☎ 6am-late Tue-Sun) In the mornings, you can get breakfast grinds like giant pancakes and bottomless cups of coffee. Dinner is another story, with good Hawaiian-influenced fusion dishes emphasizing the local catch. The bar is a cool place to hang if you don't feel like eating, with a long and intriguing cocktail menu.

El Coconut (☎ 2653 0086; mains US\$7-20; ☎ dinner Tue-Sun) Another recommended choice for seafood and pasta dishes. You can get a special dinner here without having to get formal about it. The ambience is laidback but elegant, with a tropical flair and a dessert menu that begs you to save room.

Nibbana (☎ 2653 0447; www.nibbana-tamarindo.com; US\$6-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) One of the nicest beachfront dining areas in town, Nibbana has tables scattered underneath the palms. It serves great pizza at lunch, and Tico-flavored continental cuisine, like shrimp, lemon and basil risotto, or grilled tuna with a fresh mint-and-tomato compote. It also has free wi-fi access.

Carolina's Fine Dining (☎ 2653 0091; mains US\$10-25; ☎ 6-11pm Thu-Tue) This is one place worth the splurge. Sophisticated continental cuisine highlights skillfully prepared sauces, tender cuts of meat, delectable fish and an impressive selection of imported wines. To truly appreciate the culinary experience, opt for the five-course tasting menu with a full wine tasting (US\$70).

Lazy Wave (☎ 2653 0737; meals US\$10-25; ☎ 6-10pm Sat-Thu) Dine at a table if you must, but the best place to enjoy your meal and glass of wine is on the covered pavilion, where you can curl up amid pillows in cushy lounge chairs. If you're out to woo that hot thing you met last night, this hip nightspot, built around a huge tree, is a good place to start the evening. There's a solid wine list,

good mix of cocktails and Asian- and Euro-influenced *bocas*, as well as a full menu.

Dragonfly Bar & Grill (☎ 2653 1506; www.dragonflybarandgrill.com; mains US\$10-25; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) Dragonfly is a local favorite, probably not just for its refined menu, but also for its lovely atmosphere in the festive tent-like structure of the dining room. The menu has a Californian bent, featuring fresh items like pork chop with chipotle-apple chutney and the Thai-style crispy fish cake with curried corn. Linger a while over your wine and perhaps you can also find room for a divine dessert.

Pachanga (☎ 2653 0021, 8368 6983; prix fixe dinner US\$23; ☎ 6-10pm Mon-Sat) Don't leave town without eating here – it may be the best meal you have in Costa Rica. The Israeli chef Shlomy serves innovative dishes with Mediterranean accents that change daily depending on the availability of local ingredients. The restaurant is understated yet elegant, which focuses your attention on the perfection of Shlomy's cuisine.

Drinking

In Tamarindo, all you really have to do is follow the scene wherever it happens to be on that night. On weekends especially, cruising the main drag has the festive feel of a mini Mardi Gras or spring break.

But, for a start, the Monkey Bar inside the Tamarindo Vista Villas is usually a good bet, and it has a ladies' night on Fridays. Also recommended is the Tuesday-night live-music jam at the Hotel Pasatiempo, Wednesday-night Latin dancing at La Barra and Thursday reggae night at Babylon. Any night of the week you can expect the music to be pumping *loudly* at the unnamed bar, even if no one is there.

There's often live music on the weekends at Voodoo Lounge, which has a great outdoor bar and stage in the back. Nibbana and La Palapa are good beachside spots to have a quiet getting-to-know-you cocktail.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airstrip is 3km north of town; a hotel bus is usually on hand to pick up arriving passengers or you can take a taxi. During high season, Sansa has seven daily flights to and from San José (one way/return US\$89/178), while NatureAir has three (US\$96/192).

Sansa (☎ 2653 0012) has an office on the main road, and the travel desk at Hotel El Diria can book trips on NatureAir. The airstrip belongs to the hotel and all passengers must pay a US\$3 departure tax to use it.

BUS

Buses from San José (US\$6, six hours) depart from the Empresas Alvaro office next to the police station at 3:30am, 5:45am and 12:30pm.

Catch the following buses across the street from Zullymar Hostel:

Liberia US\$1.50, 2½ hours, departs at 5:45am, 7:30am, 8:50am, 11:20am, 1pm and 2:15pm.

Santa Cruz US\$0.75, 1½ hours, departs at 6am, 9am, noon, 2:30pm and 4:15pm.

CAR & TAXI

If driving to Tamarindo, the better road is from Belén to Huacas and then south. It's also possible to drive from Santa Cruz to 27 de Abril on a paved road and then northwest on a dirt road for 19km to Tamarindo – this route is rougher, though passable for ordinary cars. A taxi from Santa Cruz costs about US\$20, and it's twice that from Liberia.

Getting Around

Boats on the northern end of the beach can be hired to cross the estuary for daytime visits to the beach at Playa Grande. The ride is roughly US\$1.25 per person, depending on the number of people.

Many visitors arrive in rental cars. If you get here by air or bus, you can rent bicycles and dirt bikes in town (see p271). There's no gas station, but you can buy expensive gas from drums at the hardware store near the entrance to town. (It's cheaper to fill up in Santa Cruz or at the gas station in Huacas.) Cars can be rented from **Alamo** (☎ 2653 0727) or **Economy Rent-a-Car** (☎ 2653 0752).

PLAYAS AVELLANAS & NEGRA

These popular **surfing beaches** have some of the best, most consistent waves in the area, made famous in the surf classic *Endless Summer II* (one of the breaks off Avellanas is known as 'Pequeño Hawaii'). The beaches begin 15km south of Tamarindo and are reached by dismal dirt roads requiring 4WD most times of the year (in the wet season there are three rivers to cross). Though the difficult access keeps the area refreshingly

WHAT TO DO IF YOU'RE CAUGHT IN A RIPTIDE

Riptides account for the majority of ocean drownings, though a simple understanding of how these currents behave can save your life. Rip currents are formed when excess water brought to shore by waves returns to the sea in a rapidly moving depression in the ocean floor. They are comprised of three parts: the feeder current, the neck and the head.

The feeder current consists of rapidly moving water that parallels the shore, though it's not always visible from the beach. When this water reaches a channel, it switches direction and flows out to sea, forming the neck of the rip. This is the fastest-moving part of the riptide, and can carry swimmers out to sea at a speed of up to 10km/h. The head of the riptide occurs past the breakers where the current quickly dissipates.

If you find yourself caught in a riptide, immediately call for help as you only have a few seconds before being swept out to sea. However, it's important to conserve your energy and not to fight the current – this is the principal cause of drownings. It's almost impossible to swim directly back to shore. Instead, try one of two methods for escaping a rip. The first is to tread water and let yourself be swept out past the breakers. Once you're in the head of the rip, you can swim out of the channel and ride the waves back to shore. Or you can swim parallel or diagonally to the shore until you're out of the channel.

Rip currents usually occur on beaches that have strong surf, though temporary rips can occur anywhere, especially when there is an offshore storm or during low tide. Fortunately, there are indicators, such as the brownish color on the surface of the water that is caused by swept-up sand and debris. Also look for surface flattening, which occurs when the water enters a depression in the ocean floor and rushes back out to sea. If you're ever in doubt about the safety of a beach, inquire locally about swimming conditions.

Remember, rips are fairly survivable as long as you relax, don't panic and conserve your energy.

uncrowded, growth here is inevitable. But concerned locals have taken steps to create a plan for sustainable growth *before* development has a chance to get out of hand, forming the **Association of Playa Avellanas** (www.avellanas.org) to that end.

Avellanas is a long stretch of white sand backed by mangroves, and Negra, a few kilometers further south, is a darker, caramel-colored beach broken up by rocky outcrops. At Avellanas, **Little Hawaii** is a powerful and open-faced right at medium tide, while **Beach Break** barrels at low tide (though the surfing is good any time of day). Negra has a world-class right that barrels, especially with a moderate offshore wind. In between is the community of **Playa Lagartillo**, with a few cabins and *sodas* scattered along the road.

If you're not coming from Tamarindo, head west on the paved highway from Santa Cruz, through 27 de Abril to Paraíso, then follow signs or ask locals. (This is a confusing area to drive through as road signs sometimes face only one direction.)

While you're at the beach, be absolutely certain that nothing is visible in your car as professional thieves operate in this area, and

they will remove your window even for a broken flip-flop or moldy sarong.

Café Playa Negra (☎ 2652 9351; www.playanegracafe.com; ☎ 7am-9pm) has a laundry service (per load US\$6), internet access (per hour US\$2) and a small book exchange.

Sleeping & Eating PLAYA AVELLANAS

The following places to stay and eat are very spread out around Playa Avellanas.

Casa Surf (☎ 2652 9075; r per person US\$10; 📍) Look for the sign for the *panadería* (bakery) across from Cabinas Las Olas, and pull over – if not for espresso and yummy banana bread, then for a clean, quiet place to stay. Run lovingly by a Tico-Swiss surfer couple, this place has three simple rooms with shared bathroom and a full kitchen. They also rent surfboards and bikes for US\$10 per day.

Rancho Iguana Verde (☎ 2652 9045; r per person US\$10; 📍) About 50m from the beach on the road toward Playa Negra, these six cabins are a bit dark but reasonably clean, and share cold-water showers. The owner Josué also runs a great *soda* here, serving up excellent, inexpensive *casados*.

Las Avellanas Villas (☎ 2652 9212; www.lasavellanasvillas.com; d/tr/q US\$64/76/87) Stunningly designed by Costa Rican architect Victor Cañas, these four casitas (cottages) are covetable as permanent residences. With an aesthetic balancing the interior environment with the exterior, they have sunken stone floors crossed by wooden bridges, open-air showers, and large windows looking out on front and back terraces. The casitas have full kitchens, but dinner is available, and the grounds are just 300m from the beach.

Mauna Loa Surf Resort (☎ 2652 9012; www.mauna-loa.it; s/d US\$76/81; 📍 🚻 🚿 🚰) This pleasant Italian-run spot is a great place for families, with a secure location that's a straight shot to the beach. Paths lead from the pool area through a well-tended garden, and the cute bungalows have orthopedic beds and hammocks hanging on the terraces.

Cabinas Las Olas (☎ 2652 9315; www.cabinasolasolas.co.cr; s/d/tr US\$81/93/105; 📍) On the road from San José de Pinilla into Avellanas, this pleasant hotel is set on spacious grounds only 200m from the beach. Ten airy, individual bungalows have shiny woodwork, stone detailing, hot-water showers and private decks. There's a restaurant, and a specially built boardwalk leads through the mangroves down to the beach (good for wildlife-spotting). Kayaks and surfing gear are available for hire.

Lola's on the Beach (☎ 2658 8097; meals US\$5-10; 📍) breakfast, lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Lola's is the place to hang, in low-slung plank chairs on a palm-fringed stretch of Avellanas sand, if the water is looking a bit glassy. Try the amazing *poke* (Hawaiian raw-fish salad) or green papaya salad with a beer. Oh, and in case you're curious, Lola is the owner's massive, happy pet pig. And no, she doesn't surf (they get this question all the time!).

Soda El Mapache (☎ 2652 9114; snacks US\$2-5; 📍 9am-7pm) This sweet little *soda* serves fruit shakes, waffles and the only real ice cream for miles. Stop in for some sugar after your surf session.

PLAYA NEGRA

In Playa Negra there are a variety of surfer-oriented places.

Kontiki (☎ 2652 9117; kontikiplayanegra@yahoo.com; dm US\$10) Along the road from Avellanas, this low-key Peruvian-run place has a rambling collection of tree-house dorms on stilts that are frequented by both surfers and howlers. In

the middle of it all is a rickety pavilion where guests hang out in hammocks and benches. There's a small restaurant serving up traditional Peruvian dishes.

Aloha Amigos (☎ 2652 9023; r with/without bathroom from US\$25/15; 📍) Friendly, self-described 'haole from Hawaii' Jerry and his son Joey keep basic, screened cabins with shared cold-water bathrooms and more expensive doubles with private hot-water bathrooms. There's a spacious shared kitchen in the center of the grassy grounds, and the atmosphere is about as chilled as it gets.

Cabinas Doña Paulina (☎ 2652 9158; r per person US\$20; 📍 🚻 🚿) Great breezy patio with hammocks, hot water, wi-fi, just a short walk to Playa Negra.

Piko Negro (☎ 2652 9369; s/d US\$35/50; 📍 🚻) Just down the road from its sister operation El Mapache, Piko Negro has a few comfortable cabins and a mellow restaurant-bar in Playa Lagartillo.

Mono Congo Surf Lodge (☎ 2652 9261; www.monocongolodge.com; r/stc from US\$64/87; 📍 🚻 🚿) This large, open-air, Polynesian-style tree house lodge is surrounded by howler-filled trees and is the pinnacle of tropical luxury in Playa Negra. High-ceilinged, polished wood rooms are exquisite, and private bathrooms have hot water and Spanish tiles. A patio has hammocks, and a star-watching deck on the roof provides 360-degree views of the area. A variety of international meals are available from the gourmet kitchen (mains US\$7 to US\$18). Rates include coffee and fresh fruit in the morning.

Hotel Playa Negra (☎ 2652 9134; www.playanegra.com; s/d/tr/q US\$81/93/105/116; 📍 🚻) This charming hotel, right on the beach at Playa Negra's reef break, is a collection of 10 spacious, circular bungalows with thatched roofs, bright tropical colors and traditional indigenous-style tapestries and linens. Each cabin has a queen-size bed, two single beds, and a private bathroom with hot water and roomy showers.

our pick **Café Playa Negra** (☎ 2652 9351; www.playanegracafe.com; r per person US\$18 incl breakfast; 📍 7am-9pm; 📍 🚻) This small hotel has a handful of sparkling-clean rooms upstairs from the café at street level. Ranging in size to accommodate pairs or small groups, these stylish, minimalist digs have cool, polished concrete floors, elevated beds neatly covered with colorful bedspreads and open-door bathrooms. The shared deck facing the road has

lounge sofas and big pillows, and amenities include laundry service, internet access and a free continental breakfast with homemade baguettes – a superb deal for these prices. The café serves Tico/Peruvian food (mains US\$3 to US\$6).

Restaurant Oasis (☎ 2652 9082; pizzas US\$4-8; ☎ 6-9pm Tue-Sun) Along the main road in Playa Negra, this oasis is a good spot for a slice of thin-crust pizza or Mexican comfort food like burly burritos. The spacious, high-ceilinged rancho is also a good place to watch surf videos with a cold beer in the evenings. Oasis was for sale when we visited.

La Ventana (☎ 2652 9197; mains US\$3-7; ☎ breakfast & lunch) An unexpectedly urbane café-gallery off the main road, La Ventana is run by a lovely American woman who makes amazing peanut butter-cup cookies, internationally influenced wraps and sandwiches (jerk chicken, tahini and hummus, eggplant parmigiana) and espressos, teas, juices and smoothies. The generously windowed gallery space features work by local Tico and expat artists, and there's free wi-fi. Heading away from the beach, it's up the road veering to the left, past the small commercial center.

Getting There & Away

The daily bus to Playa Negra leaves Santa Cruz at 8am; the bus for Santa Cruz departs at 1:30pm from the V on the main road (US\$0.60, 1½ hours). There's no public transportation to Avellanas, but surf outfitters in Tamarindo (p273) organize trips. Just about every local in town is willing to give you and your board a ride – bargain hard.

PLAYA JUNQUILLAL

Junquillal is a 2km-wide gray-sand wilderness beach that's absolutely stunning and mostly deserted – probably because the surf is high and the rips are fierce (for information on riptides, see boxed text, p278). It's best to leave your swimming trunks at home, though there are clean lefts and rights when the waves drop a bit in size. Olive ridley turtles nest here from July to November, with a peak from August to October, though in smaller numbers than at the refuges; Junquillal is also an important nesting site for leatherbacks. Though Junquillal is not a protected area, conservation groups have teamed up with local communities to protect the nesting sites and eliminate poaching.

The nearest village is 4km inland at **Paraiso**, which has a few local *sodas* and bars. Accommodations are spread out along the beach.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Los Malinches (☎ 2658 8429; per person US\$5) Just south of the Iguanazul, this pretty campground has toilets, showers, electricity until 9pm and ocean views.

El Castillo Divertido (☎ 2658 8428; www.costarica-adventureholidays.com; s/d US\$24/30, s/d with ocean view US\$28/35; ☎) On a hilltop about 500m down the road, you'll find the entrance to this quirky inn owned by an affable German/Tica couple and son. The hotel's rooftop bar has panoramic views – a breezy place to laze in a hammock. Paulo, one of the owners, plays his guitar for guests during sunsets. Tiled rooms are clean and have private hot showers, and it's worth splurging for the ones with ocean views. The restaurant (dishes US\$3 to US\$10) has good breakfasts and dinners with plenty of German favorites.

Hotel Hibiscus (☎ 2658 8437; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$40/50/60; ☎) This charming Nica/German-run hotel has five spotless rooms with private bathrooms and hammock-strung patios overlooking the palm-fringed garden. There's a small restaurant that has a good variety of international cuisine, and the breakfasts are immense and delicious.

Villa Roberta (☎ 2658 8127; dietzcom@racsa.co.cr; d incl breakfast US\$58, apt US\$87; ☎) This hospitable two-room B&B is intimate, quaint and full of personality. The rooms are fairly simple, but the house has beautiful stone floors and vaulted ceilings, and its location in the trees makes it feel tranquil in the extreme.

Guacamaya Lodge (☎ 2658 8431; www.guacamaya-lodge.com; s/d US\$58/64, apt s/d/tr/q US\$81/87/93/99, villa US\$140; ☎) Next door to El Castillo, this quiet Swiss-run place has six quaint bungalows, a two-bedroom villa with a kitchen and an apartment with balcony views. There's also a pool, tennis courts and a restaurant-bar with ocean views and a smattering of Swiss delicacies. The warm and wonderful brother and sister owners speak a remarkable seven languages. Credit cards accepted.

Hotel Tatanka (☎ 2658 8426; www.crica.com/tatanka; s/d US\$58/76; ☎) Ten rancho-style rooms with private hot-water bathrooms are pretty in pink and have rustic wooden furnishings. There's an inviting pool as well as an open-air

pizzeria that serves authentic wood-fired pizza pies (US\$4 to US\$7) in the evenings. Credit cards accepted.

Hotel Iguanazul (☎ 2658 8124; www.iguanazul.com; s/d/tr US\$70/81/93, s/d/tr with air-con from US\$93/100/116, all incl breakfast; ☎) Don't let the gaudy fountain out front put you off; the aesthetics at this well-established resort hotel are much more relaxed and attractive. The 24 brightly painted and cool, tiled rooms have garden or ocean views. Amenities include a pool, pool table, volleyball and a restaurant-bar with killer views.

Villa Serena (☎ 2658 8430; www.land-ho.com/villa/index2.html; d/tr US\$175/210; ☎) Owned by a friendly couple who also runs a restaurant in Cape Cod, this is the most luxurious digs in Junquillal. Large, airy rooms have an open design and roomy bathrooms. Turn left down the beachfront road and you'll find a shaded lawn, tennis courts, shaded pool area and a glass-walled gym. The excellent restaurant (mains US\$10 to US\$20) serves classic American fare like burgers and grilled fish along with nightly specials. Guests have free use of kayaks, snorkeling equipment and boogie boards.

Aside from the hotel restaurants, your best option for cheap eats is to head to nearby Paraiso, though there a few small spots on the beach, including the locally popular **Bar y Restaurant Junquillal** (dishes US\$3-6) and **Rudy's** (☎ 2658 8114; mains US\$3-7; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner), a mellow little bar and restaurant serving Tico standbys and casual fare.

Getting There & Away

Buses arrive and depart from Hotel Playa Junquillal on the beach. Daily buses to Santa Cruz (US\$0.60, 1½ hours) depart at 5:45am, noon and 4pm.

If you're driving, it's about 16km by paved road from Santa Cruz to 27 de Abril, and another 17km by unpaved road via Paraiso to Junquillal. From Junquillal, you can head south by taking a turnoff about 3km east of Paraiso on a road marked 'Reserva Ostional.' This is for 4WD only and may be impassable in the rainy season. There are no gas stations on the coastal road and there is little traffic, so ask before setting out. It's easier to reach beaches south of Junquillal from Nicoya.

A taxi from Santa Cruz to Junquillal costs about US\$30.

SANTA CRUZ

A stop in Santa Cruz, a *sabanero* town typical of inland Nicoya, provides some of the local flavor missing from foreign-dominated beach towns. Unfortunately, there aren't any attention-worthy sights in town, so most travelers' experience in Santa Cruz consists of changing buses and buying a mango or two. It doesn't help much that Santa Cruz (with Liberia a close second) holds the dubious title of being the hottest city in Costa Rica (we're talking temperature, not sex appeal). However, the town is an important administrative center in the region, and serves as a good base for visiting Guaitil (see boxed text, p282). And if you're here for lunch, don't miss a *casado* at CoopeTortilla.

About three city blocks in the center of Santa Cruz burned to the ground in a devastating fire in 1993. An important landmark in town is a vacant lot known as the **Plaza de Los Mangos**, which was once a large grassy square with three mango trees. However, soon after the fire the attractive and shady **Parque Bernabela Ramos** was opened up 400m south of Plaza de Los Mangos.

Information

Kion, on the southwest plaza corner, is a Wal-Mart-style department store selling English-language newspapers and more. There's a gas station off the main intersection with the highway.

Banco de Costa Rica (☎ 2680 3253) Change money at this bank, three blocks north of Plaza de Los Mangos.

Cibern@nia (☎ 2680 4520; per hr US\$2; ☎ 9am-9pm) Check your email here, 100m north of Parque Ramos.

Festivals & Events

There is a rodeo and fiesta during the second week in January and on July 25 for **Día de Guanacaste** (see p204). At these events, you can check out the *sabaneros*, admire prize bulls and drink plenty of beer while listening to eardrum-busting music.

Santa Cruz is considered the folklore center of the region and is home to a long-time marimba group, Los de la Bajura. The group plays traditional *bombas*, a combination of music with funny (and off-color) verses. Keep an eye out for wall postings announcing performances or ask hotel staff for information.

GUAITIL

An interesting excursion from Santa Cruz is the 12km drive by paved road to the small pottery-making community of Guaitil. Attractive ceramics are made from local clays, using earthy reds, creams and blacks in pre-Columbian Chorotega style. Ceramics are for sale outside the potters' houses in Guaitil and also in San Vicente, 2km beyond Guaitil by unpaved road. If you ask, you can watch part of the potting process, and local residents would be happy to give you a few lessons for a small price.

If you have your car, take the main highway toward Nicoya and then follow the signed Guaitil road to the left, about 1.5km out of Santa Cruz. This road is lined by yellow *cortezia amarilla* trees and is very attractive in April when all of them are in bloom. There are local buses from Santa Cruz, though they're infrequent and unreliable. However, a round-trip taxi should only cost about US\$10 to US\$15, depending on how long you stay.

If you don't have time to get to Guaitil, visit the small *déposito* (outlet) selling ceramics on the peninsular highway, about 10km north of Nicoya on the eastern side of the road. Be aware that if you take a tour to Guaitil, you may be taken to one particular shop on a commission basis; try to browse other shops in town and share the wealth.

Sleeping & Eating

Any directions that mention the 'plaza' are making reference to Plaza de Los Mangos. All showers are cold, though you'll wish they were even colder.

Pensión Isabel (☎ 2680 0173; r per person US\$8) The cheapest beds in town are housed in bare whitewashed rooms, though they're reasonably firm, the shared bathrooms are acceptable and the owner's quite friendly. It's southeast of the plaza.

Hotel Diríá (☎ 2680 0080, 2680 0402; hoteldiria@hotmail.com; s/d US\$30/45; P ♻️ ♻️) Though once in grander shape, this long-standing hotel 500m north of the plaza is looking a little tired lately – the restaurant was shuttered and the swimming pools not quite full when we stopped by. But rooms come with air-con, private bathroom and cable TV, and the pleasant shared terraces have lovely rattan rocking chairs. Credit cards accepted.

Hotel La Pampa (☎ 2680 0586; d with/without air-con US\$58/39; P ♻️) A good midrange option, 50m west of the plaza, this terra-cotta-color building houses 33 simple and clean modern rooms, all with private bathroom and cable TV.

La Calle de Alcalá (☎ 2680 0000, 2680 1515; hotela-lcala@hotmail.com; s/d US\$54/73; P ♻️ ♻️) With its stucco arches and landscaped garden around a pool with swim-up bar, this inn gets points for design details. Carved wooden doors open into cool, tiled rooms with amenities like hair dryers, wicker furniture and window seats. A pleasant al fresco restaurant-bar rounds out the picture.

CoopeTortilla (casados US\$3; ☎ 5:30am-5pm) Feast on tasty, inexpensive casados at this busy place 700m south of the plaza. Also referred to as 'la tortillera,' it's a huge corrugated-metal barn with big windows lined with plants. Seat yourself at long, wooden communal tables, and eat whatever's available – all of it cooked right in front of you on an enormous wood-fired clay stove, and all served with a side of house-made tortillas. Try a glass of the tamarindo juice, perfect on a parched Santa Cruz afternoon.

El Milenio (☎ 2680 3237; mains US\$3-6; ☎ 9am-9pm) With a notable Chinese population, Santa Cruz has its share of Chinese food – El Milenio tops them all with its colossal portions of fried rice, decent stir-fries, big-screen TV and blessed air-con. It's 100m west of the plaza.

Among the several supermarkets in town, the SuperCompro, just east of the Empresas Alfaro station, is the biggest.

Getting There & Away

Santa Cruz is 57km from Liberia and 25km south of Filadelfia. It's on the main peninsular highway and is often an overnight stop for people visiting the peninsula. A paved road leads 16km west to 27 de Abril, from where dirt roads continue to Playa Tamarindo, Playa Junquillal and other beaches.

Some buses depart from the terminal on the north side of Plaza de Los Mangos. For Empresas Alfaro buses, buy tickets at the Alfaro office, 200m south of the plaza, but catch the bus on the main road north of town.

Liberia (La Pampa) US\$1, 1½ hours, departs every 30 minutes from 5:30am to 7:30pm.

Nicoya (La Pampa) US\$0.50, one hour, departs every 30 minutes from 5:30am to 9:20pm.

San José US\$5.50, 4½ hours, seven buses from 3:30am to 5pm (Tralapa); eight buses from 3am to 4:30pm (Empresas Alfaro).

Other local buses leave from the terminal 400m east of the plaza. These schedules fluctuate constantly, so ask around.

Bahía Potrero US\$1.50, 1¼ hours, departs every two to three hours.

Playa Brasilito US\$1.50, one hour, departs in the morning and afternoon.

Playa Flamingo US\$1.50, one hour, departs afternoon.

Playa Junquillal US\$2, 1½ hours, departs in the afternoon.

Playa Tamarindo US\$2, 1½ hours, departs every two to three hours.

CENTRAL PENINSULA

Long the political and cultural heart of Guanacaste, the inland region of the central peninsula looks and feels palpably more 'Costa Rican' than the beach resorts of the northern coast. Over the generations, the dry tropical forest has been cut down to make way for the *sabaneros'* cattle, but stands of forest remain, interspersed between fincas and coastal villages, sometimes backing stretches of wild, empty beaches.

Hwy 21 snakes through the higher elevations of the interior, from the population center of Santa Cruz down through Nicoya, where Hwy 151 branches southward toward Sámará in a winding road through the forest.

Development in the region is considerably less than in the north of the peninsula, though the areas around Sámará and Nosara are growing slowly. Most foreigners who are drawn to the rugged coastal landscapes of the central peninsula are actively committed to its conservation. This part of the coast is rife with secluded beaches, small villages where authenticity reigns, and endless possibilities for getting off the map.

NICOYA

Situated 23km south of Santa Cruz, Nicoya was named after an indigenous Chorotega chief, who welcomed Spanish *conquistador*

(conqueror) Gil González Dávila in 1523 (a gesture he regretted; see boxed text, p324). In the following centuries, the Chorotegas were wiped out by the colonists, though the distinctive facial features of the local residents is a testament to their heritage.

Although Nicoya is in fact a colonial city, very little still remains of the original architecture, and what is left is usually in a state of disrepair. However, Nicoya is one of the most pleasant cities in the region, and the bright buildings and bustling streets contribute to the welcoming atmosphere.

For travelers, Nicoya primarily serves as a transportation hub for the region, though the city serves as a good base for exploring Parque Nacional Barra Honda (p286). It's also a good base for visiting **Puerto Humo**, a small town about 27km northeast on the road past Coralillo that has good opportunities for birding.

Information

Area de Conservación Tempisque (ACT; ☎ 2685 5667; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) The office of the ACT can help with accommodations and cave exploration at Parque Nacional Barra Honda.

ATH ATM (A Toda Hora ATM) This 24-hour ATM accepts cards on the Cirrus system.

Banco de Costa Rica (☎ 8:30am-3pm Mon-Fri) Exchanges US dollars.

Banco Popular (☎ 9am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:15-11:30am Sat) Also exchanges US dollars.

Ciber Club (☎ 2685 4182; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-9pm Sun) Has air-con and roughly a dozen terminals with very good connections.

Clínica Médica Nicoyana (☎ 2685 5138) For lesser illnesses, visit this clinic.

Hospital La Anéxion (☎ 2685 5066) The main hospital on the peninsula is north of town.

Nicoya Netcafé (☎ 2686 8090; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-8pm) Make international internet calls at this conveniently located café.

Sights

In Parque Central, a major town landmark, is the attractive white colonial **Iglesia de San Blas**, which dates back to the mid-17th century. The appealingly peaceful, wood-beamed church is under continuous restoration, and its mosaic tiles are crumbling, but it can be visited when Mass is not in session. Have a look at the wooden Jesus with articulated joints and bleeding stigmata. Or attend a **Mass** (☎ 6pm Mon & Fri, 7am Tue, 7am & 7pm Thu). It

has a small collection of colonial religious artifacts. The park outside is an inviting spot to people-watch from one of the shady stone benches.

On the opposite side of the park is **La Casa de la Cultura**. This small exhibit area has cultural exhibits a few times a year and features work by local artists. The exhibit schedule and hours of operation are erratic, but it's worth a peek if the doors are open.

Festivals & Events

The town goes crazy for **Día de Guanacaste**, on July 25, so expect plenty of food, music and beer in the plaza to celebrate the province's annexation from Nicaragua. The Festival de La Virgen de Guadalupe (see boxed text A Brief

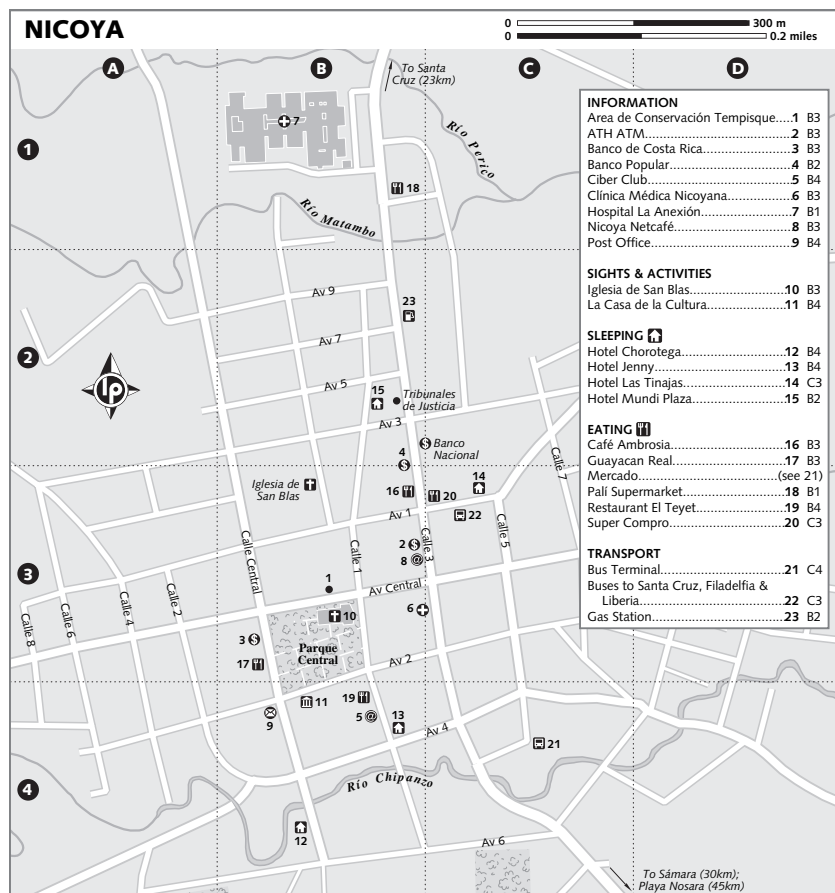
History of the Chorotega, opposite) is one of the most unique festivals in Costa Rica.

Sleeping & Eating

All showers are cold unless otherwise stated.

Hotel Chorotega (☎ 2685 5245; s/d with bathroom US\$17/22, without bathroom US\$6/12; ♿) Next to the Río Chipanzo and run by a pleasant family that keeps bare-bones rooms that could use a face-lift but are reasonably clean and neat. You won't find a cheaper bed elsewhere.

Hotel Las Tinajas (☎ 2685 5081; s/d US\$11/17; ♿) This hotel is decent and mercifully far from the noise of the plaza, though it's on a relatively busy road. The 28 rooms are clean (though rough around the edges), with cable TV and private bathrooms.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CHOROTEGA

Although there were several pre-Columbian populations in the Nicoya peninsula, the most prominent were the Chorotega, which translates as 'Fleeing People.' The Chorotega arrived on the peninsula around the 8th century BC, and are believed to be descendants of the Olmec in Mexico. They were also contemporaries of the Maya, and a part of a cultural link extending from Mexico through Central America to the Andes.

Unlike their contemporaries, however, the Chorotega were not prolific builders. As a result, most of our understanding of the group is based on the representations that appear in their artwork. The Chorotega are best known for their elaborate jade work, though they were also talented potters and sculptors.

Archaeologists believe that the Chorotega were a hierarchical and militaristic society that kept slaves and regularly practiced both cannibalism and human sacrifice. It's also believed that shamanism, fertility rites and ritualistic dance played an important role in their society, though little is actually known about their belief structure.

Although their civilization survived for over 2000 years, the Chorotega were wiped out by warfare and disease during the Spanish colonial period, though their artisan tradition is still evident among the surviving indigenous populations of Península de Nicoya (see boxed text Guaitil, p282). The December 12 **Festival de La Virgen de Guadalupe** in the city of Nicoya incorporates the Chorotega legend of *La Yequita*, which relates how a little mare stopped two brothers from killing one another over the love of a princess. The celebration blends Catholic and Chorotega elements by parading a statue of the Virgin to the tune of indigenous music and loud fireworks, while revelers drink copious amounts of *chicha*, a traditional liquor of fermented corn and sugar that's served in hollowed gourds.

Hotel Jenny (☎ 2685 5050; s/d/tr/q US\$16/24/28/36; ♿) This is one of the best deals in town – all 24 spic-and-span rooms have air-con, cable TV and private bathrooms. Try to get a room in the cooler, darker halls rather than the noisier ones facing the street.

Hotel Mundi Plaza (☎ 2685 3535; hotelmundiplaza@yahoo.com; s/d US\$26/36; ♿) The Mundi Plaza has clean, bland, comfortable rooms with air-con and cable TV, and some have balconies as well. The staff here does nothing to improve on the indifferent atmosphere, however. Credit cards accepted.

Restaurant El Teyet (mains US\$2-5; ☎ lunch & dinner) Chinese restaurants such as this are some of the tastiest and cheapest spots to eat in the city. Grab a seat on the patio or in the air-conditioned interior and feast on huge portions of chow mein and other noodle dishes.

Guayacan Real (mains US\$2-4; ☎ lunch & dinner) The best place for a drink and delicious *bocas* is the consistently packed Guayacan Real. The *ceviche* and *patacones* (fried plantain with bean dip) are exceptional – and there is cable TV.

Café Ambrosia (☎ 2685 4251; mains US\$5-8; ☎ 8:30am-7pm Mon-Sat) Excellent espresso drinks, pasta carbonara, gnocchi and fresh sandwiches and salads are the specialties of

the house. They also dish out ice cream, for which you'll be thankful if the air-conditioned room isn't doing enough for you. They even accept credit cards.

Super Compro and Palí supermarkets provide food and supplies for self-caterers. There are also a number of cheap *sodas* in the *mercado* (market) that are good for a quick bite, as well as all your favorite Costa Rican fast-food chains.

Getting There & Away

Most buses arrive at and depart from the bus terminal southeast of Parque Central.

Liberia US\$1.40, 2½ hours, departs every 30 minutes from 3am to 8pm.

Playa Naranjo, connects with ferry US\$1.75, three hours, departs at 5am, 9am, 1pm and 5pm.

Playa Nosara US\$1.25, 2½ hours, departs at 5am, 10am and 2pm.

Puntarenas US\$2.75, 2½ hours, departs at 7:35am and 4:20pm.

Sámara US\$1, two hours, departs at 6am, 7:45am, 10am, noon, 3pm, 4:20pm and 5pm.

San José, via Liberia (Empresas Alfaro) US\$6, five hours, departs five times daily.

San José, via Río Tempisque bridge US\$6, four hours, departs seven times daily from 3am to 5:20pm (Empresas Alfaro), and five times daily from 3:20am to 1:45pm (Tralapa).

Santa Ana, for Barra Honda one hour, US\$1.25, departs at 8am, 11:30am and 4pm Monday to Saturday.

Other buses for Santa Cruz, Filadelfia and Liberia depart every 30 minutes from 3:50am to 8:30pm from the terminal northeast of the park.

If you need a taxi, try calling **Cootagua** (☎ 2686 6490, 2686 6590) or **Taxis Unidos de Nicoya** (☎ 2686 6857).

PARQUE NACIONAL DIRIÁ

Since 2004, **Parque Nacional Diríá** (☎ 2680 1820; admission US\$6; ☒ 8am-4pm) covers 5424 hectares, 1500 of which are primary tropical dry forest and river basins of the Ríos Diríá, Enmedio, Tigre and Verde. At its higher altitudes are stands of tropical humid forest, as well. In addition to protecting these vital watersheds, the park is also a refuge for wildlife, such as howler monkey, deer, anteater and over 100 species of bird.

Two trails, El Venado and El Escabel, lead through the forest and to the lovely Brasil waterfall.

It's possible to stay in a basic bunkhouse here, which has running water and electricity, but you'll have to be otherwise self-sufficient. Call the Santa Cruz Minae office (at the number listed above) to make arrangements.

The park is 14km southwest of Santa Cruz; there is no public transportation.

PARQUE NACIONAL BARRA HONDA

Situated about halfway between Nicoya and the mouth of the Río Tempisque, this 2295-hectare national park protects a massive underground system of more than 40 caves and is one of the most unusual (and also highly memorable) national parks in all of the country. The caverns, which are composed of soft limestone, were carved by rainfall and erosion over a period of about 70 million years. Speleologists have discovered just more than 40 caverns, with some of them reaching as far as 200m deep, though to date only 19 have been fully explored. There have been discoveries here of pre-Columbian remains dating back to 300 BC.

The caves come with the requisite cave accoutrements: stalagmites, stalactites and a host of beautiful formations with intriguing names such as fried eggs, organ, soda straws, popcorn, curtains, columns, pearls, flowers and shark's teeth. However, unlike caverns

in your own country perhaps, Barra Honda is not developed for wide-scale tourism, which means that the caves here feel less like a carnival attraction and more like a scene from *Indiana Jones*. So, don your yellow miner's hat, put on some sturdy boots and be prepared to get down and dirty.

Information

The dry season is the only time that tourists are allowed to enter the caves, though hiking is good any time of year. In the dry season, carry several liters of water and let the rangers know where you are going. Two German hikers died at Barra Honda in 1993 after getting lost on a short hike – they had no water, and succumbed to dehydration. Sneakers or preferably boots are necessary if you will be caving.

The **ranger station** (☎ 2659 1551; ☒ 8am-4pm) in the southwest corner of the park takes the US\$7 admission fee and provides information. Plan to arrive by noon to tour the caverns, as tours last three to four hours and guides won't start tours much later than that.

Sights

You can only explore the **caves** with a guide from the Asociación de Guías Ecologistas de Barra Honda, which can be arranged in the national park offices in **Nicoya** (☎ 2686 6760), **Santa Cruz** (☎ 2680 1920) or **Bagaces** (☎ 2671 1455). A guide charges about US\$14 for up to four people, including equipment (US\$2 per additional person). The descent involves using ladders and ropes, so you should be reasonably fit and you must be at least 12 years of age.

A guide service is available for hiking the trails within the park and also for descending into the most popular caves. Guides speak Spanish, though a few of the rangers speak some English.

The only cave with regular access to the public is the 62m-deep **La Terciopelo**, which has the most speleothems – calcite figures that rise and fall in the cave's interior. The best known of these is **El Órgano**, which produces several notes when lightly struck. Scientists and other visitors are required to have permits from the park service to enter other caves. These include **Santa Ana**, the deepest (249m); **Trampa** (Trap), 110m deep with a vertical 52m drop; **Nicoya**, where early human remains were found; and, our favorite, **Pozo Hediondo**, or Fetid Pit, which is famous for its huge piles

of bat droppings. Note that caves cannot be entered after 1pm.

Activities

While **wildlife-watching** underground, you'll have the chance to see such fun-loving creatures as bat, albino salamander, blind fish and a variety of squiggly little invertebrates. On the surface, howler and white-faced monkey, armadillo, coati, kinkajou and white-tailed deer are regularly spotted, as are striped hog-nosed skunk and anteater.

For **hiking**, the Barra Honda hills have a few trails through deciduous, dry tropical rain forest that lead to waterfalls (in the rainy season) adorned with calcium formations. It's also possible to hike to the top of Cerro Barra Honda, which has a lookout with a view that takes in the Río Tempisque and Golfo de Nicoya. Since this national park is comparatively undertouristed and undeveloped, it is advised that you either inquire about the state of the trails before setting out, or hire the services of a guide.

Sleeping & Eating

At the entrance to the park, there is a **camping area** (per person US\$2) with bathrooms and showers. There is also a small park-administered area that has three basic dorm-style **cabins** (per person US\$12), each with a shower and six beds. Meals can be prearranged (breakfast US\$2.50, lunch and dinner US\$5). Reserve accommodations and meals through the **ACT office** (☎ 2685 5667) in Nicoya or by calling the ranger station. Spanish is necessary.

Getting There & Away

The easiest way to get to the park is from Nicoya. No bus goes directly to the park; however, buses to Santa Ana (1km away) will get you close. These leave Nicoya at 8am, 11:30pm and 4pm. Return buses leave Santa Ana at noon and 4:30pm. There are no buses on Sunday. The better option is to take a taxi from Nicoya, which will cost about US\$12. You can arrange for your driver to pick you up later at a specified time.

If you have your own vehicle, take the peninsular highway south out of Nicoya toward Mansión and make a left on the access road leading to Puente La Amistad. From here, continue another 1.5km and make a left on the signed road to Barra Honda. The dirt road will take you to the village of Barra Honda and

will then wind to the left for another 6km before ending up at the entrance to the national park. The community of Santa Ana is passed en route. The road is clearly marked, and there are several signs along the way indicating the direction of the park. After the village of Barra Honda, the road is unpaved, but in good condition. However, there is no telling what the next rainy season will do to it, so ask locally before setting out.

If you are coming to the park from Puente La Amistad you will see the access road to Barra Honda signed about 16km after leaving the bridge. From this point, follow the above directions.

PUENTE LA AMISTAD

Once made exclusively by ferry (car and passenger), the trip over the Río Tempisque has been completely transformed by the recent construction of a brand-new 780m bridge, now the largest in Costa Rica (but tiny by US standards). The Puente La Amistad (Bridge of Friendship) was built with Taiwanese financial support and opened in July 2003. There is a small parking area and observation platform on the western side of the river so that you can admire it and take photos (as the locals proudly do).

NOSARA AREA

The attractive beaches near the small Tico village of Nosara are backed by a pocket of luxuriant vegetation that attracts birds and wildlife. The area has seen little logging, partly because of the nearby wildlife refuge, and partly because of real-estate development – an unlikely sounding combination.

There are a few hundred foreigners living permanently in the Nosara area (mainly North Americans), the majority of them keen on protecting the rain forests. One resident describes the area as 'sophisticated jungle living,' and indeed blending retirement with conservation is an interesting experiment. However, Ticos remain hostile to the development of the area, mainly because land prices have been driven through the roof in just under a decade.

The Nosara area is a magical destination as you can sometimes see parrot, toucan, armadillo and monkey just a few meters away from the beaches. There are three distinct beaches here. North of the river is **Playa Nosara**, which is difficult to access and primarily used

by fishermen. Further south is **Playa Pelada**, a small crescent-shaped beach with an impressive blowhole that sends water shooting through the air at high tide. The southern-most beach is **Playa Guiones**, a 7km stretch of sand that's one of the best surf spots on the central peninsula.

Orientation

The Nosara area is spread out along the coast and a little inland (making a car a bit of a necessity). Nosara village, where you'll find supplies and gas, and the airport are 5km inland from the beach. The main areas with accommodations, restaurants and beaches are Playa Pelada to the north and Playa Guiones to the south. There are many unidentified little roads, which makes it hard to get around if you don't know the place – look for hotel and restaurant signs, and ask for help. Log on to Nosara Travel's website (www.nosaratravel.com/map.html) for a handy map.

Information

There is a public phone by Café de Paris; you'll find one gas station on the road between Playa Pelada and Nosara village, and another in the village.

Banco Popular (☎ 2682 0267, 2682 0011; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Changes US dollars and traveler's checks, and gives cash advances on Visa cards only; the ATM also only accepts Visa cards.

Café de Paris (☎ 2682 0087, 2682 1035; internet per hr US\$6) Check your email at the air-conditioned internet café in this hotel or get a password to use its wireless access.

Nosaranet & Frog Pad (☎ 2682 4039; www.thefrogpad.com; internet per hr US\$6; ☎ 9am-8pm) The going rates for internet use are pretty astronomical in Nosara. The Frog Pad also has used books for sale, and DVDs, bikes and surfboards for rent.

Nosara Travel (☎ 2682 0300; www.nosaratravel.com; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) In Playa Guiones, this office books air tickets, arranges car rentals and books hotel reservations or vacation homes.

Police (☎ 2682 0317) Next to the Red Cross and post office on the southeast corner of the soccer field in the village center.

Post office (☎ 7:30am-noon & 1-6pm)

Super Nosara (☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, 8am-3pm Sun) Super Nosara, southwest of the soccer field, will change US dollars and traveler's checks. This is also a good place to stock up on supplies – it's cheaper than anything by the beaches.

Activities

CANOPY TOUR

Miss Sky (☎ 2682 0969; www.misskycanopytour.com; adult/child US\$60/30; ☎ 7am-5pm) has brought a canopy tour to Nosara. It's the longest in the world – at least for now – with a total length of 11,000m, above a pristine, private reserve. The zip lines don't go from platform to platform, but from mountainside to mountainside, and have double cables for added safety. When last we heard, plans were afoot to build the last zip line to a bar. Tours leave twice daily, at 8am and 2pm.

HIKING

The **Reserva Biológica Nosara** behind the Lagarta Lodge (p290) has private trails leading through a mangrove wetland down to the river (five minutes) and beach (10 minutes). This is a great spot for birding, and there's a good chance you'll see some reptiles as well (look up in the trees as there are occasionally boa constrictors here). Nonguests can visit the reserve for US\$6.

SURFING

Check out **Playa Guiones** for the best beach break in the central peninsula, especially when there is an offshore wind. Although the beach is usually full of surfers, there are fortunately plenty of take-off points.

At the main intersection in Guiones, the surf shop **Coconut Harry's** (☎ 2682 0574; www.coconutharrys.com; ☎ 7am-5pm) offers private surfing lessons (US\$35 per hour), board rental (US\$20 per day) and repair, and long-term board storage (US\$90 per year).

From here, turn left on the main road into Guiones past Café de Paris and you'll find **Nosara Surf Shop** (☎ 2682 0186; www.nosarasurfshop.com; ☎ 7am-6pm). It rents surfboards (US\$15 to US\$20 per day) and ATVs (US\$35 to US\$50), does board repairs and arranges surf lessons (US\$40) and tours.

TURTLE-WATCHING

Most hotels in the area can arrange guided tours to Refugio Nacional de Fauna Silvestre Ostional (p292), where you can watch the mass arrivals of olive ridley turtles.

YOGA

In the hills near Playa Guiones is the famous **Nosara Yoga Institute** (☎ 2682 0071, toll-free 866-439 4704; www.nosarayoga.com). The institute offers

regular classes, open to the public, as well as workshops, retreats and instructor training courses. To practice in such a beautiful jungle setting, in airy studios ventilated by ocean breezes, is a wonderful experience for beginners or yogis (and yoginis) alike.

Sleeping & Eating

Playa Pelada lies to the north of the Nosara area, while Playa Guiones is to the south.

PLAYA GUIONES

Rancho Congo (☎ 2682 0078; rcongo@racs.com; r incl breakfast US\$20-50; ☎) This three-room B&B is a sweet, German-run retreat with big rooms, hammocks and a quiet garden setting just off the main road.

our pick **Kaya Sol** (☎ 2682 0080; www.kayasol.com; dm US\$10, d US\$41-93, cabins US\$47-58; ☎) The heart of this sprawling surfer-and-seeker retreat (formerly Blew Dogs) is the dorm-style accommodations in the 'flop house,' though the shared bathrooms are spotless and the pool, with waterfall shower, is perfect for cooling off. There are also a few rooms and private cabins with hot-water bathroom in the back of the property, as well as a beach house (US\$757 per week). A restaurant serves American-style food, and the bar is *the* place to hang out at night. It's down the road toward the beach on the right-hand side, just before the Mini Super Delicias.

La Banana (☎ 2682 4082; d/tr US\$47/58; ☎) Approaching the area from the south, you'll see the new French-run La Banana on your right, just before Nosara Yoga Institute. Rooms have private bathroom and are breezy and simple, with wood floors, muted shades of tropical fruit, and jute curtains. The bar, raised on stilts, looks like it could become a gathering place for relaxed evenings.

Casa Romántica (☎ 2682 0272; www.casa-romantica.net; d incl breakfast from US\$71; ☎) Right next to Playa Guiones is this recommended Spanish colonial mansion with several rooms with private bathrooms. They've all been recently renovated, and have views of the manicured gardens surrounding the pool. There is also private beach access, a small restaurant featuring international cuisine and well-being services (yoga and massage). Tours can be arranged. Credit cards are accepted.

Giardino Tropicale (☎ 2682 0258; www.giardino-tropicale.com; s/d from US\$64/76; ☎) On the main road, north of Marlin Bill's, this collection of

white-walled cabins offers various sizes and views. The pleasant quarters with solar-heated showers all look out on to a lawn shaded by a huge tree, and there's a pool for taking a cool dip. Deluxe rooms include kitchens (sans stove). There's also a rambling, rustic restaurant (dishes US\$5 to US\$9) that's popular for its thin-crust pizzas.

Harbor Reef Lodge (☎ 2682 0059; www.harborreef.com; d US\$111-122, Pelada/Guiones ste US\$150/173, casas per week from US\$1664; ☎) These cool, tiled rooms with private bathroom, air-con, hot water and fridge have wood detailing and attractive Latin American textiles. Suites are located on Playas Pelada and Guiones, and are much more expensive and have full kitchens. There are also two- and three- bedroom casas, and suites within casas, available for rent. They are pristine, secluded and guests can use the hotel's facilities. Credit cards accepted. To get here, continue beyond Nosara Surf Shop to where the road bends to the left as it hits the shore.

Harmony Hotel (☎ 2682 4114; www.harmonynosara.com; d US\$186, 2-person bungalow US\$262, 4-person ste US\$402; ☎) Designed with clean lines and fostering a tranquil, happy atmosphere, this effortlessly stylish hotel lives up to its name in look and feel. Better, it also strives for harmony with the environment, employing a full-time sustainability coordinator and involving itself with the community and environmental initiatives. Simple but luxurious rooms have spacious, private decks with outdoor showers and hammocks, and bungalows afford even more privacy and space. Using fresh, organic ingredients as much as possible, the restaurant and bar (mains US\$11 to US\$20) are worth a visit if you're not staying here (reservations recommended).

Café de Paris (☎ 2682 0087, 2682 1035; www.cafede-paris.net; d/tr US\$80/92; ☎) This pleasant hotel is located at the corner of the main road and the first access road that leads to Playa Guiones. Shiny, clean rooms have plenty of polished woodwork, a private bathroom and air-con, while larger bungalows and villas are great deals if you're traveling in a group. The bakery-restaurant turns out heavenly French breads and pastries and is an excellent place to eat or pick up a lovely brioche.

our pick **Robin's** (☎ 2682 0617; mains US\$5-7; ☎ 7:30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 7:30am-5pm Sat & Sun) Perfectly suited to the health-conscious yoga practitioners and surfers who live in and visit Nosara,

Robin offers a welcome menu of salads, wraps and sandwiches on homemade, whole-wheat focaccia. But she also caters to the indulgent side as well, with dessert crêpes and sublime homemade ice cream and sorbet. The treecanopied patio is a lovely spot for lunch.

Marlin Bill's (☎ 2682 0548; meals US\$6-14; 🕒 11am-2:30pm & 6pm-late Mon-Sat) Across the main road is this popular bar-restaurant with fantastic ocean views. It's worth grabbing lunch here when the menu is cheaper, though it's worth the price anytime for a hearty filet of blackened tuna and a slab of key lime pie.

Gilded Iguana Bar & Restaurant (☎ 2682 0259; www.gildediguana.com; d US\$52-87; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Down the second access road to Guiones, this long-standing hotel for anglers and surfers has well-furnished, tiled rooms of varying sizes with private hot-water bathrooms and refrigerators. Fishing charters can be arranged, and kayaking, snorkeling and nature tours are also offered. The tasty restaurant will grill your catch for you, and the attached bar is a popular gringo hangout. Credit cards accepted.

Mini Super Delicias del Mundo (☎ 2682 0291; 🕒 8:45am-1pm & 2:30-6:15pm) Groceries are available here, on the second access road to Playa Guiones.

On the road between Playas Guiones and Playa Pelada are two hillside retreats worth checking out.

Vista del Mar (☎ 2682 0633; www.lodgevistadelmar.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$36-48/44-56, apt from US\$90; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Run by a super-friendly gringo named Gale, this is a great option for long-term surf bums and swimmers, as it has a 25m lap pool.

Vista del Paraíso (☎ 2682 0637; www.paradiseviewvillas.com; d US\$76-175; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Small, family-run (and family-friendly) lodge with drop-dead stunning views from the top of the mountain.

PLAYA PELADA

Refugio del Sol (☎ 2682 0287; www.refugiodelsol.com; s/d/tr US\$35/47/52, d with kitchen US\$55; 🍷) Five cozy rooms surround a garden courtyard at this small hotel across from Pancho's. It's a very mellow place to stay, and just a short stroll down to Playa Pelada from here.

Nosara B&B (☎ 2682 0209; www.nosarabandb.net; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$39/49/64) Further north, on a signed access road, this cute, clean and very quiet option is set back in the trees near a quiet strand of beach. All of the homey rooms have private hot-water bathroom and simple decorative motifs.

Rancho Suizo Lodge (☎ 2682 0057; www.nosara.ch; s/d incl breakfast US\$41/58; 🍷 🍷) From Pancho's, take a right instead of heading toward the beach and follow the road to the left for another 200m to the end to get to Rancho Suizo. It's only a few minutes' walk from Playa Pelada and is run by René and Ruth, a charming Swiss couple. Rustic, tiled bungalows all have private hot-water bathrooms, and there's an inviting pool and whirlpool. There's a good restaurant and bar, and transfers to and from the airport are free.

Villa Mango B&B (☎ 2682 0130; www.villamangocr.com; s/d US\$69/79; 🍷 🍷) You can't help but relax at this tiny B&B in the trees, with ocean views and hosts who enjoy chatting with their guests. While there's a pool on the property, you can also take a short stroll down to an isolated stretch of beach.

Pancho's Resort (☎ 2682 0591; www.panchosresort.com; bungalow US\$76-145; 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷) On the main road between Playa Pelada and Nosara village, this large property has it all: supermarket, bar, restaurant and cabins. Comfortable bungalows sleeping four to six people have private hot-water bathrooms along with attractive tile floors, high ceilings, lofts and kitchenettes. To top it off, Pancho and his bilingual family are all incredibly nice.

Lagarta Lodge (☎ 2682 0035; www.lagarta.com; s/d/tr US\$72/79/86; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Further north, a road dead-ends at this six-room hotel, a recommended choice high on a steep hill above the private 50-hectare Reserva Biológica Nosara. Birding and wildlife spotting is good here – and you can watch from the comfort of the hotel balcony or see many more species if you go on a hike. Large rooms have high ceilings, hot showers and small private patios or balconies. The balcony restaurant (breakfast and lunch US\$4 to US\$7, dinner US\$9 to US\$15; closed Tuesday) is worth a visit just for the spectacular view and sunsets, though the rotating menu of international and Tico specialties is equally appealing.

Our pick Hotel Playas de Nosara (☎ 2682 0121; s/d US\$70/85; 🍷 🍷) Follow the Playa Pelada road to the left and all the way to the point, where you'll dead-end at this fantastic Nosara landmark, perhaps the most unusual hotel in Costa Rica. With its white-washed minaret-style tower and unique rambling architecture, it's somewhere between *1001 Nights* and a Salvador Dalí painting.

TOP SPOTS FOR A SPECTACULAR SMOOCH

The Peninsula de Nicoya is blessed with endless romantic beaches, but if you're looking for a dramatic backdrop for that cinematic kiss, here's where to set the scene.

- The 360-degree view from the domed observation terrace at **Hotel Playas de Nosara** (opposite) is pretty swoony by itself.
- Perched high on a bluff, **Restaurant Mirador Barranquilla** (p298) is stunning at sunset with the Pacific at your feet.
- Wake early and hike up to the **Montezuma Waterfall** (p306) to have the pools to yourself.
- After dark, nestle into sumptuous pillows at the **Lazy Wave** (p276), where low lighting and low tables invite canoodling over cocktails.
- Pack picnic provisions, rent kayaks in the morning and paddle away from **Sámara** (p294) to play castaway on uninhabited Isla Chora.

Balconied rooms offer beautiful beach views, with trail access to beaches on either side of the point. There's a good restaurant and pool, and the owner-designer's daughter is bringing it back to its proper glory.

Olga's Bar & Restaurant (casados US\$3; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A few hundred meters to the north of La Luna, on a separate side road, lies this perennially popular beachside institution. The Tico-owned joint whips up cheap, yummy casados and very reasonable fish dinners (US\$6).

La Luna (☎ 2682 0122; dishes US\$9-12; 🍷 lunch & dinner) On the beach, to the right of the Hotel Playas de Nosara, you'll find this impressive stone building that houses a trendy restaurant-bar. The eclectic menu has Asian and Mediterranean flourishes, and the views (and cocktails) are intoxicating. Call ahead for reservations.

NOSARA

Rancho Tico (☎ 2682 0006; dishes US\$4-6; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The best casados are served here, at the western end of town, or try the catch of the day, which is usually farm-raised tilapia or red snapper.

There are a few grocery stores in town as well as a number of small *sodas*.

Drinking & Entertainment

Aside from the bars and restaurants previously listed, there are a few spots in the village of Nosara.

Near the soccer field are two Tico-riffic spots – Tropicana, which is a great place for showing off your salsa moves, and Bar Bambú, another hot spot for Saturday nights.

The bar at Kaya Sol (p289) sometimes has live music and always a good vibe.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Both Sansa and NatureAir have one daily flight to and from San José for about US\$93 each way.

BUS

Local buses depart from the *pulperia* (corner grocery store) by the soccer field. Traroc buses depart for Nicoya (US\$1.25, two hours) at 6am, 12:15pm and 3pm. Empresas Alfaro buses going to San José (US\$6, five to six hours) depart from the pharmacy by the soccer field at 12:30pm.

For US\$0.25, any of these buses will drop you off at the beach. To get to Sámara, take any bus out of Nosara and ask the driver to drop you off at *la bomba de Sámara* (Sámara gas station). From there, catch one of the buses traveling from Nicoya to Sámara. It's also easy to hitch at this point (see p549 for tips).

CAR

From Nicoya, a paved road leads toward Playa Sámara. About 5km before Sámara (signed), a windy, bumpy (and, in the dry season, dusty) dirt road leads to the village (4WD recommended). It's also possible to continue north (in the dry season), to Ostional, Paraíso and Junquillal, though you'll have to ford a few rivers. Ask around before trying this road in the rainy season, when the Río Nosara becomes all but impassable.

TRACKING TURTLES

Looking to give back before heading home? Since 1998 Programa Restauración de Tortugas Marinas (Pretoma; Marine Turtle Restoration Program) has collaborated with locals to monitor turtle nesting activity and the operation of hatcheries in order to guarantee the efficient protection of nesting sea turtles and the production of hatchlings. Members of the community are hired as field assistants, and environmental education activities are held with the children in town. The project also involves tagging, measuring and protecting nesting turtles, which has resulted in a drastic reduction in poaching levels.

At the time of writing, Pretoma was operating projects in Playa Ostional, Playa San Miguel, Playa Costa de Oro (on the Central Pacific Coast) and Punta Banco, near the border with Panama. For more information on volunteering, visit the website at www.tortugamarina.org.

REFUGIO NACIONAL DE FAUNA SILVESTRE OSTIONAL

This 248-hectare coastal refuge extends from Punta India in the north to Playa Guiones in the south, and includes the beaches of Playa Nosara and Playa Ostional. It was created in 1992 to protect the *arribadas*, or mass nesting of the olive ridley sea turtles, which occurs from July to November with a peak from August to October. Along with Playa Nancite in Parque Nacional Santa Rosa, Ostional is one of two main nesting grounds for this turtle in Costa Rica.

The olive ridley is one of the smallest species of sea turtle, typically weighing around 45kg. Although endangered, there are a few beaches in the world where ridleys nest in large groupings that can number in the thousands. Scientists believe that this behavior is an attempt to overwhelm predators, which contributes to increased species survival.

Prior to the creation of the park, coastal residents used to harvest eggs indiscriminately (drinking raw turtle eggs is thought to increase sexual vigor). However, an imaginative conservation plan has allowed the inhabitants of Ostional to continue to harvest eggs from the first laying, which are often trampled by subsequent waves of nesting turtles. By allowing locals to harvest the first batches, the economic livelihood of the community is maintained, and the villagers in turn act as park rangers to prevent other poachers from infringing on their enterprise.

Rocky **Punta India** at the northwestern end of the refuge has tide pools that abound with marine life, such as sea anemone, urchin and starfish. Along the beach, thousands of almost transparent ghost crabs go about their business, as do the bright-red Sally Lightfoot crabs. The vegetation behind the beach is

sparse and consists mainly of deciduous trees, and is home to iguana, crab, howler monkey, coati and many birds. Near the southeastern edge of the refuge is a small mangrove swamp where there is good birding.

Activities

Mass arrivals of nesting turtles occur during the rainy season every three or four weeks and last about a week (usually on dark nights preceding a new moon), though it's possible to see turtles in lesser numbers almost any night during nesting season. In the dry season, a fitting consolation prize is the small numbers of leatherback and green turtles that also nest here. Many of the upmarket hotels and tour operators in the region offer tours to Ostional during nesting season, though you can also visit independently.

Aside from turtle-watching, surfers can catch some good lefts and rights here just after low tide, though the beach is notorious for its strong currents and huge, crashing surf – it's definitely not suitable for swimming unless you're green and have flippers.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping (per person US\$3) is permitted behind the centrally located Soda La Plaza, which has a portable toilet available. The *soda* is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Cabinas Guacamaya (☎ 2682 0430; r per person with/without bathroom US\$8/6; 📍) In the village of Ostional, this place has several small and dark rooms with shared cold showers, though you'll be thrilled to spend the night here as demand is high during nesting season. The same folks run the attached *pulperia*, which can sell you basic supplies.

Cabinas Ostional (☎ 2682 0428; s/d/q US\$10/16/28; 📍) The rooms are slightly better here, with

private cold-water shower and a cozy garden. It, too, fills up quickly.

Rancho Brovilla (☎ 2280 4919, 8821 5910; www.brovill.com; r US\$33-66, apt US\$120-200, casas US\$250-280; 📍 🚗 🚚) In the hills, 2km north of town, Rancho Brovilla is an upscale lodge that's a world away from the more modest accommodations in Ostional. Rooms are adorned with stained-wood accents and come equipped with private hot-water bathrooms. There's also a restaurant-bar (dishes US\$6 to US\$10) featuring international food.

Getting There & Away

Ostional village is about 8km northwest of Nosara village. During the dry months there are two daily buses from Santa Cruz (times change, so ask around), but at any time of the year the road can get washed out by rain. Hitching from Nosara is reportedly easy.

If you're driving, plan on taking a 4WD as a couple of rivers need to be crossed. From the main road joining Nosara beach and village, head north and cross the bridge over the Río Nosara. After the bridge, there's a T-junction after about 2km; take the left fork (which is signed) and continue on the main road north to Ostional, about 6km away. There are several river crossings on the way to Ostional, so ask locally about conditions before setting out.

Beyond Ostional, the dirt road continues on to Marbella before arriving in Paraíso, northeast of Junquillal. Ask carefully before attempting this drive and use 4WD.

PLAYA SÁMARA

The crescent-shaped strip of pale-gray sand at Sámara is one of the most beloved beaches in Costa Rica – it's safe, tranquil, reasonably developed and easily accessible by public transportation. Not surprisingly, it's popular with vacationing Tico families, backpackers, wealthy tourists, snorkelers and surfers alike (even President Oscar Arias has a vacation house near here).

In recent years the village has undergone a bit of a transformation. Sámara is becoming increasingly more sophisticated, and Tico and expat residents are giving face-lifts to tired-looking shops, restaurants and storefronts. Although the village is trying to hang on to the authenticity of its relaxed vibe, Sámara is one of the more sophisticated destinations on the central peninsula.

Information

Go to www.samarabeach.com to get the skinny on Sámara.

Banco Nacional (☎ 2656 0086; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Change money at this bank behind the church; there's also an ATM.

Sámara Beach Travel Center (☎ 2656 0920; www.samara-tours.com; 🕒 9am-9pm) On the main road, this place has an internet café, and can book flights and Interbus tickets and arrange tours. Also rents bicycles (US\$12 per day) and scooters (US\$35 per day).

Se@net Internet Café & Tours (☎ 2656 0302; per hr US\$2; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Check your email here, 100m east of the main road.

Activities

BIKING

Ciclo Sámara (☎ 2656 0438) rents bicycles for US\$2.50 an hour or US\$12 per day. It's 100m west of Cabinas Arenas.

CANOPY TOUR

The local zip-line operator is **Wing Nuts** (☎ 2656 0153; adult/child US\$55/35), on the eastern outskirts of town off the main paved road.

FLIGHTS

Several kilometers west, in Playa Buenavista, the **Flying Crocodile** (☎ 2656 8048; www.flying-crocodile.com) offers ultralight flights (20-minute tour US\$75).

SWIMMING

Though the surf can pick up just before high tide, Sámara is safe for swimming.

SNORKELING & DIVING

When the water's calm and visibility high, snorkelers should check out the coral reef in the center of the bay. Divers can go to **Pura Vida Dive Center** (☎ 2656 0643, 8843 2075), which arranges trips to nearby sites. Find the dive center 200m west of Banco Nacional.

SURFING

Experienced surfers will probably be bored with Sámara's inconsistent waves, though beginners can have a blast here.

The experienced and personable Jesse at **Jesse's Sámara Surf School** (☎ 2656 0055; www.samarasurfschool.com) has been teaching wannabe surfers for years, as does his daughter Sunrise. Their friendly, expert instruction is highly recommended by readers (private one-hour lesson US\$40). Jesse also arranges

custom surfing safaris to secret spots all over the coast.

Another great choice is the **C&C Surf School & Adventure Center** (☎ 2656 0628; www.samarasurf.com) at the northern end of town, which gives one-hour private lessons for US\$40; the fee includes another hour of board rental afterwards, and the school donates US\$3 from every surf lesson to a local children's school and a turtle conservation project. It also rents kayaks and surfboards and arranges a variety of tours and trips throughout Costa Rica.

Courses

Centro de Idiomas Intercultura (☎ 2656 0127, 2260 8480; www.interculturacostarica.com) has a campus right on the beach. Language courses begin at US\$270 a week without homestay.

Tours

Tío Tigre (☎ 2656 0098; www.samarabeach.com/tiotigre), around the corner from the Super Sámara, offers all kinds of excursions: snorkeling, dolphin-watching, turtle-watching, kayak and horseback riding.

Sleeping BUDGET

Showers are all cold unless otherwise noted. High-season prices are listed.

Camping Los Coco (☎ 2656 0496; camping per person US\$5) On the eastern edge of the beach, this attractive site has well-maintained facilities but can sometimes be absolutely packed. There are several other campsites along this road if Los Coco has no space.

Hotel Playa Sámara (☎ 2656 0190; www.hotelplaya.com) r per person US\$12; (P) Off the soccer field, this is the number one choice for Tico travelers (who must be completely immune to the sound of the nightclub next door). Clean lime-green rooms with private bathrooms are yours for a cheap price, but don't expect to get much sleep here.

Cabinas Kunterbunt (☎ 2656 0235; www.cabinas-villa-kunterbunt.com; s/d without bathroom US\$20/25, s/d/tr with bathroom US\$30/40/50; (P) (☎) (🚿)) Tommy and Antje, the German owners, have built a beachfront house and 'multicolored' (in case you were wondering what Kunterbunt meant) cabinas right beside a peaceful section of beach. From the communal outdoor kitchen to the lawn area leading on to the beach, the place has a bare-bones, ma-

roomed-on-a-desert-island feel. It's 3km from town, so you'll want your own wheels.

Bar Olas (☎ 2656 1100, 8830 2414; camping per person US\$5, s/d cabins US\$20/30; (P)) This beachside place is about 200m west of Soda Sheriff Rustic, and offers the most unusual accommodations in town: thatched huts with private bathroom. There are no screens, so bring bug repellent – and it's next to the bar, so plan on drinking yourself into oblivion or bring earplugs. You can also camp here.

La Locanda (☎ 2656 0036; www.locandasamara.com; d with/without bathroom US\$35/30, d with air-con US\$70, apt US\$110-150; (P) (☎)) These clean, bright rooms are right on the beach, and there's a bar and café out front. Rooms that have air-con also have fridge and cable TV, and the hotel has secure parking.

Hotel Casa del Mar (☎ 2656 0264; www.casadelmar.com) d incl breakfast with/without bathroom US\$79/30; (P) (☎) (🚿) Just east of the Super Sámara and close to the beach is this agreeable American-run hotel, which has a good mix of rooms for travelers of all budgets. If you don't need your own bathroom, rooms here are a steal (and you can still use the Jacuzzi), though those with private bathroom are bright, airy and well worth the money.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

All showers are hot unless otherwise stated.

Bungalows Casa Valeria (☎ 2656 0511; casavaleria_af@hotmail.com; d/tr/q from US\$35/52/81; (P) (☎)) This intimate little inn is right on the beach about 100m east of the main road. The rooms and bungalows vary in size and are fairly simple, though it's the hammock-strung palm trees and tranquil garden setting that make this place a winner. A communal kitchen is available.

Posada Matilori (☎ 2656 0291, 8817 8042; posadamatilori@racsa.co.cr; d/tr US\$41/52; (P) (☎)) With four brand-new rooms in a cozy and secure home, the extremely friendly Italian-Tica couple running this inn provide every comfort – orthopedic beds, free laundry, free coffee and tea, free use of the boogie boards, a fully equipped kitchen (with a waffle iron!) and lots of comfy hammocks. The house is absolutely spotless and on a quiet side street just 100m from the beach.

Our pick: Entre Dos Aguas B&B (☎ 2656 0998; www.hoteldosaguas.com; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$45/50/55/65; (P) (🚿) (🚿)) This fantastic little inn, on the way into town, is what one reader accurately de-

scribes as 'Mercedes Benz accommodations on a Toyota budget.' Seven brightly colored rooms have private stone showers and vibrant woven linens. A well-manicured garden surrounds the pool, and the common courtyard is invitingly strung with hammocks and set with heavy tables. There's an outdoor wood-fired oven if you're inspired to grill your supper.

Tico Adventure Lodge (☎ 2656 0628; www.ticoadventurelodge.com; s/d/apt US\$29/52/128; (P) (☎) (🚿)) The American owners are proud of the fact that they built this lodge without cutting down a single tree, and they have every reason to be – it's stunning. Nine double rooms with private bathrooms and wood accents are surrounded by lush vegetation and old-growth trees while the tree-top apartment for four lets you swing on the patio hammock from three stories high. Or you can stay in the poolside house for five (US\$151) with a fully equipped kitchen and dining room and dream about a life in the tropics. Cheaper weekly and monthly rates are available.

Casa Paraíso (☎ 2656 0741; s/d incl breakfast US\$29/58; (P)) This comfortable B&B run by a pleasant Tico family is on the road to Playa Carrillo. Rooms with private bathrooms are basic, though the owners fill the place with warmth, and the freshly cooked breakfasts are a great way to start your day.

Hotel Belvedere (☎ 2656 0213; www.samara-costarica.com; s/d/tr/q US\$45/65/75/85, bungalow US\$75, all incl breakfast; (P) (☎) (🚿) (🚿)) Set in a breezy garden with nice views at the northern end of town, the Hotel Belvedere has 10 whitewashed rooms with exposed wooden beams, solar-heated private shower, cable TV and a small private terrace. Two larger bungalows include a kitchenette – perfect for self-caterers looking for a quiet spot in town. The German owners also speak English. Credit cards are accepted.

Sámara Tree House Inn (☎ 2656 0733; www.samarabeach.com; bungalow incl breakfast from US\$111; (P) (☎) (🚿) (🚿)) These five stilt treehouses for grown-ups are so appealing that you might not want to move out. Fully equipped kitchens have pots and pans hanging from driftwood racks, the cable TVs spin on lazy Susans to face whichever room you're in, and there's wi-fi throughout. Even the bathroom tile is gorgeous. Huge windows let in light and breezes, and hammocks are hung underneath the raised bungalows.

Hotel Rancharlo (☎ 2656 0573; www.rancharlo.com; s/d US\$41/47, with bathroom US\$47/76, all incl breakfast;

(P) (☎) (🚿) New, very clean rooms here have a modern Mediterranean flavor to them, though they're a bit on the small side. The atmosphere is low-key and friendly, with a pool, bar and Italian restaurant.

Villas Pepitas (☎ 2656 0747; www.villaspepitas.com; d/tr/q apt US\$116/140/163, d/tr/q villa US\$128/151/175; (P) (☎) (🚿) (🚿)) On the west side of town, just before crossing the river, these cheery yellow villas are like a sunny slice of Italy in a tropical garden setting. It's quiet on this road, but just a short walk into town and to the beach. The owner is friendly but completely respectful of guests' privacy and comfort.

Hotel Mirador de Sámara (☎ 2656 0044; www.miradordesamara.com; tr incl breakfast US\$105, apt US\$122; (P) (🚿)) Perched on a hill on the northern edge of town is this architecturally unusual hotel, complete with looming towers that offer dizzying views of the area. The 'sky rooms' can accommodate up to three, while the large apartments with kitchens can sleep up to six. There's also a small private restaurant with panoramic views of the entire area. Credit cards accepted.

Eating

Out with the old and in with the new is the name of the game in Sámara. There are still some simple *sodas* left in town, but with each passing year the restaurant scene is reinventing itself to cater to a more sophisticated palate. Self-caterers can stock up on supplies at the Super Sámara Market, east of the main road.

Panadería Café Sámara (☎ 2656 0811; pastries US\$1.50-3; ☎ 6am-6pm Wed-Mon) Around the corner from Super Sámara and Casa del Mar (opposite), this heavenly little bakery turns out excellent, light German pastry, great breads and baguettes, and the patio is a wonderfully minimalist place to have coffee and breakfast.

Soda Sheriff Rustic (dishes US\$2-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) One of a few classic *sodas* in town, the beachside location sells itself, though the filling breakfasts, killer casados and low, low prices aren't too bad either.

Restaurante Jardín Marino (mains US\$4-8; ☎ lunch & dinner) This large, airy *soda* is always packed, and if you sit yourself down and order something here, you'll see why. The typical food is fresh and of high quality – a *casado de pescado* here means grilled fish, not a deep-fried filet. It's on the main road leading to the beach.

Shake Joe's (☎ 2656 0252; mains US\$4-10; 🍷 11am-late) This hip beachside spot is awash with chilled-out electronica and cool, calm travelers lounging on the huge wooden outdoor couches. You can grab a burger here after your surf session, but the ambience is tops when the sun goes down and the drinks start to flow.

El Dorado (☎ 2656 0145; mains US\$5-10; 🍷 5-10pm, closed Thu) It's not hard to have the best Italian food in Sámara when all your pasta is homemade, your meats and cheeses are imported directly from Italy, and you have the Pacific Ocean in your backyard.

Restaurant Las Brasas (☎ 2656 0546; dishes US\$7-12; 🍷 noon-late) This upscale Spanish restaurant on the main street has all the signature dishes including tortillas, paellas and roast suckling pig. It also has a well-stocked wine cellar, and the upstairs balcony is perfect for people-watching.

Drinking & Entertainment

The coolest nightspot in town is La Vela Latina, on the beach, which serves sophisticated *bocas* and perfectly blended cocktails and sangria to guests sitting on wooden seats or rocking in comfy leather chairs. To settle in for the evening with some *bocas* and beers with the locals, check out Pablito's Bar way on the west side of town.

On the main road, La Gondola is also a fun late-night spot for drinks, pool and darts – check out the full-on mural of Venice. Shake Joe's (see above) really gets going in the evenings with low lighting and trendy tunes. Tutti Frutti Discotheque (on the beach) keeps the music pumping late most weekends of the year, and is perennially popular with Ticos. Bar Olas (p294) is a good place to get started with an Imperial on a beach log.

Shopping

Numerous vendors sell crafts and hand-made jewelry at stands along the main road.

Koss Art Gallery (☎ 2656 0284) Visit Jaime at his outdoor studio on the beach, where he frequently displays his richly hued works in the high season. Call ahead for a viewing.

Galería Dragonfly (☎ 2656 0964; www.samararte.com) You'll see Leonardo Palacios' mural as you walk the main street; the gallery inside houses uniquely wrought jewelry in all sorts of media like leather and seashells, along with sculpture, paintings and decorative pieces in a very organic style.

Also worth a stop is Mama Africa, which sells beautiful beaded leather sandals from Kenya. The Italian owners work directly with a Maasai collective that crafts the sandals, and purchases support this work.

Getting There & Away

The beach lies about 35km southwest of Nicoya on a well-paved road.

AIR

The airport serving Playa Sámara is nearer to Playa Carrillo (and is often referred to as Carrillo). Sansa flies daily to and from San José (one way/round-trip US\$89/178). Book flights at Sámara Beach Travel Center (see p293).

BUS

Empresas Alfaro has a bus to San José (US\$6, five hours) that departs from the main road at 4:30am, 8:30am and 3pm. Only the 8:30am bus runs on Sundays.

Traroc buses to Nicoya (US\$1.25, two hours) depart 11 times daily from the *pulpería* by the soccer field; there's a more limited schedule on Sundays.

PLAYA CARRILLO

About 4km southeast of Sámara, this lazily curving beach with its palm-fringed boulevard is quieter and less developed. With its clean sand, rocky headlands and backdrop of jungle, Carrillo is a postcard-perfect tropical beach. During weekends and holidays, the boulevard is lined with cars and the beach crowded with Tico families camped out festively beneath the palms.

The little town is on a hillside above the beach and attracts a trickle of surfers working their way down the coast, as well as schools of American sportfishers chasing billfish.

Activities

SPORTFISHING

Kingfisher Sportfishing (☎ 2656 0091; www.costaricabillfishing.com) is a well-known local outfit, offering full-day offshore excursions for US\$950.

Kitty Cat Sportfishing (☎ 2656 0170; www.sportfishcarrillo.com) is another reputable operation with competitive prices; call to charter a trip.

SURF CASTING

You don't have to drop big bucks to catch some nice-sized fish – do as the Ticos do and try your hand at surf casting. Most ho-

tels and tour outfitters can set you up for a few dollars.

SURFING

Surfing here is better than at nearby Playa Sámara, though it's nothing great. Mid-to high tide is when you can catch some decent waves.

Tours

Popos (☎ 2656 0086; www.poposcostarica.com) offers exciting, well-orchestrated and reasonably priced kayak tours, including a few designed for families. Prices start at US\$55.

Carrillo Tours (☎ 2656 0543; www.carrillotours.com; 🍷 8am-7pm), on the road up the hill, organizes snorkeling, dolphin-watching, kayaking, horseback riding and trips to Palo Verde (p208).

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Mora (☎ 2656 0118; per person US\$5; 📍) At the western end of the beach, this campsite has showers, bathrooms, electricity and potable water.

All of the following hotels are at the eastern end of the beach on a hill. The beach is a five- to 10-minute walk down from most of these places.

Casa Buenavista (☎ 2656 0385; www.samarabeach.com/casabuenavista; d incl breakfast US\$45-55; 📍) A sweet Italian couple runs this two-room B&B. Each basic but homey room has its own hot-water bathroom, porch and entrance, and there's a small shaded yoga terrace in the garden.

Cabinas El Colibri (☎ 2656 0656; www.samarabeach.com/elcolibri; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$50/60/70; 📍) These Argentinean-run cabinas are high on the hilltop, and come fully equipped with private hot-water bathrooms; mini-apartments with kitchenettes are the same price but don't include breakfast. It's a relaxed and comfortable spot, and you'll be well fed at the attached restaurant (open from 5pm to midnight, dishes US\$4 to US\$10), which serves traditional Argentinean *parrilladas* (grilled meats) and *empanadas* (corn turnovers with minced meat).

Carrillo Club (☎ 2656 0316; www.carrilloclub.com; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$55/85/95/105, apt US\$85; 📍) This pretty yellow inn on the hillside has a clutch of comfortable cabinas with private terraces and hot-water bathrooms. The two-person apartments are equipped with

kitchens. There's a pool with ocean views, and the beach is a short walk downhill. Taking breakfast on the big terrace in front is a treat, with beautiful, big views of Playa Carrillo below.

Hotel Arena Blanca (☎ 2656 2025; www.arenablancahotel.com; d incl breakfast US\$111; 📍) Designed like a modern-day hacienda, this hotel employs rustic detail with contemporary polish. Backed by trees, the low-lying building circles a pool area, and the beach is only 150m away. Staff can arrange tours.

Hotel Esperanza (☎ 2656 0564; www.hotelesperanza.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$110/120; 📍) Cheerful rooms at this newly remodeled hotel are set back from a columned promenade and open on to the pool area. The rooms are a bit small, but packed with amenities like cable TV, DVD players, hair dryers and tropical artwork.

There are a number of small *sodas* along the road and soccer field.

Getting There & Away

Regularly scheduled Sansa flights to and from San José (one way/round trip US\$89/178) use the airstrip just northwest of the beach. Some Traroc buses from Nicoya to Sámara continue on the well-paved road to Playa Carrillo – check with the driver first.

ISLITA AREA

The coast southeast of Playa Carrillo remains one of the most isolated and wonderful stretches of coastline in the Nicoya, mainly because it's largely inaccessible and lacking in accommodations. Regardless, if you're willing to tackle some rugged roads or venture down the coastline in a sea kayak (or possibly on foot), you'll be rewarded with abandoned beaches backed by pristine wilderness and rugged hills.

There are a few smaller breaks in front of the Hotel Punta Islita. Another good beach break lies north of Punta Islita at **Playa Camaronal**. This beach also happens to be a protected nesting site for leatherback, olive ridley, hawksbill and black turtles, and is officially known as **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Camaronal**.

Playa Corzalito and **Playa Bejuco** to the south of the Punta Islita are both backed by mangrove swamps, and offer good opportunities for birding and wildlife-watching.

Also worth a visit is the small town of **Islita**, which is home to the Museo de Arte

Contemporáneo al Aire Libre, an open-air exhibition of contemporary art featuring mosaics, murals, carvings and paintings that adorn everything from houses to tree trunks. This project was organized by the Hotel Punta Islita, which sells local art in its gift shops and invests proceeds in the community. If you're interested in helping with the project, inquire at the hotel about volunteer possibilities in the community.

Sleeping & Eating

You can camp on the beaches (without facilities) if you have a vehicle and are self-sufficient.

Hotel Punta Islita (☎ 2661 4044; www.hotelpuntaislita.com; d/ste incl breakfast US\$349/489, casitas from US\$559; 📞 📺 📶 🚿) This luxury resort should serve as an example of how to ethically operate a hotel in Costa Rica. In addition to organizing community arts projects, the hotel has sponsored the construction of various public buildings, including a new church, and is consistently working to integrate the rural community of Islita into its development. The hotel is on a hilltop, and has 40 fully equipped rooms with staggering ocean views; spend up for a suite (with private outdoor Jacuzzis). The infinity pool and surrounding grounds are simply stunning, and the staff can arrange any tour you desire.

Restaurant Mirador Barranquilla (mains US\$3-5; 🕒 11am-midnight Wed-Mon) On the crest of a hill about 2km southeast of the hotel, the Mirador Barranquilla has breathtaking 180-degree views of Punta Islita and Playas Bejuco and San Miguel, and is the top place in the area for a sunset beer.

Cambute (mains US\$4-8; 🕒 lunch & dinner) For something more low-key, this dressed-up *soda* serves excellent *ceviche* and *casados* in a relaxed, riverside setting.

1492 Restaurant (☎ 2661 4044; mains US\$10-25; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The movie *1492* was shot on location in Punta Islita, and some of the set pieces adorn the restaurant. The cuisine here, which is a fusion of Costa Rican and international food, is top quality – and the view is superlative.

Getting There & Away

AIR

NatureAir and Sansa each fly once daily between San José and Punta Islita (one way/round-trip around US\$94/188).

BUS

The closest you can get to Islita by bus is Empresa Arza's two daily buses from San José that go through San Francisco de Coyote and on to Playas San Miguel and Bejuco. Keep in mind, though, that from Bejuco there is still a long uphill hike to Islita – and hitching is almost impossible due to the lack of traffic.

CAR

Although Punta Islita is less than 10km by road southeast of Playa Carrillo, the road is wicked and requires some river crossings that are impossible in the wet season. See boxed text, p310 for more information. The 'easiest' route is for you to head inland from Playa Carrillo through the communities of San Pedro and Cangrejal, which is also known as Soledad, and then down to Bejuco on the coast. From there, you can head to Islita (to the northwest).

PLAYAS SAN MIGUEL & COYOTE

Just south of Playa Bejuco are arguably two of the most beautiful and least visited beaches in Costa Rica. Playa San Miguel, to the north, and Playa Coyote, to the south, are wilderness beaches of fine, silver-gray sand that are separated by the mouth of the Río Jabillo. Despite opportunities for great surfing, kayaking and just about anything else you want to do on a sandy strip of paradise, the beaches are nearly always abandoned (the lack of reliable public transportation is probably to blame). As if there weren't enough reasons to visit, San Miguel and Coyote also serve as nesting grounds for olive ridley turtles.

There are no coastal villages to speak of, though a number of in-the-know foreigners have settled in the area and have built some beautiful accommodations near the shoreline. The nearest village is **San Francisco de Coyote**, which is 4km inland and has a few small *sodas* and cabins.

Activities

You can revel in the crowd-free beach breaks to **surf** off San Miguel, particularly when the tide is rising. At Coyote there is an offshore reef that can be surfed at high tide.

If **swimming**, you are advised to take precautions as the surf can pick up, and there are not many people in the area to help you in an emergency.

If you have your own sea kayak, these beaches (as well as nearby Islita) are perfect for coastal exploration.

Sleeping & Eating

You can camp on both beaches if you're self-sufficient, as there are no services.

Soda Familiar y Cabinas Rey (☎ 2655 1055; s/d/tr US\$6/15/20; 📞 📺 📶) For those taking the more direct (and treacherous) route to Mal País, this Tico-run *soda* in the village of San Francisco de Coyote is a good place to stock up on provisions and get some local advice. If it's getting late, you might want to stay here as there are simple cabins with private cold showers for rent. Believe it or not, this is a wi-fi hot spot.

Blue Pelican (☎ 2655 8046; www.thebluepelicaninn.com; s/d incl breakfast from US\$25/35; 📞 📺 📶) Near the center of Playa San Miguel is this quirky, purple wooden house. There's a variety of rooms suited for singles to groups, including a great upstairs suite with ocean views and a private terrace. Just steps from the beach, the inn has an outdoor shower and board storage racks. The bar-restaurant (dishes US\$4 to US\$12) has international dishes emphasizing fresh seafood, and the beer is cold.

Flying Scorpion (☎ 2655 8080; rossi@scorpionvolador.com; d incl breakfast US\$45, apt US\$75; 📞) Turn right at the Blue Pelican and continue on the dirt road along the beach for a few hundred meters to find this mellow inn with a handful of clean, very comfortable rooms with new teak beds and an assortment of eclectic folk art. It has direct beach access for long days of surfing, and you'll be happy to come back to the bar-restaurant's homemade bread, pasta and ice cream. Run by an amiable couple and their pack of Weimeraners, this is a great spot to zone out for a few days or weeks.

Casitas Azul Plata (☎ 2655 8209; www.casitasazulplata.com; d/tr apt US\$70/80; 📞 📺 📶) This homey, German-run spot has a couple of two-bedroom apartments with full kitchens, cable TV and hot-water showers. It's a great choice for families, located on a quiet hillside.

Hotel Arca de Noé (☎ 2655 8065; www.hotelarcadenoe.com; dm US\$10, d incl breakfast US\$70, additional person US\$10; 📞 📺 📶) Inland from the beach, this pleasantly landscaped, critter-friendly complex has 10 attractive doubles with private hot showers and air-con. It grows many of its own fruits and herbs, has a dairy that provides the milk and cheese for the restaurant and has begun a community recycling program in the area.

Casa Caletas (☎ 2289 6060; www.casacaletas.com; d/ste incl breakfast US\$192/233; 📞 📺 📶) Down at the end of the road before turning toward Mal País, this beautiful little boutique hotel sits on the bank of the Río Coyote and feels blissfully isolated. There's an airy *palapa* restaurant, cushy rooms and an infinity pool overlooking river and ocean. The beach is accessible by crossing the river or via trails, and the hotel can arrange horseback rides, kayaking and fishing trips. To get here, take the road from San Francisco de Coyote toward Mal País and follow the signs for the hotel.

Bar.Co Nico (☎ 2655 1205; www.barco-nico.com; bocas US\$3-10; 🕒 10am-late; 📞) A few kilometers past the village on the turnoff for Costa de Oro, this German-run beachfront restaurant (which looks like a giant ship) has reinstated the old Tico tradition of giving away a free *boca* with every beer. The beer is cold and the *bocas* are delicious – what are you waiting for? There's also free wi-fi, and Nico now rents a few simple cabins.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Empresa Arza (☎ 2650 0179) has two daily buses from San José that cross the Golfo de Nicoya on the Puntarenas ferry and continue through Jicaral to San Francisco de Coyote, and on to Playa San Miguel and Bejuco. Buses depart San José at 6am and 3:30pm, pass through San Francisco de Coyote at about 11:30am and 10pm, and arrive at Playa San Miguel at noon and 10:30pm. Return buses leave Bejuco at 2:15am and 12:30pm, pass through Playa San Miguel at around 3am and 1:45pm, and San Francisco de Coyote at 3:30am and 2:15pm. This service is sketchy in the rainy season and the trip may take longer if road conditions are bad.

There aren't any other bus services frequenting this area from Nicoya – or from any other of the peninsula towns, for that matter.

In addition, there is no bus service (because there is barely an actual road) along the coast between Playa Coyote and Mal País.

CAR

See opposite for valuable information about heading north along the coast from here. Also consult the boxed text *Along the West Coast* by 4WD, p310, for details on how you could *possibly* travel further south along the coast.

SOUTHEASTERN PENINSULA

At the very southern tip of the Nicoya peninsula lies the first and one of the most pristine natural reserves in Costa Rica – and there’s a reason it has remained so untouched. An arduous drive down the rugged southeastern coastal route crosses several rivers through the thick rain forest before dropping back down toward the beach at Mal País, just north of the reserve. From the other side, it used to require hours of dusty bus rides and sluggish ferries from the mainland to access this tropical land’s end, but these days more roads in the region are slowly being paved and regular shuttles are dropping tourists right into Mal País and Montezuma, making Cabo Blanco a day trip from either burgeoning base.

Word has spread about the miles of surf breaks in Mal País and the chill vibe of hippie outpost Montezuma – and transport options have sprung up to meet the demands of surfers and wanderers steadily streaming in to the southeastern peninsula. Growth is somewhat limited by geography in Montezuma and the pulse there beats at the same relaxed pace, but Mal País is pumping. The beauty and wildness on either side of the peninsula can hold you under its thrall, so give yourself the luxury of time here.

As in the rest of the peninsula, Ticos in this region primarily live rural lives centered on agriculture and ranching, though the recent influx of travelers has created a number of jobs in the tourism market.

PLAYA NARANJO

This tiny village next to the ferry terminal is nothing more than a few *sodas* and small hotels that cater to travelers either waiting for the ferry or arriving from Puntarenas. There really isn’t any reason to hang around, and thankfully you probably won’t have to, as the ferries tend to run reasonably on time.

If you get stuck at the port for a night, the **Hotel El Ancla** (☎ 2661 3887; d with/without air-con US\$64/52; ♿ ♿ ♿) is just 200m from the pier. Rooms with cold-water bathrooms seem a bit pricey, but there’s a pool, bar and restaurant to help kill the time.

There’s a small *soda* next to the ferry port, as well as a few vendors selling shaved ice and other goodies.

Getting There & Away

All transportation is geared to the arrival and departure of the Puntarenas ferry, so don’t worry – if either is running late, the other will wait.

BOAT

The **Coonatramar ferry** (☎ 2661 1069; passenger US\$1.50, car US\$10.50) to Puntarenas operates daily at 8am, 12:30pm, 5:30pm and 9pm, and can accommodate both cars and passengers. The trip takes 1½ hours. If traveling by car, get out and buy a ticket at the window, get back in your car and then drive on to the ferry. You cannot buy a ticket on board. Show up at least an hour early on holidays and busy weekends, as you’ll be competing with a whole lot of other drivers to make it on.

BUS

Buses meet the ferry and take passengers to Nicoya (US\$1.75, three hours). Departures are at approximately 7am, 10:50pm, 2:50pm and 7pm.

Regular buses ride from Paquera to Montezuma, though there are none that go southeast from here.

CAR & TAXI

It’s possible to get to Paquera via a scenic, bumpy and steep dirt road with some great vistas of Bahía Gigante. For this, a 4WD is recommended, especially in the rainy season when there are rivers to cross. The only public transportation is 4WD taxi – about US\$25, depending on the number of passengers and road conditions.

ISLANDS NEAR BAHÍA GIGANTE

The waters in and around the isolated Bahía Gigante, 9km southeast of Playa Naranjo, are studded with rocky islets and deserted islands, 10 large enough to be mapped on a 1:200,000 map. Since there is no public transportation here, and a 4WD is a necessity almost year-round, the area feels quiet and unhurried (read: completely abandoned).

However, travelers are drawn to this off-the-beaten-path destination for its range of activities, namely sportfishing, snorkeling, diving and kayaking, which can all be ar-

ranged through hotels and travel agencies in the area. There are also plenty of opportunities for some serious adventure here: kayak between the islands, camp on a deserted island or explore the crumbling ruins of an island prison – the choice is yours.

Isla San Lucas

The largest island in Bahía Gigante (just more than 600 hectares) is about 5km off the coast from Playa Naranjo, and from a distance seems like a beautiful desert island. On the contrary, the ‘Island of Unspeakable Horrors’ has a 400-year history as one of the most notorious jails in Latin America. The island was first used by Spanish *conquistadors* as a detention center for local tribes in the 16th century. In 1862 the job of warden was inherited by the Costa Rican government, which used the island to detain political prisoners up until 1992. The prison was also the inspiration for Costa Rica’s most internationally famous memoir: *La isla de los hombres solos* (available in English as *God Was Looking the Other Way*) by José León Sánchez, who was imprisoned on the island for stealing *La Negrita* from the cathedral in Cartago.

Visitors to the island can expect to see the 100-year-old overgrown remains of the prison. Although there are still guards living on the island, their primary purpose is to discourage poachers, which means that travelers are usually permitted to wander freely through the prison grounds and even camp on the island.

Isla Gigante

In the middle of Bahía Gigante is the 10-hectare Isla Gigante, which is shown on most maps as Isla Muertos (Island of the Dead) because it is home to a number of Chara burial sites (and believed by locals to be haunted).

The island once served as a rustic resort for yachters, but is now completely abandoned and covered with cacti. Isla Gigante is an interesting place to explore, especially since most Ticos are afraid to set foot on the island (good luck trying to convince anyone to spend the night).

Isla Guayabo, Islas Negritos & Los Pajaros

This cluster of islands was recently established as a biological reserve to protect nesting seabird populations, including the largest breeding colony of brown pelicans in Costa

Rica along with frigate birds, boobies, egret, peregrines and petrels. Although they’re not geographically close to one another, the islands are managed as a single unit. For the protection of the birds, no land visitors are allowed except researchers with permission from the park service. However, the reserves can be approached by boat, and the bird populations are large enough to be visible from the ocean.

Isla Tortuga

Isla Tortuga, which consists of two uninhabited islands just offshore from Curú, is widely regarded as the most beautiful island in Costa Rica. The white-sand beaches feel like baby powder, there are gargantuan coconut palms overhead, and the coral reef is perfect for snorkeling. Unfortunately, Tortuga receives heavy boat traffic from tour operators in Montezuma and Jacó, but if you can visit during the week in low season it can be a magical place.

Tours

Most travelers arrange tours either through the hotels listed below or with an operator in Montezuma (p306) or Jacó (p332). However, this is one region where independence (and language skills) can make for a good adventure – inquire locally to find out if someone with a boat is willing to take you where you want to go for a fair price.

The most luxurious excursion is with **Calypso Tours** (☎ 2256 2727; www.calypsocruises.com). The company transports passengers to Isla Tortuga in a luxurious 21m motorized catamaran called the *Manta Raya*. It’s all flash with this boat, which has air-con, a couple of outdoor Jacuzzis and an underwater viewing window. The cost is US\$99 – not a bad deal considering the price includes transportation from Quepos or Manuel Antonio, food and drinks.

Sleeping

Hotels come and go quickly in these parts, though there are two recommended places that have stood the test of time. Both are located on the road between Naranjo and Paquera.

Hotel Maquinay (☎ 2641 8011; s/d US\$30/35; ♿ ♿) In Playa Naranjo, this quaint hacienda-style hotel is a great deal, with comfortable fan-cooled rooms and shared terraces that look on to a tropical garden and swimming pool.

CALLING ALL COSTA RICAN CAT CONSERVATIONISTS

Since 1992 Programa para la Conservación de Felinos (Profelis; Feline Conservation Program) has taken care of confiscated felines that were given to the center by Minae. The project concentrates on smaller felines, including the margay, ocelot and jaguarundi, and aims to rehabilitate and, when possible, reintroduce animals into the wild. In addition, a large component of the program involves the environmental education of the public.

Profelis is headquartered in Hacienda Matambú, a private wildlife reserve in San Rafael de Paquera, about 5km west of Paquera. Volunteers are sought after, especially if you have experience in either keeping animals or veterinary science. For more information on volunteering, visit the website at www.grafischer.com/profelis or contact **Profelis** (☎ 2641 0644, 2641 0646; profelis@racsa.co.cr).

Hotel Bahía Luminosa Resort (☎ 2641 0386; tropics@racsa.co.cr; d with fan/air-con US\$52/70, q US\$105; (P) (♿) (♿)) Set back in the hills and overlooking the bay is this 15-room resort complex with well-appointed rooms, attractive hammock-strung gardens and an inviting pool. This is also a good spot for organizing tours around the bay.

Getting There & Away

There is no public transportation in the area. The dirt road from Playa Naranjo to Paquera requires 4WD for most of the year.

PAQUERA

The tiny village of Paquera is about 25km by road from Playa Naranjo and 4km from the ferry terminal. Paquera is more of a population center than Playa Naranjo, though there's little reason to stay here longer than you have to.

Banco Popular (🕒 8:15am-4pm), on the side street, can change US dollars and traveler's checks. On the main road, across from the gas station, you'll find the new **Turismo Curú** (☎ 2641 0004; www.curutourism.com; 🕒 7am-9pm), operated by the knowledgeable Luis Schutt of the Curú refuge (right). Luis offers a tour that combines a visit to Curú and a snorkeling trip to Isla Tortuga for US\$25 per person (a great deal!).

There are a number of cabins in the village, though the best option is **Cabinas & Restaurant Ginana** (☎ 2641 0119; s/d/tr/q US\$33/37/44/51; (P) (♿) (♿)), which has 28 simple and clean rooms with private bathroom and optional air-con. There's also a good restaurant (dishes US\$3 to US\$5) in case you need a bite to eat before getting on the ferry.

Getting There & Away

All transportation is geared to the arrival and departure of the Puntarenas ferry. If either is running late, the other will wait.

BOAT

Ferry Naviera Tambor (☎ 2641 2084; passenger US\$1.50, car US\$9) operates daily at 8am, 9:30am, 12:30pm, 2:30pm, 6pm and 9pm (the last ferry doesn't run in the low season). The trip takes about an hour. Buy a ticket at the window, reboard your car and then drive onto the ferry; you can't buy a ticket on board. Show up at least an hour early on holidays and busy weekends.

BUS

Buses meet passengers at the ferry terminal and take them to Paquera, Tambor and Montezuma. The bus can be crowded, so try to get off the ferry fast to get a seat.

Most travelers take the bus from the terminal directly to Montezuma (US\$2.25, two hours). Many taxi drivers will tell you the bus won't come, but this isn't true. There are no northbound buses.

TAXI

Getting several travelers together to share a taxi is a good option since the ride will take half as long as the bus. The ride to Montezuma is about US\$7 per person and to Mal País it's about US\$10 – provided you can get enough people together.

A 4WD taxi to Playa Naranjo costs about US\$25.

REFUGIO NACIONAL DE VIDA SILVESTRE CURÚ

This small 84-hectare **refuge** (day fee US\$8; 🕒 7am-3pm), which is now part of a larger protected area of almost 1500 hectares, is a wilderness gem in the largely deforested peninsula. Situated at the eastern end of the peninsula and only 6km south of Paquera, the tiny Curú holds a great variety of landscapes, including

dry tropical forest, semideciduous forest and five types of mangrove swamp. The rugged coastline is also home to a series of secluded coves and white-sand beaches that are perfect for snorkeling and swimming.

The refuge is privately owned by the Schutts, a Tico family whose roots in the area go back more than 70 years. They have long been active in environmental efforts, and were instrumental in having the area designated a wildlife refuge. Currently, they are working to reintroduce species to the area, including the scarlet macaw and the rare *mono tití*, or squirrel monkey.

The entrance to the refuge is clearly signed on the paved road between Paquera and Tambor (it's on the right-hand side). Day visitors can show up anytime during operating hours and pay the day fee to hike the trails and visit the reserve. In addition, a variety of tours are available – from horseback riding and kayaking through the estuary to snorkeling and guided hikes. The Schutts can arrange transport to the reserve from Paquera, and travel agencies in Montezuma (p306) can arrange guided day tours.

Seventeen well-marked, easy to moderate trails take visitors through the different ecosystems; maps are available at the entrance. Readers recommend hiring a guide as it greatly increases your chances of spotting wildlife. The forested areas are the haunts of deer, monkey, agouti and paca, and three species of cat have been recorded. Iguana, crab, lobster, chiton, shellfish, sea turtle and some other marine creatures can be seen on the beaches and in the tide pools. Birders have recorded more than 232 species of bird throughout the reserve, though there are probably more.

Camping is not allowed in the reserve, though there are six rustic **cabinas** (r per person with 3 meals US\$35) with private cold showers. Stays must be arranged in advance either through the office in Paquera, your tour operator or at the entrance. There is no electricity, so take a flashlight and batteries.

PLAYAS Pochote & Tambor

These two mangrove-backed gray-sand beaches are protected by Bahía Ballena, the largest bay on the southeastern peninsula, and are surrounded by a few small fishing communities. In the past 15 years, however, the area has slowly been developed as a resort destina-

tion; the outcome has been less than green (see boxed text Clamor in Tambor, p304). Fortunately, there are a few good choices for accommodations in the area, and for the most part Pochote and Tambor are undertouristed, providing plenty of opportunities for hiking, swimming, kayaking and even whale-watching.

The beaches begin 14km south of Paquera, at the community of Pochote, and stretch for about 8km southwest to Tambor – they're divided by the narrow and wadeable estuary of the Río Pánica.

Activities

Both beaches are safe for **swimming**, and there are occasional **whale sightings** in the bay. The gentle waters also make this a good spot for **kayaking**. Although the mangroves are not set up for hiking, Curú (opposite) is just down the road.

Sleeping

There are a number of all-inclusive, very expensive, environmentally questionable resorts around here – if you want more information, talk to your travel agent.

Hotel Dos Lagartos (☎ 2683 0236; aulwes@costarica.net; d with/without bathroom US\$30/20; (P) (♿)) At the southern end of the bay, in the village of Tambor, this clean, simple American-run hotel has beach views, a nice restaurant and a pleasant garden. Seventeen tidy rooms share clean bathrooms, while five pricier units have private bathrooms.

Cabinas El Bosque (☎ 2683 0039; s/d/tr/q US\$17/23/27/29; (P) (♿)) A short walk to the beach, this is a good, cheap option. Rooms are neatly tiled, and though they're on the small side, they're quiet and have private cold-water bathrooms.

Cabinas Cristina (☎ 2683 0028; s/d/tr US\$17/23/27; (P) (♿) (♿)) These recommended cabins are run by the always-welcoming Eduardo and Cristina, a Tico couple who are eager to show you the *real* beauty of the area. Rooms are simple and spotless, and accommodate travelers of all budgets. There's also a small restaurant, and the owners can give you good advice about booking tours in the area.

Hotel Costa Coral (☎ 2683 0105; www.costacoral.com; d incl breakfast with/without air-con US\$70/58, additional person US\$19; (P) (♿) (♿)) Slightly more upscale (though you don't have to wear those ridiculous bracelets), the Costa Coral's 10 colorful

CLAMOR IN TAMBOR

Few sites are better examples of how *not* to be environmentally sustainable than Playa Tambor. In 1991 Spanish hotel chain Grupo Barceló began the construction of a massive beachside resort on this tranquil bay that was to include 2400 hotel rooms, a golf course and a marina. The following year, Barceló and the regional government overseeing the project were challenged by grassroots groups alleging environmental violations – from the draining of mangrove swamp to the removal of sand and gravel from a nearby riverbed (causing erosion). The hotel chain was ultimately fined the paltry sum of US\$14,000 for its actions. The project proceeded – though the plans were significantly scaled down – and Hotel Barceló Playa Tambor opened its doors to the public in 1992. Ironically, the hotel's website now touts the resort as ideal for 'nature lovers.'

The small fine outraged Noemi Canet, a Costa Rican biologist who was active in Ascona (Costa Rican Association for the Protection of Wildlife), an organization that helped lead the charge against Barceló. But for her, the main issue shouldn't be one hotel chain's alleged actions but the compliant attitude of her own government, which in turn opens the door for other developers to do the same thing.

Canet says that a number of things need to improve. For one, all tourism projects should require an environmental impact study conducted by a biologist knowledgeable about the area. In addition, she reports that the permit process is so Byzantine that sometimes it's difficult to know who is in charge of what, much less enforce environmental laws. Unfortunately, groups such as Ascona are fighting a continuing battle – one that pits the influence of money against the interests of local communities. 'This belongs to the people of Costa Rica,' says Canet of the country's natural wonders. 'It's a national treasure – we should start treating it as such.'

As the massive developments at the equally controversial Papagayo project (p262) continue on the northern Península de Nicoya, it's easy to be skeptical about whether this will happen soon enough.

For more information on the Costa Rican Tourism Institute's sustainable tourism program, visit www.turismo-sostenible.co.cr/en/home.shtml.

Spanish-colonial villas accommodate up to four people and have hot-water bathroom, cable TV, kitchenette and optional air-con. There's a pool and Jacuzzi, and there's also a small bar-restaurant. Credit cards are accepted.

Getting There & Away

The airport is just north of the entrance to Hotel Barceló Playa Tambor. Hotels will arrange pick-up at the airport for an extra fee. Between them, Sansa and NatureAir (one way/round-trip US\$72/144) have about six daily flights to San José.

Paquera–Montezuma buses pass through here.

CÓBANO

Cóbano has a post office, gas station, clinic and **Banco Nacional** (☎ 2642 0210; 🕒 8:30am–3:45pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat), making it the only real 'city' (it's hardly even a town) in the southeastern peninsula. Although there are a few hotels and restaurants here, there's no reason to stay since Montezuma is only 5km away.

Paquera–Montezuma buses pass through here, and a 4WD taxi to Montezuma costs about US\$6.

MONTEZUMA

Up until the late 1990s, a traffic jam in Montezuma was getting off your bike to shoo some cows off the road, a tourist was someone who left after only a month, a night out was rolling a spliff on the beach instead of in your hammock, a good time was – OK, you get the idea. Montezuma was one of the original 'destinations' in Costa Rica, and its remote location and proximity to Costa Rica's first nature reserve, Cabo Blanco (p314), attracted hippies, artists and dreamers alike. You had to work to get here, and no one had plans to leave quickly.

Montezuma is still a charming village, and foreign travelers continue to be drawn here by the laidback atmosphere, cheap hotels and sprawling beaches. And while nothing ever stays the same, Montezuma has managed to hang on to its tranquil appeal. Typical touristy offerings, like canopy tours and ATV

rentals, do a brisk trade here, but you'll see – in the yoga classes, the volunteer opportunities, the arts festivals and the vegan food – that the town stays well in touch with its hippie roots.

Information

The nearest bank is in Cóbano (opposite). For money exchange, tour operators in town will take US dollars, euros or traveler's checks, though you can expect to pay a heavy commission. Laundry service is available at most hotels for about US\$3 per kg. A couple of good web resources are www.nicoyapeninsula.com and www.playamontezuma.net.

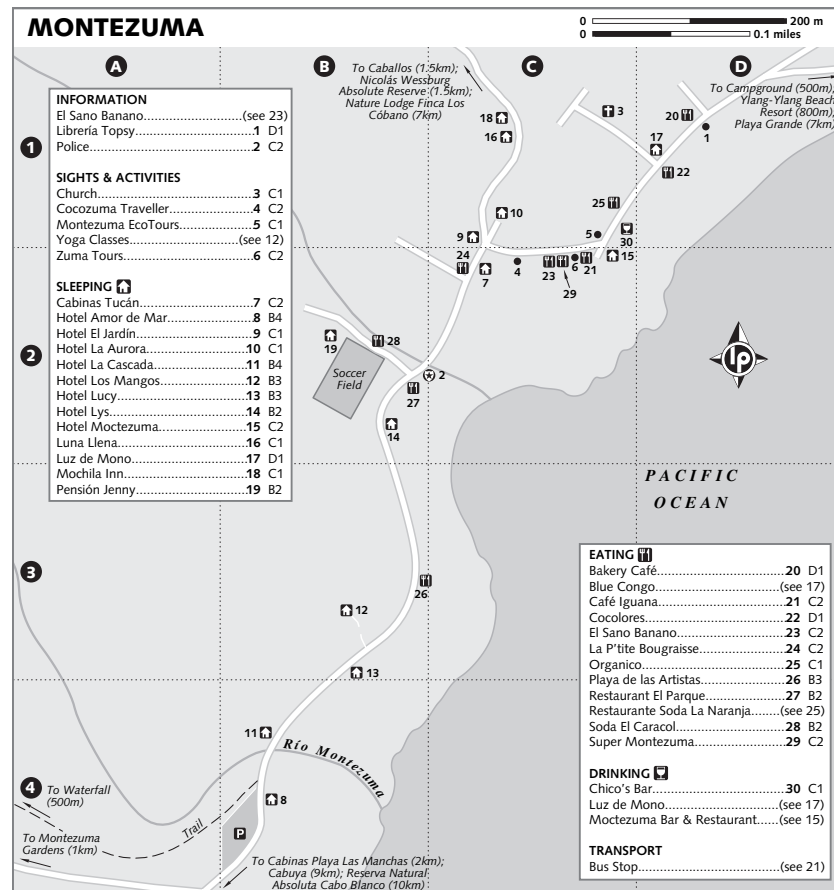
El Sano Banano (☎ 2642 0638; per hr US\$2) Internet access.

Librería Topsy (☎ 2642 0576; 🕒 8am–4pm Mon–Fri, 8am–noon Sat & Sun) Has American newspapers and magazines, and a large lending library with books in several languages. It also serves as the unofficial post service, selling stamps and making regular mail drops at Cóbano's post office.

Sights & Activities

BEACHES

Picture-perfect white-sand beaches are strung out along the coast, separated by small rocky headlands and offering great beachcombing and tide-pool studying. Unfortunately, there are strong rips along the entire coastline, so inquire locally before going for a swim and take care. For more information on riptides see boxed text, p278.



THE MONTEZUMA WATERFALL

A 20-minute stroll south of town takes you to a set of three scenic waterfalls. The main attraction here is to climb the second set of falls and jump in. Though countless people do this every day, be aware that even though there is a warning sign, about half a dozen people have died attempting this.

The first waterfall has a good swimming hole, but it's shallow and rocky and not suitable for diving. From here, if you continue on the well-marked trail that leads around and up, you will come to a second set of falls. These are the ones that offer a good clean leap (from 10m up) into the deep water below. To reach the jumping point, continue to take the trail up the side of the hill until you reach the diving area. Do *not* attempt to scale the falls. The rocks are slippery and this is how most jumpers have met their deaths. From this point, the trail continues up the hill to the third and last set of falls. Once again, these aren't that safe for jumping. However, there is a rope swing that will drop you right over the deeper part of the swimming hole (just be sure to let go on the out-swing!).

A lot of travelers enjoy the thrill, but as with anything of this nature, you undertake it at your own risk. To get there, follow the main Montezuma road south out of town and then take the trail to the right after Hotel La Cascada, past the bridge. You'll see a clearly marked parking area for visitors (US\$2.50 per car) and the beginning of the trail that leads up.

The beaches in front of the town are nice enough, but the further northeast you walk, the more isolated and pristine they become. During low tide, the best **snorkeling** is in the tide pools, and at the beach in front of Cabinas Playa Las Manchas (opposite). There's great **surf** if you're willing to walk the 7km up the coastline to Playa Grande, or if you head south about 3km to Playa Cedros.

Because of the town's carefree boho feel, topless and (sometimes) nude sunbathing have become de rigueur on some beaches. No one is likely to say anything if you choose to go topless, but keep in mind that Ticos are fairly conservative and many residents find the scene disrespectful of their town.

BUTTERFLY GARDEN

The **Montezuma Gardens** (☎ 8888 4200; www.montezumagardens.com; ☹ 8am-4pm) are about 1km up the hill toward Cóbano, alongside the waterfall trail, you can take a tour through this lush *mariposario* (butterfly garden) and nursery where the mysterious metamorphoses occur. On your walk, you'll learn about the life cycles and benefits of a dozen local species, of which you'll see many colorful varieties. The lovely Oregonian family running the gardens also have a B&B here and offer excellent live-work opportunities.

CANOPY TOUR

After you've flown down nine zip lines, the **Montezuma Waterfall Canopy Tour** (☎ 2642 0808;

www.montezumatraveladventures.com; US\$45) winds up with a hike down – rather than up – to the waterfalls. Bring your swimsuit.

HIKING & HORSEBACK RIDING

Inland from Montezuma is the **Nicolás Wessburg Absolute Reserve**, a private conservation area that was the original site of Olof Wessburg and Karen Mogensen's homestead (for more information, see p314). Although the reserve is closed to visitors, you can either hike or go horseback riding along its perimeter – tours can be arranged through operators in town or at the Nature Lodge Finca Los Caballos (p308).

YOGA

Daily **yoga classes** (☎ 8811 7582; www.montezuma.yoga.com; per person US\$12, private session US\$40) are offered at the open-air studio at Hotel Los Mangos.

Classes are also held at Ylang-Ylang Beach Resort and through **Devaya Yoga** (☎ 8833 5086).

Tours

Tour operators around town rent everything from snorkeling gear and body boards to bikes and ATVs. Prices vary depending on the season, and it pays to shop around. They can also arrange speed-boat transfers to Jacó as well as private shuttle transfers (also known as 'Gringo Buses').

The most popular tour is a boat trip to Isla Tortuga, which costs around US\$40 a person and should include lunch, fruit,

drinks and snorkeling gear. Although the island is certainly beautiful, travelers complain that the whole outing feels like a tourist circus, especially during high season when the entire island is full of boat tours.

Another popular excursion is to take a guided hike (US\$55) or a half-day horseback ride (US\$50) to nearby Cabo Blanco.

The following three tour operators are recommended:

Cocozuma Traveller (☎ 2642 0911; www.cocozumacr.com; ☹ 24hr)

Montezuma EcoTours (☎ 2642 0467; www.playa.montezuma.net/ecotours/agency.htm; ☹ 8am-9pm)

Zuma Tours (☎ 2642 0024; www.zumatours.net; ☹ 24hr)

Festivals & Events

Keep an eye out for posters advertising special events, as there always seems to be something going on in town.

Festival de Arte Chunches de Mar (www.chunchesdemar.com) This arts festival brings together artists and musicians to camp on the beach for one month – dates change every year, but is usually during high season – and create art together from found objects.

Montezuma International Film Festival (www.montezumafilmmfestival.com) Usually held in November, this is a great excuse to celebrate the arts in Montezuma before high season kicks in.

Sleeping

The high season gets crowded, though with so many hotels dotting such a small town you're bound to find something. High-season prices are listed throughout.

BUDGET

All the following hotels have shared cold-water showers unless otherwise stated. Also, be careful with your stuff – travelers frequently complain of thefts from hotel rooms in Montezuma.

Camping is illegal on the beaches, though some travelers seem to have not had a problem outside the town limits. If you want to play it safe, there is a small, shaded **campground** (per person US\$3) with bathrooms and cold showers only a 10-minute walk north of town.

Mochila Inn (☎ 2642 0030; d US\$15, d/tr cabins from US\$20/25; ☹) On a quiet hillside north of town, this secluded inn is brimming with wildlife and is silent (except for the sounds of the rain forest) at night. There are a variety of

rooms available that cater to different budgets, though everyone can use the outdoor toilets, which offer only a thin curtain between you and nature. (Bring binoculars and watch nature from the throne.)

Cabinas Playa Las Manchas (☎ 2642 0415; www.beach-hotel-manchas.com; d with kitchenette US\$40, without US\$17-30, casitas US\$140; ☹) About 2km south of the bridge, this low-key Italian-run spot is a fabulous deal. The wooden cabinas are simple and comfortable (despite having thin walls); one has its own kitchenette. The breezy common area (with pool table) opens to the romantic terrace restaurant in front, which serves authentic Italian specialties with hints of Asian influences. Best of all, it's directly across from the small beach Playa Las Manchas – a wonderful place for a sunrise snorkel.

Cabinas Tucán (☎ 2642 0284; s/d US\$10/20) Just north of the soccer field, the Tucán is attentively managed by the crotchety Doña Marta. Rooms are spotless, as are the communal showers.

Pensión Jenny (r per person US\$10) This lovely white-and-blue country house north of the soccer field is a bit removed from the action, which makes it a good option if you want a quiet night's sleep.

Hotel Lucy (☎ 2642 0273; s/d US\$10/24; ☹) This beachside pension is popular with shoestring travelers, and was the first budget place to open up in town. It's an excellent deal in this price range, with hammocks, tables and chairs on the shared terraces. There's free coffee and fruit in the mornings and a communal fridge, but no kitchen. Ask for a room upstairs – the ocean views and verandas make all the difference.

Luna Llena (☎ 2642 0390; www.playamontezuma.net/lunallena/index.swf; dm/s/d/tr from US\$10/18/28/35; ☹) On the northern edge of town at the base of the hills is this delightful German-run budget option that's terrific value. Eight rooms at the edge of the forest share kitchens and four hot-water bathrooms, but if you can, snag the honeymoon suite, an incredible pavilion that overlooks the bay. If not, the gorgeous shared blue-tile and wood-floored aerie boasts its own stunning ocean view.

Hotel Moctezuma (☎ 2642 0058; www.playa.montezuma.net/ecotours.htm; s/d US\$15/30) This hotel right in the center of town has 21 worn-out rooms containing private warm-water bathrooms, though the loud (and we mean very

L-O-U-D) bar next door won't allow for any beauty rest.

Hotel Lys (☎ 2642 0642; www.hotellysmontezuma.net; camping US\$6, r per person US\$16) This recommended beachside budget hotel is run by a group of funky Italians who are bursting with creativity. In addition to creating a laidback vibe that's perfect for slowing down and reflecting on your travels, the owners have also launched a project known as Libre Universidad de Montezuma, or LUDM. This rapidly evolving concept is based on communication through artistic expression, and the aim is for travelers to bring an idea to the resident artisans and explore a part of their personality that may not have been previously expressed. Past 'graduates' have studied music, sculpture, painting, cooking, photography and fashion, though the founders believe that the possibilities are endless as long as you arrive with an open mind.

MIDRANGE Montezuma

All hotels have private hot-water showers.

Hotel Los Mangos (☎ 2642 0076; www.hotellosmangos.com; d with/without bathroom US\$70/35, tr bungalow US\$93; ☎ ☎) This is a charming hotel offering bright, clean yellow-and-blue doubles with shared bathroom in the main building and bungalows with private bathrooms scattered around the mango-dotted gardens. There is also a small wooden pavilion near the base of the hills where daily yoga classes (p306) take place.

Hotel La Cascada (☎ 2642 0057; www.playamontezuma.net/cascada.php; d US\$45, additional person US\$15; ☎) By the river en route to the waterfalls, this classic Montezuma hotel has 19 simple wooden rooms with ocean views and a 2nd-floor deck that's fully strung with cozy hammocks – perfect for swinging or snoozing.

Hotel Amor de Mar (☎ 2642 0262; www.amorde-mar.com; d US\$58-111, houses from US\$210; ☎) At the southern end of town, this charming, serene place has a well-manicured lawn strewn with palms and strung with luxurious hammocks, all fronting a beautiful beach with a tide pool big enough to swim in. There are 11 rooms of different shapes and sizes that have varying amenities depending on your budget.

Hotel La Aurora (☎ 2642 0051; www.playamontezuma.net/aurora.htm; s/d from US\$47/58, additional person US\$5; ☎ ☎) La Aurora has been around for more than 20 years. and the pretty, vine-

covered yellow building has an assortment of 15 comfortable rooms with fan, orthopedic bed and mosquito net; others have varying degrees of cold or hot water and air-con. There's a communal kitchen and plenty of hammocks for chilling out. Credit cards accepted.

Luz de Mono (☎ 2642 0090; www.luzdemono.com; d/ste US\$81/93, casitas from US\$140, all incl breakfast; ☎ ☎ ☎) Between the beach and the forested hills, this hotel has a variety of rooms and casitas, though they're all well appointed with solar-heated showers, ceramic tiles and wooden accents (it's worth the splurge to have a private outdoor Jacuzzi). The bar-restaurant Blue Congo (dishes US\$5 to US\$12) serves a good mix of international and Tico dishes, but the real reason you're here is to try the restaurant's wine (who knew grapes grew in the tropics?). It's bottled under its own label, and it's called – wait for it – 'monkeyshine.' Credit cards accepted.

Hotel El Jardín (☎ 2642 0074; www.hotelesjardin.com; d US\$85-95, 4-person villa US\$135; ☎ ☎ ☎) This hillside hotel has 15 luxurious stained-wood cabins of various sizes and amenities (some have stone bathrooms and ocean views). The grounds are landscaped with tropical flowers and lush palms, and there's also a pool and Jacuzzi for soaking your cares away.

Around Montezuma

Nature Lodge Finca Los Caballos (☎ 2642 0124; www.naturelodge.net; d incl breakfast US\$100-160, additional person US\$23; ☎ ☎) North of Montezuma on the road to Cóbano, this 16-hectare ranch is adjacent to the Nicolás Wessburg Absolute Reserve. The lodge has a variety of rooms around the property with either jungle or ocean views. The Canadian owner prides herself on having some of the best looked-after horses in the area, and there are great opportunities here for riding on the trails around the reserve. You can also rent bikes, go hiking, have a meal in the restaurant or splash around the infinity pool.

Ylang-Ylang Beach Resort (☎ 2642 0636; www.ylangylangresort.com; d bungalow US\$186, beachfront r/ste US\$204/244, beachfront bungalow US\$274-308, all incl breakfast & dinner; ☎) About a 15-minute walk north of town along the beach is this resort catering to holistic holiday-seekers. Here you'll find a collection of beautifully appointed rooms, suites and polygonal bungalows with private hot showers (some open-air), as well as a palm-fringed swimming pool, yoga center,

gourmet restaurant and spa. Oh, and you can't actually drive here, though staff will pick you up in their custom beach cruisers. Credit cards are accepted.

Eating

Self-caterers should head to the Super Montezuma for fresh food.

Bakery Café (☎ 2642 0458; sanforest@hotmail.com; dishes US\$1-3; ☎ 6am-4pm) Grab a chair on the outdoor patio of this homey vegetarian restaurant and feast on homemade banana bread and French toast – or get some tasty whole-grain bread for a picnic on the beach (or on the ferry).

La P'tite Bougraisse (crêpes US\$3-5; ☎ 5-10pm Wed-Sun) Run by a lovely Montreal native, this wonderful crêperie has low-lit seating in which to enjoy your made-to-order savory and sweet crêpes as you watch the world walk by.

Restaurante Soda La Naranja (☎ 2642 1001; mains US\$3-5; ☎ 7:30am-10pm Mon-Sat) Typical food on the main strip, this *soda* has a nice shaded patio next to Organico and reasonably priced eats.

Restaurant El Parque (dishes US\$3-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) For beachside ambience and cheap seafood, this small *soda* is a good choice.

Organico (www.organicomontezuma.com; smoothies US\$4; ☎ 8am-6pm) When they say 'pure food made with love,' they mean it – this healthy new café turns out homemade, nondairy ice creams, vegan pastries, *batidos* (fruit smoothies) and other tasty treats you can feel good about.

Soda El Caracol (dishes US\$4-6; ☎ 11am-7pm) Although the building looks like it's seen better days, don't let appearances fool you – the casados here are tops.

Café Iguana (dishes US\$4-6; ☎ 6am-9pm) In the center of town is this vegetarian-friendly spot, where you can get hummus sandwiches, veggie lasagna, healthy salads and fresh *batidos*.

El Sano Banano (☎ 2642 0638; dishes US\$4-12; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This restaurant is way overpriced for simple dishes – nine bucks for a casado? But it's worth showing up in the evening when the restaurant shows nightly films for US\$6 minimum consumption.

Cocolores (☎ 2642 0348; dishes US\$5-12; ☎ 2-9:30pm) One of the best restaurants in Montezuma, Cocolores has a pleasant patio for candle-lit dinners and heaping portions of French-influenced cuisine, as well as some Tico-fusion standards.

TRAVEL LIKE YOU CARE!

So say Kerri Bowers and Cesar Benavides of **Proyecto Montezuma** (www.proyecto-montezuma.com), a wonderfully innovative volunteer program that not only gives to the community, but fosters cultural exchange, pays fair wages to its employees and gifts you something for giving of your time and energy. You choose the project in which you'd like to participate, such as teaching local classes or removing trash from the beach and jungle, and you also sign up for a sustainable adventure tour around Montezuma. Long-term opportunities are also available; hit the website for details.

Playa de las Artistas (☎ 2642 0920; mains US\$8-12; ☎ 10:30am-10:30pm) This artfully decorated beachside spot is the most adored restaurant in town. The international menu with heavy Mediterranean influences changes daily depending on locally available ingredients, though you can always count on fresh seafood and impeccable culinary sophistication.

Drinking & Entertainment

There are a few bars in town, and you can stop by El Sano Banano to check out which movie it's screening that night.

Chico's Bar is a sprawling complex of bars, tables, beach chairs and dance space with the music turned up loud – making it party central most nights. If you can score a table outside, it can be sort of romantic.

Luz de Mono has an open-air discotheque that plays house music on Thursday and reggae on Saturday (smoke 'em if you got 'em).

Moctezuma Bar & Restaurant at Hotel Moctezuma has an excellent location on the beach and two cool terraces.

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 Gulf of Nicoya, and the journey only takes about an hour. At US\$30 it's not cheap, but it'll save you about a day's worth of travel. Wear shoes you can use for a beach landing.

ALONG THE WEST COAST BY 4WD

If you are truly adventurous, have a lot of time on your hands and have some experience driving in places where there is nary a road in sight, then you might be ready to take on the southern Pacific coast of Península de Nicoya. Make sure that you have a 4WD with high clearance though, as well as a comprehensive insurance policy. Do *not* attempt this drive during the rainy season.

Mal País, Montezuma and Cabo Blanco are most frequently reached by the road that follows the eastern part of the peninsular coast and connects with the ferry from Puntarenas in Playa Naranjo. However, if you're looking for some adventure in your life, it's possible to take a 4WD from Playa Carrillo along the southeast coast to Islita, Playa Coyote, south to Mal País and points beyond. Again, don't even think of trying to do any of this in a regular car.

As the crow flies, it's about 70km of 'road' from Playa Carrillo to Mal País, though you should allow at least five hours for the trip (provided you encounter no delays). Several rivers have to be forded, including the Río Ora about 5km east of Carrillo, which is impassable at high tide during the dry season – even to 4WDs; check tide schedules.

From Playa Coyote, drivers will cross a few more rivers, including the Río Bongo and Río Arío, and pass by Playas Caletas, Arío and Manzanillo (you can camp on any of these beaches if you're self-sufficient). There are some pretty hairy river crossings throughout this stretch, so it certainly helps to talk to locals before setting out. In some cases the road doesn't cross directly through the river, and you'll have to drive up the river a bit to find the egress. In these cases, it is best to walk the river first, double-check the egress and then drive in so that you don't plunge your rental car into thigh-deep mud or onto a pile of rocks. Many a rental vehicle has been lost to this stretch of road, so it definitely pays to be cautious (see boxed text Driving Through Rivers, p548).

From Playa Manzanillo head inland to Cóbano (p304), which is well connected to Montezuma, Mal País and Cabo Blanco by reasonable dirt roads.

For the majority of the trip, there are no facilities, a couple of villages and few people that can help you if you get stuck. Also, the roads are unsigned, so getting lost will be part of the deal, though you can always navigate with a compass and the sun. Take a jerry can of gas, your favorite snack foods and plenty of water – if you break down, plan on spending some quality time on your own or with your traveling companion.

For very good reason, Costa Rica's tourist office recommends against undertaking this journey.

BUS

Buses depart Montezuma from in front of Café Iguana. Buy tickets directly from the bus driver.

Cabo Blanco US\$31, 30 minutes, departs at 8:15am, 10:15am, 2:15pm and 6:15pm.

Paquera US\$2, 1½ hours, departs at 5:30am, 8am, 10am, noon, 2pm, 4pm and 6pm.

San José US\$10, nine to 12 hours, departs at 4:45am.

Santa Teresa US\$1.25, 45 minutes, departs at 10:30am and 2:30am.

CAR & TAXI

During the rainy season, the stretch of road between Cóbano and Montezuma is likely to require a 4WD. In the village itself, parking can be a problem, though it's easy enough to walk everywhere.

A 4WD taxi is able to carry five people, and can take you from Montezuma to Cóbano (US\$6), Cabo Blanco (US\$12),

Tambor (US\$30), Mal País (US\$35) or Paquera (US\$30).

Montezuma Expeditions (www.montezumaexpeditions.com) runs private shuttles to San José (US\$35), Mal País and Santa Teresa (US\$35).

MAL PAÍS & SANTA TERESA

Mal País (Bad Country) refers to the southwestern corner of Nicoya that's famous among surfers for its consistent waves. The area lies more or less north to south along the coastline, with Santa Teresa being the largest village in the area. Further south is the smaller village of Playa Carmen, and more southerly still is Mal País, the village. ¿Comprende? Don't worry if it doesn't make sense at first; the villages have pretty much merged into one surf community lining the coast, and are collectively known as Mal País.

The legendary waves at Mal País have been attracting surfers since the 1970s, so it's not

surprising that many of them grew up and decided to stay. In the last several years, this once isolated corner of the peninsula has become something of the backpacker's version of Nosara – surf session in the morning, yoga in the afternoon and cruising at night. Widespread development is rapidly carving up the beachfront, and at press time, the dust on the coastal road was swirling as the road was being prepared for paving. Considering the speed of these changes and the busloads of international neo-hippies and surfers arriving by the day, it's looking like the next big thing – a big thing like Jacó or Tamarindo.

Mal País is not for everyone. If you're an experienced surfer looking for a 'scene,' throw away your itinerary because you're going to get stuck here. But if you're looking for an authentic Costa Rican beach town and are not so stoked on surf culture, skip the trip.

Orientation & Information

The road from Cóbano meets the beach road next to Frank's Place (see p312), on the western side of the peninsula. To the left (south) lies Mal País and to the right (north) there's Santa Teresa.

Across the intersection from Frank's Place is the new Centro Comercial Playa El Carmen, where you'll find a branch of **Banco Nacional** (☎ 640-0598; ☹ 1-7pm) that can change US dollars if it doesn't accept your ATM card. Super Santa Teresa (300m north of Frank's Place), on the road to Santa Teresa, will change US dollars and traveler's checks.

You can find internet access all over Mal País, but for a start, try Frank's Place on the main intersection and **Beach Break Surf Hotel** (☎ 2640 0612; www.beachbreakcr.net; ☹ 7am-10pm) in Santa Teresa.

A useful website for local info is www.malpais.net.

Activities

Surfing is usually the be-all and end-all for most visitors to Mal País, but the beautiful beach stretches north and south for kilometers on end – many accommodations can arrange horseback riding tours and fishing trips.

SURFING

The following beaches are listed from north to south. If you choose a lodge that has 'surf camp' in its name, chances are it's right in

front of a good break. At the very least, it can point you to the best nearby spots.

About 8km north of the intersection, **Playa Manzanillo** is a combination of sand and rock that's best surfed when the tide is rising and there's an offshore wind.

The most famous break in the Mal País area is at **Playa Santa Teresa**, and is characterized as being fast and powerful. This beach can be surfed virtually any time of day, though be cautious as there are scattered rocks.

Playa El Carmen, which is at the end of the road leading down from the main intersection, is a good beach break that can also be surfed anytime.

The Mal País area is saturated with surf shops, and competition has kept prices low – this is a good place to pick up an inexpensive board, and you can probably make most of your money back if you sell it elsewhere. Most of the local shops also do rentals and repairs, and may let you in on some good surf spots. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

Alex Surf Shop (☎ 2640 0364) Rent or buy a board here, or take a lesson; 250m north of the intersection.

Corduroy to the Horizon (☎ 2640 0173; ☹ 8am-6pm) Shapers Andy and Aaron create custom epoxy boards and also do ding repairs. Find their shop 50m west of Frank's Place.

Jobbie's Surf Camp (www.surfjobbie.com) Not a shop, per se, but kooky local Canuck Josh (aka 'Jobbie') is a brand in and of himself, and he gives surfing lessons.

Shit Hole (☎ 8887 9144) Yep, that's really what it's called, 200m north of the main intersection. It rents and sells boards as well as gives lessons – also, it claims to make crêpes.

Tuanis (☎ 2640 0370) Has internet access, various gifts and sundries, and can help book taxi services around the area. It's 2km north of Frank's.

YOGA

Yoga naturally complements surfing – at the very least, if you haven't been in the water for awhile, the stretching can be the perfect antidote to sore paddling arms.

Casa Zen (p312) Offers three- to seven-day yoga retreats; the instructor here teaches a variety of styles, from Ashtanga to Vinyasa.

Horizon Yoga Hotel (☎ 2640 0524; www.horizon-yogahotel.com) Offers three classes daily, in a serene environment overlooking the ocean.

Milarepa (p313) Offers classes in Hatha yoga, Swasthya yoga and partner yoga for all levels of practice.

Sleeping & Eating

We've listed these places in relation to the main intersection in Playa Carmen, where Frank's Place (below) occupies the corner. For simplicity's sake, though the nomenclature isn't technically accurate, listings north of the intersection appear in the Santa Teresa section. Listings around and south of the intersection we'll call Mal País.

SANTA TERESA

You'll find all of the following places heading north into Santa Teresa – they're listed below according to their distance from Frank's Place.

Frank's Place (☎ 2640 0096, 2640 0071; s with shared bathroom US\$25, bungalow US\$60, d US\$70; (P) (☎) (📺) (📺)) Coming into town from Cóbano, the first place you'll see is this local landmark and historic surfer outpost, which has taken over the entire corner with lots of rooms and an internet café. Spacious, tiled cabins are comfortable, and the shared bathrooms and communal kitchen are well kept. This place is always full of travelers, and the free-form pool, whirlpool and restaurant are great places to hang out and get the latest surf report.

Las Piedras (☎ 2640 0453; mains US\$3-7; (☎) lunch & dinner) This Argentinean-run chicken shack proclaims that, 'Our chicken is the sh%t.' One bite and you'll agree – its chicken really is the sh%t.

Tranquilo Backpackers (☎ 2640 0589; www.tranquilo-backpackers.com; dm US\$10, d/tr with shared bathroom US\$30/45, d with private bathroom US\$35, 4-/5-person loft apt US\$60/75, all incl breakfast; (P) (📺)) One of the best budget options in the area. Everything here has been designed to be smart, hip and functional – you can even flush the toilet paper. The owners know exactly how to create happy campers who get to eat their fill of free pancakes every morning and have access to the shared kitchen, shared hot-water bathrooms, free internet and free surfboards to borrow. Bikes can be rented for US\$3 per day, and if it's full (or you're almost broke), they'll let you sleep in a hammock (US\$7).

Hotel Buenos Aires (☎ 2640 0254; www.buenosaires-malpais.com; d with/without air-con US\$65/45; (P) (☎) (📺)) The eight rooms at this awesome hillside hotel have either hammocks or comfy chairs on its shared terraces, and private hot-water showers. There's a pool as well, but best of all is the restaurant, serving international food (mains US\$5 to US\$11) on a terrace with some of the

area's best views. Not a bad place for a few romantic drinks in the evening, either.

Luz de Vida (☎ 2640 0568; www.luzdevida-resort.com; d/tr/q US\$93/105/116, bungalow d/tr/q US\$111/122/134; (P) (☎) (📺)) The light of life is an apt name for this bright tropical refuge. All of the rooms and bungalows have air-con and private bathroom, and the common areas have a pool and cozy *palapa* bar.

Casa Zen (☎ 2640 0523; www.zencostarica.com; dm US\$12, d with shared bathroom US\$24-45, apt from US\$55; (P)) This recommended Asian-inspired guesthouse is decked out in Zen art, celestial murals and enough happy Buddha sculptures to satisfy all your belly-rubbing needs. The owner, Kelly, is committed to helping guests 'chill and recreate on their own time.' She also runs an eclectic restaurant (dishes US\$3 to US\$7) that has everything from veggie sandwiches and burgers to fresh sushi and Thai curries. Casa Zen also offers a variety of yoga retreats; check the website for current offerings.

Trópico Latino Lodge (☎ 2640 0062; www.hotel-tropicalatino.com; d/tr/q US\$100/115/130, bungalow from US\$140; (P) (☎) (📺)) Beautifully decorated with dark wood and deep, saturated colors, the roomy bungalows here are peppered around a tropical garden and along the beach, and feature air-con, king-size beds, hammock-strung patios and private hot-water bathrooms (one bungalow also has a full kitchen). There's a dreamy pool fringed with palms and heliconia, and a surfside restaurant (dishes US\$4 to US\$8) that specializes in Italian food.

Hostal Brunela (☎ 2640 0321; hostalbrunela.com; dm US\$12; (P)) This big hostel feels very homey, maybe because there are so many long-term surf slaves living here, or because the owner has a kind, paternal air about him, or the lounge area feels like a giant living room with, uh, *sleepy* surfers sprawled out watching TV. Comfortable, colorful rooms each have four beds, lockers and a private bathroom. The kitchen is huge and fully equipped – with free coffee – and the place is right next to a great surf break.

Don Jon's (☎ 2640 1938; grupodonjons@gmail.com; dm/d/apt from US\$12/35/50; (P) (☎)) This basic spot is run by a couple of Tico brothers who offer clean rooms for various budgets, some with fridges and air-con. The two-bedroom apartment has a full kitchen and is roomy enough for four or five.

Funky Monkey Lodge (☎ 2640 0272; www.funky-monkey-lodge.com; dm/ste US\$12/99, 4-person bungalow

US\$93, 8-person bungalow US\$163; (P) (☎) (📺) (📺)) Up the hill from Tuanis (p311), this funky lodge is situated at the top of a natural rock hill, and has sweet, rustic-style bungalows built out of bamboo. Each has an open-air shower, and the larger ones have a fully equipped kitchen. A popular bar-restaurant (sushi rolls US\$4 to US\$8) packs in the crowds with good international food and excellent sunsets.

Point Break Hotel (☎ 2640 0190; www.surfing-malpais.com; casita with/without bathroom from US\$50/40; (P)) Down a quiet dirt road, these cute wooden casitas are a great deal, and about 50m to a beautiful beach break. The bigger casitas are raised on stilts, have full kitchens and lofts – perfect if you're on a surf trip with a few buddies.

our pick **Cuesta Arriba** (☎ 2640 0607; www.santateresa-hotels.com; dm US\$12; (P)) Up a hill across from one of Santa Teresa's best surf breaks, this Argentinean-run hostel is a gem – each bright, colorful room sleeps four and has a private bathroom. There's a big, beautiful kitchen area with a breezy wood-floored terrace upstairs with a flat-screen TV and DVDs. It also has boards for rent, laundry service, coffee and toast in the morning, and secure parking. There are hammocks in the garden, lots of places to lounge, and the vibe is happy and relaxed.

Milarepa (☎ 2640 0023; www.milarepahotel.com; bungalow from US\$198; (P) (📺)) This self-proclaimed 'small hotel of luxurious simplicity' has Asian-inspired bungalows constructed of bamboo and Indonesian teak. Each is furnished with four-poster beds draped in voluminous mosquito nets, and comes complete with a shower open to the sky. The restaurant (mains US\$6 to US\$9) serves international cuisine that emphasizes the fresh local seafood. The owners can arrange tours and activities and offer several types of yoga classes (see p311 for details).

Florblanca (☎ 2640 0232; www.florblanca.com; villa incl breakfast US\$675-1050; (P) (☎) (📺)) The most sumptuous hotel in Santa Teresa is truly in a class of its own – not surprisingly, it belongs to the group of 'Small Distinctive Hotels of Costa Rica.' Ten romantic villas are scattered around 37 hectares of land next to a pristine white-sand beach. Each villa is lit by warm hues, with indoor-outdoor spaces such as open-air sunken bathtubs and living areas. Complimentary yoga and Pilates classes are offered, as are free use of bikes, surfboards

and snorkeling equipment. Transfers to and from Tambor airport are included in the rates. Its Asian-fusion restaurant, Nectar (dishes US\$7 to US\$20), is open to the public and is highly recommended for its innovative dishes and unbelievably fresh sushi. Credit cards accepted; children under 13 are not allowed.

On the beach, **Roca Mar** (☎ 2640 0250; per person US\$6; (P)) and **Zeneida's** (☎ 2640 0118; camping per person US\$6; (P)) offer secure parking and lots of space to camp, as well as toilets and cold showers, but no kitchen.

MAL PAÍS

Frank's Place (opposite) marks the spot – this is the main intersection, where shuttles will drop you off and pick you up.

Umi Sushi (☎ 2640 0968; sushi US\$3-10; (☎) noon-10pm) In the courtyard of the Centro Comercial Playa El Carmen, this sushi bar has a pleasant dining room and tables outside. If you're lucky, it will have a surf movie projected on the outside wall while you savor your Mal País roll. Beer drinkers beware: it only serves Japanese beers, at exorbitant prices.

Palma Real (☎ 2640 1913; mains US\$3-8; (☎) noon-9pm) On the road back toward Cóbano, past Frank's Place, pull up a chair at this family-run spot for fresh *ceviche*, fish tacos and fried yuca. It does typical Tico food as well, but if you're craving a taco, this is where you want to be. It is open daily during the hours listed, *más o menos*.

You'll find all of the following places heading south from the intersection into Mal País.

Ritmo Tropical (☎ 2640 0174; ritmtropical_mp@yahoo.com; s/d US\$58/64; (P) (📺)) Clean, tropical-themed cabins with airy rooms, hot showers and shady verandas dot the simple grounds of this peaceful, family-run place. There's an on-site bar-restaurant (dishes US\$3 to US\$7) that does pancakes and *gallo pinto* (beans and rice) in the morning, and Italian-inspired dishes for lunch and dinner.

The Place (☎ 2640 0101; www.theplacemalpais.com; d incl breakfast US\$68-230, additional person US\$12; (P) (☎) (📺)) Cheaper rooms in this Swiss-run guesthouse are air-conditioned and have private hot-water bathrooms, but it's absolutely worth it to splurge on the more expensive bungalows – each one is creatively decorated according to a different theme (check the website for pictures). Rooms ring a small

pool amid the somewhat random landscaping. The owners can arrange surfing lessons and tours, and the small restaurant serves Mediterranean-style seafood by candlelight in the evenings.

Malpais Surf Camp & Resort (☎ 2640 0061; www.malpaisurfcamp.com; camping per person US\$7, cabina US\$41, r US\$64, villa US\$111; 📞 📺 📺) Whether you're looking for a breezy bunkhouse or poolside villa, this 'surfer's lodge' caters to travelers of all budget levels. However, regardless of how much you're paying each night, you can wander the landscaped tropical grounds, swim in the lavish pool or grab a cold beer in the open-air bar-restaurant.

Soda Piedra Mar (☎ 2640 0069; mains US\$3-7; 📞 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is one of the best local places to eat in Mal País, with generous portions of fresh seafood and, as the name suggests, a rocky location right on the ocean.

Blue Jay Lodge (☎ 2640 0089; www.bluejaylodgecostarica.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$50/65, additional person US\$20; 📞) These charming stilt bungalows are built along a forest-covered hillside, each with its own hot-water bathroom and huge, screened-in veranda with hammocks. The bamboo-and-wood bungalows sleep three, and though they're a bit on the rustic side, the luxury is in their spaciousness and openness to their surroundings. The lodge is 200m from the beach.

Star Mountain Eco Resort (☎ 2640 0101 www.starmountaineco.com; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$65/95/110; 📞 📺 📺 📺) This intimate and secluded lodge was built without cutting down a single tree, and today the grounds of the resort abound with wildlife. There are trails leading through the property that have good birding, and a viewpoint overlooks both sides of the peninsula. There are four hillside rooms, each simply and thoughtfully decorated in muted tropical colors. Only the casita (US\$130) has air-con and wi-fi access. The resort is off the rough road (4WD only) between Mal País and Cabuya, alongside the Cabo Blanco reserve (follow the signs), 5.5km south of Frank's Place. It's closed in September and October.

Getting There & Away

From Mal País, there's a bus to Cóbano at 7am. From Santa Teresa there are buses at 6:45am and 11am. A taxi to these areas from Cóbano costs about US\$18, depending on road conditions.

CABUYA

This tiny village is scattered along a dirt road about 9km south of Montezuma. Although it's rather uninteresting, it's worth visiting the town **cemetery**, which is on Isla Cabuya to the southeast and can only be reached at low tide. Here you'll find a few modest graves marked by crosses, though make sure you keep an eye on the tides!

Aside from the cemetery, most travelers either pass through Cabuya on their way to Cabo Blanco or use the town as a base for exploring Cabo Blanco.

Coming from Montezuma, the first hotel you'll come to is the Belgian-owned **Hotel Celaje** (☎ 2642 0374; www.celaje.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$70/82; 📞 📺 📺 📺), which has a collection of beautiful A-frame, thatched bungalows that sleep four. Neatly standing beside a nice pool and Jacuzzi, each lovely bungalow has its living quarters above, and an open ground floor with its own hammock. Real Belgian beer is readily available.

The Dutch-owned **Ancla de Oro** (☎ 2642 0369; www.caboblancopark.com/ancla; d US\$22, d/tr bungalow US\$35/42; 📞) was one of the original places to stay in the area and is looking a little overgrown. There are simple rooms catering to budget travelers, but it's worth springing for the 'jungalows,' which are raised bungalows like the others in Cabuya – but the most rustic of the lot.

Turning down the signed side road, you'll find the Tica-run **Howler Monkey Hotel** (☎ 2642 0303; www.caboblancopark.com/howler; bungalow US\$60; 📞 📺). These are cute A-frame bungalows with kitchenettes. In price and condition, they strike a happy medium between Hotel Celaje and Ancla de Oro. They are perfectly clean and comfortable, and the place is right on a slice of very quiet, rocky beach.

For everything else, make a pit stop at **Café Coyote** (dishes US\$5-6; 📞). The owners serve up pizza, seafood and veggie meals, and offer internet access.

RESERVA NATURAL ABSOLUTA CABO BLANCO

Just 11km south of Montezuma is Costa Rica's oldest protected wilderness area. Cabo Blanco is comprised of 1272 hectares of land and 1700 hectares of surrounding ocean, and includes the entire southern tip of the Península de Nicoya. The moist microclimate present on the tip of the peninsula fosters the growth

of evergreen forests, which are unique when compared with the dry tropical forests typical of the Nicoya. The park also encompasses a number of pristine white-sand beaches and offshore islands that are favored nesting areas for various species of bird.

The park was originally established by a Danish-Swedish couple, the late Karen Mogensen and Olof Wessberg, who settled in Montezuma in the 1950s and were among the first conservationists in Costa Rica. In 1960 the couple was distraught when they discovered that sections of Cabo Blanco had been clear-cut. At the time, the Costa Rican government was primarily focused on the agricultural development of the country (see boxed text A Whopper of a Problem, p223), and had not yet formulated its modern-day conservation policy. However, Karen and Olof were instrumental in convincing the government to establish a national park system, which eventually led to the creation of the Cabo Blanco reserve in 1963. The couple continued to fight for increased conservation of ecologically rich areas, but tragically Olof was murdered in 1975 during a campaign in the Osa Peninsula. Karen continued their work until her death in 1994, and today they are buried in the Nicolás Wessberg Absolute Reserve, which was the site of their original homestead.

Cabo Blanco is called an 'absolute' nature reserve because prior to the late 1980s visitors were not permitted. Even though the name has remained, a limited number of trails have been opened to visitors, though the reserve remains closed on Monday and Tuesday to minimize environmental impact.

Information

The **ranger station** (☎ 2642 0093; admission US\$8; 📞 8am-4pm Wed-Sun) is 2km south of Cabuya at the entrance to the park, and trail maps are available. It is not possible to overnight in the park, though there are plenty of options in nearby Cabuya (opposite) or Montezuma

(p307). Bring drinks and snacks as there is no food or water available.

The average annual temperature is about 27°C/80°F and annual rainfall is some 2300mm at the tip of the park. Not surprisingly, the trails can get muddy, so it's best to visit from December to April – the dry season.

Activities

WILDLIFE-WATCHING

Monkey, squirrel, sloth, deer, agouti and raccoon are usually present, and armadillo, coati, peccary and anteater are occasionally sighted.

The coastal area is known as an important nesting site for brown booby, which are mostly found 1.6km south of the mainland on **Isla Cabo Blanco** (White Cape Island). The name 'Cabo Blanco' was coined by Spanish *conquistadores* when they noticed that the entire island consisted of guano-encrusted rocks. Other seabirds in the area include brown pelican and magnificent frigatebird.

HIKING

From the ranger station, the **Swedish Trail** and **Danish Trail** lead 4.5km down to a wilderness beach at the tip of the peninsula. Note that both trails intersect at various points, and it's possible to follow one down and return on the other. Be advised that the trails can get very muddy (especially in the rainy season), and are fairly steep in certain parts – plan for about two hours in each direction. From the beach at the end of the trails it's possible to follow another trail to a second beach, though check first with park rangers as this trail is impassable at high tide.

Getting There & Away

Buses depart from the park entrance for Montezuma at 7am, 9am, 1pm and 4pm.

A 4WD taxi (for six passengers) from Montezuma to the park costs about US\$12. You can prearrange for a pick-up.

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