

Northwestern Costa Rica



Iconic Costa Rica lives in the northwest. Whether it's for a glimpse of Volcán Arenal spitting fiery lava, the flash of green from a quetzal's wing or the perfect barrel ride at Witch's Rock, this region is heavily traveled for these and a wealth of other reasons. The landscape ranges from the blazing, dry beaches of the Guanacaste coast to the mist-shrouded heights of Volcán Miravalles (2028m) along the region's chain of volcanoes. The number and diversity of national parks and reserves alone sums up northwestern Costa Rica's classic ecodestination status.

Many visitors make Arenal and Monteverde their first and last stop in the region, but if you have more time, it's worth seeking out the smaller, less-visited spots for a taste of something more authentic. Fumaroles and bubbling mud pots, impossibly aquamarine waterfalls and jewel-toned frogs and toucans add unexpected wonder to swaths of tropical wet forest and the humid slopes of the Cordillera de Guanacaste. At lower elevations, the open stretch of big-sky country along the Interamericana is lined with fincas (farms) and the odd guanacaste tree, for which the province is named. Just short of the Nicaraguan border, a detour west off the Interamericana leads to out-of-the-way bays, some kick up consistent wind for kiteboarding addicts while others shelter tranquil sands for unruffled sunbathers.

While the hot spots in the northwest are undoubtedly well traveled, the infinitude of natural attractions and remote destinations means that the experience can be as small, or as sprawling, as you want to make it. Backroads abound, offering independent travelers endless opportunities to explore the lesser-known, tucked-away treasures of the region.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Watching lava light the night above the peak of **Volcán Arenal** (p241) from viewpoints in La Fortuna or El Castillo
- Waking early to hike in the magical mists of **Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde** (p190) and **Reserva Santa Elena** (p201) before the busloads arrive
- Satisfying your need for speed on windy **Bahía Salinas** (p227) with a kitesurfing course, or taking the chance to bronze on a deserted bay
- Trekking the circuit of waterfalls, thermal pools and volcanic vents of **Volcán Rincón de la Vieja** (p215) by foot and horseback
- Hiking out to the otherworldly cerulean-blue waters of the Río Celeste at **Parque Nacional Volcán Tenorio** (p205)
- Watching wildlife at Costa Rica's largest wetland sanctuary, **Parque Nacional Palo Verde** (p208)



History

The first occupants of Guanacaste are believed to have been the Chorotega, who occupied large tracts of land throughout Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua in the 8th century BC. Unfortunately, our knowledge about the group is incomplete due to the lack of extensive ruins typical of populations in other parts of Central America. For more information on the Chorotega, see boxed text, p285.

Although their civilization prospered for over 2000 years, the Chorotega were wiped out by warfare and disease during the Spanish colonial period. During this era, the Spanish systematically clear-cut large tracts of dry tropical rain forest as the table-flat landscape was perfect for growing crops and raising cattle.

Following the independence of Central America from Spain, the newly independent provinces formed the Central American Federation. At the time, Guanacaste was part of Nicaragua, although border disputes resulted in skirmishes with Costa Rica. But on July 25, 1824, Guanacastecos voted to separate and join Costa Rica. Contemporary Guanacastecos take pride in their unique origin and culture, and it's not uncommon to see flags proclaiming an independent Guanacaste.

Climate

The climate in northwestern Costa Rica varies widely from the heat of Guanacaste to the peaks of the chain of volcanoes in the region. As Costa Rica's driest province, Guanacaste gets little to no rain during the months of November through April, in sharp contrast to the rest of the tropical country. At higher elevations that range from dry tropical forest to the famous misty cloud forests, temperatures are significantly cooler (averaging at around 18°C/65°F year-round), and places like Monteverde modulate between humid and rainy.

Parks & Reserves

Northwestern Costa Rica has a wealth of parks and reserves, ranging from little-visited national parks to the highlight on many visitors' itineraries, Monteverde.

Parque Nacional Guanacaste (p222) One of the least-visited parks in Costa Rica, the land transitions between dry tropical forest to humid cloud forest.

Parque Nacional Palo Verde (p208) Stay at the research station here and take a guided tour to see some of the 300-plus bird species that have been recorded in this rich wetland.

Parque Nacional Rincón de la Vieja (p215) Peaceful, muddy isolation can be found just outside of Liberia, where bubbling thermal activity abounds.

Parque Nacional Santa Rosa (p218) Access legendary surf, hike through the largest stand of tropical dry forest in Central America and visit an historical battle site.

Parque Nacional Volcán Arenal (p241) Centered on the perfect cone of Volcán Arenal, the clouds will sometimes disperse to reveal red-hot lava or a plume of smoke.

Refugio Nacional de Fauna Silvestre Peñas Blancas (p168) If you're self-sufficient, it's possible to visit this wild refuge in the southern Cordillera de Tilarán.

Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Bahía Junquillal (p221) Another small, peaceful protected site, this refuge has a beach backed by mangrove swamp and tropical dry forest.

Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde (p190) Costa Rica's most famous cloud forest, Monteverde receives a steady stream of visitors without having lost its magic.

Reserva Biológica Lomas de Barbudal (p209) If you're here in March, you might be lucky enough to catch the yellow blooms of the *corteza amarilla* tree in this tropical dry forest reserve.

Reserva Santa Elena (p201) Slightly less crowded and at a higher elevation than Monteverde, this is also a good spot to seek a quetzal sighting.

Dangers & Annoyances

While foreign women generally have no problems traveling in Costa Rica, they may sense a whiff of *machismo* in Guanacaste, most often if traveling alone, and usually in the form of harmless hissing or catcalls. This constant annoyance may become exasperating (especially when combined with heat and humidity), and the best way to combat it is simply to ignore it.

Getting There & Around

More and more visitors are flying directly into Liberia, a convenient international airport that makes for quick escapes to both northwestern Costa Rica and the beaches of the Península de Nicoya. Liberia is also a major transport center for buses traveling the Interamericana, from the border with Nicaragua to San José. Regular buses also serve the Península de Nicoya to hubs such as Santa Cruz and Nicoya and coastal points beyond. The most unusual mode of transport in the area is the jeep-boat-jeep transfer between Monteverde and La Fortuna, but it's also possible to do the trip on horseback.

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INTERAMERICANA NORTE

Even between the Tico speed demons and lumbering big rigs, the Interamericana offers up a wide-angle view of the region. This highway, the main artery connecting San José with Managua, Nicaragua, runs through kilometers of tropical dry forest and neat roadside villages, to the open grasslands and fincas of the northern end of Guanacaste Province. Vistas across vast expanses of savannah, which seem more suited to Africa or the American southwest, are broken only by windblown trees, some of which shed their leaves during the hot, dry summer. But complex communications between these seemingly dormant giants will suddenly inspire an entire species to erupt into fountains of pink, yellow or orange blossoms, welling up from the dry grasses in astounding syncopation. This is also where you'll see the signature gait of the *sabanero* (cowboy) as he rounds up a herd of cattle with grace and precision.

For travelers, this is the main route for accessing Monteverde, Liberia, the northern volcanoes, Parque Nacional Santa Rosa and the extreme northwest. The Arenal route (p228) connects with the Interamericana Norte in Cañas.

REFUGIO NACIONAL DE FAUNA SILVESTRE PEÑAS BLANCAS & AROUND

This 2400-hectare refuge, not to be confused with the Nicaraguan border crossing of the same name, is along the steep southern arm of the Cordillera de Tilarán. Elevations in the small area range from less than 600m to over 1400m above sea level, variations that result in different types of forest, such as tropical dry forest in the lower southwestern sections, semideciduous dry and moist forests in middle elevations, and premontane forest in the higher northern sections. The terrain is very rugged, and while there are some hiking trails, they are unmaintained and difficult to follow.

The name Peñas Blancas (White Cliffs) refers to the diatomaceous deposits, similar to a good-quality chalk, found in the reserve. The whitish deposits, remnants of unicellular algae once common here when Central America was under water, are found in the

steep walls of some of the river canyons in the refuge.

The refuge was created to protect the plant species in the varied habitats as well as an important watershed, and until the Ministerio del Ambiente y Energía (Minae; Ministry of Environment & Energy) gets the money to develop some tourist infrastructure, the region is inaccessible to all but the most diligent visitors. There are no facilities at the refuge. **Camping** (per person US\$2) is allowed, but you must be self-sufficient and in good shape to handle the very demanding terrain. The dry season (January to early April) is the best time to go – it's unlikely that you'll see anyone else there.

The closest town to the refuge is **Miramar**, an historic gold-mining town about 8km northeast of the Interamericana. In town you can visit **Las Minas de Montes de Oro** (guided tour US\$79), an old, abandoned gold mine that dates back to 1815. The tour is coupled with horse riding and a guided hike to a waterfall. The mine is administered by **Finca Daniel Adventure Park** (☎ 2639 9900; www.finca-daniel.com; 2hr horse riding tour US\$45, waterfall canopy tour US\$89), which has the usual assortment of pricey tours. The onsite lodge, **Hotel Vista Golfo** (s/d/tr standard US\$64/67/82, with view US\$75/78/94; ☎ ☑ ☒), is a pleasant hotel with a tranquil, mountain setting that's perfect for getting a little fresh air. Rustic rooms have private hot-water bathrooms, and some have sweeping views of the Golfo de Nicoya. There's also a shady pool and a good restaurant. A much more personal option is the German-run **Finca El Mirador B&B** (☎ 2639 8774; www.finca-mirador.com; d US\$60; ☎ ☑), which has three adorable bungalows equipped with full kitchens – perfect for self-caterers.

In the small town of Zapotal, 18km north-east of Miramar, is the **Reserva Biológica Alberto Manuel Brenes** (☎ 2437 9906; resbio@cariari.ucr.ac.cr), a cloud-forest reserve administered by the University of Costa Rica. The park is famous among birders for its quetzal population, and travelers usually arrive here on a private tour.

Although there are infrequent buses connecting Miramar to San José and Puntarenas, this is a difficult area to travel in without your own car. Also, be advised that the roads here are frequently washed out during the rainy season, so a 4WD is highly recommended.

COSTA DE PÁJAROS

The 40km stretch of road between Punta Morales in the south and Manzanillo in the north is famous for its mangrove-lined shores, which attract countless varieties of birds (and birders). The most famous sight in the area is **Isla Pájaros** (Bird Island), which lies less than 1km off the coast at Punta Morales. There are no facilities on the 3.8-hectare islet, which protects a rare colony of brown pelicans. It also acts as a refuge for various seabirds, and the island is a virtual forest of wild guava trees. Aside from becoming an ornithologist, you can visit the island on an organized tour (from US\$30), which can be arranged at La Ensenada Lodge.

Popular among the birding population, **La Ensenada Lodge** (☎ 2289 6655; www.laensenada.net; s/d/tr/q US\$49/62/76/84; ☎ ☑) is a 380-hectare finca and working cattle ranch, salt farm and papaya orchard. Comfortable villas, which face out onto the Golfo de Nicoya, have private bathrooms heated by solar panels and private patios with hammocks – perfect for watching sunsets (or birds). There's also a pool, restaurant and tennis courts, and you can help out with reforestation projects or on the farm.

JUNTAS

Las Juntas de Abangares (its full name) is a small town on the Río Abangares that was once the center of the gold-mining industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Juntas was once the premier destination in Costa Rica for fortune seekers and entrepreneurs from all over the world, who wanted a part of mine-owner Minor Keith's other golden opportunity. Today, it's simply a pleasant mountain town full of ranchers and farmers.

With the gold boom over, Juntas is trying to reel in travelers by flaunting its ecomuseum and a recently constructed hot-springs resort. Most travelers aren't making special detours here on their way to or from Monteverde, but Juntas makes for a pleasant enough stop if you've got your own wheels. If it's starting to get dark, it's a good place to spend the night rather than misguidedly attempting the muddy slip-and-slide commonly known as the road to Monteverde.

Orientation & Information

The town of Juntas is centered on the Catholic church, which has some very nice stained glass, and the small but bustling downtown is about 300m north of the church, with a Banco

Nacional and several *sodas* (inexpensive eateries) and small markets. The Ecomuseo is 3km from the main road.

Sights

OK, so the terms 'eco' and 'mining' don't exactly sing 'chocolate and peanut butter' to us either, but it's still worth visiting the small **Ecomuseo de las Minas de Abangares** (☎ 2662 0310; suggested donation US\$2; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Fri), which has a few photographs and models depicting the old mining practices of the area. In the grounds outside the museum are a picnic area and children's play area, and there's a good system of trails that pass by old mining artifacts, such as bits of railway. There's also good **birding** (and iguana-ing) along the trails, and monkeys are occasionally sighted.

From the Interamericana, take the paved road 100m past the Parque Central, turn left, cross a bridge, then turn right at the 'Ecomuseo 4km' sign. About 2km past Juntas, the road forks – a sign indicates a road going left to Monteverde (30km) and to the right to the Ecomuseo (3km).

Tours

Mina Juntas (☎ 2662 0753; www.minatours.com; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri), behind the church, is a family-run tour outfit that can arrange transportation and accommodations reservations, and offers several gold-themed tours, including the Ecomuseo and abandoned mines, beginning at about US\$30 per person for day trips and more for overnight excursions.

Sleeping & Eating

Cabinas Las Juntas (☎ 2662 0153; s/d US\$6/10; ☎ ☑) The cheapest bed in town is perfectly acceptable if you're just looking to get a bit of shut-eye before heading to Monteverde. Basic but clean, small, tiled rooms with a cold private shower and cable TV. América, the proprietor, will fix breakfast for US\$2 extra. It's 200m south of the gas station.

Centro Turístico Cayuco (☎ 2662 0868; d with/without air-con US\$15/10; ☎ ☑ ☒) This is a popular option with vacationing Ticos as there's an onsite pool, hot spring, restaurant and bar, all 200m north of the mining station. Unfortunately, the pool barely looks swimmable, and the hot spring is a concrete dish that's fed by a pipe bearing 'springwater' of dubious origins. The rooms, however, are decent, and have cable TV and private bathrooms with cold water.

Pueblo Antiguo Lodge & Spa (☎ 2662 0033; www.puebloantiguo.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$32/61; (P) ♿ ♿) This rustic mountain getaway next to the Ecomuseo caters to tourists looking for a rejuvenating escape; and its onsite hot springs, swimming pool, Jacuzzi, sauna, nature trails and restaurant ensure you will be sufficiently entertained (and relaxed). Ten rooms in wooden cabins have private bathrooms and scenic mountain views, and there's a good chance wildlife will appear on your front doorstep. The friendly staff members also arrange tours to the nearby Ecomuseo and gold mines.

Restaurante Los Mangos (☎ 2662 0410; mains US\$3-6; ♿ 11am-2am Tue-Sun) The nicest restaurant in town (we know it's run-down, but there aren't exactly a lot of options here) is on the main road, and does your standard mix of casados (set meals), *ceviche* (local dish of uncooked but well-marinated seafood) and fried chicken, and it'll get you liquored up at night.

Getting There & Away

Buses from Cañas (US\$0.50, 45 minutes) depart at 9:30am and 2:15pm. There are no buses to the Ecomuseo, but a taxi will cost about US\$4 one way.

Drivers can take the turnoff from the Interamericana, 27km south of Cañas at a gas station called **La Irma** (☎ 2645 5647), where you can also catch buses between Liberia and San José. Monteverde is 30km from Las Juntas on a rough dirt road, though it's passable to normal cars in the dry season; buses taking the 2½-hour route to Monteverde stop at La Irma around 2:30pm.

MONTEVERDE & SANTA ELENA

Strung between two lovingly preserved cloud forests is this slim corridor of civilization, which consists of the Tico village of Santa Elena and the Quaker settlement of Monteverde. A 1983 feature article in *National Geographic* described this unique landscape and subsequently billed the area as *the* place to view one of Central America's most famous birds – the resplendent quetzal. Suddenly, hordes of tourists armed with tripods and telephoto lenses started braving Monteverde's notoriously awful access roads, which came as a huge shock to the then-established Quaker community. In an effort to stem the tourist flow, local communities lobbied to stop developers from paving the

roads. And it worked. Today, the dirt roads leading to Monteverde and Santa Elena have effectively created a moat around this precious experiment in sustainable ecotourism.

The cloud forests near Monteverde and Santa Elena are Costa Rica's premier destination for everyone from budget backpackers to well-heeled retirees. On a good day, Monteverde is a place where you can be inspired about the possibility of a world where organic farming and alternative energy sources help to salvage the fine mess we've made of the planet. On a bad day, Monteverde can feel like a cross between a natural reserve and Disneyland. But the upside is that the local community continues to maintain the fragile balance of this ecopark and fight against the threat of overdevelopment.

History

The history of these settlements dates back to the 1930s when a few Tico families left the gold-mining settlement of Juntas, and headed up the mountain to try to make a living through logging and farming. In a completely unrelated turn of events, four Quakers (a pacifist religious group also known as the 'Friends') were jailed in Alabama in 1949 for their refusal to be drafted into the Korean War. Since Quakers are obligated by their religion to be pacifists, the four men were eventually released from prison. However, in response to the incarceration, 44 Quakers from 11 families left the US and headed for greener pastures – namely Monteverde.

The Quakers chose Monteverde (Green Mountain) for two reasons – a few years prior, the Costa Rican government had abolished its military and the cool, mountain climate was ideal for grazing cattle. The Quakers found their isolated refuge from the ills of the world, and adopted a simple, trouble-free life of dairy farming and cheese production amid a new-found world of religious freedom.

But the story doesn't end there. In an effort to protect the watershed above its 1500-hectare plot in Monteverde, the Quaker community agreed to preserve the mountaintop rain forests. When ecologists arrived in the area years later to investigate the preserve, they discovered that the cloud forests were actually two different ecosystems that straddled both sides of the continental divide. In the Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde (p190), the warm, moisture-

laden trade winds from the Caribbean sweep up the slopes of the divide where they then cool and condense to form clouds. These clouds also pass over the Reserva Santa Elena (p201), though the absence of the trade winds means that the forests here are a few degrees warmer than in Monteverde. As a result, each ecosystem boasts several distinct species (most of which you probably won't be able to see, however).

Orientation

Driving from either of the Interamericana's first two turnoffs to the region, you'll first arrive in Santa Elena, a bustling little community with lots of budget hotels, restaurants and attractions. A road beginning at the northern point of the triangle leads to Juntas and Tilarán, with a turnoff to Reserva Santa Elena. From the westernmost point of the triangle (to the right as you enter town) you can access a scenic and heavily rutted 6km road to the Monteverde reserve.

This road forms the backbone of a spread-out community, and is lined with hotels and restaurants of varying degrees of attractiveness. About 2km from Santa Elena, the neighborhood of Cerro Plano has a neat nucleus of cute businesses centered on Casem and the Monteverde Cheese Factory. Almost 5km from town, a turnoff leads a steep 3km to the Ecologe San Luis and research station and San Luis Waterfall. Roads are generally paralleled by pedestrian trails.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Librería Chunches (☎ 2645 5147; Santa Elena; ♿ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat) A bookstore and coffee shop with a fine selection of books (many in English), including travel and natural history guides and some US newspapers. There's laundry service (US\$6 to wash and dry up to 4kg) and its bulletin board is a good source of information. Also see Bromelias Books (p189).

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 2645 5127; Santa Elena)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is widely available around Santa Elena and many hotels.

Hotel Camino Verde (☎ 2645 6304; www.exploringmonteverde.com/hotel-camino-verde; ♿ 6:30am-10pm) Has a busy internet café in front, with international internet calling available; across from the Santa Elena bus terminal.

Internet Pura Vida (☎ 2645 6419; www.internetpuravida.com; per hr US\$2; ♿ 9am-10pm) Across from Banco Nacional in Santa Elena; they'll also do laundry.

Tree House Restaurant & Café (☎ 2645 5751; www.canopydining.com; ♿ 6:30am-10pm) Has a few terminals downstairs that you can use for free (!) for half an hour.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Consultorio Médico (☎ 2645 7778, 8304 2121; ♿ 24hr) Across the intersection from Hotel Heliconia.

Red Cross (☎ 2645 6128; ♿ 24hr) Just north of Santa Elena.

MONEY

Euros, US dollars and traveler's checks can be exchanged at Hotel Camino Verde (left), although you can expect to pay a fairly hefty commission.

Banco de Costa Rica (☎ 2645 5519; ♿ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Has a 24-hour ATM; up the same driveway as Hotel El Sapo Dorado.

Banco Nacional (☎ 2645 5027; Santa Elena; ♿ 8:30am-3:45pm)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Cámara de Empresarios Turísticos y Afines de Monteverde (CETAM; ☎ 2645 6565; www.monteverdecr.com; Santa Elena; ♿ 8am-8pm) As the local chamber of commerce, this office only promotes hotels and tour companies that pay the membership fee, so come in with the understanding that you'll get biased information.

Monteverde Treehouse Tourist Center (☎ 2645 7070; www.monteverdeinfo.com; ♿ 8am-10pm) Long a great source of information online, now staff will also happily book you as well. Based at the Tree House Restaurant & Café (p187).

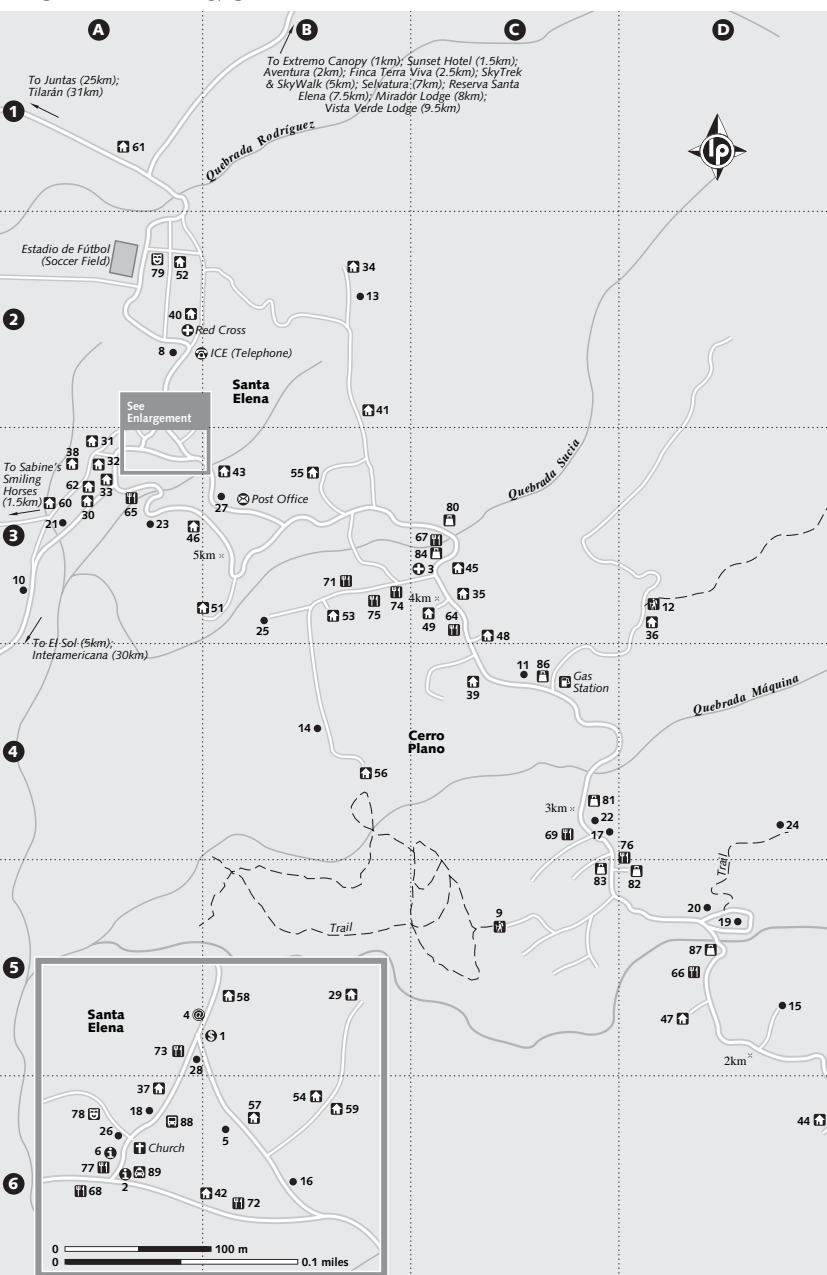
Pensión Santa Elena (p180; www.pensionsantaelena.com) A better option than the tourist office, even if you're not staying at this place, talk to its friendly staff or check out its comprehensive website.

Sights

Ecotourism is big business in Monteverde and Santa Elena, so it's unsurprising that there are a number of ecoriffic attractions scattered around both towns. And if there's a certain critter you're itching to see, there are plenty of places where your view won't be obscured by all those pesky trees.

As places possessed of such sublime beauty are apt to do, the Santa Elena-Monteverde corridor is attracting an impressive art scene, and there are a growing number of galleries scattered throughout the cloud forest. One specialty here is woodwork, but not at

MONTEVERDE & SANTA ELENA



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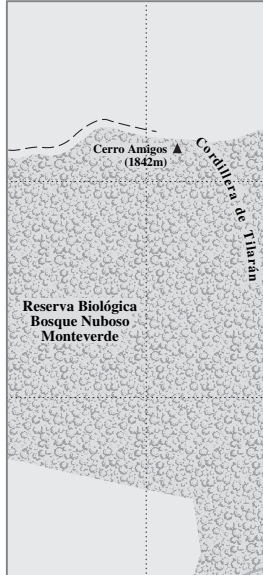
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NORTHWESTERN COSTA RICA

THE FABLE OF THE GOLDEN TOAD

Once upon a time, in the cloud forests of Monteverde, there lived the golden toad (*Bufo perigrines*), also known as the *sapo dorado*. Because this bright-orange, exotic little toad was often seen scrambling amid the Monteverde leaf litter – the only place in the world where it appeared – it became something of a Monteverde mascot. Sadly, the golden toad has not been seen since 1989 and is now believed to be extinct.

In the late 1980s, unexplained rapid declines in frog and toad populations all over the world spurred an international conference of herpetologists to address these alarming developments. Amphibians once common were becoming rare or had already disappeared, and the scientists were unable to agree upon a reason for the sudden demise of so many amphibian species in so many different habitats.

Several factors may be to blame for these declines, including the fact that amphibians breathe both with primitive lungs and through their perpetually moist skin, which makes them susceptible to airborne toxins. Their skin also provides little protection against UV light, which studies have shown can result in higher mortality rates to amphibian embryos and damaged DNA that in turn causes deformities. Pesticides also have been proven to cause deformities and hermaphroditism; and then there's the global issue of habitat loss. If all that didn't tell a bleak enough story, scientists have since discovered that the worldwide spread of chytridiomycosis disease (caused by the fungus *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis*, in case you were wondering) has decimated amphibian populations everywhere.

According to the Global Amphibian Assessment, an entire 39% of New World amphibians (that would be 1187 species) are currently threatened with extinction. In response to this dire statistic, an international coalition of zoos and wildlife conservation organizations have jointly established **Amphibian Ark** (www.amphibianark.org), an attempt to 'bank' as many species as possible in the event of further die-offs. We may never know what happened to the golden toad, but as one of the first warning signs that the ecosystem is off balance, its mysterious disappearance might have given a chance for survival – and a happy ending? – to other amphibian species.

all like that of the Sarchí scene – sculpture, figurative and fluid, is a local art movement worth checking out. Artists from all over the country also display their work in town.

EL JARDÍN DE LAS MARIPOSAS

One of the most interesting activities is visiting the **El Jardín de las Mariposas** (Butterfly Garden; ☎ 2645 5512; adult/student US\$9/6; 🕒 9:30am-4:30pm). Admission entitles you to a naturalist-led tour (in Spanish, English or German) that begins with an enlightening discussion of butterfly life cycles and the butterfly's importance in nature. A variety of eggs, caterpillars, pupae and adults are examined. Visitors are taken into the greenhouses, where the butterflies are raised, and on into the screened garden, where hundreds of butterflies of many species are seen. The tour lasts about an hour, after which you are free to stay as long as you wish. There's also a theater that presents an informational video in English, Spanish, French, Dutch or German. It's best to visit in the morning when the butterflies are most

active. There are good volunteer opportunities available here.

RANARIO

Monteverde's cloud forest provides a heavenly habitat for amphibians, which, if you're lucky, you'll see in the park. But no need for luck at the **Ranario** (Frog Pond; ☎ 2645 6320; www.ranario.com; adult/student or child US\$9/7; 🕒 9am-8:30pm), where about 30 species of Costa Rica's colorful array of frogs and toads reside in terraria lining the winding indoor-jungle paths. Sharp-eyed guides lead informative tours in English or Spanish, pointing out frogs, eggs and tadpoles with flashlights. You'll get to see the brilliantly fake-looking red-eyed tree frog (*Agalychnis callidryas*), the glass frog (*Hyalinobatrachium fleischmanni*) and a variety of poison-dart frogs.

If you're lucky, your guide may also imitate frog calls, or give you the lowdown on local folklore (tips are always appreciated). Many resident amphibians are more active by night, so it's best to visit during the evening;

your ticket allows you to return for free in the evening.

SERPENTARIO

Biologist Fernando Valverde has collected about 40 species of snake, plus a fair number of frogs, lizards, turtles and other cold-blooded critters at his **serpentario** (serpentarium; ☎ 2645 6002; adult/student/child US\$7/5/3; 🕒 8:30am-8pm). Sometimes it's tough to find the slithering stars of the show in their comfy, foliage-filled cages, but guides are available in Spanish or English for free tours. The venomous snake displays are awesome, and you'll get to see your first (and hopefully last) fer-de-lance.

BAT JUNGLE

Learn about echolocation, bat-wing aerodynamics and other amazing facts about the (incredibly cute) flying mammal, the bat. The stellar **Bat Jungle** (☎ 2645 6566; www.paseoestella.com; adult/child US\$8/6; 🕒 9:30am-8:30pm), a labor of love realized by biologist Richard Laval, has terrific exhibits including a free-flying bat habitat, beautiful sculptures and a lot of bilingual educational displays. The Bat Jungle makes up part of the new Paseo de Stella visitors center, a modern hacienda-style building that also houses a café specializing in Argentinean chocolate, a museum of Monteverde history and an art gallery. The wide terrace of the building is a wonderful spot to stop for coffee and a handmade truffle.

MUNDO DE LOS INSECTOS

The **Mundo de los Insectos** (World of Insects; ☎ 2645 6859; klatindancer@hotmail.com; adult/student US\$8/6; 🕒 9am-7pm) goes beyond just butterflies with its collection of creepy cloud-forest crawlies, from hermaphroditic walking sticks to notoriously venomous banana spiders. Other insects featured here include water cockroaches, scorpions and various arachnids, all explained on tours in Spanish or English. It's better to visit at night, when the insects are more active, but these days the displays are looking a bit worse for wear and may not measure up to the price of admission.

JARDÍN DE ORQUIDEAS

This sweet-smelling **Jardín de Orquideas** (Orchid Garden; ☎ 2645 5510; www.monteverdeorchidgarden.com; adult/child US\$5/3; 🕒 8am-5pm) has shady trails winding past more than 400 types of orchid organized into taxonomic groups. Guided

tours in Spanish and English are included with admission, on which you'll see such rarities as *Platytele jungermannioides*, the world's smallest orchid, and several others marked for conservation by the Monteverde Orchid Investigation Project. And if you have orchids at home, you might also learn some tips and tricks for organic care.

CAFÉ MONTEVERDE

Coffee lovers will be excited to find some of the finest coffee in the world right here at **Café Monteverde** (☎ 2645 5901; www.cafemonteverde.com; 🕒 7:30am-6pm), where you can sample six roasts free of charge. Better yet, make reservations in advance for a three-hour **tour** (www.monteverdecoffeetour.com; per adult/student US\$30/25) of the coffee fincas, which use entirely organic methods to grow the perfect bean. You can help pick some beans, after which you'll be brought to the *beneficio* (coffee mill), where you can watch as the beans are washed and dried, roasted and then packed. Of course, you'll also get to taste the final product with a snack. Late April is the best time to see the fields in bloom, while the coffee harvest (done entirely by hand) takes place from December to February. Anytime is a good time to see how your favorite beverage makes the transition from ruby-red berry to smooth black brew.

MONTEVERDE CHEESE FACTORY

Until the recent upswing in ecotourism, Monteverde's number-one employer was this **cheese factory** (☎ 2645 5522; tours adult/child US\$8/6; 🕒 7:30am-4pm Mon-Sat, to 12:30pm Sun), also called La Lechería (the Dairy). Reservations are required for the two-hour tour of operations, where you'll see old-school methods used to produce everything from a creamy Gouda to a very nice sharp, white cheddar, sold all over the country, as well as other dairy products such as yogurt and, most importantly, ice cream. If you've got a hankering for something sweet, our favorite treat is the coffee milk shake.

Stop by for a cone of soft-serve scrumptiousness here or at a few other select locations around town, including Sabores (p186). The small attached shop also sells deli meats, homemade granola and other picnic goodies, and you can watch cheese being made through the big window Monday to Friday.

SELVATURA

The makers of ecofun really went all out at **Selvatura** (☎ 2645 5929, 2645 5757; www.selvatura.com; admission hummingbird garden US\$5, hanging bridges US\$20, canopy tour US\$40, exhibition US\$10; 🕒 7:30am-4pm), a huge ecocomplex 150m from Reserva Santa Elena complete with butterfly and hummingbird gardens, a canopy tour (p179) and a series of hanging bridges, though the star attraction is the slightly overwhelming **Jewels of the Rainforest Exhibition**. This exhibition houses the majority of the Whitten Entomological Collection, a mind-boggling collection of the strangest and most stunning insects you've ever seen. The entire exhibition is the life's work of Richard Whitten (with a little help from his wife, Margaret), and is masterfully presented using a combination of art, video and music. If you only have time for one sight in Monteverde, this is the one. Check the website for package deals.

FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE

The Quakers (or more correctly, the Society of Friends) who settled in Monteverde played a direct role in preserving the cloud forest (p170), and they remain extremely active in the local community, though they're not recognizable by any traditional costume (you know what we mean). Quakerism began as a breakaway movement from the Anglican Church in the 1650s, founded by the young George Fox, who in his early 20s heard the voice of Christ, and claimed that direct experience with God was possible without having to go through the sacraments. Today, this belief is commonly described by Quakers as the 'God in everyone,' and the community continues to lead a peaceful lifestyle in the Monteverde area.

If you're interested in learning more about the Society of Friends, prayer meetings at the **Friends Meeting House** in Monteverde are held on Sunday at 10:30am and Wednesday at 9am. If you're willing to give at least a six-week commitment, there are numerous volunteer opportunities available. For more information, contact the **Monteverde Friends School** (www.mfschool.org).

Activities

Don't forget your hiking boots, bug spray and a hat – there's plenty to do outdoors around here, including lots of action either on horseback or in the jungle canopy.

HIKING

The best hikes are at the two cloud-forest reserves bookingend the main road, Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde (see p190) and Reserva Santa Elena (see p201).

If you've ever felt cynical about schoolchildren asking for money to save the rain forest, then you really must stop by **Bosque Eterno de los Niños** (Children's Eternal Forest; ☎ 2645 5003; www.acmc.org; adult/student day use US\$7/4, guided night hike US\$15/10; 🕒 7:30am-5:30pm) and see what they purchased with all that spare change. Keep in mind, however, that this enormous 22,000-hectare reserve, which dwarfs both the Monteverde and Santa Elena reserves, is largely inaccessible. The international army of children who paid the bills decided that it was more important to provide a home for local wildlife among the primary and secondary forest (and to allow former agricultural land to be slowly reclaimed by the jungle) than to develop a lucrative tourist infrastructure. Kids today, what can you do?

The effort has allowed for one fabulous trail that hooks into a system of unimproved trails that are primarily for researchers, the 3.5km **Sendero Bajo del Tigre** (Jaguar Canyon Trail), which offers more open vistas than do those in the cloud forest, so spotting birds tends to be easier. The reason is that a good portion of the surrounding area was clear-cut during the mid-20th century, though there has been significant regrowth since it was granted protected status. The resulting landscape is known as premontane forest, which is unique in Costa Rica as most things that are cut down stay cut down. Visitors also report that wildlife-watching tends to be better here than in the reserves at Monteverde or Santa Elena since the tourist volume is considerably lower.

Make reservations in advance for the popular night hikes, which set off at 5:30pm for a two-hour trek by flashlight (bring your own) through a sea of glowing red eyes. The San Gerardo Biological Station at the end of the trail has dorm beds for researchers and students, but you may be able to stay overnight with prior arrangements. If you're looking for a good volunteer program, the administration of the Bosque Eterno de los Niños is always looking for help.

Offering hikes of varying lengths, **Santuario Ecológico** (Ecological Sanctuary; ☎ 2645 5869; admission adult/student/child US\$9/7/5, guided night tour US\$15/12/10; 🕒 7am-5:30pm) has four loop trails (the longest

takes about 2½ hours at a slow pace) through private property comprising premontane and secondary forest, coffee and banana plantations, and past a couple of waterfalls and lookout points. Coati, agouti and sloth are seen on most days, and monkey, porcupine and other animals are also common. Birding is also good. Guided tours are available throughout the day, but you'll see even more animals on the guided night tours (adult/student US\$14/9, 5:30pm to 7:30pm).

An 81-hectare private reserve, **Reserva Sendero Tranquilo** (Tranquil Path Reserve; ☎ 2645 5010; admission US\$20; 🕒 tours 7:30am & 1pm) is located between the Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde and the Río Guacimal. Trails here are narrow to allow for minimal environmental impact, and the group size is capped at six people, which means you won't have to worry about chattering tourists scaring away all the animals. The trails pass through four distinct types of forest, including a previously destroyed area that's starting to bud again.

Sendero Valle Escondido (Hidden Valley Trail; ☎ 2645 6601; day use US\$5, night tour adult/child US\$15/10; 🕒 7am-4pm) begins behind the Pensión Monteverde Inn and slowly winds its way through a deep canyon into an 11-hectare reserve. In comparison with the more popular reserves, Valle Escondido is quiet during the day and relatively undertouristed, so it's a good trail for wildlife-watching. However, the reserve's two-hour guided night tour (at 5:30pm) is very popular, so it's best to make reservations for this in advance.

Take a free hike up **Cerro Amigos** (1842m) for good views of the surrounding rain forest and, on a clear day, of Volcán Arenal, 20km away to the northeast. Near the top of the mountain, you'll pass by the TV towers for channels 7 and 13. The trail leaves Monteverde from behind Hotel Belmar and ascends roughly 300m in 3km. From the hotel, take the dirt road going downhill, then the next left. Note that this trail does not connect to the trails in the Monteverde reserve, so you will have to double back.

Another popular (but strenuous) hike is to visit the **Catarata San Luis**, a gorgeous ribbon of water streaming from the cloud forests into a series of swimming holes just screaming for a picnic. The distance from the parking area to the falls is only a few kilometers, but it's steeply graded downhill, and the rocky, mud-filled terrain can get very slick. Readers

report that their entire families have been OK on the trail, but it's important to go slow and turn back if it becomes too difficult. However, your efforts will be worth it as the waterfall is simply breathtaking.

Drivers will need 4WD to ford the little river and climb the muddy road out. You can park (US\$6 per car) at a private farm, which is next to the trailhead. Several horseback-riding companies offer excursions to the falls (US\$50 per person), but note that much of the road is now paved and this is hard on the horses' knees. A taxi from town to the falls will cost about US\$12.

CANOPY TOURS

Wondering where the whole canopy tour craze was born? Santa Elena is the site of Costa Rica's first zip lines, today eclipsed in adrenaline by the nearly 100 imitators who have followed, some of which are right here in town. You won't be spotting any quetzals or coatis as you whoosh your way over the canopy, but this is the best way to burn your holiday buck.

Before you tighten your harness and clip in for the ride, you're going to have to choose which canopy tour will get your hard-earned cash – this is more challenging than you'd think. Much like the rest of Costa Rica, Monteverde works on a commission-based system, so be skeptical of the advice that you're given, and insist on choosing the canopy tour that you want. We provide basic information on the five major players in town (p179), though it's good to talk to the friendly, unbiased staff at the Pensión Santa Elena if you want the full scoop (see p180).

HORSEBACK RIDING

Until recently, this region was most easily traveled on horseback, and considering the roads around here, that's probably still true. Several operators offer you the chance to test this theory, with guided horse rides ranging from two-hour tours to five-day adventures. Shorter trips generally run about US\$15 per hour, while an overnight trek including meals and accommodations runs between US\$150 and US\$200.

Some outfitters also make the trip to La Fortuna, an intriguing transportation option with several caveats (US\$60 to US\$100; see boxed text, p188), including only going in the dry season. Though a few operators will

CANOPY FIGHTING

All is not well in the world of zip-line operators. As competition has come to a boil between the nearly 100 canopy-tour operators around the country, the founder of the Original Canopy Tour decided to patent his concept and the words 'canopy tour' with Costa Rica's National Registry. After receiving the title, Darren Hreniuk, the Canadian behind the tour, has claimed that all other operators are running 'pirate tours' and has demanded that they pay him licensing fees or shut down.

The title has been largely ignored by other operators, who insist that the idea of crossing trees on a cable-and-pulley system is hardly a new one. (There is a painting dating back to 1858 in the Museo Nacional de San José that shows people transporting themselves on ropes tied between trees.) Hreniuk insists otherwise. 'I am the inventor of the canopy tour,' he told the *Tico Times* in August 2003. 'If people like that or not, it is irrelevant.'

The National Registry supported his claim and provided Hreniuk with a cease-and-desist order that demanded that all other tours close up shop. Armed with this, Hreniuk visited more than a dozen tour sites in April and December 2003 and attempted to shut them down. Since then, the government annulled the patent in 2005, and while Hreniuk has probably not given up the ghost on that one, he has moved on to develop a (patent-pending!) double-line for added safety.

Locally, Hreniuk's legal moves were poorly regarded. Many Ticos viewed his patent and subsequent enforcement of it as an attempt to create a foreign monopoly on an activity that more than a quarter of all tourists who go to Costa Rica participate in. This is the kind of legal wrangling that can take all the fun out of traveling, in our opinion, and we can only hope that the person who 'invented' rafting doesn't try to do the same.

As an aside, another criticism of canopy tours is that their environmental impact may be greater than previously believed. Specifically, canopy tours can contribute to ground erosion, the disruption of vegetation and damage to tree trunks, though this varies widely from operator to operator. And an increase in the number of screaming gringos flying across the rain-forest canopy can't be good for nearby birders and wildlife-watchers. Regardless, it's likely that at some point during your travels in Costa Rica, you'll probably give in to the temptation and sign up for a quick adrenaline fix. The point is simply to inquire about the environmental impact of a particular canopy tour before you fork out your cash, and to be happy that Costa Rica has a good system of patent law in place.

charge less, remember you (or more likely, the horse) get what you pay for.

Caballeriza El Rodeo (☎ 2645 5764, 2645 6306; elrodeo@racsa.co.cr) Does local tours on private trails, as well as trips to San Luis Waterfall and a sunset tour to a spot overlooking the Golfo de Nicoya.

Desafío Adventure Company (☎ 2645 5874; www.monteverdetours.com) Does local treks for groups and individuals around town, day trips to San Luis Waterfall (six hours, per person including admission US\$60) and several multiday rides. This established outfitter will arrange rides to La Fortuna for US\$75, usually on the Lake Trail. The company also arranges white-water rafting trips on the Ríos Toro, Sarapiquí and others, and can help with transport and hotel reservations.

Meg's Riding Stables (☎ 2645 5560, 2645 5052)

Takes folks on private trails nearby plus treks to San Luis Waterfall. Kid-sized saddles and gentle horses are also available. The horses are well looked after, and this is the longest-established operation in Monteverde.

Mirador Lodge (p182; ☎ 2645 5354; Monteverde to Arenal ride US\$70) The Quesada family at this isolated cloud-forest lodge takes riders on horseback tours as well as to Arenal, starting from the lodge. If the weather and trail conditions are not perfect, they will arrange a taxi-boat-taxi transfer as an alternative.

Sabine's Smiling Horses (☎ 2645 6894, 8385 2424; www.horseback-riding-tour.com) Run by Sabine, who speaks English, French, Spanish and German, Smiling Horses offers a variety of treks, from US\$15-per-hour day trips to specialty tours, including a Full Moon Ride (per person US\$50, three hours). Several multiday treks are also on offer, and Sabine may also take experienced riders on the Castillo Trail, weather permitting. This outfitter has been highly recommended by readers year after year.

TRAMS & HANGING BRIDGES

OK, so you're too scared to zip through the canopy on a steel cable, but fear not as the makers of ecofun have something special for

you – trams and hanging bridges, the safe and slightly less expensive way to explore the tree tops.

Aerial Adventures & Natural Wonders Tram (☎ 2645 5960; naturalwonders@racsa.co.cr; tram adult/child US\$15/8, hike US\$7, tram & hike US\$20) is essentially a ski lift, offering a 1.5km journey in electrically propelled gondola chairs on rails attached to towers; heights reach 12m. The ride lasts an hour, and you have the option of pausing your car briefly to look around. You can also rent golf carts (US\$30) that hold up to three people for cruising around the trails afterward – a great choice for folks with limited mobility who want to get out in the woods on their own.

Selvatura, SkyWalk (owned by SkyTrek) and Aventura (see Tours, right) have systems of hanging bridges across which you can traipse and live out your Indiana Jones fantasies. There are subtle differences between all of them (some are fat, some are thin, some are bouncy, some are saggy), though you're going to enjoy the views of the canopy regardless of which one you pick. They're all priced around US\$20 for adults and US\$15 for students.

Festivals & Events

The **Monteverde Music Festival** is held annually on variable dates from late January to early April. It's gained a well-deserved reputation as one of the top music festivals in Central America. Music is mainly classical, jazz and Latin, with an occasional experimental group to spice things up. Concerts are held on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, at different venues all over town and at Monteverde Institute, which sponsors it (see right). Some performances are free, but most events ask US\$5 to US\$15 – proceeds go toward teaching music and the arts in local schools.

The **Sol y Música** festival is sponsored by Bromelias Books (p189), with weekly shows happening from February through April at its amphitheater. In July and August it also hosts the **Gotas y Notas** festival to keep spirits afloat during the wet season; ask around town about shows during your visit.

Courses

Centro Panamericano de Idiomas (CPI) (☎ 2265 6306; www.cpi-edu.com; classes with/without homestay US\$465/315; ☎ 8am-5pm) Specializes in Spanish-language education, with some courses geared to teenagers, medical professionals or social workers. Also has locations in Heredia

and Playa Flamingo, with the opportunity to transfer from campus to campus.

Monteverde Institute (☎ 2645 5053; www.mvinstitute.org) A nonprofit educational institute, founded in 1986, that offers interdisciplinary courses in tropical biology, conservation, sustainable development and Spanish, among other topics. Courses are occasionally open to the public, as are volunteer opportunities in education and reforestation – check the website. Monthly intensive Spanish courses are offered for US\$790, while short courses (US\$800 to US\$1800, two weeks) teach both high-school and college students about conservation and land use in the Monteverde area. Long courses (US\$4000, 10 weeks) are university-accredited programs for undergraduates and they emphasize tropical community ecology.

Monteverde Studios of the Arts (☎ 2645 5053)

Administered by Monteverde Institute, this offers a variety of classes and workshops, sometimes open to visitors, covering everything from woodworking to papermaking, with a special emphasis on pottery.

Tours

Aventura (☎ 2645 6388; www.monteverdeadventure.com; adult/student US\$40/30; ☎ 7am-4pm) Aventura has 16 platforms that are spiced up with a Tarzan swing and a 15m rappel. It's about 3km north of Santa Elena on the road to the reserve, and transportation from your hotel is included in the price.

Extremo Canopy (☎ 2645 6058; www.monteverdeextremo.com; adult/student/child US\$37/27/25; ☎ 8am-4pm) The newest player on the Monteverde canopy scene, this outfit runs small groups and doesn't bother with extraneous attractions if all you really want to do is fly down the zip lines.

Original Canopy Tour (☎ 2645 6950; www.canopytour.com; adult/student/child US\$45/35/25; ☎ 7:30am-4pm) On the grounds of Cloud Forest Lodge, this has the fabled zip lines that started an adventure-tourism trend of questionable ecological value (see boxed text, opposite). These lines aren't as elaborate as the others, but with 14 platforms, a rappel through the center of an old fig tree and 5km of private trails worth a wander afterward, you can enjoy a piece of history that's far more entertaining than most museums.

Selvatura (☎ 2645 5929; www.selvatura.com; adult/child US\$40/30; ☎ 7:30am-4pm) One of the bigger games in town, Selvatura has 3km of cables, 18 platforms and one Tarzan swing through primary forest. The office is across the street from the church in Santa Elena.

SkyTrek (☎ 2645 5796; www.skywalk.co.cr; adult/student US\$44/37; ☎ 7:30am-5pm) If you're not buying the whole 'eco' element of canopy tours, then this is definitely for you. This seriously fast canopy tour consists of 11 platforms attached to steel towers that are spread out along a road. We're talking about some serious speed here,

which is probably why SkyTrek is the only canopy tour that has a real brake system.

Sleeping

During Christmas and Easter, many hotels are booked up weeks in advance. During the January-to-April busy season and also in July, reservations are a good idea, though you can almost always find somewhere to stay. Note that Monteverde can get very cool at night, so don't be surprised if your room doesn't have a fan (but do be if it doesn't have a warm blanket!).

The rates given are high-season rates, but low-season rates could be as much as 30% to 40% lower.

BUDGET

Competition has kept costs low and budget spots usually offer warm showers.

Pensión Sinai (☎ 2645 6252; lucrecraj@yahoo.com; r per person with/without bathroom US\$10/6;) Tiled rooms in this homey family-owned *penión* are pristine, and readers rave about the friendly staff and the warm communal feel. Showers have warm water, and there is a communal kitchen available.

Cabinas Mar Inn (☎ 2645 5279; cabmarin@racs.co.cr; d incl breakfast with/without bathroom US\$12/10;) On a hill about 50m north of the high school, this is a great option as the managers are welcoming, the breakfasts are filling and there's a nice outdoor patio overlooking the town. Wood-paneled rooms are rustic and airy, and the quiet location means a restful night's sleep.

Hotel Bellbird (☎ 2645 5026; www.hotelbellbird.com; r per person with/without bathroom & incl breakfast US\$12/10;) On the road toward Monteverde next to Centro Panamericano de Idiomas is this cute wooden hotel surrounded by a small garden. The friendly Tico owner, Alexis, offers simple, homey rooms and a quiet environment. The common area upstairs has comfy chairs and excellent views.

Casa Tranquilo (☎ 2645 6782; www.casatranquilo.com; r per person incl breakfast with/without bathroom US\$15/12;) This wonderful little hotel is owned and managed by a delightful Tico couple, David and Elena (and their little one, Josue). Some of the wood-paneled rooms have skylights and views of the gulf. Check out the great upstairs terrace, perfect for a few late-night ballads on the guitar. There's also a communal kitchen, free internet (and wi-fi), free coffee and tea, CD burning and printing,

and a buffet breakfast with granola, bread, eggs and fruit.

Ourpick Pensión Santa Elena (☎ 2645 5051; www.pensionsantaelena.com; camping per person US\$3, dm US\$5, r without bathroom US\$7-28, r with bathroom US\$15-18, cabinas US\$25-50;) This full-service shoe-stringer's hostel is a perennial favorite, right in central Santa Elena. Ran and Shannon, the brother-sister duo from Austin, Texas, are committed to offering budget travelers top-notch, five-star service. They offer the most unbiased tourist information in town and will take the time to explain all the options to travelers. They're also environmentalists at heart, and work with the local community on projects such as the reduction of gray water by installing septic tanks. Each room is different, with something to suit everyone – take a look at several, as quality and cleanliness also vary. Amenities include hot showers, cozy front porch, message board, excellent shared kitchen, free internet (wi-fi too), and free coffee and tea all day. The Costa Rican staff is also fully bilingual, extremely professional and altogether charming.

Cabinas Eddy (☎ 2645 6635; www.cabinas-eddy.com; d with/without bathroom US\$25/14;) This reader-recommended budget spot continues to get raves for its delightful, English-speaking staff and the marimba-playing owner and manager Eddy. Breakfast is an extra US\$3, but there's a shared kitchen. The balcony is a great place to relax with a cup of free coffee and take in the view.

Sleepers Sleep Cheaper Hostel (☎ 2645 6204; www.sleepershostel.blogspot.com; dm US\$6, s with/without bathroom US\$20/15, d US\$25/15, all incl breakfast;) Run by the friendly Ronny and his darling family, this hostel is a terrific deal, with free internet access, tea and coffee, and a great shared kitchen. Rooms are simple but comfortable, with hot-water shower, and there's a convivial atmosphere.

Tina's Casitas (☎ 2645 5641; www.tinascasitas.de; s with/without bathroom US\$20/10, d US\$25/18;) The casitas (cottages) at this funky German-run spot are a great value. The rooms are well maintained, featuring firm beds and hand-carved furniture of Tina's own design. There's also a shared kitchenette.

Monteverde Backpackers (☎ 2645 5844; www.monteverdebackpackers.com/home.html; dm US\$10, s/d/tr/q US\$20/30/39/44, all incl breakfast;) Another branch from the guys running Pangaea in San José, this new budget spot in Monteverde

is just down the road from Supermercado La Esperanza and has been getting good reviews from travelers.

Cabinas El Pueblo (☎ 2645 6192; www.cabinaselpueblo.com; s with/without bathroom US\$15/10, d US\$24/15, all incl breakfast;) These pleasant cabinas are run by an attentive Tico couple who will do everything possible to make your stay memorable. Well-furnished rooms have firm mattresses and private hot-water showers, and there's a fully equipped kitchen and a garden out back.

Pensión Colibrí (☎ 2645 5682; r per person with/without bathroom US\$25/6;) Another popular budget option, this small, family-run *penión* is on a quiet lane and feels like it's perched among the trees. The larger rooms with private bathroom are worth the money as they have balconies overlooking the woods, which are perfect for breathing in the cool, mountain air. There's also a small communal kitchen.

Quetzal Inn (☎ 2645 6076; www.quetzalinn.com; s/d US\$15/30;) Up the same quiet alley as Pensión Colibrí is this lovely little lodge. With wood-plank walls, high sloped ceilings and green surroundings, this family-run inn embodies the perfect combination of central location, thoughtfully designed accommodations and a personable, hospitable ambience.

Pensión Flor de Monteverde (☎ 2645 5236; flor.monteverde@racs.co.cr; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$20/30/45/60;) Though it's definitely further out than other hotels, you'll be glad you came to this sheltered hideaway. Owner Eduardo Venegas Castro is a font of information. In the past, he worked at both the Monteverde and Santa Elena reserves, and was director of the latter. Rooms are basic but comfortable. Tours and transportation can be arranged.

Hotel El Sueño (☎ 2645 5021; www.hotelesuenocr.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$25/40;) This Tico-run hotel has huge wooden rooms with private hot showers. Upstairs rooms are airier, though the best ones are toward the back. There's a great balcony with sweeping views of the area.

Cabinas Vista al Golfo (☎ 2645 6321; www.cabinasvistalagolfo.com; s with/without bathroom US\$17/12, d US\$29/17;) This is a very comfortable locale run by a congenial Costa Rican family. Rooms are well kept, the showers are hot and the owners will make you feel right at home. The upstairs balcony has great views of the rain forest and, on a clear day, the Golfo de Nicoya. There's a small, communal kitchen.

Manakín Lodge (☎ 2645 5080, 2645 5835; www.manakinlodge.com; r per person incl breakfast standard/superior US\$15/20;) This simple Tico family-run lodge in Cerro Plano has a friendly, laidback feel. All rooms have homey furnishings, wi-fi and private hot-water showers, though the 2nd-floor superior rooms have better views of the forest and TV and fridge.

Pensión Monteverde Inn (☎ 2645 5156, 2645 6601; r per person incl breakfast US\$20;) In a tranquil corner of Cerro Plano is this small inn, next to the trailhead for the Sendero Valle Escondido (p177). Spartan rooms have private hot showers, and its remote location means lots of peace and quiet. The owners can pick you up at the bus stop if you have a reservation.

MIDRANGE

Ourpick Arco Iris Ecolodge (☎ 2645 5067; www.arcoirislodge.com; s US\$25-55, d US\$35-120, honeymoon ste US\$180;) This clutch of pretty cabins is on a little hill overlooking Santa Elena and the surrounding forests, and has the privacy and intimacy of a mountain retreat. The lodge features a system of private trails that wind throughout the property, including one that leads to a lookout point where you can see the Pacific on a clear day. There are a variety of different room sizes and styles to choose from, so you can either go rustic or live it up. If you're traveling in a group, the four-to-five-person split-level cabin (US\$95 to US\$200) is highly recommended – it's adorned with rich tapestries and features volcanic rock-laden showers. The multilingual German owners are delightful, and they make excellent meals that sometimes feature organic vegetables grown on the grounds. Breakfast is an additional US\$6.50.

Mariposa B&B (☎ 2645 5013; vmfamilia@costarricense.cr; s/d incl breakfast US\$25/40;) Just 1.5km from the Monteverde reserve, this friendly family-run place has simple but very nice rooms with private hot showers, all nestled into the forest. In addition to breakfast (a *real* breakfast of fruits, pancakes, eggs and tortillas), there's also a little balcony for observing wild-life, because nothing is cuter than a passel of *pizotes* (coatimundis).

Finca Terra Viva (☎ 2645 5454; www.terravivacr.com; d US\$40, extra person US\$5, 3 meals extra US\$14, caseta US\$60;) This 135-hectare finca 2.5km or so out on the road toward Reserva Santa Elena is being gradually returned to the forest; about 60% is already there. In the meantime, cattle,

pigs, goats, horses and chickens offer guests a typically Costa Rican rural experience – kids love this place. Each of the six rustic, wooden rooms sleeps up to four and has a private hot shower; a few free-standing *casetas* (huts), each sleeping four and fitted with kitchenette, are available for those desiring more privacy. Owner Federico is a well-known naturalist and guide who has long envisioned living in a finca that combines education, conservation and farming – this is the result. Horse riding can be arranged, and you can try your hand at milking cows and making cheese at the organic dairy.

Sunset Hotel (☎ 2645 5228; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$30/40/55; 📍) About 1.5km out of Santa Elena toward Reserva Santa Elena, this intimate guesthouse is in a secluded location with great views of the Golfo de Nicoya and ample opportunities for bird-watching on private trails. Clean, standard rooms with porches have two little luxuries: real hot showers (not suicide machines) and toilets with enough pressure to flush paper. German and English are spoken.

La Colina Lodge (☎ 2645 5009; www.lacolinalodge.com; camping per person US\$5, d with/without bathroom incl breakfast US\$52/44; 📍) This is the former Flor Mar opened in 1977 by Marvin Rockwell, one of the area's original Quakers, who was jailed for refusing to sign up for the draft in 1949 and then spent three months driving down from Alabama. Nowadays, the gringo owners John and Kim are as gracious and unpretentiously welcoming as the lodge itself. All of the rambling rooms on this peaceful property are hand-painted in cheery colors with unique furniture and décor, and the kitchen and communal areas provide either shade or sun, and always a relaxed vibe.

Swiss Hotel Miramontes (☎ 2645 5152; www.swiss-hotelmiramontes.com; s/d US\$47/58, d chalet US\$87, all incl breakfast; 📍) Just outside Santa Elena on the road to Juntas is this charming European-inspired retreat, well situated in a grove of pine trees and tropical flowers. Eight rooms of varying size come with fabulous private hot-water bathrooms, while the two chalets have a little more breathing space, and a private porch where you can kick off your shoes. Kids love the expansive landscaped grounds, with trails through the well-stocked orchid garden (US\$5 for nonguests) and everyone enjoys the huge, pretty chalets. The restaurant (mains US\$4 to US\$10, open 1pm to

10pm) specializes in Swiss treats, and as this is a Swiss-run Costa Rican hotel, staff speak English, German, French and Spanish.

Hotel Don Taco (☎ 2645 5263; www.cabinasdontaco.com; d standard/cabina incl breakfast US\$29/47, cabaña US\$58; 📍) The name sounds a little silly, but with big porches, great murals and an outdoor dining and chill-out area, this spot is fabulous. Cabañas come with TV, refrigerator and a balcony overlooking the Golfo de Nicoya. It's just north of Santa Elena proper, so you can rest easy at night.

Monteverde Rustic Lodge (☎ 2645 6256; www.monteverderusticlodge.com; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$35/52/68; 📍) The tree-branch posts and tree-trunk table tops play along with the theme, but the rooms are spotless, comfortable and not at all rustic. Rooms have private hot-water showers and tile floors and open onto the garden. It's a short walk from the center of Santa Elena and the Tico owners will happily arrange tours for you.

Nidia Lodge (☎ 2645 5236, 2645 6082; www.nidia-lodge.com; s/d standard US\$45/60, deluxe US\$65/80, junior ste US\$80/100, all incl breakfast; 📍) The proprietor of *Pensión Flor de Monteverde*, Eduardo Venegas Castro, has a beautiful new inn named for his wife. The area is peaceful and just steps away from the Santuario Ecológico, so there's a good chance that wildlife will grace your front doorstep and the motmots will hang out in the trees out back. First-rate accommodations feature hot water and private balconies upstairs, with free wi-fi to boot. There's a nice restaurant where breakfast is served. Nidia provides a super-chill presence around the inn, and Eduardo, an expert naturalist, clearly revels in offering guided walks of the area's forests.

Mirador Lodge (☎ 2645 5354; www.miradorlodge.com/home.html; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$70/90/130; 📍) About 9km north of Santa Elena, the Quesada family has established this 55-hectare private reserve in the mists of virgin cloud forest. With views of Arenal, the wooden cabins have gas-heated water, and some have wood-burning stoves. There's generator-powered electricity, but candles are provided as a backup, and it's advisable to bring a flashlight. The lodge provides free transfers from town, and transportation in the area for a small fee. The owners also run reputable horseback tours (p177).

Cloud Forest Lodge (☎ 2645 5058, toll-free 877-2623 3198; www.cloudforestlodge.com; s/d/tr/q US\$81/93/105/116;

📍) Simple, wood-walled rooms at this hilltop lodge have hot-water showers, but lack extras like satellite TV. Instead, there are trails to walk, birds and sometimes sloths to be seen in the garden and surrounding cloud forest, and views of the Golfo de Nicoya. The helpful staff can arrange tours. It's a pleasant walk into town, but you might want a car to get around.

Los Pinos Cabañas y Jardines (☎ 2645 5252; www.lospinos.net; cabaña standard/family/junior ste US\$65/80/120; 📍) Eleven free-standing cabañas (cabins) are scattered around the peaceful, forested gardens of this nine-hectare property, which once formed a part of the family finca. Each cabaña affords a sense of privacy, with plenty of space between each one, and has a fully equipped kitchen and small terrace. It's a superb setting for those seeking a little solitude in easy walking distance of restaurants and shops around Cerro Plano. Though all of the cabañas are very comfortable and cozy, junior suites are the largest and are outfitted with hair dryers, cable TV and more upscale furnishings.

Hotel Claro de Luna (☎ 2645 5269; www.hotelclarodeluna.com; s standard/deluxe US\$60/67, d standard/deluxe US\$70/79, all incl breakfast; 📍) This sweet mountain chalet just southwest of Santa Elena is the perfect getaway for lovers. If you squint your eyes just a bit while staring at the hotel's Swiss-inspired architecture, you could convince yourself you're summering high up in the Alps. All nine rooms have hardwood floors and ceilings, and feature luxurious, hot-water bathrooms with regal tiles.

El Sol (☎ 2645 5838; www.elsolnuestro.com; d small/large cabin US\$60/80; 📍) Located 5km outside of Santa Elena near Guacimal is this 'sunny' spot. This small farm with two guest cabins is at a lower elevation than Santa Elena – the climate is drier and the sun is warmer. The owners of this highly recommended accommodations, Elisabeth and Ignacio, are a German-Spanish couple who will pamper you with strong massages and delicious home cooking. Their teenage son, Javier, is a great guide around the private trails on foot or on horseback.

Hotel Finca Valverde (☎ 2645 5157; www.monteverde.co.cr; d standard/cabin/superior US\$87/93/111, extra person US\$17-23; 📍) Just outside Santa Elena, this working coffee farm is a great choice if you're looking for something a bit different. Cabins each have two bare units with private hot-water showers, an upstairs loft and a balcony,

though the real reason you're here is to soak up the rural atmosphere. Junior suites are only slightly more expensive, though they have full bathrooms and cable TV. A simple but pleasant restaurant (mains US\$4 to US\$11, open 6am to 9:30pm) serves good fish and meat dishes as well as vegetables from the backyard garden. The attached bar is locally popular.

Hotel Poco a Poco (☎ 2645 6000; www.hotelpocoapoco.com; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$81/93/105; 📍) A short walk from Santa Elena will bring you to this funky property, which is adorned with ceramic mushrooms, tree frogs and other Costa Rican critters. Yellow-stuccoed rooms sleep three, and they have some great perks – full bathtubs, free wi-fi, big cable TVs and a DVD library (rental US\$3) to dip into during those rainy nights. The best draw, however, is the excellent restaurant (mains US\$6 to US\$11, open 6:30am to 9am and noon to 9:30pm), also open to the public, which specializes in reader-recommended BBQs.

TOP END

Many of the pricier hotels are experimenting with alternative technologies, from solar-heated showers to elaborate gray-water systems. Owners are usually more than happy to offer impromptu tours with full explanations of how these technologies work, and can offer suggestions to folks who'd like to implement similar systems back home.

Monteverde Lodge & Gardens (☎ 2257 0766; www.costaricaexpeditions.com; s/d/tr/q US\$99/136/150/173; 📍) A progressive recycling strategy, a solar-energy system and a huge solar-powered – but nice and hot – Jacuzzi are among this nonsmoking hotel's noteworthy environmentally sound practices. Large rooms with full bathrooms and wraparound picture windows have garden or forest views. The large lobby is graced by a huge fireplace, and there's an impeccable bar that looks down on the huge Jacuzzi. The grounds are attractively landscaped with a variety of native plants, emphasizing ferns, bromeliads and mosses, and a short trail leads to a bluff with an observation platform at the height of the forest canopy, with good views of the forest and a river ravine. Most folks are here on all-inclusive package deals that include three meals, served à la carte and featuring quality international cuisine, as well as guided tours and transportation from San José.

our pick **Hotel Belmar** (☎ 2645 5201; www.hotelbelmar.net; s/d/tr standard US\$98/110/126, chalet US\$87/98/110, all incl breakfast; 📞 📺 🍷) Despite being a 'real' ecoresort, the Hotel Belmar admirably doesn't flaunt this in its name. Rooms here are definitely upscale, though even their design scheme is commendable as all the artwork is from Casem (see p188). Minibars in the rooms, a TV lounge, and transportation from the bus stop are all part of the deal, but the biggest bonus is right out back: this is the trailhead for Cerro Amigos (p177). And you can be sure that the management works continuously to minimize its environmental impact – even the excess water from the mountainside Jacuzzi and pool is reused in the organic gardens, which itself makes for some great dishes at the onsite restaurant (with tremendous views of cloud forest and the gulf).

Hotel Fonda Vela (☎ 2645 5125; www.fondavela.com; s/d US\$109/120, junior ste US\$120/141, extra person US\$9; 📞 📺 🍷) With a convenient location near the Monteverde reserve, unique architectural styling, 14 hectares of trail-laden grounds and a private stable, this classy retreat is a sophisticated home base for enjoying the pleasures of the area. Standard rooms are spacious and light, with wood accents and large windows; and the suites are among the nicest rooms in town, featuring bathtubs, balconies and sitting rooms with huge TVs. Many rooms are wheelchair accessible. The restaurant (mains US\$8 to US\$16, open 6:15am to 9am, noon to 2pm and 6:30pm to 8:30pm) is open to the public, and recommended for its excellent food that emphasizes fresh, local ingredients. The hotel is owned by the two sons of Paul Smith, who first arrived in Monteverde in the 1950s and is a well-known local artist whose work graces the walls.

Hotel Heliconia (☎ 2645 5109; www.hotelheliconia.com; d standard/junior ste/family ste/master ste incl breakfast US\$99/111/134/151; 📞 📺) In Cerro Plano, this attractive, wooden, family-run hotel consists of the main lodge and several bungalows that are spread out across a mountainside. Standard rooms have breezy views while junior suites are ridiculously luxurious with two double beds, full bathrooms and stained-glass windows. The two master suites, which can each accommodate up to six people or be connected for a party of 12, are downright palatial with huge sitting areas, whirlpool tubs and outdoor terraces overlooking the Golfo de Nicoya. Owners arrange all the usual tours,

and operate a spa and aesthetic center where you can soak your stresses away in the Jacuzzi, or indulge in an endless list of beauty treatments. The onsite *Restaurante Mediterráneo* (mains US\$8 to US\$12, open 6:30am to 9pm) offers innovative Italian and seafood specialties as well as a smattering of typical Costa Rican dishes.

Trapp Family Lodge (☎ 2645 5858; www.trappfam.com; d superior/ste US\$93/111, extra person US\$17; 📞 📺 🍷) The closest lodge to the reserve entrance (just under 1km away) has 20 spacious rooms with high wooden ceilings, big bathrooms and fabulous views from the picture windows (which overlook either gardens or cloud forest). Suites come complete with TV and refrigerator, and there's no smoking anywhere, so you can breathe easy. There's a homey restaurant (mains US\$10 to US\$16) for guests only; a bar and sitting room with cable TV is open till 10pm. The emphasis here is on creating a family atmosphere, so bring the kids along and teach them a thing or two about nature.

Hotel El Sapo Dorado (☎ 2645 5010; www.sapodorado.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$120/142, extra person US\$30; 📞 📺 🍷) This hotel is owned by the Arguedas family, which first settled in the Monteverde area 10 years prior to the Quakers. Today the family is extremely active in the community, and they're regular promoters of the virtues of sustainable tourism. The 'Golden Toad' has 30 spacious rooms mostly in duplex cabins. All have two queen-size beds, a table and chairs, and private hot showers. Various deluxe suites have minibars, refrigerators and French doors that open to private terraces with views of the Golfo de Nicoya. The private forest behind the hotel has an extensive system of trails, and the restaurant (mains US\$10 to US\$20, open 6:30am to 9am, noon to 3pm and 6pm to 9pm) is renowned for its use of locally grown produce and wide range of vegetarian dishes.

Vista Verde Lodge (☎ 8380 1517; www.info-monteverde.com; s/d standard US\$93/107, junior ste US\$102/115, extra person US\$14, all incl breakfast; 📞) When you really want to get away from it all, take the signed side road just east of Selvatura and head 2.5 rough kilometers (4WD only) to this marvelous lodge, where you'll fall asleep to the sounds of the surrounding rain forest. Wood-paneled rooms with picture windows take in views of Volcán Arenal, and the current direction of the lava flow means that on a clear night you will see plenty of fireworks.

There's also a great common area where you can unwind in front of the TV and warm your feet beside the fire. Some 4km of trails through the primary forest surrounding this gorgeous spot can be explored on horseback. Staff can pick you up from the airport with advance notice, and they provide a shuttle service into Santa Elena. If you're expecting luxury at this price, look elsewhere (plus generator power can mean dim lights and quickly cooling showers), but solitude you'll find in spades.

Hotel de Montaña Monteverde (☎ 2645 5046; www.monteverdemountainhotel.com; standard/superior US\$73/132; 📞 📺) Opened in 1978 as the first high-end accommodations in Monteverde, this hotel has had a recent renovation to show off its expansive lobby views to better advantage; though the rooms didn't benefit from any added character, they're still perfectly comfortable. Standard rooms have wood accents, thick mattresses and cable TV, and they can

sleep up to three people. The superior rooms can accommodate up to four people, and they have a huge bathtub, a private balcony and a minibar. The spacious gardens and forests of the 15-hectare property are pleasant to walk around, and there's also a sauna and Jacuzzi.

El Establo Mountain Resort (☎ 2645 5110; www.hotelelestable.com; d deluxe/ste incl breakfast US\$187/237; 📞 📺 🍷) This is a seriously upscale lodge offering a variety of rooms, which are among the most luxurious that the Monteverde-Santa Elena area has to offer. Deluxe rooms have an orthopedic mattress, cable TV, fridge, safe and hair dryer. Junior suites have all of those amenities in addition to split bathrooms and sitting areas, while the open-plan suites are A-frame lofts with private terraces. Some of the suites have Jacuzzi tubs facing wonderful views, while others have private flagstone terraces. Since this is Monteverde, you'll be happy to know that the deluxe property comes

INSPIRATION IN THE CLOUD FOREST

Born and raised in Monteverde, Marco Tulio Brenes moved to San José at age 18, where he worked with established artists. He ran the gallery *Éxtasis* for a decade, lived in the US, and exhibited his work there in group and solo shows, and found inspiration for recent work in his travels through Europe and Turkey. He's been an artist – or at least wished to be one – since he was very small. Now he is dedicated to working mostly in sculpture and painting in his open studio, *Simbiogénesis* (p188), in the cloud forest.

What are your artistic influences? In my sculptures I always find that nature is my biggest influence, and when I saw the works of Henry Moore, they also influenced me for some time. In painting, my primary influence was the Surrealists, especially Dalí; after some time, I discovered that the true influence for my work I found inside myself, through the investigation of the intense colors and organic shapes of the tropics.

How would you describe your style, and in what media do you work? It's difficult for me to describe my own style. It's imaginative, visionary art. In painting, I work in oil and acrylic on canvas. And in sculpture, I work in stone, ceramics and principally in clay. Stone and clay are my favorite media.

Can you tell me about the arts world in Monteverde? I live in Monteverde because it's the place that brings me the most inspiration, with its marvelous forests and its spectacular views of the Pacific. Furthermore, it's a place where I meet good artists working in different media, and who live the artistic life very intensely, and with a dedication to diverse cultural activities. For this reason it's a great place where I can show the public my work in my studio and at the same time demonstrate my process.

What is it like being an artist in Monteverde? I think that Monteverde is a unique place to feel and live art. There's a definite feeling of a dedicated artistic community, whose art manifests itself in diverse media – music, poetry, sculpture, yoga, photography, makers of musical instruments... There are quite a few arts events here, but the artists and the art-appreciating community always wish there were more events and opportunities to share artistic experiences.

complete with solar power, gray-water systems, a well-insulated underground electrical network and a good restaurant where buffet-style meals usually include locally grown produce. It's a steep hike to the best rooms, but the resort runs a shuttle on request.

Eating

The top-end hotels in town often have good restaurants, most of which are open to the public. Santa Elena has most of the budget eateries in the area.

Restaurante Mary Tierra (mains US\$3-7; ☎ 8:30am-9pm) In the heart of downtown Santa Elena, this spot serves top-quality typical food, including casados featuring the usual suspects from land and sea.

Dulce Marzo (☎ 2645 6568; pastries US\$1.50-3; ☎ 10am-6pm) Yummy homebaked sweets, wraps, sandwiches, good espresso drinks and a favorite-café feel make this one of those places to linger over a late-morning coffee as you skim the paper or your guidebook. Foreign magazines scatter the tables and there's also a book exchange if you need reading material for the next leg of your trip.

Sabores (☎ 2645 6174; cones US\$1-3; ☎ 11am-8pm) With longer hours than La Lechería, this place serves Monteverde's own brand of ice cream, plus coffee and a variety of homemade desserts. It's the perfect place for a civilized scoop after a morning hike through primitive forest.

Stella's Bakery (☎ 2645 5560; mains US\$2-5; ☎ 6am-6pm) Order your choice of sandwich on delicious homemade breads with a convenient order form (one side is in English), and don't skimp on the veggies, many of which are locally grown (and organic). You can also get soups, salads, quiches and lots of tempting sweet pastries.

La Cocina de Leña de Doña Flory (☎ 2645 5306; mains US\$4-6; ☎ 8am-8pm Sun-Fri) On a tiny turnoff close to La Colina Lodge, this 'Restaurante Rustico' is owned by Flory Salas and her husband Marvin Rockwell, one of the area's original Quaker settlers. Not surprisingly, food at this outdoor *soda* is simple yet healthy and filling, and it probably has the best tamales in town as well as its own special stew on Sunday.

Restaurante Campesino (mains US\$2-8; ☎ 9am-11pm) Relax beneath about 80 stuffed animals won from machines by the dexterous owner, who also serves up amazing casados, salads

and a variety of sublime *ceviche* with a smile. The blue shopfront also has our favorite mural in town, and we've never seen toilet cozies quite like these.

Panadería Jiménez (☎ 2645 5035; ☎ 6am-6pm Mon-Sat, 6-10am Sun) This bakery has the best goods in town, like whole-wheat breads, pastries and coffee for folks booked on the early bus.

Chimera (☎ 2645 6081; tapas US\$3-9; ☎ noon-10pm) Latin-infused tapas are complemented by an excellent wine list featuring robust reds like Chilean syrah-cabernets and crisp whites like pinot grigio. Dine alfresco at the trellis patio or the big-windowed dining room with beautiful jungle views. Charming staff will lay out a spread of cocktails (like kiwi caipirinhas, with lime, sugar and rum) and tapas like sea bass with passion-fruit cream and spicy mayo, or fried yuca with chipotle garlic aioli, all on white tablecloths.

Kaffá El Café (☎ 2645 6335; mains US\$3-10; ☎ noon-10pm) Where else in Monteverde can you sit at a bar in a swing? Nowhere, that's where. There are tables for regular dining, if you feel like having a sweet *tres leches* (as dairy-licious as it sounds), chicken in parchment paper, or a vegetarian quesadilla stuffed with fresh veggies. Or find a comfortable spot in one of the lounge rooms in back, with low tables and cushions heaped invitingly on the floor. On Thursday and Friday nights you'll often find a great DJ or live music in the main room.

Morpho's Restaurant (☎ 2645 5607; mains US\$4-10; ☎ 7:30am-9:30pm) This romantic, downtown restaurant spices up typical Costa Rican food by adding a gourmet flair. Casados feature a variety of European-influenced sauces (think sea bass in a fruity demiglace), and are served with a traditional *batido* (fruit shake) or a more sophisticated glass of wine. The menu also has a good variety of vegetarian dishes.

La Pizzería de Johnny (☎ 2645 5066; www.pizzeria.dejohnny.com; mains US\$4-10; ☎ 11am-10pm) Wood-fired, thin-crust pizzas will warm you right up after a long hike through the cloud forests (or up the hill from Santa Elena). The warm atmosphere and lovely dining area make it feel as though you are having a nice dinner out without paying the price.

Pizzeria Tramonti (☎ 2645 6120; mains US\$5-11; ☎ noon-9pm, closed Mon in low season) It's worth the trip out here if you hanker for authentic Italian, as the pizzas are baked in a wood-fired oven, and the pastas and seafood are consistently fresh. The atmosphere is also relaxed yet

romantic, and the picture windows are perfect for admiring the cloud forest and passers-by.

Tree House Restaurant & Café (☎ 2645 5751; www.canopydining.com; mains US\$5-13; ☎ 6:30am-10pm) Built around a half-century-old *higuerón* (fig) tree, this hip café serves up your favorite Mexican dishes from burritos to huevos rancheros (eggs served with tortillas and a tomato sauce), but also has a healthy selection of salads and sandwiches. The burlap-bag ceiling and jungle-themed murals painted on the yellow stucco walls surround the airy atrium. It's a cool, lively space to have a bite, linger over wine and sometimes catch good live music.

Moon Shiva Restaurant (☎ 2645 6270; www.moonshiva.com; mains US\$10-14; ☎ 11am-10pm) We get a lot of readers' mail about this Israeli-run bohemian eatery. By day, Moon Shiva is a good spot for Mediterranean- and Middle Eastern-inspired dishes. By night it turns into the hippest spot in town for live music. Look for flyers in town advertising different shows and events, as this is the place for everything from rock and jazz to salsa and electronica.

Flor de Vida (☎ 2645 6328; www.flordevida.net; mains US\$8-15; ☎ 7am-9pm) The emphasis at this Argentinean-run spot is on homemade international food, made with an artistic and loving hand. The menu features many vegetarian options, including spicy lentil stews or polenta layered with vegetables and cheese, as well as substantial burgers and lasagna. The sweet-toothed should save room for carrot cake or heavenly tiramisú. Even better, this is the only place in town with excellent, dense bagels shipped from San José.

Restaurant de Lucía (☎ 2645 5337; www.costa-rica-monteverde.com; mains US\$7-15; ☎ 11am-9pm) On the same road as El Jardín de las Mariposas, this Chilean-owned place is Monteverde's most famous restaurant. Chef José Belmar, who speaks more languages than you and your friend put together, regularly chats up guests and asks for feedback on the cuisine, and dishes (a good mix of Italian and South American specialties) are always flawless (and reasonably priced).

Sofía (☎ 2645 7017; mains US\$10-18; ☎ 5-10pm) Sofía has established itself on the Monteverde restaurant scene as one of the best places in town with its *nuevo Latino* cuisine – a modern fusion of traditional Latin American cooking styles. The ambience is flawless – soft lighting, hip music, picture windows, romantic candle settings, sloping wooden ceilings, pas-

tel paintwork and potent cocktails to lighten the mood.

Try **Supermercado La Esperanza** (☎ 2758 7351; ☎ 7am-8pm) in Santa Elena for organic groceries. **Coop Santa Elena** (☎ 7:30am-6pm) in Cerro Plano has a smaller selection, but profits are reinvested in the community.

Entertainment

Monteverde and Santa Elena nightlife generally involves a guided hike into one of the reserves, but since this misty green mountain draws artists and dreamers, there's a smattering of regular cultural offerings. When and if there's anything going on, you'll see it heavily advertised around town with flyers. Look for events at Galeron Cultural Aspinall Murray (left) or Bromelias Music Garden (p189), the long-running and constantly metamorphosing haven for the arts in Monteverde.

If you desire aural pleasure, pop into the Tree House Restaurant & Café (left), Moon Shiva (left) or Kaffá El Café (opposite) to see if anyone's playing live music – you'd be surprised at the quality of local music you might hear.

Unicornio Discotec is an almost exclusively local hangout near the northern end of the soccer field; it's the only place in town that has Imperial on tap (pro), but also has karaoke (con). Two popular bars that usually have a good mix of locals and tourists are Amigos Bar, a great place to drink and shoot pool, and the Taberna Los Valverde (at Hotel Finca Valverde; see p183), which has a dance floor made for shaking your moneymaker.

Shopping

These are some local galleries, listed in order from Santa Elena to Monteverde reserve.

Flor de Vida (☎ 2645 6328; www.flordevida.net; ☎ 10am-7pm) One of the best galleries in the area, this small space packs a lot of punch. The restaurant owner and her daughter both have work here, of the batik-silk variety, but there's also a high-quality collection of photographs, paintings, wearable textiles, jewelry and handmade musical instruments. Most artists exhibiting here are from the area.

Art House (Casa de Arte; ☎ 2645 5275; www.monteverdearthouse.com; ☎ 9am-6:30pm) Several rooms stuffed with colorful Costa Rican artistry is what you'll find at the Art House. There's jewelry, ceramic work, Boruca textiles and paintings. Though styles here differ quite a

bit, it's more along the crafty end of the artsy-craftsy spectrum. It's a great place to find a unique local souvenir.

Compleja Atmosfera (☎ 2645 6555; complejoatmosfera@yahoo.com.mx; ☎ 10am-8pm) An upscale Cerro Plano gallery that specializes in wood sculpture created by artists from all over Costa Rica. Several are from the Monteverde area, and the pieces run the gamut of style and function. They're also priced accordingly, from about US\$25 to US\$5000. If you fall in conflicted love with some sinuous piece here, may we suggest you think it over with a massage (US\$50 to US\$60) at the in-house natural spa.

Luna Azul (☎ 2645 6638; lunaazulmonteverde@gmail.com; ☎ 9am-6:30pm) This funky boutique is decked out in celestial murals, and it's a relaxing spot to do a little souvenir shopping for your friends...or yourself. There's a great variety of clothing, handmade jewelry and local art up for grabs as well as various aromatherapy products. Check out the fused glass jewelry – some of our favorite pieces here.

Río Shanti (☎ 2645 6121; www.rioshanti.com; ☎ 10am-5pm) The real reason to come here is for a spa treatment, massage or yoga class (be sure to call ahead for an appointment or schedule), but this calming space on the

road into Monteverde also has a gallery of local art for sale.

Atelier Simbiogénesis (☎ 2645 5567; ☎ 11am-5pm Mon-Sat) A working studio where you can browse the gallery and also roam upstairs to watch the artists at work, this art is a bit more experimental and an intriguing look into the contemporary scene fostered by the magical Monteverde atmosphere (see also boxed text, p185).

Alquimia Artes (☎ 2645 5847; www.alquimiaartes.com; ☎ 10am-5pm) Has work that is a tad more affordable than some other places (check out the jewelry by Tarsicio Castillo from the Ecuadorian Andes), but this doesn't mean its collection of wood sculpture, paintings and prints by Costa Rican artists isn't astounding.

Casem (Cooperativa de Artesanía Santa Elena Monteverde; ☎ 2645 5190; www.casemcoop.org; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun high season) Begun in 1982 as a women's cooperative representing eight female artists, today Casem has expanded to include almost 150 local artisans, eight of whom are men. Embroidered and hand-painted clothing, polished wooden tableware, handmade cards and other work, some priced even for budget souvenir shoppers, make for an eclectic selection.

Bromelias Books (☎ 2645 6272; www.bromeliasmusicgarden.com; ☎ 10am-5:30pm) Don cute felt shoes before entering this bookstore, with its polished-wood Cerro Plano expanse of local arts and crafts, including some intricate batik. There are also books about the region, in particular natural history, in English and Spanish, plus lots of excellent Costa Rican and Central American music. The small amphitheater outside the bookstore has regular theater and musical performances – be on the lookout for posters advertising events.

Hummingbird Gallery (☎ 2645 5030; ☎ 8:30am-5pm) This gallery just outside Monteverde reserve has beautiful photos, watercolors, art by the indigenous Chorotega people and, best of all, feeders that constantly attract several species of hummingbird. Great photo ops include potential hot shots of the violet sabrewing (Costa Rica's largest hummer) and the coppery-headed emerald, one of only three mainland birds endemic to Costa Rica. An identification board shows the nine species that are seen here. If you'd like a closer look, slides and photographs of the jungle's most precious feathered gems (and other luminous critters) by renowned British wildlife photographers Michael and Patricia Fogden are on display; the smaller prints are for sale.

Getting There & Away

The government has been planning to build a series of bridges across the several rivers that feed Laguna de Arenal's southwestern shore for about 20 years. If completed, this would provide a road connection between Monteverde and La Fortuna, which would probably be the end of the ecoparadise formerly known as Monteverde. There are always a few scattered spots where some construction work is going on but, fortunately for the time being, they're not making too much progress.

BUS

All intercity buses stop at the **bus terminal** (☎ 2645 5159; ☎ 6-11am & 1:30-5pm Mon-Fri, closes 3pm Sat & Sun) in downtown Santa Elena, and most continue on to the Cheese Factory in Monteverde. On the trip in, keep an eye on your luggage, particularly on the San José–Puntarenas leg of the trip, as well as on the Monteverde–Tilarán run.

Purchase tickets to the Monteverde and Santa Elena reserves at Hotel Camino Verde (p171), which can also make reservations for pricier trips with private companies. Destinations, bus companies, fares, journey times and departure times are as follows:

TO RIDE OR NOT TO RIDE?

Though the top two tourist destinations in the region, La Fortuna and Monteverde–Santa Elena, are only about 25km apart, there are a few roadblocks that have thus far stopped anyone from paving a direct route between them: an erupting volcano, the country's largest lake, seven rivers and the Cordillera de Tilarán for starters, not to mention mountains of bureaucratic red tape in San José. Currently, it takes several very bumpy hours by bus to make the trip.

In the mid-1990s, local entrepreneurs began offering transportation on horseback between the towns, calling it 'the shortest and most convenient connection.' The idea enchanted tourists and quickly became a booming business; as demand for the scenic trip grew, so did the number of outfitters. The result was severe price cutting, and someone had to suffer for the savings. It was usually the horses.

Unethical practices such as buying cheap old horses and literally working them to death were reported: Lonely Planet received scores of horrified letters describing thin, diseased mounts that could barely make it through the mud; at least one overworked animal died on the Castillo Trail. Author Rob Rachowiecki wrote about the problem, angering local businesspeople who complained that his 'job was to write a guidebook, not harass them.' But the letters kept coming, so Rachowiecki kept reporting. Many companies went out of business.

Today, standards are high for reputable operators, in part (we like to think) because of informed tourists who asked hard questions and insisted on examining their horses before setting out – two precautions we still ask you to take. Although incidents of abuse are still reported, these are happily the exception rather than the rule. Costs have risen, the advertising revolves around how healthy the horses are, and most operators offer mellower alternatives.

There are now three main routes: the gorgeous and infamous **Castillo Trail** (three hours on horseback), also called the 'Mountain Trail' or 'Mirador Trail,' crosses the fierce Caño Negro three times. It's still in use, but should only be done during the dry months (if then) from mid-March through May (assuming that it's actually dry) by experienced riders. Some businesses offer the trek year-round, as it saves operators about US\$25 per person in transport costs compared to other options – but don't do it in the rainy season, no matter what your operator says.

The **Chiquito Trail** (3½ hours on horseback) is still scenic and slippery, but doesn't require crossing the deepest rivers. This trail should also be avoided during wet weather, particularly by inexperienced riders. Finally, the flat and somewhat-less-scenic **Lake Trail** (5½ hours on horseback) is fine year-round, great for newbies, and basically skirts Laguna de Arenal between the boat taxi and jeep taxi that provide the actual transportation.

A good operator will never guarantee these or any other horseback trip, particularly along the Castillo Trail, as safety for both you and the horse depends completely on the weather. If they aren't offering some kind of refund in the event of rain, and/or an alternate lake trail or jeep-boat option, something's wrong. Also note that some hotels will imply that they are booking you through an established operator, but actually deliver you to a pal's independent company: ask if anything seems fishy.

And yes, budget travelers, you can find cheaper rides or even bargain reputable operators down by a few dollars in the low season. It's your choice. But consider this: when you save US\$5, it's got to come out of someone's hide. Whose do you think it will be?

If you happen to witness any instance of horse abuse, talk to the equine-loving folks at the Pensión Santa Elena (p180) – they know the scene well, and will make sure that the complaint reaches the right people.

Las Juntas US\$2, 1½ hours, departs from bus station at 4:30am. Buses to Puntarenas and San José can drop you off in Las Juntas.

Managua, Nicaragua (Tica Bus) US\$13, eight hours; a small shuttle bus (US\$1.50) departs from the bus station at 6am and brings you to the Interamericana in Lagartos, where you can pick it up.

Puntarenas US\$3, three hours, departs from the front of Banco Nacional at 6am.

Reserva Monteverde US\$0.50, 30 minutes, departs from front of Banco Nacional at 6:30am, 7:30am, 9:30am, 11:30am, 1pm and 2:30pm, returns 6:40am, 8am, 10:40am, noon, 2:10pm and 3pm.

Reserva Santa Elena US\$2, 30 minutes, departs from front of Banco Nacional at 6:30am, 8:30am, 10:30am, 2:30pm and 3:30pm, returns 11am, 1pm and 4pm.

San José (TransMonteverde) US\$3.90, 4½ hours, departs from La Lechería at 6:30am and 2:30pm, with pick-up at the bus station in Santa Elena.

Tilarán, with connection to La Fortuna US\$2, seven hours, departs from the bus station at 5:30am. This is a long ride as you will need to hang around for two hours in Tilarán. If you have a few extra dollars, it's recommended that you take the jeep-boat-jeep (see right) option to La Fortuna.

CAR

While most Costa Rican communities regularly request paved roads in their region, preservationists in Monteverde have done the opposite. All roads here are shockingly rough, and 4WD is necessary all year, especially in the rainy season. Many car-rental agencies will refuse to rent you an ordinary car during the rainy season if you admit that you're headed to Monteverde.

There are four roads from the Interamericana: coming from the south, the first turnoff is at Rancho Grande (18km north of the Puntarenas exit); a second turnoff is at the Río Lagarto bridge (just past Km 149, and roughly 15km northwest of Rancho Grande). Both are well signed and join one another about a third of the way to Monteverde. Both routes boast about 35km of steep, winding and scenic dirt roads with plenty of potholes and rocks to ensure that the driver, at least, is kept from admiring the scenery.

A third road goes via Juntas (p169), which starts off paved, but becomes just as rough as the first two roads a few kilometers past town, though it's about 5km shorter than the previous two options. Finally, if coming from the north, drivers could take the paved road from Cañas via Tilarán (p251) and then take the rough road from Tilarán to Santa Elena.

HORSE

There are a number of outfitters that offer transportation on horseback (five to six hours, per person US\$65 to US\$100) to La Fortuna, usually in combination with jeep rides. The Castillo Trail has long been the source of some hand-wringing on the part of animal lovers and guidebook writers, but today there are three different trails available of varying difficulty. Use your own best judgment (see boxed text, p188).

JEEP-BOAT-JEEP

The fastest route between Monteverde–Santa Elena and La Fortuna is a jeep-boat-jeep combo (around US\$30, three hours), which can be arranged through almost any hotel or tour operator in either town. A 4WD jeep taxi takes you to Río Chiquito, meeting a boat that crosses Laguna de Arenal, where a taxi on the other side continues to La Fortuna. This is increasingly becoming the primary transportation between La Fortuna and Monteverde as it's incredibly scenic, reasonably priced and saves half a day of rough travel.

RESERVA BIOLÓGICA BOSQUE NUBOSO MONTEVERDE

When Quaker settlers first arrived in the area, they agreed to preserve about a third of their property in order to protect the watershed above Monteverde. By 1972, however, encroaching squatters began to threaten the region. The community joined forces with environmental organizations such as the Nature Conservancy and the World Wildlife Fund to purchase 328 hectares adjacent to the already preserved area. This was called the Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde (Monteverde Cloud Forest Biological Reserve), which the Centro Científico Tropical (Tropical Science Center) began administering in 1975.

In 1986 the Monteverde Conservation League (MCL) was formed to buy land to expand the reserve. Two years later it launched the International Children's Rainforest project, which encouraged children and school groups from all over the world to raise money to buy and save tropical rain forest adjacent to the reserve. Today the reserve totals 10,500 hectares.

The most striking aspect of this project is that it is the result of private citizens working for change rather than waiting around

for a national park administered by the government. The reserve relies partly on donations from the public (see Information, right). Considering that the ridiculously underfunded Minae struggles to protect the national-park system, enterprises like this are more important than ever for maintaining cohesive wildlife corridors.

Visitors should note that some of the walking trails are very muddy, and even during the dry season (late December to early May) the cloud forest is rainy (hey, it's a rain forest – bring rainwear and suitable boots). Many of the trails have been stabilized with concrete blocks or wooden boards and are easy to walk on, though unpaved trails deeper in the preserve turn into quagmires during the rainy season.

Because of the fragile environment, the reserve allows a maximum of 160 people at any time. During the dry season this limit is almost always reached by 10am, which means you could spend the better part of a day waiting around for someone to leave. The best strategy is to get there before the gates open, or better (and wetter) to come during the off season, usually May through June and September through November.

There are a couple of important points to consider, so read carefully. If you only have time to visit either the Monteverde or Santa Elena reserve, you should know that Monteverde gets nearly 10 times as many visitors, which means that the infrastructure is better and the trails are regularly maintained, though you'll have to deal with much larger crowds. Also, most visitors come to Monteverde (and Santa Elena) expecting to see wildlife. However, both reserves cover large geographic areas, which means that the animals have a lot of space to move around in. Taking a night tour or staying overnight in one of the lodges deep within the reserve will maximize your chances of spotting wildlife; still, it's best to enter the parks without any expectations. The trees themselves are primitive and alone worth the price of admission, though a lot has changed since the quetzal-spotting days of 1983. The animals have adapted to the increased tourist volume by avoiding the main trails, but most people who visit either reserve are more than satisfied with the whole experience.

Information

The **visitor center** (☎ 2645 5122; www.cct.or.cr; park entry adult/child under 6yr/student US\$15/7.50/6.50; ♿ 7am–4pm) is adjacent to the reserve gift shop, where you can get information and buy trail guides, bird and mammal lists, and maps. The shop also sells T-shirts, beautiful color slides by Richard Laval, postcards, books, posters and a variety of other souvenirs, and rents binoculars (US\$10); you'll need to leave your passport. The annual rainfall here is about 3000mm, though parts of the reserve reportedly get twice as much. It's usually cool (high temperatures around 18°C/65°F), so wear appropriate clothing.

It's important to remember that the cloud forest is often cloudy (!) and the vegetation is thick – this combination cuts down on sound as well as vision. Also keep in mind that main trails in this reserve are among the most trafficked in Costa Rica. Some readers have been disappointed with the lack of wildlife sightings. The best bet is, as always, to hire a guide.

Donations to the **Friends of Monteverde Cloud Forest** (www.friendsofmonteverde.org) are graciously accepted at the following address: PO Box 1964, Cleveland, OH 44106, USA.

If you're looking for a great volunteer opportunity, the **Cloud Forest School** (☎ 2645 5161; www.cloudforestschool.org) is a kindergarten-through-11th-grade bilingual school locally known as the Centro de Educación Creativa. The school was founded in 1991 to increase educational opportunities for a growing population of school-age children in the area. This independent school offers creative, experiential education to 220 students with an emphasis on integrating environmental education into all aspects of the school. For more information about volunteering as well as a few intern positions, you can contact the Volunteer Coordinator at opportunities@cloudforestschool.org.

Activities

HIKING

There are 13km of marked and maintained trails – a free map is provided with your entrance fee. The most popular of the nine trails, suitable for day hikes, make a rough triangle (El Triángulo) to the east of the reserve entrance. The triangle's sides are made up of the popular **Sendero Bosque Nuboso** (1.9km), an interpretive walk (booklet US\$0.75 at gate)

through the cloud forest that begins at the ranger station, paralleled by the more open, 2km **El Camino**, a favorite of bird-watchers. The **Sendero Pantanoso** (1.6km) forms the far side of El Triángulo, traversing swamps, pine forests and the continental divide. Returning to the entrance, **Sendero Río** (2km) follows the Quebrada Cuecha past a few photogenic waterfalls.

Bisecting the triangle, the gorgeous **Chomogo Trail** (1.8km) lifts hikers 150m to 1680m, the highest point in the triangle, and other little trails crisscross the region, including the worthwhile **Sendero Brillante** (300m), with bird's-eye views of a miniature forest. There's also a 100m suspension bridge about 1km from the ranger station. However, keep in mind that despite valiant efforts to contain crowd sizes, these shorter trails are among the most trafficked in the country, and wildlife learned long ago that the region is worth avoiding unless they want a good look at hominids.

There are also more substantial hikes, including trails to the three backcountry shelters (p201) that begin at the far corners of the triangle. Even longer trails, many of them less developed, stretch out east across the reserve and down the Peñas Blancas river valley to lowlands north of the Cordillera de Tilarán and into the Bosque Eterno de los Niños. If you're strong enough and have the time to spare, these hikes are highly recommended as you'll maximize your chances of spotting wildlife, and few tourists venture beyond the triangle. If you're serious about visiting the backcountry shelters, you should first talk to the park service as you will be entering some fairly rugged terrain, and a guide is highly recommended and, at times, essential. Camping is normally not allowed.

For advice on deep-jungle trekking and reputable local guides, contact trekking guide **Andres Vargas** (www.euforiaexpeditions.com), a socially responsible, superknowledgeable adventure specialist.

WILDLIFE-WATCHING

Monteverde is a birding paradise, and though the list of recorded species tops out at over 400, the one most visitors want to see is the resplendent quetzal. The Maya bird of paradise is most often spotted during the March and April nesting season, though you could get lucky anytime of year.

For mammal-watchers, the cloud forest's limited visibility and abundance of higher primates (namely human beings) can make wildlife-watching quite difficult, though commonly sighted species (especially in the backcountry) include coati, howler, capuchin, sloth, agouti and squirrel (like squirrel-squirrel, not the squirrel monkey).

Tours & Guides

Although you can hike around the reserve on your own, a guide is highly recommended, and not just by us but by dozens of readers who were inspired by their adventures to email Lonely Planet. The park runs a variety of guided tours: make reservations at *least* one day in advance. As size is limited, groups should make reservations several months ahead for dry season and holiday periods. Guides speak English and are trained naturalists, and proceeds from the tours benefit environmental-education programs in local schools.

The reserve offers guided **natural history tours** (☎ reservations 2645 5112; tours excl entry fee US\$15) at 7:30am daily, and on busy days at 8:30am as well. Participants meet at the Hummingbird Gallery (p189), where a short 10-minute orientation is given. A half-hour slide show from renowned wildlife photographers Michael and Patricia Fogden is followed by a 2½- to three-hour walk. Once your tour is over, you can return to the reserve on your own, as your ticket is valid for the entire day.

The reserve also offers recommended two-hour **night tours** (incl entry fee with/without transportation US\$15/13) at 7:15pm nightly. These are by flashlight (bring your own for the best visibility), and offer the opportunity to observe the 70% of regional wildlife with nocturnal habits.

Guided **birding tours** (5hr tour incl entry fee per person US\$40-50) in English begin at Stella's Bakery (p186) at 6am, and usually sight more than 40 species. There's a two-person minimum and six-person maximum. Longer tours go on by request at a higher fee, and usually more than 60 species are seen.

Several local businesses can arrange a local to guide you within the reserve or in some of the nearby surrounding areas. Staff can also recommend **private guides** (guide@monteverdeinfo.com), or ask at your hotel or tour operator.

The reserve can also recommend excellent guides, many of whom work for it, for a

(Continued on page 201)

(Continued from page 192)

private tour. Costs vary depending on the season, the guide and where you want to go, but average about US\$60 to US\$100 for a half-day. Entrance costs may be extra, especially for the cheaper tours. Full-day tours are also available. The size of the group is up to you – go alone or split the cost with a group of friends.

Sleeping & Eating

Near the park entrance are **dormitories** (☎ reservations 2645 5122; www.cct.or.cr; dm adult/student US\$37/33) with 43 bunks and shared bathrooms. These are often used by researchers and student groups but are often available to tourists – make reservations. Full board can be arranged in advance.

There are also three **backcountry shelters** (dm US\$5), with drinking water, showers, propane stoves and cooking utensils. You need to carry a sleeping bag, candles, food and anything else (like toilet paper) you might need. El Valle (6km, two hours) is the closest; Alemán Hut (8km, four hours) is near a cable car across Río Peñas Blancas; and Eladios Hut (13km, six hours) is the nicest, with separate dorm rooms and a porch. Trails are muddy and challenging, scenery mossy and green, and the tourist hordes that inundate the day hikes a far-off memory. This may be the best way to appreciate the reserve. Reservations are highly recommended, and they can be made at the park office prior to setting out on your hike.

There is a small **restaurant** (plates US\$2-5; ☎ 7am-4pm) at the entrance to the reserve, which has a good variety of healthy sandwiches, salads and typical dishes.

Getting There & Away

Public buses (US\$2, 45 minutes) depart the Banco Nacional in Santa Elena at 6:30am, 7:30am, 9:30am, 11:30am, 1pm and 2:30pm daily. Buses return from the reserve at 6:40am, 8am, 10:40am, noon, 2:10pm and 3pm. You can flag down the buses from anywhere on the road between Santa Elena and the reserve – inquire at your hotel about what time they will pass by. Taxis are also available for around US\$5.

The 6km walk from Santa Elena is uphill, but lovely – look for paths that run parallel to the road. There are views all along the way, and many visitors remark that some of the best birding is on the final 2km of the road.

RESERVA SANTA ELENA

Though Monteverde gets all the attention, this exquisitely misty reserve, at 310 hectares just a fraction of the size of that other forest, has plenty to recommend it. You can veritably hear the canopy, draped with epiphytes, breathing in humid exhalas as water drops onto the leaf litter and mud underfoot. The odd call of the three-wattled bellbird or low crescendo of a howler monkey punctuates the higher-pitched bird chatter and chirps.

While Monteverde Crowd...er...Cloud Forest entertains almost 200,000 visitors annually, Santa Elena sees fewer than 20,000 tourists each year, which means its dewy trails through mysteriously veiled forest are usually far quieter. It's also a bit cheaper and much less developed; plus your entry fee is helping support another unique project.

This cloud-forest reserve was created in 1989 and opened to the public in March 1992. It was one of the first community-managed conservation projects in the country, and is now managed by the Santa Elena high school board and bears the quite unwieldy official name of Reserva del Bosque Nuboso del Colegio Técnico Profesional de Santa Elena. You can visit the **reserve office** (☎ 2645 5693; ☎ 8am-4pm Wed-Fri) at the high school.

The reserve is about 6km northeast of the village of Santa Elena. This cloud forest is slightly higher in elevation than Monteverde, and as some of the forest is secondary growth, there are sunnier places for spotting birds and other animals throughout. There's a stable population of monkey and sloth, many of which can be seen on the road to the reserve. Unless you're a trained ecologist, the old-growth forest in Santa Elena is fairly similar in appearance to Monteverde, though the lack of cement blocks on the trails means that you'll have a much more authentic (note: muddy) trekking experience.

This place is moist, and almost all the water comes as fine mist, and more than 25% of all the biomass in the forest are epiphytes – mosses and lichens – for which this place is a humid haven. Though about 10% of species here won't be found in Monteverde, which is largely on the other side of the continental divide, you can see quetzal here too, as well as Volcán Arenal exploding in the distance – theoretically. Rule No 407 of cloud forests: it's often cloudy.

Information

You can visit the **reserve** (☎ 2661 8290; www.monteverdeinfo.com/reserve-santa-elena-monteverde; adult/student US\$8/4.50; ☎ 7am-4pm) on your own, but a guide will enhance your experience tenfold (see below).

There's also a simple restaurant, coffee shop and gift store. Note that all proceeds go toward managing the reserve and to environmental-education programs in local schools. Donations are graciously accepted.

If you have some extra time, there's a good volunteer program here – possible projects include trail maintenance, surveying, administration and biological research. You're expected to make at least a one-week commitment, and very basic (no electricity, very cold showers) dorm-style accommodations are available free to volunteers, though all but the most rugged will prefer a US\$10-per-day homestay, including three meals. Although at times it's possible to simply show up and volunteer, it's best to contact the reserve in advance.

Activities

More than 12km of trails are open for hiking, featuring four circular trails offering walks of varying difficulty and length, from 45 minutes to 3½ hours (1.4km to 4.8km) along a stable (though not 'concrete-blocked') trail system. Rubber boots (US\$1) can be rented at the entrance. Unlike Monteverde, Santa Elena is not developed enough to facilitate backcountry hiking, and at the time of writing it was not possible to overnight in the reserve.

Tours & Guides

The reserve offers guided **daylight tours** (3hr tours excl admission per person US\$15) at 7:30am and 11:30am daily; try to make the earlier hike. Popular **night tours** (1½hr tour excl admission per person US\$13) leave at 7pm nightly. Tours have a two-person minimum and six-person maximum, so reservations are recommended for both tours during the dry season. The reserve can also arrange three-day private tours through various guides for US\$20.

Getting There & Away

A daily shuttle (US\$1 each way) between the village of Santa Elena and the reserve departs from the Banco Nacional in town at 6:30am, 8:30am, 10:30am and 2:30pm, and

returns at 11am, 1pm and 4pm. A taxi from Santa Elena costs US\$8.

ECOLOGDE SAN LUIS & RESEARCH STATION

Formerly a tropical-biology research station, this facility now integrates research with ecotourism and education, and is administrated by the University of Georgia. The 70-hectare site is on the Río San Luis and adjoins the southern part of the Monteverde reserve. Its average elevation of 1100m makes it a tad lower and warmer than Monteverde, and birders have recorded some 230 species attracted by the slightly nicer weather. There are also a number of trails into primary and secondary forest, and there's a working farm with tropical fruit orchards and a coffee harvest from November to March.

A variety of comfortable accommodations at the **lodge** (☎ 2645 8049; www.ecolodgesanluis.com; dm US\$65, s/d cabin US\$85/160; (P)) are available for anyone interested in learning about the cloud-forest environment and experiencing a bit of rural Costa Rican life. Rates include all meals and most activities. There are a host of day and night hikes guided by biologists, as well as slide shows, seminars, horse rides and even an introduction to research activities. Discounts can be arranged for students, researchers, large groups and long stays.

The ecolodge also runs a resident naturalist volunteer program, though there is a preference for University of Georgia students and graduates, and a six-month commitment is required. The position entails running a number of teaching workshops and guided walks, as well as participating in development projects on the station and in the community. Training, room and board are provided.

From the main road between Santa Elena and Monteverde, it's a steep 3km walk from the signed road where the bus will drop you off. A 4WD taxi from town costs about US\$12 each way, and the lodge can also arrange transportation from San José in advance.

PUENTE LA AMISTAD

About 23m south of Cañas on the Interamericana is a turnoff, continuing for another 25km to the Puente La Amistad. Prior to debut of the 'Friendship Bridge,' constructed with the help and funding of the Taiwanese government, drivers had to ferry across the Río Tempisque. The bridge was

greatly reduced travel time to and from the beaches in Nicoya.

CAÑAS

If you're cruising north on the Interamericana, Cañas (population 25,000) is the first town of any size in Costa Rica's driest province, Guanacaste. *Sabanero* culture is evident on the sweltering and quiet streets, where full-custom pick-up trucks share the road with wizened cowboys on horseback, fingering their machetes with a swagger you just don't see outside the province. It's a dusty, typically Latin American town, where everyone walks slowly and businesses shut down for lunch, all centered on the Parque Central and Catholic church – which are most definitely not typical.

You're better off basing yourself in livelier Liberia, which has more traveler-oriented services. That said, Cañas is a good place for organizing rafting trips on the nearby Río Corobicí or for exploring Parque Nacional Palo Verde. And if you need to stop here for gas, there are a couple of interesting sights to check out.

Information

You can find public phones, a post office, library and a Banco Nacional, as well as many simple *sodas* and hotels here.

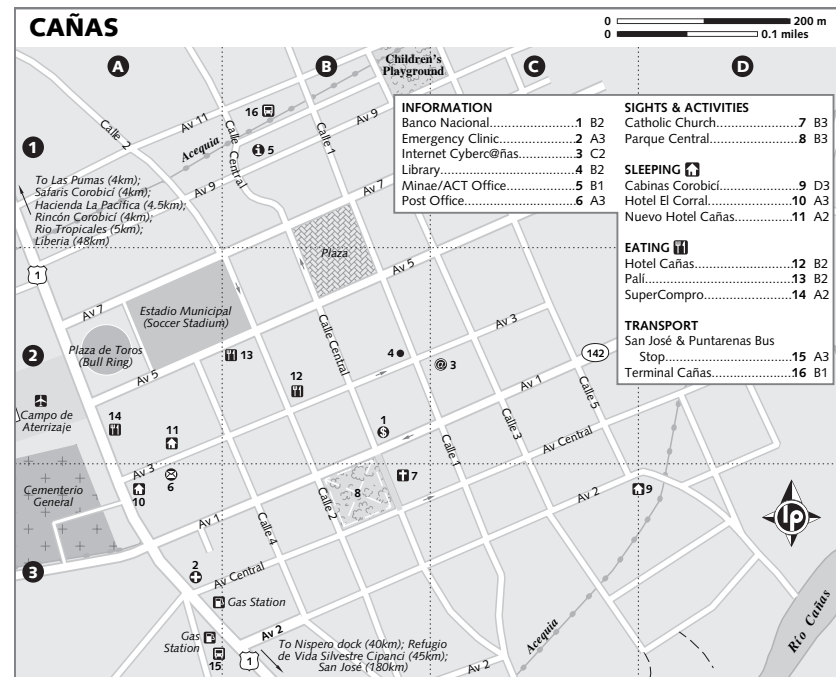
Emergency clinic (☎ 2669 0092; nr Av Central & Hwy 1; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Fri) Has 24-hour on-call service.

Internet Cybercafé (☎ 2663 5232; Av 3 btwn Calles 1 & 3; per hr US\$1.25; ☎ 8:15am-9pm Mon-Sat, 2-9pm Sun) Has fast computers, air-con and, if you get here at 8:15am, two hours for the price of one.

Minae/ACT office (☎ 2669 0533; Av 9; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Has limited information about nearby national parks and reserves.

Sights & Activities

Though most visitors simply use the town as a base for visits to nearby **Parque Nacional Palo Verde** (p208) or rafting the **Río Corobicí**, it's worth the trip just to see the Catholic church's **psychedelic mosaics** designed by famed local painter Otto Apuy. Sinewy vines and colorful starbursts that have enveloped the modern church's once clean lines are enhanced by jungle-themed stained glass that's completely different from anything on offer at the Vatican. In **Parque Central** opposite, park



benches and the pyramid-shaped bandstand are equally elaborate.

LAS PUMAS

Directly behind the office of Safaris Corobici is **Las Pumas** (☎ 2669 6044; admission by donation; ☞ 8am-5pm), a wild-animal shelter started in the 1960s by Lilly Hagnauer, a Swiss woman, and said to be the largest shelter of its kind in Latin America. Pumas, jaguars, ocelots and margays – plus peccaries and a few birds that were either orphaned or injured – are taken care of here and it has clearly been a labor of love to save and raise them. Lilly died in 2001, but the shelter is still managed by her family. Las Pumas is not officially funded and contributions are crucial to offsetting the high costs of maintaining the shelter; you may also be able to volunteer here by contacting it beforehand.

REFUGIO DE VIDA SILVESTRE CIPANCI

New in 2001, this small wildlife refuge is at the confluence of the Ríos Tempisque and Bebedero, at the southern end of Parque Nacional Palo Verde. It's a good spot for **birding** and **fishing**, though it's virtually untouristed. Local fishers offer passenger boats for tours on these two rivers. A three-hour guided tour costs around US\$20 per person (US\$150

minimum), and can usually be arranged at the docks; show up early.

The Minae/ACT office in Cañas has more information on the park. Boats leave from the Nispero dock, just north of the Tempisque ferry.

RAFTING

Gentle rafting trips down the Río Corobici can be made with **Safaris Corobici** (☎ 2669 6191; www.nicoya.com; Km 193 Interamericana Hwy; ☞ departures 7am-3pm). Bookings can be made at its office on the Interamericana about 4.5km north of Cañas. The emphasis is on wildlife observation rather than exciting white-water rafting. The river is Class I-II (in other words, pretty flat) but families and nature lovers enjoy these trips. Swimming holes are found along the river. Per person, based on a two-person minimum, a two-hour float costs US\$35/17.50 per adult/child under 14 years, a three-hour birding float covering 12km costs US\$45/22.50, and a half-day 18km float including lunch costs US\$60/30. The company also rents out a little guesthouse nearby.

A branch office of the popular **Río Tropicales** (☎ 2233 6455; www.riostropicales.com/english.htm; ☞ departures 7am-3pm) operates out of the Rincón Corobici restaurant (opposite).

LAS FIESTAS DE GUANACASTE

Guanacastecos love their horses, almost as much as they love their fiestas. And what better way to get the best of both worlds than with a *tope* (horse parade), a mix of a Western rodeo and a country fair complete with a cattle auction, food stalls, music, dancing, drinking and, of course, bull riding? Fortunately, in Costa Rica the bulls are never killed, and so watching the insane helmetless, bareback, bucking bronco action is exciting and (usually) gore-free. Even better than watching the bull riding is the aftermath of the rider getting tossed, as it's fairly common for the local drunks and young machos to jump into the ring to act as volunteer rodeo clowns, which is simultaneously hilarious and scary.

Though the bull riding usually draws the biggest crowds, the main event is the *tope* itself, where you can see the high-stepping gait of the *sabanero* (cowboy), which demands endurance and skill from both horse and rider.

Topes are also a great place to catch the region's traditional dance, known as the Punto Guanacasteco. Perhaps the showiest aspect of the dance is the long, flowing skirts worn by the women. This skirt is meant to resemble an oxcart wheel, which is a traditional Costa Rican craft most often associated with the town of Sarchí. Punto Guanacasteco traditionally served as a means of courtship, and it's common for the dance to be frequently interrupted by young men who shout rhyming verses in order to try to win over a love interest. The dance and accompanying music are fast paced and full of passion, and they're similar to most other Central American styles.

Topes are a fairly common occurrence in Guanacaste, so ask a local about where one might be happening, or look out for posters. Generally, *topes* occur on Costa Rican civic holidays (p533), though you can bet on finding big parties during Semana Santa (the week before Easter), the week between Christmas and New Year, and on July 25, the anniversary of Guanacaste's annexation.

Sleeping

Cañas is a cheaper place to stay than Liberia, though the following places cater more to truckers than travelers. Rooms have cold showers unless otherwise stated.

Cabinas Corobici (☎ 2669 0241; cnr Av 2 & Calle 5; r per person US\$10; P) At the southeastern end of town, this is a good budget option as the friendly management maintains comfortable, good-sized rooms with warmish private showers, and the area is fairly quiet at night.

Hotel El Corral (☎ 2669 1467; s/d US\$17/32; ☞) Right on the Interamericana, ask for your absolutely standard room (some with air-con, hot shower and/or TV) in the back, away from the highway noise. The attached restaurant (mains US\$2 to US\$5, open 6am to 10pm) overlooks the Interamericana, so you can watch (and smell) the big rigs blast by while enjoying your casado.

Nuevo Hotel Cañas (☎ 2669 5118; hotelcanas@racsa.co.cr; Av 3 btwn Calle 4 & Hwy 1; s/d US\$30/45; P ☞ ☞) This is by far the best option in town, and although it's a bit pricey, the Nuevo Hotel Cañas is consistently packed with vacationing Ticos who adore the swimming pool and Jacuzzi. All rooms have air-con, cable TV and private hot shower, so you're definitely getting bang for your buck here.

Hotel Capazuri (☎ 2669 6280; capazuri@racsa.co.cr; camping US\$5, d incl breakfast with/without air-con US\$50/45; P ☞ ☞) Inconveniently located about 2.5km northwest of Cañas on the Interamericana, this is the place to stay if you have your own transport. This small Tico resort has rather frilly rooms, most sleeping three, with TV and private hot-water bathroom. There's also a festive, onsite restaurant and, best of all, a huge pool (admission US\$1.25 for nonguests). The friendly management will also let you pitch a tent on the well-maintained grounds.

Eating

Hotel Cañas (☎ 2669 0039; cnr Calle 2 & Av 3; mains US\$3-8; ☞ 6am-9pm Mon-Sat, 7am-2pm Sun) You can count on the most reliable quality at this hotel restaurant, serving up a number of Western dishes, including chicken cordon bleu and beef stroganoff. Dine here if you're pretty sure you can't stomach another casado.

Rincón Corobici (☎ 2669 1234; www.nicoya.com/rincon; mains US\$3-10; ☞ 8am-6pm) This attractive Swiss-run restaurant is 4km north of Cañas on the banks of the Río Corobici, and is a great lunch stop for authentic fondue. A terrace

provides river and garden views, and a short trail follows the riverbank where you can take a cool dip. English, French and German are spoken here, and you can book tours with Río Tropicales for the Río Corobici or other destinations in Costa Rica.

Hacienda La Pacifica (☎ 2669 6050; mains US\$5-12; ☞ 7am-9pm) Once a working hacienda and nature reserve, this elegant restaurant is 4.5km north of Cañas on the Interamericana and is now part of a private hotel for researchers. Many of the ingredients are grown right here on experimental organic plots, including the only large-scale organic rice cultivation site in the country.

Many of the restaurants in town shut down on Sundays, but luckily there's an enormous **SuperCompro** (☞ 8am-8pm) right on the Interamericana and a **Pali** (☞ 8am-8pm) just around the corner.

Getting There & Away

All buses arrive and depart from **Terminal Cañas** (☞ 8am-1pm & 2:30-5:30pm) at the northern end of town. There are a few *sodas* and snack bars, and you can store your bags (US\$0.50) at the desk. There's also a taxi stand in front.

Juntas US\$0.50, 1½ hours, departs 9am and 2:15pm.

Liberia US\$1.20, 1½ hours, departs 5:30am, 6:45am, 7:30am, noon, 1:30pm, 4:30pm and 5:30pm.

Puntarenas US\$2, two hours, departs 6am, 6:40am, 9:30am, 10:30am, 11:30am, 12:30pm, 1:45pm, 3:30pm and 4:30pm.

San José US\$3, 3½ hours, departs 4am, 4:50am, 5:40am, 9am, 12:15pm and 1:30pm.

Tilarán US\$0.75, 45 minutes, departs 6am, 8am, 9am, 10:30am, noon, 1:45pm, 3:30pm and 5:30pm.

Upala US\$2, two hours, departs 4:30am, 6am, 8:30am, 11:15am, 1pm, 3:30pm and 5:15pm.

VOLCÁN TENORIO AREA

A paved road 6km northwest of Cañas branches off the Interamericana and heads north to Upala, passing between Volcán Miravalles to the west and Volcán Tenorio (1916m) to the east. **Parque Nacional Volcán Tenorio**, among Costa Rica's newest national parks and part of the Area de Conservación Arenal (ACA), is one of the highlights of northwestern Costa Rica, especially since the dearth of public transportation and park infrastructure contribute to the lack of tourists. However, if you have your own transport, the park entrance is just a few kilometers south of Bijagua, and the park is an easy day trip from either Liberia or Cañas.

The trail system is relatively undeveloped. Grab a map at the **ranger station** (☎ 2200 0135; admission US\$10; ☎ 7am-4pm), which outlines one of the finest short hikes in Costa Rica. On the northeast flanks of the volcano, the **Río Celeste**, just 1.5km from the ranger station, is famed for the blue created by many minerals dissolved in its waters. After navigating a winding trail through secondary forest, you'll find yourself in front of an impossibly milky-blue **waterfall** that cascades down the rocks into a fantastically aquamarine pool. If after seeing the falls you're wondering what the thermal headwaters look like, continue along the trail for a few hundred more meters until you reach the confluence of two rivers, where the brown co-mingles with the deeper turquoise and forms an unusual variation of colors. Another 3km hike through epiphyte-laden cloud forest takes you past a series of hot springs and boiling mud pots – take great care not to scald yourself when you're exploring the area.

Since volcanic activity at Tenorio is limited to fumaroles, hot springs and mud pots, it's possible to hike to the top of the crater on a two-day trek where you can camp next to a small lake that will make your evening surreally beautiful. The trail system here is unmarked and passes through rough terrain, so you'll need the services of a local guide, who can be hired either at the ranger station or at any of the lodges.

Sleeping & Eating

There are a few simple *sodas* in Bijagua, but other than that, you'll probably be eating at your lodge.

Río Celeste Lodge (☎ 8365 3415; www.riocelstelodge.com; camping US\$2, r per person US\$20) This simple set of rustic cabins is the cheapest accommodations in the area, and is a good option if your day trip suddenly turns into an overnight stay. Rooms have fans and warm showers, and the lodge is conveniently located on the hill near the trailhead. Staff can also arrange horseback riding and guided hikes.

Posada Cielo Roto (☎ 8352 9439, 2466 8692; r per person incl 3 meals & horse rides US\$45; ☎) On expansive grounds with horse stables and several kilometers of private trails, owner Mario Tamayo, who speaks English, has built several lovely, rambling houses with shared kitchens that are just perfect for groups. Some rooms are doubles, but most are dorm style, all with private bathrooms and lots with big windows

overlooking the stunning scenery. There's no electricity, but kerosene lamps and candles are provided. Mario accepts walk-ins, but it's better to make reservations so he can bring in food, ice and whatnot for your stay.

La Carolina Lodge (☎ 8380 1656; www.lacarolina.lodge.com; s/d incl 3 meals & horse rides from US\$75/130; ☎) This isolated lodge run by a gracious North American named Bill is on a working cattle ranch on the slopes of the volcano, and is highly recommended for anyone looking for a beautiful escape from the rigors of modern life. The remote location means there's limited electricity – but candlelight only adds to the ambience. Amazing meals (organic beans, rice, fruits, cheeses, chicken and pork from the farm), cooked over an outdoor wood-burning stove, are a treat, as is soaking in the wood-fired hot tub. Rooms with hot showers are basic, but you'll be spending most of your time in the nearby hot springs, swimming holes or on the riverside (where you can lounge, swim, fish or go birding). The lodge is about 12km north of Bijagua and 7km east of the highway on the road toward the village of San Miguel.

VOLCÁN MIRAVALLS AREA

Volcán Miravalles (2028m) is the highest volcano in the Cordillera de Guanacaste, and although the main crater is dormant, the geothermal activity beneath the ground has led to the rapid development of the area as a hot-springs destination. As more travelers land in Liberia, they're starting to discover this nearby refuge from the ubiquitous cold shower.

Volcán Miravalles isn't a national park or refuge, but the volcano itself is afforded a modicum of protection by being within the Zona Protectora Miravalles. You can also take guided tours of the government-run Proyecto Geotérmico Miravalles, north of Fortuna, an ambitious project inaugurated in 1994 that uses geothermal energy to produce electricity, primarily for export to Nicaragua and Panama, but also producing about 18% of Costa Rica's electricity. A few bright steel tubes from the plant snake along the flanks of the volcano, adding an eerie touch to the remote landscape. But the geothermal energy most people come here to soak up comes in liquid form. Note that all of the listed hot springs are north of Fortuna.

Thermo Mania (☎ 2673 0233; www.thermomania.net; adult/child US\$6/4; ☎ 8am-10pm) is the biggest com-

HERE'S MUD IN YOUR EYE

Actually...you'll want to keep thermal mud *out* of your eyes. To get the most out of your mud bath, local hot-springs devotees suggest this general regimen.

If there's a sauna, start with a nice steam for about 15 minutes to open your pores; otherwise, have a few minutes' soak in a warm pool. Then get dirty – squish your hands into the basin of gray volcanic mud (never directly from the pools themselves, which could ruin the experience by burning the flesh off your hands) and apply liberally, avoiding the eye area. Find a spot to relax and let the mud dry on your skin for 10 to 15 minutes before rinsing off under a hot shower and/or having a good soak in the hot pools (the recommended duration depends on the location of the hot springs). Ending with a brave dip in a cold pool, if there is one, not only recharges you in a big way but also sends a healthy jolt of blood to your internal organs.

Before getting into hot water – the thermal kind, at least – remove any silver jewelry to prevent it from oxidizing and turning black.

plex in the area, with seven thermal pools that are connected by all manner of waterslides, heated rivers, waterfalls and faux-stone bridges. There are also a playground, soccer field and picnic tables; the busy restaurant-bar (mains US\$4 to US\$10) is housed in a 170-year-old colonial cabin furnished with museum-worthy period pieces. Guests who stay in the log-cabin rooms (per person adult/child US\$22/11) have free access to the pools during their stay, with TV and cold-water bathrooms (neatly counterbalancing the lack of cold-water pools).

El Guayaçán (☎ 2673 0349; www.termalelguayaçan.com; adult/child US\$4/2), whose hissing vents and mud pots (absolutely stay on the trail!) are on the family finca, lie just behind Thermo Mania. With its five thermal pools and one cold pool in front of its simple, cold-water cabinas (adult/child US\$18/11), this unpretentious place has a mellow, family vibe to it. There's an onsite restaurant (mains US\$2 to US\$6).

Nearby **Yökö Hot Springs** (☎ 2673 0410; www.yokotermale.com; adult/child US\$5/3; ☎ 7am-11pm) has four hot springs with a small waterslide and waterfall, set in an attractive meadow at the foot of Miravalles. The 12 elegant cabinas (single/double with breakfast US\$50/77) have huge bathrooms and gleaming wood floors. Extra amenities include a Jacuzzi, sauna and a relaxed restaurant (mains US\$2 to US\$10) serving everything from burgers to filet mignon.

For some local flavor, the more far-flung **Thermale Miravalles** (☎ 8358 4586, 8305 4072; adult/child US\$2.50/1.50) has two pools and lies along a thermal stream. The owners have set up a small restaurant and offer camping (per person US\$6) on the property. They're usually open on weekends year-round, and daily during high season.

On the southern slopes of Miravalles, **Las Hornillas** (☎ 8839 9769; www.lashornillas.com; admission US\$15; ☎ 9am-5pm) is the center of volcanic activity in the area. The entrance fee includes an informative tour around the small crater (again, stay on the trail, kids) and allows you to soak in the thermal pools. This wonderfully isolated, family-run spot also offers hiking tours (US\$25) via hanging bridges to a waterfall, including lunch and access to the mud and pools.

Near the base of the volcano is the newly opened **Centro de Aventuras** (☎ 2673 0697; www.volcanoAdventuretour.com), which has a number of offerings including a canopy tour (without/with lunch US\$20/28), rappelling (US\$10), horse riding (US\$25 to US\$50), and a guided tour through a nearby macadamia-nut farm (US\$40). The clean, brightly painted cabinas (double US\$30) have private hot-water bathrooms and are centered on a pool that's fed by mountain springwater; camping (US\$5) is also available, with access to showers and bathrooms. This is a good place to inquire about local guides who can take you on independent tours, eg a two-day hike to the summit of Miravalles.

Volcán Miravalles is 27km northeast of Bagaces and can be approached by a paved road that leads north of Bagaces through the communities of Salitral and Torno, where the road splits. From the left-hand fork, you'll reach **Guayabo**, with a few *sodas* and basic cabinas; to the right, you'll find **Fortuna** (not to be confused with La Fortuna), with easier access to the hot springs. Both towns are small population centers, and are not of much interest to travelers. The roads reconnect north of the two towns and toward Upala, and also

make a great scenic loop. Though the region is relatively remote, it's well served by buses from Bagaces.

BAGACES

This small town is about 22km northwest of Cañas on the Interamericana, and is the headquarters of the **Area de Conservación Tempisque** (ACT; ☎ 2200 0125; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri), which, in conjunction with Minae, administers Parque Nacional Palo Verde, Reserva Biológica Lomas de Barbudal, and several smaller and lesser-known protected areas. The office is on the Interamericana opposite the signed main entry road into Parque Nacional Palo Verde. The office is mainly an administrative one, though sometimes rangers are available. Any buses between Cañas and Liberia can drop you off in Bagaces. If you're heading to Miravalles, there are hourly local buses to both Fortuna and Guayabo.

If you have your own car, 3km south of Bagaces on the road to Palo Verde is the turnoff for **Llano de Cortés**, a hidden waterfall that's free to enter and perfect for an afternoon swim. Follow the dirt road for about 1.5km until you reach the small parking area.

PARQUE NACIONAL PALO VERDE

The 18,417-hectare Parque Nacional Palo Verde is a wetland sanctuary in Costa Rica's driest province that lies on the northeastern banks of the mouth of Río Tempisque at the head of the Golfo de Nicoya. All of the major rivers in the region drain into this ancient intersection of two basins, which creates a mosaic of habitats, including mangrove swamps, marshes, grassy savannahs and evergreen forests. A number of low limestone hills provide lookout points over the park, and the park's shallow, permanent lagoons are focal points for wildlife.

The park derives its name from the *palo verde* (green tree), which is a small shrub that's green year-round and abundant within the park. The park is also contiguous in the north with the 7354-hectare Refugio de Vida Silvestre Dr Rafael Lucas Rodríguez Caballero and the Reserva Biológica Lomas de Barbudal (opposite), which, along with Parque Nacional Barra Honda (p286), make up part of the **Area de Conservación Tempisque**, a large conservation area containing some of the remaining strands of dry tropical forest. A recent addition to this project was Refugio do Vida Silvestre

Cipancí, which protects the corridors linking the various parks from being clear-cut by local farmers.

Palo Verde has the greatest concentrations of waterfowl and shorebirds in Central America, and over 300 different bird species have been recorded in the park. Birders come particularly to see the large flocks of heron (including the rare black-crowned night heron), stork (including the endangered jabirú stork), spoonbill, egret, ibis, grebe and duck, and forest birds, including scarlet macaw, great curassow, keel-billed toucan, and parrot are also common. Frequently sighted mammals include deer, coati, armadillo, monkey and peccary, as well as the largest population of jaguarundi in Costa Rica. There are also numerous reptiles in the wetlands including crocodiles that are reportedly up to 5m in length.

The dry season, from December to March, is the best time to visit as flocks of birds tend to congregate in the remaining lakes and marshes and the trees lose their leaves, thus allowing for clearer viewing. However, the entire basin swelters during the dry season, so bring adequate sun protection. There are also far fewer insects in the dry season, and mammals are occasionally seen around the water holes. Take binoculars or a spotting scope if possible. During the wet months, large portions of the area are flooded, and access may be limited.

Orientation & Information

The **park entrance** (☎ 2200 0125; admission US\$6; ☎ 8am-4pm) is 28km along the turnoff from the Interamericana near the town of Bagaces. However, your best source of information on the park is the Hacienda Palo Verde Research Station (opposite). There is a fairly extensive system of roads and hiking trails that originate from the park entrance and lead to a series of lookout points and observation towers.

Tours

To fully appreciate the size and topography of the park, it's worth organizing a boat trip. Travelers recommend the **guided tours** (2/3/4 people half-day US\$35/60/75) that can be arranged through the Hacienda Palo Verde Research Station. The station also offers **birding tours** (half-/full day per person US\$38/30) through the park. Tour operators in San José and La Fortuna run package tours to

Palo Verde, but you'll save money by arranging everything yourself.

Sleeping & Eating

Overnight visitors should make reservations and must also pay the US\$6 entry fee.

Camping (per person US\$4) is permitted near the Palo Verde ranger station, where toilets and hot-water showers are available. Meals and box lunches (US\$12) are available at the OTS research station by advance arrangement.

Hacienda Palo Verde Research Station (☎ 524-0607; www.ots.ac.cr; s/d incl meals US\$65/124) Run by the Organization of Tropical Studies (OTS), this station conducts tropical research and teaches university graduate-level classes. Researchers and those taking OTS courses get preference for dormitories with shared bathrooms. A few two- and four-bed rooms with shared bathrooms are also available. The rates for visitors include a guided hike. The research station is on a well-signed road 8km from the park entrance.

Getting There & Away

The main road to the entrance, usually passable to ordinary cars year-round, begins from a signed turnoff from the Interamericana, opposite Bagaces. The 28km gravel road has tiny brown signs that usually direct you when the road forks, but if in doubt, take the fork that looks more used. Another 8km brings you to the limestone hill, Cerro Guayacán (and the Hacienda Palo Verde Research Station), from where there are great views; 2km further are the Palo Verde park headquarters and ranger station. You can drive through a swampy maze of roads to the Reserva Biológica Lomas de Barbudal without returning to the Interamericana.

Buses connecting Cañas and Liberia can drop you at the ACT office, opposite the turnoff to the park. If you call the ACT office in advance, rangers may be able to pick you up in Bagaces. If you're staying at the Hacienda Palo Verde Research Station, the staff can also arrange to pick you up in Bagaces.

RESERVA BIOLÓGICA LOMAS DE BARBUDAL

The 2646-hectare Lomas de Barbudal reserve forms a cohesive unit with Palo Verde, and protects several species of endangered trees, such as mahogany and rosewood, as well as the common and quite spectacular *corteza*

amarilla. This tree is what biologists call a 'big bang reproducer' – all the yellow cortezas in the forest burst into bloom on the same day, and for about four days the forest is an incredible mass of yellow-flowered trees. This usually occurs in March, about four days after an unseasonal rain shower.

Nearly 70% of the trees in the reserve are deciduous, and during the dry season they shed their leaves as if it were autumn in a temperate forest. This particular habitat is known as tropical dry forest, and occurs in climates that are warm year-round, though characterized by a long dry season that lasts several months. Since plants lose moisture through their leaves, the shedding of leaves allows the trees to conserve water during dry periods. The newly bare trees also open up the canopy layer, enabling sunlight to reach ground level and facilitate the growth of thick underbrush. Dry forests were once common in many parts of the Pacific slopes of Central America, but little remains. Dry forests also exist north and south of the equatorial rain-forest belt, especially in southern Mexico and the Bolivian lowlands.

Lomas de Barbudal is also known for its abundant and varied wasps, butterflies, moths and other insects. There are about 250 different species of bee in this fairly small reserve – representing about a quarter of the world's bee species. Bees here include the Africanized 'killer' bees – if you suffer from bee allergies, this is one area where you really don't want to forget your bee-sting kit.

There are more than 200 bird species, including the great curassow, a chickenlike bird that is hunted for food and is endangered, as well as other endangered species including the king vulture, scarlet macaw and jabirú stork. Much like Palo Verde, Lomas de Barbudal is also home to a variety of mammal species as well as some enormous crocodiles – you might want to leave your swim trunks at home.

Orientation & Information

At the reserve entrance, there's a small **information center** (☎ 2671 1029, 2237 7039; reserve admission US\$2; ☎ 7am-4pm), though the actual reserve is on the other side of the Río Cabuyo, behind the museum. The infrastructure of the park is less geared to tourists than at Palo Verde, though there is a small network of hiking trails that radiates from the information center. A small map is provided. It is not possible to

overnight in the park and backcountry hiking is not permitted.

Getting There & Away

The turnoff to Lomas de Barbudal from the Interamericana is near the small community of Pijije, 14km southeast of Liberia or 12km northwest of Bagaces. It's 7km to the entrance of the reserve. The road is unpaved, but open all year – some steep sections may require 4WD in rainy season. Buses between Liberia and Cañas can drop you at the turnoff to the reserve.

LIBERIA

Well, the secret's out. Before the boom in Costa Rican tourism, deciphering the bus timetables and fighting your way through the crowds at the Coca-Cola terminal in San José was a rite of passage for the uninitiated traveler. Even just a few years ago, getting to the beaches on the Península de Nicoya took determination, patience and – depending on the state of Costa Rica's dreadful roads – a little luck. These days, though, travelers are getting their first glimpse of *pura vida* Costa Rica at Liberia's own Aeropuerto Internacional Daniel Oduber Quiros, which is roughly the size of a Wal-Mart parking lot, but more of a breeze to exit.

Previously, the sunny capital of Guanacaste served as a transportation hub connecting Liberia with both borders, as well as the standard bearer of Costa Rica's *sabanero* culture (see boxed text, p204). Even today, a large part of the greater Liberia area is involved in ranching operations, but tourism is fast becoming a significant contributor to the economy. Liberia has long been a base for visiting the nearby volcanoes, national parks and beaches, and nowadays the sight of gringos heading for their second homes in Tamarindo, or surfers toting their boards, is commonplace.

For now, Liberia is a much safer and surprisingly chill alternative to San José, although the government is looking to expand the airport in several years, with an eye to accommodating as much traffic, or more, as Juan Santamaría airport. A brand-new Hilton was slated to open by this book's publication, and the Guanacaste Country Club, complete with 18-hole golf course and a gated community, is also under construction.

Liberia is still a great base for exploring the attractions in the northwest and the

beaches of the Península de Nicoya. And, though most of the historic buildings in the city center are a little rough around the edges and in desperate need of a paint job, the 'white city' is a pleasant one, with a good range of accommodations and services for travelers on all budgets.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Cyberm@nia (☎ 2666 7240; Av 1 btwn Calles 2 & Central; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-10pm) With the friendliest staff ever, this spot is also good for cheap long-distance calls, charging US\$0.25 a minute to most parts of the world.
Planet Internet (☎ 2665 3737; Calle Central btwn Avs Central & 2; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-10pm) Has speedy machines in a spacious, frigidly air-conditioned room; also offers internet calls.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Dr Enrique Baltodano Briceño (☎ 2666 0011, emergencies 2666 0318) Behind the stadium on the northeastern outskirts of town.

MONEY

Most hotels will accept US dollars, and may be able to change small amounts. If not, Liberia probably has more banks per square meter than any other town in Costa Rica.
BAC San José (☎ 2666 2020; Centro Comercial Santa Rosa; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Changes traveler's checks; try this 24-hour ATM if others won't accept your card.

Banco de Costa Rica (☎ 2666 2582; cnr Calle Central & Av 1) Has a 24-hour ATM.

Banco Nacional (☎ 2666 0191; Av 25 de Julio btwn Calles 6 & 8; ☎ 8am-3:45pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Has a 24-hour ATM.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Sabanero Art Market & Tourist Information Center (☎ 2666 2183; www.elsabanero.8k.com; Calle 2 btwn Avs Central & 2) Travelers seeking guidance will be best off here. It has bus schedules, information on tours and lodging, and will arrange taxi pick-ups.

Tourist office (☎ 2666 4527; cnr Av 6 & Calle 1) Has hours that remain a mystery. One local explained it this way: 'Sometimes it's open. Sometimes it's closed.'

Sights & Activities

Though there's not much of historical or cultural interest in town, the lack of sights gives you an excuse to relax in one of the local restaurants or bars as you plan your next trip to a beach or volcano.

The tourist office has a tiny **museum** of local ranching artifacts – cattle-raising is a historically important occupation in Guanacaste. There has also been talk of reopening a museum of *sabanero* culture in **La Gobernación**, the old municipal building at the corner of Avenida Central and Calle Central.

In the meantime, a **statue** of a steely eyed *sabanero*, complete with an evocative poem by Rodolfo Salazar Solórzano, stands watch over Avenida 25 de Julio, the main street into town. The blocks around the intersection of Avenida Central and Calle Central contain several of the town's oldest houses, many dating back about 150 years.

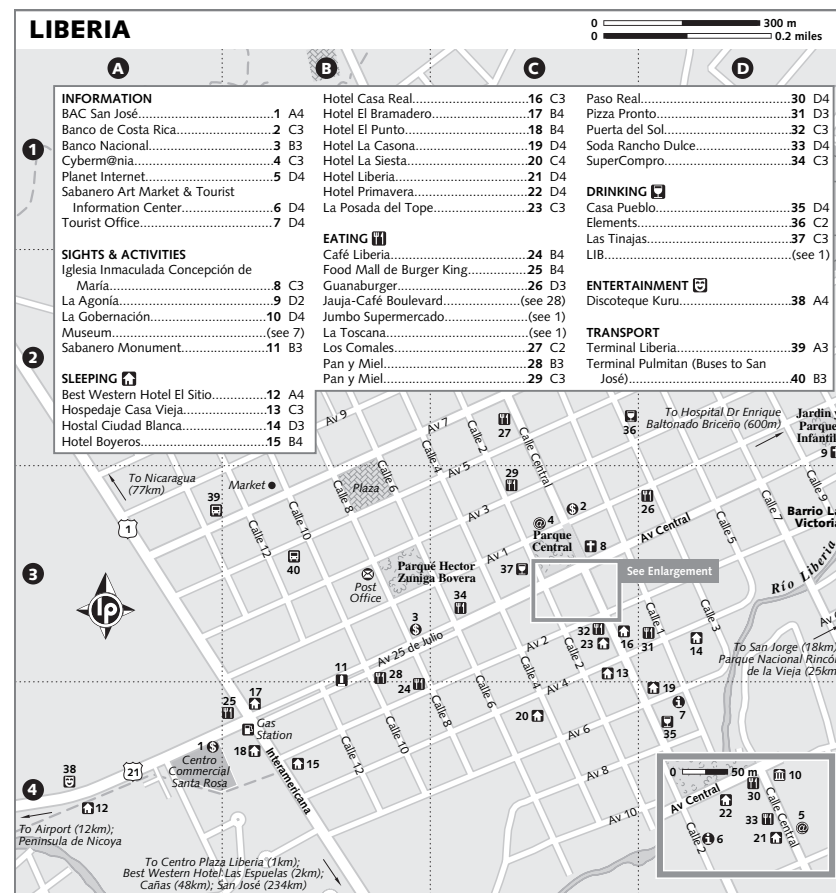
The pleasant Parque Central frames a modern church, **Iglesia Inmaculada Concepción**

de María. The park is also the seasonal hangout of the Nicaraguan grackle, a tone-deaf bird that enjoys eating parrot eggs and annoying passers-by with its grating calls.

Walking six blocks northeast of the park along Avenida Central brings you to the oldest church in town, popularly called **La Agonía** (although maps show it as **La Iglesia de la Ermita de la Resurrección**). Strolling to La Agonía and around the surrounding blocks makes a fine walk.

Tours

Hotel Liberia and La Posada del Tope (p212) are great budget hotels that can organize trips and tours throughout Costa Rica. La Posada del Tope has the best deals on rental cars.



Sleeping

Liberia is at its busiest during the dry season – reservations are strongly recommended over Christmas, Easter, Día de Guanacaste and on weekends. During the wet season, however, most of the midrange and top-end hotels give discounts.

Note that although streets are labeled on the map, very few of them are signed, especially once you get away from Parque Central (see boxed text, p537).

BUDGET

Hotel Liberia (☎ 2666 0161; www.hotelliberia.com; Calle Central btwn Aves Central & 2; s with/without bathroom US\$19/11, d with/without bathroom US\$22/18; (P) Rooms in this rambling, century-old building surround an outdoor lounge complete with TV, hammocks, and jet-lagged backpackers chatting about their past and present travel plans. Rooms are tidy and bright but pretty basic, and a buffet breakfast is available for US\$3. The hotel is recommended for its vibrant atmosphere that's in part created by the Peruvian manager Beto, who's an absolute riot.

La Posada del Tópe (☎ 2666 3876; www.posada.deltópe.com; Calle Central btwn Aves Central & 2; r per person US\$5-17; (P) ☒ ☑) This budget hotel is housed in an attractive mid-19th-century house that's decorated with old photos, antiques and mosquito nets, and has a bit of an old-plantation feel to it. Rooms have shared bathrooms and are fairly basic, though the hotel is recommended as the bilingual Tico owner, Denis, is a wealth of information. The annex across the street, Hotel Casa Real, has slightly nicer rooms with TV, set around a lovely little courtyard.

Hotel La Casona (☎ 2666 2971; casona@racsa.co.cr; cnr Calle Central & Av 6; s/d with fan US\$16/24, with air-con US\$20/30; (P) ☒) This pink, wooden house has simple rooms with private bathrooms and cable TV. There's no hot water (which shouldn't be an issue), and there is also an apartment at the same rates per person as the rooms.

Hospedaje Casa Vieja (☎ 2665 5826; Av 4 btwn Calles Central & 2; s/d with fan US\$18/22, with air-con US\$36/44; ☒) Just a couple of blocks from Parque Central, this quiet, home-like place has 10 comfortable rooms with private bathroom and TV. Rates do not include breakfast, but there's a small yard out back with a shaded raised patio where you can enjoy the granola that you bring yourself.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hotel Primavera (☎ 2666 0464; Av Central btwn Calles Central & 2; s/d with fan US\$30/42, with air-con US\$34/47; (P) ☒) Just off Parque Central but set back from the street a bit, rooms at this small hotel are a little worn, but they have attractive wood accents and come furnished with microwave, cable TV and private cold showers. Not the best value in town, but perfectly OK.

Hostal Ciudad Blanca (☎ 2666 3962; Av 4 btwn Calles 1 & 3; s/d with fan US\$30/40, with air-con US\$35/45; (P) ☒) One of Liberia's most attractive hotels is in a historic colonial mansion that has been completely refurbished. Tree-shaded rooms have air-con, fan, cable TV, nice furnishings and private hot-water bathroom. The charming little restaurant-bar downstairs is perfect for a nightcap – or a game of pinball.

Hotel La Siesta (☎ 2666 0678; lasiestaliberia@hotmail.com; Calle 4 btwn Aves 4 & 6; s/d incl breakfast US\$40/50; (P) ☒ ☑) Spotless, standard rooms with cable TV and private cold showers are arranged around a pretty poolside garden. Rooms upstairs are slightly larger, but all are very quiet and the place has a relaxed feel. The real reason to stop by, however, is the attached restaurant (meals US\$4 to US\$7), which is regarded by locals as having the best casado in town.

Hotel El Bramadero (☎ 2666 0371; www.hotel.elbramadero.com; cnr Interamericana & Hwy 21; s/d US\$40/58; (P) ☒ ☑) El Bramadero is a comfortable, midrange hotel that has well-appointed rooms with air-con, hot showers and cable TV. It has a *sabanero* theme, so it follows that the restaurant (meals US\$10 to US\$16) has some of the thickest and juiciest steaks you've ever feasted on.

Hotel Boyeros (☎ 2666 0722, 2666 0809; www.hotel.boyeros.com; cnr Interamericana & Av 2; s/d/tr US\$56/68/74; (P) ☒ ☒ ☑) The largest hotel in Liberia feels like a cross between a dude ranch and the Holiday Inn. Immaculate rooms all have new furnishings, air-con and cable TV, and the upstairs rooms have private balconies. There's also a 24-hour restaurant, free wi-fi, pool with waterslide, kiddie pool and a shaded sitting area. Look for the sculpture of the *boyero* (ox-cart driver) out front.

Hotel El Punto (☎ 2665 2986; www.elpuntohotel.com; Interamericana btwn Aves 25 de Julio & 2; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$70/90/100/110; (P) ☒ ☑) This converted elementary school is now a chic hotel, and would definitely feel more at home in trendy Miami than in humble Guanacaste. The saturated

tropical colors of the loft apartments manage also to be understated and minimalist. All rooms have beautifully tiled bathrooms, kitchenettes, hammocks, free wi-fi and colorful modern art. The common area features low outdoor sofas and even crayons for the kids, and unsurprisingly, the bilingual architect-owner Mariana is charm personified.

Not one, but two, Best Western Hotels are available for all your overpriced chain-hotel needs.

Best Western Hotel Las Espuelas (☎ 2666 0144; espuelas@racsa.co.cr; s/d incl breakfast US\$70/81, ste US\$151; (P) ☒ ☒ ☑ ☑ ☑) About 2km south of Liberia, this has all the standard amenities and generic rooms you'd expect.

Best Western Hotel El Sitio (☎ 2666 1211; htlsitio@racsa.co.cr; s/d incl breakfast US\$70/81; (P) ☒ ☒ ☑ ☑ ☑) On the road to Nicoya, this one is closer to town.

Eating

Food Mall de Burger King (cnr Interamericana & Hwy 21; ☒ 7am-11pm) Yearning for the gringo-style fast-food you left behind? Don't worry, it's followed you to Costa Rica: this food mall houses Burger King, Church's Chicken, Papa John's Pizza, Subway, TCBY and Pizza Hut.

Café Liberia (☎ 2665 1660; www.cafeliberia.com; Calle 8 btwn Aves 25 de Julio & 2; snacks US\$1-3; ☒ 8:30am-7:30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & holidays; ☒ ☑) Run by a sweet Tica named Radha, this hip spot is a dream, serving organic juices, Costa Rican coffee, fresh sandwiches, pastries, wines and lots of vegetarian items. Plus, there's free wi-fi and sometimes live music.

Guanaburger (cnr Calle 3 & Av 1; burger, fries & drink combo US\$2.50; ☒ noon-2:30pm & 5:30-10pm) This famous homegrown institution packs in the locals with its US\$2.50 bargain combo.

Soda Rancho Dulce (Calle Central btwn Aves Central & 2; mains US\$2-4; ☒ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Sometimes a casado is more than a casado, and this outstanding open-air *soda*, with groovy wooden tables and good *batidos*, serves some of the best.

Los Comales (Calle Central btwn Aves 7 & 5; plates US\$2-5; ☒ 6:30-9pm) This convivial, popular local spot is run by a women's collective, and serves native Guanacaste dishes as well as typical cuisine. The specialty is chicken and salsa, but the *casados* are just as tasty.

Pan y Miel (☎ 2666 0718; Av 25 de Julio btwn Calles 10 & 8; mains US\$2-5; ☒ 6am-6pm) The best breakfast in town can be had at this branch of the local bakery, which serves its excellent

bread as sandwiches and French toast, as well as offering a buffet line with casado fixings, pastries and fresh fruit. There's a surlier bakery-only branch a block north of Parque Central.

Jauja-Café Boulevard (☎ 2665 2061; Calle 25 de Junio btwn Calles 10 & 8; mains US\$3-9; ☒ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A German bakery with beautifully flaky croissants, a respectably authentic sushi counter doing what it can with the local rice and an international kitchen turning out Euro-style numbers can all be found at this corner spot. The patio is also a great place for a beer under the canopy of the huge guanacaste tree.

Pizza Pronto (☎ 2666 2098; cnr Av 4 & Calle 1; mains US\$5-9; ☒ lunch & dinner) Situated in a handsome 19th-century house, this romantic pizzeria is in a class of its own. You can choose from a long list of toppings for your wood-fired pizza, including fresh, local seafood or pineapple; the pastas are just as tasty.

ourpick Puerta del Sol (cnr Calle Central & Av 2; mains US\$5-7; ☒ noon-3pm & 6-10pm) Peruvian-style *ceviche* is the bomb at this four-table establishment, done up in blue and deliciousness. In addition to the specialty of the house, there are interesting corn-based desserts and drinks, like the refreshing, nonalcoholic *chicha morada*. And if you're with someone special, you might consider one of the aphrodisiac dishes, like the *leche de tigre* (tiger's milk), made from seafood and tantalizingly secret ingredients.

La Toscana (☎ 2665 0653; Centro Comercial Santa Rosa; mains US\$4-13; ☒ noon-11pm; ☒) Satisfy those pangs for gnocchi or spaghetti carbonara at one of the most authentically Italian restaurants in the region. Tuscan wine, tablecloths and tiramisu await.

Paso Real (☎ 2666 3455; Av Central btwn Calles Central & 2; mains US\$6-20; ☒ 11am-10pm) Liberia's most famous restaurant has a breezy balcony overlooking Parque Central, and is locally known for its inventive cuisine, like sea bass served in a cream sauce of puréed spinach.

Liberia has many inexpensive *sodas*, or you could grab groceries at the **SuperCompro** (Av Central btwn Calles 4 & 6; ☒ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat & Sun). For a good selection of international groceries, including tahini, Argentinean wine and curry paste, stop by the **Jumbo Supermercado** (Centro Comercial Santa Rosa), conveniently located at the intersection, to load up on supplies before heading to the beach.

Drinking

Despite the recent tourist influx, Liberia is short on nightlife. There are a number of local spots where you can get hammered for under US\$10.

Las Tinajas (Calle 2 btwn Aves Central & 1; ☎ lunch & dinner) Sip a cold beer and nosh on some greasy fries at this parkside pub, an ideal place to people-watch the happenings in Parque Central. It occasionally has live music.

Casa Pueblo (Calle Central btwn Aves 6 & 8; ☎ 5:30-10pm) This cool little bar is housed in an old Spanish colonial building, and is a good place to meet the local hipsters.

Elements (Calle 3 btwn Aves 5 & 3) Probably the priciest and definitely the sleekest bar in Liberia, the theme is based on the four elements (earth, wind, alcohol and lounge sofas...no, wait...).

LIB, housed upstairs in the Centro Comercial Santa Rosa, is a newish hot spot attracting locals and tourists. It occasionally hosts live music, and you may have to pay admission on weekends.

Entertainment

Cultural offerings are unfortunately slim to none in Liberia. Your best chance of seeing Punto Guanacasteco is to be in town for a *tope* (p204).

Cinema (Centro Plaza Liberia) If you're looking for your Hollywood fix, this has a decent offering of mainstream American films.

Discoteque Kuru (Av 25 de Julio) Across from the Best Western El Sitio, lets the DJs do their thing Thursday through Sunday nights.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Since 1993, Aeropuerto Internacional Daniel Oduber Quirós (LIR), 12km west of Liberia, has served as the country's second international airport, providing easy access to all those beautiful beaches without the hassle of dealing with the lines and bustle of San José. It's a tiny airport, jam-packed with increasing traffic; all international flights are through the USA, though there's talk of starting direct flights to Europe.

NatureAir and Sansa both make multiple daily runs between Liberia and San José, with connections all over the country, for about US\$90 one way, US\$185 round-trip.

There are no car-rental desks at the airport; make reservations in advance, and your com-

pany will meet you at the airport with a car. You'll find a money-exchange, café and gift shop. Taxis to Liberia cost US\$10.

At the time of writing the first six airlines listed were the only ones that flew direct into and out of Liberia from the USA.

American Airlines (☎ 800-421 7300; www.aa.com)

Flights to/from Miami, Florida.

Continental (☎ 800-231 0856; www.continental.com)

To/from Houston, Texas.

Delta (☎ 800-241 4141; www.delta.com) To/from

Atlanta, Georgia.

NatureAir (☎ 2220 3054; www.natureair.com) To/from

San José.

Northwest Airlines (☎ 800-800 1504; www.nwa.com)

To/from Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Sansa (☎ 2668 1047; www.flysansa.com) To/from

San José.

United Airlines (☎ 800-538 2929; www.united.com)

To/from Chicago, Illinois.

US Airways (☎ 800-622 1015; www.usairways.com)

To/from Charlotte, North Carolina.

BUS

Buses arrive and depart from **Terminal Liberia** (Av 7 btwn Calles 12 & 14) and **Terminal Pulmitan** (Av 5 btwn Calles 10 & 12). Routes, fares, journey times and departures are as follows:

Cañas US\$1.20, 1½ hours, departs Terminal Liberia 5:30am, 6:45am, 7:30am, noon, 1:30pm, 4:30pm and 5:30pm. It's quicker to jump off the San José-bound bus in Cañas.

La Cruz/Peñas Blancas US\$1.25, 1½ to two hours, departs Pulmitan 5:30am, 8:30am, 9am, noon, 1pm, 3pm, 5pm and 6:30pm.

Managua, Nicaragua US\$10, five hours, departs Pulmitan 8:30am, 9:30am and 1pm (buy tickets one day in advance).

Nicoya, via Filadelfia & Santa Cruz US\$1.15, 1½ hours, 15 departures from Terminal Liberia from 6:30am to 7:30pm.

Playa del Coco US\$0.75, one hour, departs Pulmitan 5:30am, 7am, 9:30am, 11am, 12:30pm, 2:30pm, 4:30pm and 6:30pm.

Playa Hermosa, Playa Panamá US\$1.30, 1¼ hours, departs Terminal Liberia 5:30am, 7:30am, 11:30am, 1pm, 3:30pm, 5:30pm and 7:30pm.

Playa Tamarindo US\$0.90, 1½ to two hours, departs Terminal Liberia 3:50am, 6:10am, 8:10am, 10am, 11:10am, 12:45pm and 4:10pm.

Puntarenas US\$2.25, three hours, seven services from 5am to 3:30pm. It's quicker to jump off the San José-bound bus in Puntarenas.

San José US\$3.70, four hours, 11 departures from Pulmitan from 4am to 8pm.

CAR

Liberia lies on the Interamericana, 234km north of San José and 77km south of the Nicaraguan border post of Peñas Blancas. Hwy 21, the main artery of the Peninsula de Nicoya, begins in Liberia and heads southwest. A dirt road, passable to all cars in dry season (4WD is preferable), leads 25km from Barrio la Victoria to the Santa María entrance of Parque Nacional Rincón de la Vieja; the gravel road to the Las Pailas entrance begins from the Interamericana, 5km north of Liberia (passable to regular cars, but 4WD is recommended).

There are several rental-car agencies in the region (none of which have desks at the airport) that charge about the same amount as those in San José. Most can arrange pick-up in Liberia and drop-off in San José, though they'll try to charge you extra. Rental agencies are on Hwy 21 between Liberia and the airport, but should be able to drop off your car in town. La Posada de Tope (p212) arranges the cheapest car rental in Liberia. At last count, there were upwards of 30 car-rental agencies in Liberia, but here are a few of the more popular ones:

Adobe (☎ 2667 0608; www.adobecar.com)

Avis (☎ 2668 1196; www.avis.co.cr)

Budget (☎ 2668 1024; www.budget.com)

Dollar (☎ 2668 1061; www.dollarcostarica.com)

Economy Rent-A-Car (☎ 2666 2816; www.economyrentacar.com)

Europcar (☎ 2668 1023; www.europcar.co.cr)

Hola (☎ 2667 4040; www.hola.net)

Mapache (☎ 2665 4444; www.mapache.com)

National (☎ 2666 5595; www.natcar.com)

Payless (☎ 2667 0511; www.paylesscr.com)

Toyota Rent a Car (☎ 2666 8190; www.carrental-toyota-costarica.com)

Tricolor (☎ 2665 5555; www.tricolorcarrental.com)

PARQUE NACIONAL RINCÓN DE LA VIEJA

Given its proximity to Liberia – really just a hop, skip and a few bumps away – this 14,161-hectare national park feels refreshingly uncrowded and remote. Named after the active Volcán Rincón de la Vieja (1895m), the steamy main attraction, the park also covers several other peaks in the same volcanic range, including the highest, Volcán Santa María (1916m). The park breathes geothermal energy, which you can see for yourself in its multihued fumaroles, hot springs, lively *pailas* (mud pots) bubbling and blooming clumps of

ashy gray mud, and a young and feisty *volcancito* (small volcano). All these can be visited on foot and horseback on well-maintained but sometimes-steep trails.

The park was created in 1973 to protect the 32 rivers and streams that have their sources within the park, an important watershed. Its relatively remote location means that wildlife, rare elsewhere, is out in force here, with the major volcanic crater a rather dramatic backdrop to the scene. Volcanic activity has occurred many times since the late 1960s, with the most recent eruption of steam and ash in 1997. At the moment, however, the volcano is gently active and does not present any danger – ask locally for the latest, as it's in their nature for volcanoes to act up.

Elevations in the park range from less than 600m to 1916m, so visitors pass through a variety of different habitats as they ascend the volcanoes, though the majority of the trees in the park are typical of those found in dry tropical forests throughout Guanacaste. One interesting tree to look out for is the strangler fig, a parasitic tree that covers the host tree with its own trunk and proceeds to strangle it by competing for water, light and nutrients. The host tree eventually dies and rots away, while the strangler fig survives as a hollow, tubular lattice. The park is also home to the country's highest density of Costa Rica's national flower, the increasingly rare purple orchid (*Cattleya skinneri*), locally known as *guaria morada*.

Most visitors to the park, however, are here for the hot springs, where you can soak to the sound of howler monkeys overhead. Many of the springs are reported to have therapeutic properties, which is always a good thing if you've been hitting the Guaro Cacique a little too hard. Several lodges just outside the park provide access and arrange tours. You can also book transportation and tours directly from Liberia.

Orientation & Information

Each of the two main entrances to the park has its own ranger station, where you sign in and get free maps. Most visitors enter through **Las Pailas ranger station** (☎ 2661 8139; admission US\$6; ☎ 7am-5pm, no entry after 3pm, closed Mon) on the western flank. Trails to the summit and the most interesting volcanic features begin here. Note that on the way to Las Pailas, you must pay a fee of US\$1.50 for the privilege

of passing through the private property of Hacienda Guachipelín. The fee is ostensibly for road maintenance but is fairly ludicrous considering its hotel rates.

The **Santa María ranger station** (☎ 2661 8139; admission US\$6; ☎ 7am-5pm, no entry past 3pm, closed Mon), to the east, is in the Hacienda Santa María, a 19th-century ranch house with a small public exhibit that was reputedly once owned by US President Lyndon Johnson. It's closest to the sulfurous hot springs and also has an observation tower and a nearby waterfall.

Activities

WILDLIFE-WATCHING

The wildlife of the park is extremely varied. Almost 300 species of bird have been recorded here, including curassow, quetzal, bellbird, parrot, toucan, hummingbird, owl, woodpecker, tanager, motmot, dove and eagle.

Insects range from beautiful butterflies to annoying ticks. Be especially prepared for ticks in grassy areas – long trousers tucked into boots and long-sleeved shirts offer some protection. A particularly interesting insect is a highland cicada that burrows into the ground and croaks like a frog, to the bewilderment of naturalists.

Mammals are equally varied; deer, armadillo, peccary, skunk, squirrel, coati and three species of monkey make frequent appearances. Tapir tracks are often found around the lagoons near the summit. Several of the

wild cat species have been recorded here, including the jaguar, puma, ocelot and margay, but you'll need patience and good fortune to observe one of these.

HIKING

A circular trail east of Las Pailas (about 3km in total) takes you past the boiling mud pools (Las Pailas), sulfurous fumaroles and a *volcancito* (which may subside at any time). About 700m west of the ranger station along the **Sendero Cangreja** is a swimming hole, which is prescribed for lowering your body temperature after too much time in the hot springs. Further away along the same trail are several waterfalls – the largest, **Catarata La Cangreja**, 5km west, is a classic, dropping straight from a cliff into a small lagoon where you can swim. Dissolved copper salts give the falls a deep blue color. This trail winds through forest, then onto open grassland on the volcano's flanks, where you can enjoy views as far as the Golfo de Nicoya. The slightly smaller **Cataratas Escondidas** (Hidden Waterfalls) are 4.3km west on a different trail.

The longest and most adventurous hike in the area is the 16km round-trip trek to the summit of Rincón de la Vieja and to nearby **Laguna de Jilgueros**, which is reportedly where you may see tapirs – or more likely their footprints, if you are observant. The majority of this hike follows a ridge trail, and is known for being extremely windy and cloudy – come prepared for the weather. It's also advised

that you hire a guide from the ranger station or a nearby hotel as the trail is dotted with sulfurous hot springs and geysers, and hikers have been severely burned (and occasionally boiled) in the past.

From the Santa María ranger station, a trail leads 2.8km west through the 'enchanted forest' and past a waterfall to sulfurous **hot springs** with supposedly therapeutic properties. Don't soak in them for more than about half an hour (some people suggest much less) without taking a dip in one of the nearby cold springs to cool off. An observation point is 450m east of the station.

SIMBIOSIS SPA

Affiliated with Hacienda Guachipelín, this **spa** (☎ 2666 8075; www.simbiosis-spa.com; admission US\$15; ☎ 9am-5:30pm) is also open to the public. With spring-fed hot pools, volcanic mud, a sauna, showers and lounge chairs, all in a natural outdoor setting, this is a lovely place to unwind. You can also arrange massages and spa treatments (US\$35 to US\$75) on the spot, though it recommends reserving ahead.

Tours

All of the tourist lodges can arrange a number of tours, including horse riding (US\$25 to US\$35), mountain biking (US\$10 to US\$30), guided waterfall and hot-springs hikes (US\$15 to US\$25), rappelling (US\$20 to US\$50), rafting and tubing on the lesser-known Río Colorado (US\$45 to US\$60), hanging bridges (US\$15 to US\$20) and everyone's favorite cash-burner, canopy tours (US\$30 to US\$50). Rates vary depending on the season, and there are a number of package deals available. If you're staying in Liberia, it's possible to organize these activities in advance either through your hotel, or by contacting the lodges directly.

Sleeping & Eating

INSIDE THE PARK

Both ranger stations have camping (per person US\$2). Each campground has water, pit toilets, showers, tables and grills. There is no fuel available, so bring wood, charcoal or a camping stove. Mosquito nets or insect repellent are needed in the wet season, as is a strategy to keep your food secure from persistent, marauding raccoons and coatis.

Camping is allowed in most places within the park, but you should be self-sufficient

and prepared for cold and foggy weather in the highlands – a compass is very useful. The wet season is very wet (October is the rainiest month), and there are plenty of mosquitoes then. Dry-season camping in December, March and April is recommended. January and February are prone to strong winds.

OUTSIDE THE PARK

Note that all of the following are a long way from any eateries, so you're stuck with paying for (usually pricey) meals at your hotel restaurant.

our pick Rinconcito Lodge (☎ 2200 0074; www.rinconcitolodge.com; camping per person US\$3, s/d/tr/q US\$20/35/47/57; ☎) Just 3km from the Santa María sector of the park, this recommended budget option has attractive, rustic cabins with private warm-water showers, and is surrounded by some of the prettiest pastoral scenery imaginable. Meals are available for around US\$5 and breakfast isn't complimentary, but it's worth paying for as your eggs and milk come straight from the lodge's farm. Since it primarily caters to budget travelers, it also offers inexpensive local tours. Shuttles travelers to and from Liberia (one way US\$20).

Rincón de la Vieja Mountain Lodge (☎ 2200 0238; www.rincondelaviejalodge.net; standard s/d incl breakfast US\$45/65, bungalow US\$55/75; ☎) Closest to the Las Pailas entrance, this rustic hacienda is on 400 hectares of protected land and has 49 spacious standard rooms, some with wildly painted walls or exposed-beam roofs, and even larger cottages with balconies. The electricity is produced by water falling into a turbine, but the ecofriendly power goes out after 10pm (candles are thoughtfully provided). Staff here are utterly charming.

Hacienda Guachipelín (☎ 2666 8075; www.guachipelin.com; standard s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$51/73/93, superior US\$66/83/107; ☎) On the road to Las Pailas, this appealing, 19th-century working cattle ranch is on 1200 hectares of primary and secondary forest, and has over 100 attractively designed, spacious rooms and suites with private hot-water bathrooms and porches. It has a garden-fringed pool, receives guests at check-in with a welcome drink and has free wi-fi. The only downside (aside from charging all and sundry to cross its property) is that it feels like a factory farm, catering largely to package-tour clientele.

our pick Hotel Borinquen (☎ 2690 1900; www.borinquenresort.com; s incl breakfast US\$175-357, d US\$204-374;

HOTTEST SPOTS FOR THERMAL POOLS & MUD POTS

Costa Rica's volcano-powered thermal pools and mud pots provide plenty of good, *clean* fun for beauty queens and would-be mud wrestlers alike.

- On the slopes of Volcán Rincon de la Vieja, **Simbiosis Spa** (opposite) has several pools, a wood sauna and quiet vibe, all in a jungle setting.
- While some hot spots around Arenal charge outrageous fees to soak in sparkly surrounds, **Eco-Termales** (p233) maintains its sense of elegance by limiting guest numbers.
- **Las Hornillas** (p207) keeps it real on the southern slope of Volcán Miravalles, with a steaming, bubbling crater you can pick your way around before taking the plunge in its mud pots and hot pools.
- The pinnacle of luxury dirt exists in the remote heights of Rincón de la Vieja at **Hotel Borinquen** (opposite), where, if mineral mud is not your thing, you can opt instead for a wine or chocolate skin treatment.
- Tico-run and family-friendly, **El Guayacán** (p207) has a waterslide, several thermal pools, a trail encircling bubbling mud pots and inexpensive cabins so you can take your time enjoying it all.

If you want to splurge, wallow here. The most luxurious resort in the area features plush, fully air-conditioned bungalows with private deck, minibar and satellite TV. The onsite hot springs, mud baths and natural saunas are beautifully laid out and surrounded by greenery, but a treatment at the unbelievable Anáhuac Spa (treatments US\$35 to US\$100, open 10am to 6pm), suspended over the river and jungle, is the icing on this decadent mud pie.

Cropping up on the road to the park is an eclectic collection of truly lovely lodges that are worth considering if you've got your own wheels. The following are listed in the order you'll encounter them from Liberia.

Rancho Curubandé Lodge (☎ 2665 0375; www.rancho-curubande.com; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$35/45/55, villa d US\$70; Quiet, peaceful finca setting with garden rooms; also has horses for hire.

Canyon de la Vieja Lodge (☎ 2665 5912; www.canyonlodgete.com; standard s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$48/69/90/105, bungalows US\$65/80/100/120; Riverside rooms surround a *palapa* (shelter with a thatched, palm-leaf roof and open sides) bar and pool, and the attractive accommodations are a comfortable place to crash after a day of adventure tours.

Posada El Encuentro Lodge (☎ 8848 0616; www.posadaencu.com; r incl breakfast US\$75-85, cottage US\$105; A few stylish rooms in the cozy house, plus a stand-alone cottage with five beds; has expansive ocean and volcano views from its isolated orchard locale.

El Sol Verde (☎ 2665 5357; www.elsolverde.com; camping US\$5, camping incl tents & bedding US\$18, r US\$40-60; The sweet Dutch couple here in Curubandé village have three lovely stone-floored, wood-walled rooms and a camping area with shared outdoor kitchen.

Casa Rural Aroma de Campo (☎ 2665 0008; www.aromadecampo.com; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$55/68/92/111; This serene, epiphyte-hung, hammock-strung oasis has elegantly designed rooms with polished clay floors, open bathrooms, mosquito nets and classy rural sensibility.

Buena Vista Lodge (☎ 2690 1414; www.buenavistalodgecr.com; s/d/tr US\$44/59/73, incl breakfast US\$51/75/95; On the way to Boringuen, this friendly finca lodge has spring-fed pools, a herpetarium, great views and loads of activities.

Getting There & Away
The Las Pailas sector is accessible via a good, 20km gravel road that begins at a signed turnoff from the Interamericana 5km north of Liberia; a private road is needed to reach the park and costs US\$1.50 per person. The Santa

María ranger station, to the east, is accessible via a rougher road beginning at Barrio La Victoria in Liberia. Both roads are passable to regular cars throughout the dry season, but a 4WD is required during the rainy season and is highly recommended at all other times (or it will take you twice as long). There's no public transportation, but any of the lodges (see p217) can arrange transport from Liberia for around US\$15 per person each way (two or three people minimum). Alternately, you can hire a 4WD taxi for about US\$25 to Las Pailas, or US\$45 to Santa María, each way.

PARQUE NACIONAL SANTA ROSA

Among the oldest (established in 1971) and largest national parks in Costa Rica, Santa Rosa's sprawling 38,674 hectares on the Península Santa Elena protects the largest remaining stand of tropical dry forest in Central America, and some of the most important nesting sites of several species of sea turtle. Santa Rosa is also famous among Ticos as a symbol of historical pride – Costa Rica has only been invaded by a foreign army three times, and each time the attackers were defeated in Santa Rosa.

The best known of these events was the Battle of Santa Rosa, which took place on March 20, 1856, when the soon-to-be-self-declared President of Nicaragua, an American named William Walker, invaded Costa Rica. Walker was the head of a group of foreign pirates and adventurers known as the 'Filibusters' that had already seized Baja and southwest Nicaragua, and were attempting to gain control over all of Central America. In a brilliant display of military prowess, Costa Rican President Juan Rafael Mora Porras guessed Walker's intentions, and managed to assemble a ragtag group of fighters that proceeded to surround Walker's army in the main building of the old Hacienda Santa Rosa, known as La Casona. The battle was over in just 14 minutes, and Walker forever driven from Costa Rican soil.

Santa Rosa was again the site of battles between Costa Rican troops and invading forces from Nicaragua in both 1919 and 1955. The first was a somewhat honorable attempt to overthrow the Costa Rican dictator General Federico Tinoco, while the second was a failed coup d'état led by Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza. Today, you can still see Somoza's abandoned tank, which lies

in a ditch beside the road just beyond the entrance to the park. However, the military history surrounding the park didn't end with Somoza, as Santa Rosa was later used as a staging point for the US military during the Sandinistas-Contra War.

Although the park was established mainly due to historical and patriotic reasons, in a surprising coincidence Santa Rosa has also become extremely important to biologists. With its acacia thorn trees and tall *jaragua* grass, first impressions of the park are likely to make you believe you've suddenly landed in the African savannah, though closer inspection reveals more American species of plants, including cacti and bromeliads. Santa Rosa is also home to Playa Nancite, which is famous for its *arribadas* (mass nesting) of olive ridley sea turtles that sometimes number up to 8000 at a single time.

However, a good number of travelers are here for one reason – the chance to surf the near-perfect beach break at Playa Naranjo, which is created by the legendary offshore monolith known as Witch's Rock (also known locally as Roca Bruja). The park is also home to another break of arguably equal fame, namely Ollie's Point, which was immortalized in the film *Endless Summer II*, and is named after US Marine Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North. North is most famous for illegally selling weapons to Iran during the Reagan Era, and using the profits to fund the Contras in Nicaragua – Ollie's Point refers to the nearby troop staging area that everyone but the US Congress knew about.

Difficult access means that Santa Rosa is fairly empty, though it can get reasonably busy on weekends in the dry season when Ticos flock to the park in search of their often-hard-to-find history. In the wet months from July through December, particularly September and October, you'll often have the park virtually to yourself.

Orientation & Information

Parque Nacional Santa Rosa's entrance is on the west side of the Interamericana, 35km north of Liberia and 45km south of the Nicaragua border. The Santa Rosa Sector **park entrance** (☎ 2666 5051; admission US\$6, camping per person US\$2; 8am-4pm) is close to the Interamericana, and it's another 7km to park headquarters, with the administrative offices, scientists' quarters, an information

center, a basic campground, museum and nature trail. This office administers the Area de Conservación Guanacaste (ACG).

From this complex, a very rough track leads down to the coast to Playa Naranjo, 12km away. Even during the dry season, this road is only passable to a high-clearance 4WD, and you must sign a waiver at the park entrance stating that you willingly assume all liability for driving this road. The park also requires that you be completely self-sufficient should you choose to undertake the trip, which means bringing *all* your own water and knowing how to do your own car repair. The rangers simply do not have the resources to bail you out or perform vehicle repair if you get into trouble. During the rainy months (May to November), the road is open to hikers and horses but closed to all vehicles; if you want to surf here, it's infinitely easier to gain access to the beach by hiring a boat from Playa del Coco or Tamarindo, further south. Be aware that rangers can and will shut down Playa Nancite to all visitors during the turtle nesting season. From the campsite at Playa Naranjo, it's a 5km hike to the beach. Playa Nancite is generally closed to visitors unless you have permission from the park office.

The park's Sector Murciélago (Bat Sector) encompasses the wild northern coastline of the Península Santa Elena, and is not accessible from the main body of the park. From the Interamericana, continue north past the entrance to the Santa Rosa sector for 10km and then turn left once you pass through the police checkpoint. Continue on this road for a few more kilometers until you reach the village of Cuajiniquil and then bear left. Continue on this road for another 15km, which will bring you past such historic sights as the former hacienda of the Somoza family (it's currently a training ground for the Costa Rican 'police') and the old airstrip that was used by Oliver North to 'secretly' smuggle goods to the Nicaraguan Contras in the 1980s. Just after the airstrip is the **park entrance** (admission US\$6; camping per person US\$2; 8am-4pm), which is in the village of Murciélago. From here, it's another 16km to the isolated white-sand beach of Playa Blanca and the trailhead for the Poza el General watering hole, which attracts birds and animals year-round.

Ollie's Point in Playa Portero Grande is in this sector of the park and can only be reached by boat from Playa del Coco or

Tamarindo. Or you can do as Patrick and Wingnut did in *Endless Summer II* and crash-land your chartered plane on the beach (not actually recommended).

Sights

The historic **La Casona**, the main building of the old Hacienda Santa Rosa, is near the park headquarters in the Santa Rosa sector. Unfortunately, the original building was burnt to the ground by arsonists in May 2001, but was rebuilt in 2002 using historic photos and local timber. The battle of 1856 was fought around this building, and the military action, as well as the region's natural history, is described with the help of documents, paintings, maps and other displays (mostly in Spanish). If you remember your dictionary, this will be an inspiring (and perhaps humbling) history lesson in how not to invade a country – you'd think the US government would have learnt by now.

The arson was set by a local father-son team of poachers who were disgruntled at being banned from hunting here by park rangers. They were caught and sentenced to 20 years in prison for torching a building of national cultural and historical value. Unfortunately, poaching continues in the park since it's difficult for rangers to effectively patrol such a large landmass.

Activities

WILDLIFE-WATCHING

The wildlife is certainly both varied and prolific, especially during the dry season when animals congregate around the remaining water sources and the trees lose their leaves. More than 250 bird species have been recorded, including the raucous white-throated magpie jay, unmistakable with its long crest of maniacally curled feathers. The forests contain parrot and parakeet, trogon and tanager, and as you head down to the coast, you will be rewarded by sightings of a variety of coastal birds.

Bats are also very common; about 50 or 60 different species have been identified in Santa Rosa. Other mammals you have a reasonable chance of seeing include deer, coati, peccary, armadillo, coyote, raccoon, three kinds of monkey, and a variety of other species – about 115 in all. There are also many thousands of insect species, including about 4000 moths and butterflies – bring insect repellent.

Reptile species include lizards, iguanas, snakes, crocodiles and four species of sea turtle. The olive ridley sea turtle is the most numerous, and during the July to December nesting season tens of thousands of turtles make their nests on Santa Rosa's beaches. The most popular beach is Playa Nancite, where, during September and October especially, it is possible to see as many as 8000 of these 40kg turtles on the beach at the same time. The turtles are disturbed by light, so flash photography and flashlights are not permitted. Avoid the nights around a full moon – they're too bright and turtles are less likely to show up. Playa Nancite is strictly protected and entry restricted, but permission may be obtained from park headquarters to observe this spectacle; call ahead.

The variety of wildlife reflects the variety of habitat protected within the boundaries of the park. Apart from the largest remaining stand of tropical dry forest in Central America, habitats include savannah woodland, oak forest, deciduous forest, evergreen forest, riparian forest, mangrove swamp and coastal woodland.

HIKING

Near Hacienda Santa Rosa is **El Sendero Indio Desnudo**, a 1km trail with signs interpreting the ecological relationships among the animals, plants and weather patterns of Santa Rosa. The trail is named after the common tree, also called *gumbo limbo*, whose peeling orange-red bark can photosynthesize during the dry season, when the trees' leaves are lost (resembling a sunburned tourist...or naked Indian, as the name implies). Also seen along the trail is the national tree of Costa Rica, the guanacaste (*Enterolobium cyclocarpum*). The province is named after this huge tree species, which is found along the Pacific coastal lowlands. You may also see birds, monkeys, snakes, iguanas and petroglyphs (most likely pre-Columbian) etched into some of the rocks on the trail.

Behind La Casona a short trail leads up to the **Monumento a Los Héroes** and a lookout platform. There are also longer trails through the dry forest, including a gentle 4km hike to the Mirador, with spectacular views of Playa Naranjo, which is accessible to hikers willing to go another 9km along the deeply rutted road to the sea. The main road is lined with short trails to small water-

falls and other photogenic natural wonders as well.

From the southern end of Playa Naranjo, there are two hiking trails – **Sendero Carbonal** is a 20km trail that swings inland and then terminates on the beach at Cerros Carbonal, while **Sendero Aceituno** parallels Playa Naranjo for 13km and terminates near the estuary across from Witch's Rock. There's also a 6km hiking trail that starts where the northern branch of the access road terminates – this leads to the biological research station at Nancite; you'll need prior permission to access this beach.

Although it's not officially recommended by the park service, the opportunities for long-distance beach hiking abound, especially if you're an experienced hiker who's prepared to carry large quantities of food and water. Inquire locally about the feasibility of long-distance trekking (especially in regards to permanent water sources). We have heard a rumor that it's possible to hike from Santa Rosa to Playa del Coco (if you make it, let us know!).

SURFING

The surfing at Playa Naranjo is truly world-renowned, especially near Witch's Rock, a beach break famous for its fast, hollow 3m rights (although there are also fun lefts when it isn't pumping). Beware of rocks near the rivermouth, and be careful near the estuary as it's a rich feeding ground for crocodiles during the tide changes. The surfing is equally legendary at Ollie's Point off Playa Portero Grande, which has the best right in all of Costa Rica with a nice, long ride, especially with a south swell. The bottom here is a mix of sand and rocks, and the year-round offshore is perfect for tight turns and slow closes. Shortboarding is preferred by surfers at both spots.

Sleeping & Eating

There's a shady developed **campground** (per person US\$2) close to the park headquarters, with picnic benches, grills, flushing toilets and cold-water showers. Playa Naranjo has pit toilets and showers, but no potable water – bring your own. Other camping areas in the park are undeveloped. There's a 25-person, two-night maximum for camping at Playa Naranjo. There's also a small campsite with pit toilets and showers near the ranger station in the Sector Murciélago, though you'll have to carry in your own food and water.

Make reservations in advance to stay at the **research station** (dm US\$15); eight-bed bunkrooms have cold showers and electricity. Researchers get priority, but there's usually some room for travelers. Good meals (US\$3 to US\$7) are available, but you must make arrangements the day before.

Getting There & Away

The well-signed main park entrance can be reached by public transport: take any bus between Liberia and the Nicaragua border and ask the driver to let you off at the park entrance; rangers can help you catch a return bus. You can also arrange private transportation from the hotels in Liberia for about US\$15 per person round-trip.

To get to the northern Sector Murciélago, go 10km further north along the Interamericana, then turn left to the village of Cuajiniquil, with a couple of *sodas* and a *pulpería* (corner grocery stores), 8km away by paved road. Keep your passport handy, as there may be checkpoints. The paved road continues beyond Cuajiniquil and dead-ends at a marine port, 4km away – this isn't the way to Sector Murciélago but goes toward Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Bahía Junquillal. It's about 8km beyond Cuajiniquil to the Murciélago ranger station by poor road – 4WD is advised, though the road may be impassable in the wet season. You can camp at the Murciélago ranger station, or continue 10km to 12km on a dirt road beyond the ranger station to the remote bays and beaches of Bahía Santa Elena and Bahía Playa Blanca.

REFUGIO NACIONAL DE VIDA SILVESTRE BAHÍA JUNQUILLAL

This 505-hectare wildlife refuge is part of the ACG, administered from the park headquarters at Santa Rosa. There is a **ranger station** (☎ 2679 9692; admission incl Parque Nacional Santa Rosa US\$6, camping per person US\$2; 🕒 7am-4pm) in telephone and radio contact with Santa Rosa.

The quiet bay and protected beach provide gentle swimming, boating and snorkeling opportunities, and there is some tropical dry forest and mangrove swamp. Short trails take the visitor to a lookout for marine birding and to the mangroves. Pelicans and frigate birds are seen, and turtles nest here seasonally. Volcán Orosí can be seen in the distance. Campers should note that during the dry season especially, water is at a premium and is turned on for only one hour a day. There are pit latrines.

To get here from Cuajiniquil, continue for 2km along the paved road and then turn right onto a signed dirt road. Continuing 4km along the dirt road (passable to ordinary cars) brings you to the entrance to Bahía Junquillal. From here, a poorer 700m dirt road leads to the beach, ranger station and camping area.

PARQUE NACIONAL GUANACASTE

This newest part of the ACG was created on July 25 (Guanacaste Day), 1989. The park is adjacent to Parque Nacional Santa Rosa, separated from it by the Interamericana, and is only about 5km northwest of Parque Nacional Rincón de la Vieja.

The 34,651 hectares of Parque Nacional Guanacaste are much more than a continuation of the lowland habitats found in Santa Rosa. In its lower western reaches, the park is indeed composed of the dry tropical rain forest characteristic of much of Guanacaste, but the terrain soon begins to climb toward two volcanoes – Volcán Orosí (1487m) and Volcán Cacao (1659m). Here the landscape slowly transitions to the humid cloud forest that's found throughout much of the highland Cordillera de Guanacaste. This habitat, which is similar in function to Parque Nacional Carara, provides a refuge for altitudinal migrants that move between the coast and the highlands. Thus the national park allows for the ancient migratory and hunting patterns of various animal species to continue as they have for millennia.

However, this ecosystem is more the domain of biologists than tourists (it's among the least visited parks in Costa Rica), and there are three major research stations within the borders of the park. In addition to observing animal migratory patterns, researchers are also monitoring the pace of reforestation as much of the park is composed of ranch land. Interestingly enough, researchers have found that if the pasture is carefully managed (much of this management involves just letting nature take its course), the natural forest will reinstate itself in its old territory. Thus crucial habitats in the national park are not just preserved, but in some cases they are also expanded.

For information on this park, contact the **ACG headquarters** (☎ 2666 5051) in Parque Nacional Santa Rosa.

Sights & Activities

The three research stations within the park borders are open to tourists, and they're great spots for wildlife observation. If you have a relevant background in biology or ecology, volunteer positions are available, though it's best to contact ACG well in advance of your arrival.

MARITZA BIOLOGICAL STATION

This is the newest station and has a modern laboratory. From the station, at 600m above sea level, rough trails run to the summits of Volcán Orosí and Volcán Cacao (about five to six hours). There is also a better trail to a site where several hundred petroglyphs have been found that are chipped into volcanic rock. As with most indigenous sites in Costa Rica, little is known about the origins of the petroglyphs, though the area was believed to be inhabited by the Chorotega (p165). There is also another trail that leads to the Cacao Biological Station.

To get there, turn east off the Interamericana opposite the turnoff for Cuajiniquil. The station is about 17km east of the highway along a dirt road that may require a 4WD vehicle, especially in the wet season.

CACAO BIOLOGICAL STATION

High on the slopes of Volcán Cacao (about 1060m), this station offers access to rough trails that lead to the summit of the volcano and to Maritza Biological Station. Cacao Biological Station is reached from the southern side of the park. At Potrerillos, about 9km south of the Santa Rosa park entrance on the Interamericana, head east for 7km on a paved road to the small community of Quebrada Grande (marked 'García Flamenco' on many maps). A daily bus leaves Liberia at 3pm for Quebrada Grande. From the village plaza, a 4WD road that is often impassable during the wet season heads north toward the station, about 10km away.

PITILLA BIOLOGICAL STATION

This station lies on the northeast side of Volcán Orosí, which is on the eastern side of the continental divide. The surrounding forests here are humid, lush and atypical of anything you'll find in the rest of Guanacaste.

To get to the station, turn east off the Interamericana about 12km north of the Cuajiniquil turnoff, or 3km before reaching

A WHOPPER OF A PROBLEM

Although there is a long history of deforestation in Costa Rica, massive clear-cutting of the rain forests (particularly in Guanacaste) intensified during the 1970s. Currently, there is much debate regarding the causes of this wide-scale deforestation, but research suggests that a shift in governmental philosophy likely sparked the event. Specifically, national policies were implemented at the time that promoted increased land use relating to agriculture, wood production, pasture land creation and improved transit infrastructure. It is argued that these initiatives were aimed at speeding up the country's economic development, especially in response to the decrease in the international demand for Costa Rican coffee.

Clearly, development is a double-edged sword as it's impossible to argue that the philosophies of the 1970s did not in fact improve the quality of life in Costa Rica. Today, Guanacaste is one of the richest provinces in Costa Rica, and the country as a whole is often regarded as the gem of Central America. Quality of life in Costa Rica is among the highest in Latin America, and Ticos have never had to starve like their neighbors to the north and south. However, cattle ranchers in Costa Rica produce an abundance of meat, much of which is destined for the international fast-food market. Thus the devastation of the rain forest is not solely a product of national improvement.

The body of evidence supporting these claims is astounding, and consists of everything from court testimonials to recorded data on imports and exports. Officially, most fast-food companies maintain that they are in favor of rain-forest preservation, and that they do not use hamburger meat of foreign origin in their products. However, although imported beef is only a small portion of the total meat consumed in the USA, this accounts for a significant percentage of Central American beef production. One documented problem is that when Central American beef arrives at a US point of entry, it is often marked as 'US inspected and approved,' which disguises the origin of the product. Furthermore, since the meat in a single burger can be derived from multiple cows, it's difficult to verify that a product is in fact free of foreign beef.

As a consumer, it's virtually impossible to ensure that you're not eating beef that's been raised on recently deforested areas, aside from boycotting the major fast-food retailers. At the time of writing, Costa Rica had just received an extension on passing laws that would allow it to participate in the Central American Free Trade Agreement (Cafta), which will likely mean increases in Central American beef exports. Fortunately, Western diets are shifting away from beef and processed meats, and several fast-food companies have started adopting healthier menus (though much of this is attributable to recent declines in profits). And you can take comfort in knowing that researchers in Costa Rica are hard at work investigating the natural processes of reforestation (for more information, see Parque Nacional Guanacaste, opposite).

the small town of La Cruz. Follow the paved eastbound road for about 28km to the community of Santa Cecilia. From there, a poor dirt road heads 11km south to the station – you'll probably need 4WD. (Don't continue on the unpaved road heading further east – that goes over 50km further to the small town of Upala.)

Hiking

Hiking trails in the national park are among the least developed in the entire country, and are principally used by researchers to move between each of the stations. It's advisable to talk to the staff before setting out on any of the hikes, as infrastructure in the park is almost nonexistent. If you're interested in summit-

ting Volcán Cacao, it's strongly recommended that you hire a guide, which can be arranged through any of the biological stations or at Hacienda Los Inocentes (p224).

Sleeping & Eating

INSIDE THE PARK

You can **camp** (per person US\$2.50) near the stations, but there aren't any facilities.

If there's space, you may be able to reserve dorm-style accommodations at **Maritza or Cacao Biological Stations** (☎ 2666 5051; dm US\$20). The stations are both quite rustic, with room for about 30 people, and shared cold-water bathrooms. Meals are also available for US\$3 to US\$7, and should be arranged in advance.

HEADING NORTH OF THE BORDER

Peñas Blancas is a busy border crossing, open 6am to 8pm daily. You won't be charged to exit or enter Costa Rica, but leaving Nicaragua costs US\$2. The fee to enter Nicaragua is US\$7; your car will cost another US\$22 (note that most car-rental companies in Costa Rica won't allow you to cross borders; be sure to ask before you sign your contract). Banks on either side will change local colones and córdobas for dollars, but inconveniently, not for each other. Independent moneychangers will happily make the exchange for you – at whatever rates they feel like setting.

The border posts, are about 1km apart; if you're in the mood you can hire a golf cart (US\$2) to make the run. Hordes of totally useless touts will offer to 'guide' you through the simple crossing – let them carry your luggage if you like, but agree on a fee beforehand. You may be charged US\$1 to enter the state of Rivas, but this fee is voluntary. Should you have any hard currency left at this point, there's a fairly fabulous duty-free shop, with fancy makeup and lots of liquor, waiting for you in Sapoá, the Nicaraguan equivalent of Peñas Blancas.

Relax with your purchases on the 37km bus ride (US\$0.75, 45 minutes), departing every 30 minutes, to Rivas. The city is a quiet, transport hub, though its well-preserved 17th-century center is worth exploring (think a more run-down version of Granada without all the crowds).

If you're good at bargaining (and you will have to bargain hard), there are a number of taxis waiting on the Nicaraguan side of the border to whisk you to Rivas (US\$8).

San Juan del Sur

After standing in line in the hot sun and negotiating the chaos of crossing the border, all you might feel up for is collapsing on a beach with a shot of Flor de Caña in hand – if your answer to that is 'sí, por favor,' then make tracks to San Juan del Sur. This fishing village has geared itself to tourism, so you can pick up a used novel, go surfing, diving or deep-sea fishing, and then party in the evening with other travelers and local expats. Buses and water taxis also make trips to some of the stunning beaches north and south of San Juan.

There are several places to stay along the market street where the buses pull in. The beachfront is lined with breezy cafés, and you'll find lots of cheap eateries at San Juan's market.

- **Casa Oro** (☎ 505-568 2415; www.casaoloro.com; dm US\$5-6, r with/without bathroom US\$18/12) This well-run hostel is deservedly popular and always heavily booked. Quieter upstairs rooms have more space and private bathrooms.
- **Hotel Estrella** (☎ 505-568 2210; r per person US\$5) On the beach strip, this place was probably once quite elegant. Now it's a pretty basic budget flophouse, but some rooms have little balconies, and there's a nice lounge area, book exchange, and a beautiful café out front.
- **El Gato Negro** (☎ 505-828 5534) Stake out a table here for a good shot of espresso and treats like fresh sandwiches.
- **El Timón** (☎ 505-568 2243; dishes US\$5-10) This excellent beach restaurant is the place to go for a more upmarket seafood dinner, with professional service and delicious seafood; the *pulpo al vapor* (steamed octopus with a tasty garlicky sauce) is highly recommended.

Buses to and from Rivas (US\$0.60, 45 minutes), with connections to the border, depart every 30 minutes or so from 3:30am to 7pm. Taxis from Sapoá to San Juan del Sur cost about US\$10.

Isla de Ometepe

One of Nicaragua's highlights, Isla de Ometepe is like something from a fantasy landscape. The island's twin volcanoes – **Concepción** (1610m above the lake) and **Maderas** (1394m) – rise dramatically from Lago de Nicaragua and are connected by an isthmus formed by lava flow.

OUTSIDE THE PARK

Hacienda Los Inocentes (☎ 2679 9190; www.losinocenteslodge.com; d with/without 3 meals US\$70/45) This former cattle ranch on the northern edge of the park was the former property of the

Inocente family, who used to own nearly one-third of Guanacaste. Today, it's part biological research station, part ecolodge, and the principal aim is to convert much of the 1000-hectare ranch from pasture land to rain forest. The

Parts of Ometepe are still covered in primary forest, which shelters abundant wildlife, including howler monkey and green parrot. The island is also famous for its ancient Chorotega stone statues and petroglyphs.

It's possible to hike both volcanoes, though these are serious, eight- to 12-hour treks that are best attempted with a local guide. There are also great beaches for sunning and swimming all around the island. The most popular beach, **Playa Santo Domingo**, is on the isthmus and has plenty of places to stay and eat. Many local accommodations have horses, bikes or kayaks to hire at reasonable rates.

The island's two major settlements, Altagracia and Moyogalpa, both offer accommodations and restaurants, but to experience the true charms of Ometepe, travel further out: Charco Verde, Playa Santo Domingo, Balgüe and Mérida all offer lovely settings amid the island's rich biodiversity.

The fastest way of reaching Ometepe is via San Jorge near Rivas, from where boats make the 15km crossing to Moyogalpa on Ometepe. There are two types of boat: significantly more comfortable car/passenger ferries (San Jorge–Moyogalpa 1st/2nd class US\$3.30/2.20, departures 7:45am, noon, 2:30pm, 4:30pm and 5:30pm) and fairly basic *lanchas* (small motorboats; US\$1.60, departures at 9am, 9:30am, 10:30am, 11:30am, 1:30pm and 3:30pm). Taxis from Sapoá to the San Jorge ferry will run about US\$10 if you bargain hard.

Granada

The lovely colonial city of Granada is a sight for sore eyes after the brutally bland architecture of Costa Rica. The carved colonial portals, elegant churches and fine plaza, as well as its location on Lago de Nicaragua, have enchanted visitors for centuries since the city was founded in 1524. And not only is it a beautiful city to enjoy for a few days, it also makes a convenient launching point for Nicaragua's other attractions. Stop by the **Intur office** (☎ 505-552 6858; granada@intur.gov.ni; Calle Arsenal; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-12:30pm Sat & Sun), across from the San Francisco church, to pick up a good map of the city's historic buildings.

A few blocks northeast of Parque Central is the striking light-blue facade of the **Convento y Iglesia de San Francisco** (Calle Cervantes). It fronts a complex that was initiated in 1585, burned to the ground by William Walker in 1856, and rebuilt in 1867–68. It houses the city's must-see **museum** (admission US\$2; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun). Admission includes a bilingual guided tour.

Some recommended places to stay:

- **Hostal Esfinge** (☎ 505-552 4826; Calle Atravesada; dm US\$3.30, s/d US\$6.60/10, with bathroom US\$10/13.90; (P)) A gracious, old-style ambience pervades this gorgeous historic building. Rooms surround a large courtyard, and guests have access to a communal kitchen.
- **Posada Don Alfredo** (☎ 505-552 4455; alfredpaulbaganz@hotmail.com; Calle 14 de Septiembre; r US\$20-28, with bathroom US\$35, with air-con US\$40; ☎) The disordered, homey colonial elegance of this lovely old building give this place great character; spacious rooms vary widely and mostly share bathrooms.
- **Patio del Malinche** (☎ 505-552 2235; www.patiodelmalinche.com; Calle El Caimito; s/d incl breakfast US\$57/67; ☎) This lovingly restored colonial home is one of Granada's most appealing places to stay. The personal attention and delicious, massive breakfasts make it feel more like a guesthouse than a hotel.

Buses from Rivas (US\$1, 1½ hours) depart eight times daily until mid-afternoon. Taxis from Sapoá can take you to Granada for around US\$30.

ranch has a spectacular location below the Volcán Orosí, and nearly two-thirds of the property has returned to secondary forest (not surprisingly, there are great opportunities here for wildlife-watching). The hacienda building

itself is a very attractive, century-old wooden house, and has 11 spacious wooden bedrooms with private (but separate) bathroom, plus several larger separate cabins. The upper floor is surrounded by a beautiful, shaded, wooden

veranda with hammocks and also volcano views – a good spot for sunset/moonrise. The staff can arrange guided hikes throughout the park as well as to the top of Volcán Cacao.

The hacienda is 15km east of the Interamericana on the paved road to Santa Cecilia. Buses from San José to Santa Cecilia pass the lodge entrance at about 7:30pm, returning at around 4:15am. Taxis from La Cruz charge about US\$10.

LA CRUZ

La Cruz is the closest town to the Peñas Blancas border crossing with Nicaragua (see boxed text, p224), and it's the principal gateway to Bahía Salinas (opposite), one of Costa Rica's premier windsurfing and kitesurfing destinations. Although La Cruz itself is a fairly sleepy provincial town, its hilltop location is awash with scenic views of the coastline, and you can easily bus down to several stunning, isolated white-sand beaches on Bahía Salinas. An underrated place to spend the night before heading to Nicaragua.

Information

Changing money at the border post often yields a better exchange rate than in town.

Banco Nacional (☎ 2679 9296) At the junction of the short road into the town center and the Interamericana; has a 24-hour ATM.

Banco Popular (☎ 2679 9352) In the town center, has an ATM.

Cruz Roja (☎ 2679 9004, emergency 2679 9146) There is a small clinic just north of the town center on the road toward the border.

Internet Café (☎ 2679 8190, 8838 8128; per hr US\$1; ☎ approximately 8am-7pm Mon-Sat)

Sleeping

Hotel Bella Vista (☎ 2679 8060; per person fan/air-con US\$7/10; P ☎ ☎) With a lovely mosaic-bot-tomed pool and breezy restaurant at the top of the hill, this Dutch-run hotel is a great place for a beer in the evenings. Although it was a bit run-down when we visited, the owner's son had plans to clean up the still-decent rooms. All rooms have private hot-water bathrooms, and those upstairs are a bit brighter with partial views of the bay. There's also an attached restaurant (open breakfast, lunch and dinner), where breakfast will set you back US\$3.

Cabinas Santa Rita (☎ 2679 9062; s/d with bathroom US\$9/13, with air-con US\$15/23; P ☎ ☎) The best budget option in town has clean, though dark, rooms

with shared bathrooms and is popular with migrant workers. Across the street, the newer annex has frillier rooms with private bathroom, cable TV, hot showers and air-con.

Pickup Amalia's Inn (☎ 2679 9618; s/d US\$20/35; P ☎ ☎) By far the best place in La Cruz to kick back with a cool drink at sunset, the shared terra-cotta terraces at Amalia's look out onto huge, stupendous bay views. The white stucco house on a cliff isn't a bad place to spend the night, either – cozy, homey rooms are decorated with anything from white wicker to modular leather, each with private hot-water bathroom and air-con. Walls in the meandering house are hung with modernist paintings by Amalia's late husband Lester Bounds. Amalia's niece is now the lady of the house, and short of offering meals, she'll make you feel right at home.

Eating

La Cruz might possibly have the most *heladerías* (ice-cream shops) per capita in Costa Rica, for which you'll be glad when the mid-afternoon heat smites you. Pick up groceries at the neighboring Almacén Super Único and SuperCompro La Cruz, on the east side of the plaza.

Soda Candy (mains US\$2-5; ☎ 6am-8pm) There's no menu at this basic *soda* across from the bus terminal, but in addition to *casados* and *gallos* (tortilla sandwiches) 'made with a lot of love,' Candy knows all the bus schedules by heart and can fill you in if the station happens to be closed.

Pollo Rico Rico (mains US\$2-5; ☎ 10am-10pm) Folks who love fried chicken should stop by this spot, right on the park, or try the roasted chicken, which is even tastier (and a whole lot better for your poor arteries).

Soda Herbol (☎ 2679 8360; mains US\$2-6; ☎ 6am-7pm) This *soda* doesn't have a menu, either, but staff will make your *casado* to order, and the friendly owner speaks a bit of English while the resident green parakeet Ana narrates her adventures on the curtains.

Getting There & Away

A **Transportes Deldú counter** (☎ 7am-1pm & 3-5:30pm) sells tickets and stores bags. To catch a TransNica bus to Peñas Blancas, you'll need to flag a bus down on the Interamericana. Buses to the beaches depart just up the hill from Hotel Bella Vista; a taxi to the beach costs about US\$12.

Liberia (Transportes Deldú) US\$1, two hours, departs 6:15am, 7:30am, 9:30am, 11:30am, 3:15pm, 3:30pm, 5:30pm and 6:30pm.

Peñas Blancas US\$1, 45 minutes, departs 5am, 7am, 7:45am, 10:45am, 1:20pm and 4:10pm.

Playa Jobó US\$1, 30 minutes, departs at 11am and 4pm.

San José (Transportes Deldú) US\$5, five hours, departs 5:45am, 8am, 10am, 11am, 12:20pm, 2pm and 4:15pm.

BAHÍA SALINAS

Bahía Salinas is the second-best place in all of Costa Rica (only after Laguna de Arenal) for windsurfing, and is arguably the best place in the country for kiteboarding because the vegetation around Arenal can be quite dangerous for kites in the air. The bay otherwise happens to be a bit under the radar, so you'll often find that you have an entire jungle-edged crescent of white-sand beach to yourself. The bay is also home to Isla Bolaños, which protects a large colony of seabirds, including the endangered brown pelican (from January to May).

Sights & Activities

A dirt road (normally passable to cars) leads down from the lookout point in La Cruz past the small coastal fishing community of **Puerto Soley** and out along the curve of the bay to the consistently windy beaches of **Playa Papaturo** and **Playa Copal**. If wind isn't your thing but sunbathing is, head around the point to **Playa Jobó**, a perfect horseshoe of a bay with calm water, or **Playa Rajada** just beyond. Boats can be rented in the village of El Jobó or at one of the local resorts to visit **Isla Bolaños** (visits are restricted to April through November to avoid disturbing nesting seabirds). Or try contacting **Frank Schultz** (☎ 8827 4109; franksdiving@costaricense.co.cr), who also organizes fishing and diving trips.

WINDSURFING & KITEBOARDING

The strongest and steadiest winds blow from November through March, but the wind is pretty consistent here year-round. The shape of the hills surrounding the bay funnels the winds into a predictable pattern, and the sandy, protected beaches make this a safe place for beginners and experienced windsurfers and kiteboarders alike. It's important to remember that there are inherent dangers to kiteboarding (namely the risk of losing a limb – yikes!), so it's best to seek professional instruction if you're not an experienced kiteboarder. Responsible instructors recommend

at least two days of lessons before you can safely go out on your own. Windsurfing rentals and lessons can be found at **Ecoplaya Beach Resort** (☎ 2676 1010; www.ecoplaya.com).

If windsurfing is too tame for you, then enroll at **Kitesurf School 2000** (☎ 8826 5221; www.suntoursandfun.com/kite_surfing.htm), a sporty combination of wind and waves (which school instructors insist is much easier to learn than regular surfing) where you are attached to a large kite, then pulled across the bay by the breeze, allowing more advanced students to do flips and other aerial acrobatics above the froth and swells – way cool. If you want to give this a try, make reservations a couple of days in advance for two days of lessons (US\$240) or just equipment rental (basic gear per day US\$69).

Another reputable kitesurfing school is **Cometa Copal** (☎ 2676 1192; lguardbl@gmail.com), run by Bob Selfridge, who not only offers kitesurfing lessons with PASA (Professional Air Sports Association) certified instructors, but is himself an instructor, lifeguard and emergency medical technician.

Sleeping & Eating

Most hotels in Bahía Salinas offer transfers from San José or Liberia airports.

La Sandia Cabinas & Activities (☎ 8370 4894; www.lasandia-costarica.com; r US\$20; P) Stay at these colorful cabins, and the owners can help arrange windsurfing, kitesurfing, horseback riding and all manner of activities around the bay.

Blue Dream Hotel (☎ 2676 1042, 8826 5221; www.bluedreamhotel.com; dm US\$15, s/d US\$28/36; P ☎ ☎) Home base of Kitesurf School 2000, this friendly little hotel looks out over Playa Papaturo from its terraced hillside, with simple, comfortable tiled rooms at the top of the hill. Along with the hammock-strung garden, there's a yoga terrace, Mediterraneo restaurant (open breakfast, lunch and dinner) serving local and Mediterranean food, and spa services to boot, all run by Italian kiteboarding instructor Nicola and his Tica wife Katya.

Cometa Copal (☎ 2676 1192; lguardbl@gmail.com; villas from US\$65; P ☎ ☎) In addition to organizing kitesurfing lessons and rentals, the friendly American couple running Cometa Copal also rents gear and beachfront villas for the short- or long-term. Bob and Kirsten offer sweet extras like shiatsu massage, overnight kite repairs and home-baked goodies.

Bolaños Bay Resort (☎ 2676 1163; hotelbolanosbay@gmail.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$50/70; 📞 📺 📺 📺) This older, low-key resort on Playa Coyotera is being revived after being left to wither. It has sort of an appealing castaway feel to it, and the staff is very friendly, but don't expect any flashy amenities. There's a pleasant pool area above the deserted beach, and an onsite restaurant with a huge bar area.

Proyecto Pura-Vida (☎ 2676 1055, 8389 6784; www.progettopuravida.com; apt & house per night US\$30-100) Though geared toward long-term stays, this Italian-owned agency rents several wicker-furnished apartments and houses, priced according to size and amenities, which may include a pool or, perhaps, a bidet. Smaller apartments accommodate up to four people, while the larger villas can house seven. Each property is reasonably spaced from the others, and overlooks a pristine stretch of white sand. Weekly and monthly discounts are available.

Ecoplaya Beach Resort (☎ 2676 1010; www.ecoplaya.com; r&villa US\$116-250; 📞 📺 📺 📺 📺) About 16km from La Cruz, Ecoplaya efficiently delivers a luxury resort experience. Rooms and bungalows range from elegant studios, complete with kitchenettes and sustainable-teak furniture, to full luxury suites containing minibar, sitting room and air-con in every room. All rooms have DirecTV and private terrace or balcony. Opt for the full American plan (adult/child additional US\$78/39), and all meals are included, as are all drinks from 10am to 10pm (you read that right). The hotel's stretch of white-sand beach is picture perfect, and the pool with swim-up bar perfectly self-indulgent. The hotel also offers plenty of activities, including kayaking, mountain biking, fishing, diving, windsurfing and horseback riding.

Restaurant Copal (☎ 2676 1006; mains US\$4-7; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This glassed-in *palapa* on a hill-top has little competition here in Playa Copal, but it still turns out excellent Italian food, and the romantic locale can't be topped. Stop by on Thursday nights for wood-fired pizza.

Getting There & Away

Buses (US\$1) along this road depart the La Cruz bus terminal at 5am, 11am and 4pm daily and return approximately one hour later. A taxi to the beaches will cost about US\$12, and you can usually catch a colectivo (small bus; US\$3.50) from La Cruz, close to the taxi stand, though you may have to wait a while for it to fill up.

ARENAL ROUTE

If you've got your own wheels and you've got a little time, take the road from Ciudad Quesada to the Arenal area – you are in for one beautiful ride. With the backdrop of Volcán Platanar behind you, the road winding through this green, river-rich agrarian region passes through prosperous, quaint towns bright with bougainvillea. In front of you, if the weather cooperates, the smoking peak of Arenal will loom in the distance.

Past La Fortuna, the paved road (beware of potholes) hugs the north bank of Laguna de Arenal. On either side of the road, up the green slope and down on the lake side, turn-outs and driveways for lovely inns, kooky ersatz Austrian mini-villages, hip coffee houses and eccentric galleries appear invitingly like pictures in a pop-up book. Scattered in between, you can't help but notice the scads of real-estate signs offering lots for sale, but the area is bucolic and not overdeveloped, and each stop feels far enough away from the next to give a sense of isolation.

Heading back around the western edge of the lake, you'll pass through the lakeside Nuevo Arenal and down to the pleasant mountain town of Tilarán before descending back toward the Interamericana. If you don't have your own vehicle, the route is well served by public transportation.

CIUDAD QUESADA (SAN CARLOS)

The official name of this small city is Ciudad Quesada (sometimes abbreviated to 'Quesada'), but all the locals know it as San Carlos, and local buses often list San Carlos as the destination. It's long been a bustling ranching and agricultural center, known for its *talabaterías* (saddle shops), where some of the most intricately crafted leather saddles in Costa Rica are made and sold; a top-quality saddle can cost US\$1000. The city is also home to the **Feria del Ganado** (cattle fair and auction), which is held every April and accompanied by carnival rides and a *tope*.

Although San Carlos is surrounded by pastoral countryside, the city of 31,000 has developed into the commercial center of the region – it's also gritty and congested, and driving here can be harrowing for the uninitiated driver. Fortunately, there's no real

NICA VS TICO

Ticos have a well-deserved reputation for friendliness, and it's rare for travelers of any sex, race or creed to experience racism in Costa Rica. However, it's unfortunate and at times upsetting that the mere mention of anything related to Nicaragua is enough to turn your average Tico into a hate-spewing bigot (NB, even the term 'Nica' is used by *some* Ticos in a somewhat derogatory manner, so watch your language). Despite commonalities in language, culture, history and tradition, Nica vs Tico relations are at an all-time low, and rhetoric (on both sides) of *la frontera* isn't likely to improve anytime soon.

Why is there so much hostility between Nicas and Ticos? The answer is as much a product of history as it is of misunderstanding, though economic disparities between both countries are largely to blame.

Though Nicaragua was wealthier than Costa Rica as little as 25 years ago, decades of civil war and a US embargo quickly bankrupted the country, and today Nicaragua is the second-poorest country in the western hemisphere (after Haiti). For example, the 2007 CIA World Factbook lists the GDP per capita purchasing-power parity of Costa Rica as US\$13,500, while Nicaragua is listed at only US\$3200. The main problem facing Nicaragua is its heavy external debt, though debt relief programs implemented by the IMF and the pending free-trade zone created by the Central American Free Trade Agreement (Cafta) are both promising signs.

In the meantime, however, Nica families are crossing the border in record numbers, drawn to Costa Rica by its growing economy and impressive education and health systems. Unfortunately, immigration laws in Costa Rica make it difficult for Nicas to find work, and the majority end up living in shantytowns. Also, crime is on the rise throughout Costa Rica, and though it's difficult to say what percentage is actually attributable to Nica immigrants, Ticos are quick to point the finger.

It's difficult to predict whether or not relations will improve between both countries, although current signs are fairly negative. Costa Rica, whose civil guard is better funded than most country's militaries, has a bad habit of being caught on the river San Juan with a patrol boat of fatigued combat troops brandishing M16s. Nicaragua, which has the power to simultaneously defuse Tico racism and promote tourism, recently passed a law requiring all visiting Ticos to be in possession of a valid visa. Like all instances of deep-rooted prejudice, the solution is anything but clear.

reason to enter the city, except to either change buses or visit one of the area's fine hot springs.

Check your email at the **internet café** (per hr US\$1; 📞 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 3-7pm Sun), 100m north of Parque Central. Banco de San José, 200m north of Parque Central, and the Mutual de Alajuela across the street both have ATMs on the Cirrus and Plus systems.

If you're not staying at one of the two private hot-springs resorts, you can visit the budget-friendly **Agua Termales de la Marina** (☎ 2460 1692; admission US\$2). The springs, on the outskirts of town, are referred to locally as 'El Tucanito' (El Tucano is the name of the most expensive resort in town).

Sleeping

Hotel del Norte (☎ 2460 1959; s/d US\$6/9, with bathroom US\$9/13) Small, clean rooms with TV have ridiculously thin walls (so pray that you like what your neighbor is watching), although the excellent security and professional staff make

this the best budget option in town. It's 200m north of Banco Nacional.

Hotel Don Goyo (☎ 2460 1780; s/d US\$15/25; 📞) This is the most established hotel in San Carlos proper, and has small, pleasant, salmon-colored rooms with private hot showers. The attached restaurant (mains US\$4 to US\$10) is well respected for its high-quality food, including traditional Tico favorites and a good variety of Western dishes. It's 100m south of Parque Central.

Termales del Bosque (☎ 2460 4740; www.termalesdelbosque.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$49/61; 📞 📺) Several airy cottages are arranged around the jungle-like grounds at this recommended resort designed with Tico tourism in mind, though it's popular with foreigners who don't want to fork out the cash at nearby El Tucano. Luxury here is low-key with therapeutic soaking taking place in seven natural hot- and warm-water springs (adult/child US\$10/5), which are arranged on the riverbank in a forested valley populated by morpho butterflies.

To reach the resort, turn right behind the cathedral and continue for 7km to the east; you will see a sign on the left.

Hotel Occidental El Tucano (☎ 2460 6000; www.1costaricalink.com/eng/hotels/hota/tucano/home.htm; d incl breakfast US\$152-215; P ♿ ♿ ♿) This posh Mediterranean-style resort, 8km northeast of Ciudad Quesada, is in primary forest and comes complete with an Italian restaurant, swimming pool, Jacuzzi, spa and sauna, plus various sports facilities ranging from tennis courts to miniature golf. The real draw is the nearby thermal springs, which are tapped into three small warm pools that are perfect for soaking away your ills.

Eating

San Carlos has gone urban – chain restaurants abound throughout the city, though there are a few decent local spots on or near the park.

Restaurant Los Geranios (☎ 2460 0553; mains US\$2-6; ♿ lunch & dinner) On a 2nd-story terrace 100m south of the cathedral, overlooking the bustling street below, this popular meeting spot for the city's 20-somethings has cheap casados and cold beer – a perfect combination.

Restaurant El Parque (☎ 2460 0938; mains US\$3-6; ♿ lunch & dinner) If you're looking for a break from the standard rice and beans, head to this small *soda* 50m north of the *parque*, which specializes in Italian pastas.

Restaurante Don Goyo (☎ 2460 1780; Hotel Don Goyo; mains US\$4-9; ♿ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This San Carlos institution is the place to go when you really need a burger – they're big, juicy and oh-so-cheap.

Getting There & Away

The Terminal Quesada is about 2km from the center of town. Taxis (US\$1) and a twice-hourly bus (US\$0.25) make regular runs between town and the terminal. Walking there is fine if you don't mind hauling your luggage uphill. Popular bus routes (and their bus companies) from Ciudad Quesada:

La Fortuna (Coopatrac) US\$0.75, 1½ hours, departs 6am, 10:30am, 1pm, 3:30pm, 5:15pm and 6pm.

Los Chiles (Chilsaca) US\$3, two hours, departs 12 times daily from 5am to 7:15pm.

Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí (Empresarios Guapileños) US\$1.50, 2½ hours, departs 4:40am, 6am, 9:15am, 10am, 3pm and 5:30pm.

San José (Autotransportes San Carlos) US\$2.50, 2½ hours, 11 departures from 5am to 6pm.

Tilarán (Transportes Tilarán) US\$4, 4½ hours, departs 6:30am and 4pm.

LA FORTUNA & AROUND

The influx of tourism has altered the face, fame and fortunes of this former one-horse town; still, La Fortuna has not quite become just an overdeveloped gateway to Volcán

Arenal. It's true that tour operators have set up shop on every block, and that arriving visitors need to steel themselves for the onslaught of touts and hawkers as they step off their buses, but that's because tourism drives the local economy. La Fortuna has managed to retain an underlying, small-town *sabanero* feel to it, with all the bustling action still centered on the attractive church and Parque Central. Stroll beyond the park and you'll quickly hit dirt roads and mom-and-pop cabins away from the hustle and traffic flow.

Prior to 1968, La Fortuna was a sleepy agricultural town, 6km from the base of Cerro Arenal (Arenal Hill). However, on the morning of July 29, 1968, Arenal erupted violently after nearly 400 years of dormancy, and buried the small villages of Pueblo Nuevo, San Luís and Tabacón – yes, Tabacón Hot Springs (right) is in fact in the eruption path. Suddenly, like moths to the flame, tourists from around the world started descending on La Fortuna in search of fiery night skies and the inevitable blurry photo.

Since then, La Fortuna has served as the principal gateway for visiting Volcán Arenal, and it's one of the top destinations for travelers in Costa Rica. The town is well connected by public transport to San José, and many travelers arrive from or head out to Monteverde via the scenic and unusual jeep-boat-jeep transfer. If you have your own transport, however, consider staying at the Arenal Observatory Lodge (p242) or in the small town of El Castillo (p245) as you'll be rewarded with less crowds and better views of the lava flows.

Orientation & Information

Streets in La Fortuna are named, but there are few street signs and most locals will provide better directions using landmarks. The town is centered on a small park, which is adjacent to the bus stop and taxi stand.

INTERNET ACCESS

Expediciones (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9101; per hr US\$1.55; ♿ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat) Most tour operators in town also provide internet access, but if you're not interested in hearing a sales pitch, there are no hassles here.

LAUNDRY

Lavandería Alice (Map p232; ☎ 2479 7111; per kg US\$3; ♿ 7am-10pm) Here you get the full fluff-and-fold treatment, 100m north of the park.

Lavandería La Fortuna (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9547; per 4kg US\$7, internet per hr US\$1; ♿ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat) DIY, or it will wash and dry, all while you surf the internet.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Clínica Fortuna (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9461; Calle 3 btwn Av Volcán & Fort; ♿ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri)

MONEY

Banks listed below have 24-hour ATMs.

BAC San José (Map p232; ☎ 2295 9797; cnr Av Fort & Calle 3) Can change traveler's checks.

Banco de Costa Rica (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9113; Av Central)

Banco Nacional (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9355; Calle 1)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Unsurprisingly, there is no unbiased tourist information center in La Fortuna, though any tour operator or hotel front desk will be happy to give you information out of enlightened self-interest.

Lunática (Map p232; ☎ 2479 8255; lunaticarte2@ice.co.cr; ♿ 8:30am-8pm) For cultural offerings in La Fortuna area, information on events and happenings, which unfortunately are infrequent to rare. The store, across from the school, also displays the work of local artists, including baskets, masks and jewelry made by Maleku Indians.

Sights

HOT SPRINGS

What's the consolation prize if you can't actually see the volcano? Why, hot springs, of course, and La Fortuna has some doozies.

If Spielberg ever needed a setting for the Garden of Eden sequence in *Genesis*, **Tabacón Hot Springs** (Map p234; ☎ 2519 1900; www.tabacon.com; adult/child US\$60/20, after 7pm US\$45/20; ♿ 10am-10pm), 13km west of La Fortuna, would be it. Enter through the gratuitously opulent ticket counter, flanked by an outrageous buffet (US\$15 extra) on one side and glittering gift shop on the other. Then, with a thundering announcement, rare orchids and more florid tropical blooms part to reveal, oh yes, a 40°C/104°F waterfall pouring over a cliff, concealing naturalish-looking caves complete with camouflaged cup holders. And lounged across each well-placed stone, in various stages of sweat-induced exhaustion, relax reddening tourists all enjoying what could be called a hot date.

This hedonism comes at a price – on top of the exorbitant price of admission, that is. The spa is actually on the site where a volcanic eruption ripped through in pretouristed

SCAMS

If you're taking the bus to La Fortuna, they start before you even get there, boarding a few kilometers out of town, then working the crowd: 'That hotel is overpriced, but I have a friend...' You know this scam, right? But it gets worse.

In addition to steering travelers to poor hotels, which discredits reputable hoteliers who meet the bus because they can't afford flashy brochures and still charge US\$5 per room, there's a family in La Fortuna who'll also book you on 'half-price tours.' Usually you'll just show up for your tour and learn that your receipt is invalid, though we've also heard about folks taken to pricey hot springs, then abandoned without transportation or their entry fees paid as promised. In a disturbing recent development, we've even heard of touts selling vouchers for phony tours in such far-flung locales as Monteverde and Caño Negro.

After milking a batch of tourists, family members trade off between La Fortuna, Monteverde and other hot spots for a couple of weeks; it's worked hassle-free for years. Why haven't the police done anything? That's a good question, but basically it comes down to the fact that no one wants to wait around for months to bring these folks to trial. Any police report you file will be for insurance purposes only – period.

It's worth going through a reputable agency or hotel to book your tours around here. You may pay twice as much, but at least you'll get to go. On the bright side, the recent upswing in tourism in the La Fortuna area has brought promises from the Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT) that there will be a crackdown on touts, though remember that the government is in the business of making promises it can't keep. Don't believe us – just look at the state of the roads!



1975, killing one local, and several times a year the resort is evacuated whenever Arenal has a bit of indigestion and decides to belch some poisonous gas (and we haven't even told you about the threat of sudden avalanches). Chances are you'll be fine, but remember that as an active volcano, Arenal always poses the risk of unpredictably acting up.

Baldi Termae Hot Springs (Map p234; ☎ 2479 9651; www.arenal.net/baldi-hot-springs.htm; with/without buffet US\$45/28; ☎ 10am-10pm) sports concrete Roman pillars and a Maya pyramid sprouting waterfalls; the ambience of these springs 5km west of La Fortuna falls somewhere between Caesar's Palace and Epcot Center. The 16 thermal pools here can only

be considered understated in comparison to Tabacón, but despite the high prices, the swim-up bars and techno music attract younger visitors.

Across the street is an unsigned gate that leads to the recommended **Eco-Termiales** (Map p234; ☎ 2479 8484; adult/child US\$24/16; ☎ 10am-9pm) hot-spring complex, which is by reservation only. The theme here is minimalist elegance, and everything from the natural circulation systems in the pools to the soft, mushroom lighting is understated yet luxurious. Just 100 visitors per four-hour slot are welcomed at 10am, 1pm and 5pm, and you can phone ahead, make a reservation next door at Hotel el Silencio del Campo (p238), or take your chances by just showing up. During the evening session, guests have the option to choose from one of three set menus (US\$15/17/23), which feature home-style food served in earthenware pots.

We're certainly not going to let out the secret, but there are several free **hot springs** in the area that any local can take you to.

DAY SPAS

El Sueño Spa (Map p232; ☎ 2479 8261; massages US\$35-60; ☎ 9am-9pm) offers massages, facials and reflexology treatments in its peaceful little salon just across from the south side of Parque Central. It also sells volcanic mud so you can relive the spa experience at home.

Herrera Day Spa (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9016; massages US\$20-85; ☎ 9am-10pm), 200m northeast of Parque Central, has an intimate, European atmosphere and sells its own line of homemade beauty products.

WATERFALLS

Even if you can't see Arenal, La Fortuna has another natural wonder that pales only in comparison with an erupting volcano: **La Catarata de la Fortuna** (Map p234; admission US\$8; ☎ 8am-5pm), a sparkling 70m ribbon of clear water pouring through a sheer canyon of dark volcanic rock arrayed in bromeliads and ferns. It's photogenic, and you don't have to descend the canyon – a short, well-maintained and almost-vertical hike paralleling the river's precipitous plunge – to get the shot, though you do have to pay the steep entry fee.

It's worth the climb out (think Stairmaster with a view) to see the rare world at the jungle floor. Though it's dangerous to dive beneath

the thundering falls, a series of perfect swimming holes with spectacular views tiles the canyon in aquamarine – cool and inviting after the hike or ride here. Keep an eye on your backpack.

From the turnoff on the road to San Ramon, it's about 4km uphill to the falls. If you decide to walk up, you'll enjoy spectacular views of Cerro Chato as you hike through pastures and past the small hotels lining the road. You might appreciate a stop at **Neptune's House of Hammocks** (Map p234; ☎ 2479 8269; hammocks US\$50-150), which sells soft drinks and hammocks (cat-sized models also available) that you can try out while you take a breather.

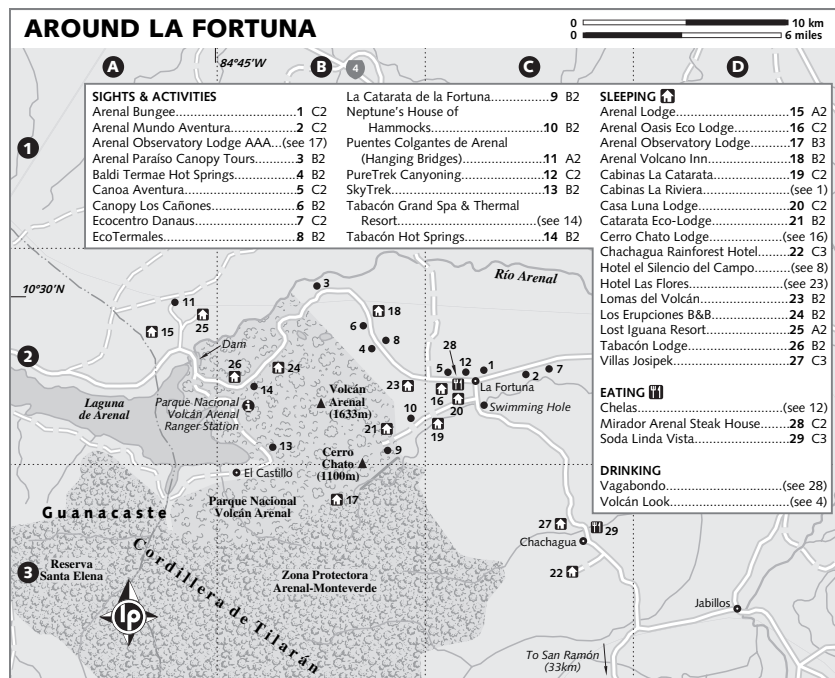
You can also get to the *catarata* on horseback (US\$25 to US\$35 per person) or by car or taxi (US\$5 one way); several outfits offer overpriced tours that include a shuttle. A handful of snack and souvenir stands are at the entrance to the falls, but it's worth packing your own lunch and making a day of it.

The falls are also the trailhead for the steep, five- to six-hour **Cerro Chato** climb, a seriously strenuous but rewarding trek to a beautiful lake-filled volcanic crater, where you can have a swim once you summit Cerro Chato. Starting from here, you'll have to pay a US\$10 fee for crossing the finca leading to Cerro Chato; a slightly cheaper (though you'll still pay a fee) and less physically taxing alternative would be to hike up the other side from Arenal Observatory Lodge (p242).

Can't handle the hike? Just past the turnoff to the *catarata*, at the third bridge as you leave La Fortuna for San Ramón, there's a short trail on the left leading to a pretty **swimming hole** just under the road, with a rope swing and little waterfall of its own, thank you very much.

ECOCENTRO DANAUS

The reader-recommended **Ecocentro Danaus** (ecological center; Map p234; ☎ 2460 8005; www.ecocentrodanaus.com; admission US\$5; ☎ 8am-3:30pm), 3km east of town then 500m on a dirt road, has a well-developed trail system that's good for birding, and there are frequent sightings of sloth, coati and howler monkey. The price of admission also includes a visit to a butterfly garden, a ranarium featuring poison-dart frogs and a small lake containing caiman and turtles. Various tour operators in town run guided night tours (US\$25) to the ecological center.



Activities

There's no shortage of things to do around La Fortuna, but it's going to cost you.

ATV RIDING

Ecotourism and ATV riding go together like topeless sunbathing and the Middle East, but whatever – to each their own. There are a surprising number of companies, though **Fourtrax Adventures** (Map p232; ☎ 2479 8444; www.fourtraxadventure.com; Av Central; 3-hr tour US\$75) is the most established operator, on the western edge of town. The three-hour tour brings you to the base of the Arenal; a second passenger on one ATV costs an extra US\$30.

BUNGEE JUMPING

It was bound to spring up here sometime – **Arenal Bungee** (Map p234; ☎ 2479 7440; www.arenalbungee.com; jump US\$39; ☎ 9:30am–9:30pm) lets you fling yourself through the air from its 'Extreme Machine' structure in several ways, including launching upwards from the ground. Confused? Try it for yourself at this outfit, safety-certified by the North American Bungee Association.

CANOEING

Highly recommended, **Canoa Aventura** (Map p234; ☎ 2479 8200; www.canoa-aventura.com; ☎ 6:30am–9:30pm) is about 1.5km west of town on the road to Arenal and specializes in canoe and float trips led by bilingual naturalist guides. Most are geared toward wildlife-watching, with birds (green macaw, roseate spoonbill, honeycreeper etc) being the focus of various tours. Popular paddles include the full-day trip to Caño Negro (US\$105, including breakfast and lunch) and an overnight (US\$250) to the northern rain forest for an opportunity to spot the great green macaw.

CANOPY TOURING

Try **Arenal Paraíso Canopy Tours** (Map p234; ☎ 2460 5333; www.arenalparaiso.com; adult/student or child US\$45/35) for two-hour tours along 12 zip lines. On the other side of La Fortuna, **Canopy Los Cañones**; ☎ 2461 1818; adult/child US\$45/35) is based at the Hotel Los Lagos, with 15 cables over the rain forest. You can also do canopy tours inside the park itself with SkyTrek, see p244. Then there's **Arenal Mundo Aventura** (Map p234; ☎ 2479 9762; www.arenalmundoaventura.com;

adult/child canopy tour US\$60/30), an ecological park where you can take a canopy tour, go rappelling and catch Maleku performances all in one go.

CANYONING

The reputable **PureTrek Canyoning** (Map p234; ☎ 2479 9940, 2461 2110; www.puretrek.com; ☎ 7am–10pm) leads guided rappels down four waterfalls, one of which is 50m in height. The four-hour tour costs US\$85 and includes transportation and lunch. Find it 500m west of town.

HORSEBACK RIDING

Desafío Adventure Company (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9464; www.desafiocostarica.com; ☎ 6:30am–9pm) treats its horses well and has been recommended for the trek to Monteverde (US\$75), with a couple of caveats (see boxed text, p188). Along with horseback riding trips, the company also organizes adventure tours rappelling down waterfalls, and community-based tours visiting a local women's recycling collective and animal rescue shelter.

KITESURFING & WINDSURFING

You're only a short drive from the premier spot in Costa Rica for wind sports – Laguna de Arenal (p245).

WHITE-WATER RAFTING & KAYAKING

Desafío Adventure Company (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9464; www.desafiocostarica.com; ☎ 6:30am–9pm) is also recommended for its expertise in river rafting. White-water rafting and kayaking on the Ríos Toro, Peñas Blancas and Sarapiquí are convenient day trips from La Fortuna, and rapids ranging from Class I to Class IV cater to all skill levels. Depending on access and the difficulty of the rapids, trips cost between US\$45 and US\$100.

Another company that has appeared on the scene is **Wave Expeditions** (Map p232; ☎ 2479 7263; www.waveexpeditions.com; ☎ 7am–9pm), running fun, professional river trips for all experience levels. Prices are competitive, and readers have raved about the excellent staff running these trips.

Festivals & Events

The big annual bash is **Fiestas de la Fortuna**, held in mid-February and featuring two weeks of Tico-rules bullfights, colorful carnival rides, gregory festival food, craft stands and unusual

gambling devices. It's free, except for the beer (which is cheap) and you'll have a blast trying to decide between the temporary disco with go-go dancers getting down to reggaetón or the rough and wild tents next door with live ranchero and salsa.

Courses

The **Adventure Education Center** (Map p232; ☎ 2479 8390; www.adventurespanishschool.com; 1 week with/without homestay US\$440/315) is an unusual Spanish school that includes outdoor healthy and safety courses as well as various guided hikes and adventures in the curriculum (most adventures cost a little extra). Specialized courses include programs for children, and others teaching medical Spanish. There are other campuses in Turrialba and Dominical.

Tours

You could have someone blindfold you and spin you around on Avenida Central and chances are you'd manage to stumble right into a tour-operator's desk – unless a tout got a hold of you first. While exploding development in La Fortuna means there's a lot of healthy competition, you'll need to shop around, compare prices and not buy your tour from some friendly dude on the street. This is one place where the freedom of having your own wheels can save you money and hassles.

There's usually a two-person minimum for any trip, and groups can work out discounts in advance with most outfitters. If you don't want to deal with the tour operators, most hotels can arrange trips for you, though you will probably be charged a US\$5-per-person commission. It's also becoming standard practice in La Fortuna to sell tourists pricey tours to distant destinations, such as Caño Negro. If you're turned off by the idea of public transportation, this is a fine option, though you'll save yourself a ton of money (and probably have a much better experience) if you actually go to these places on the local bus and then organize a tour upon arrival.

Most tourists are interested in taking the obligatory trip to Volcán Arenal, which is generally an afternoon excursion to either the national park or a private overlook to appreciate the mountain by day, combined with a trip to one of the hot springs and usually dinner. Then it's off to another overlook in the evening, where lucky souls will see some lava. Prices vary widely, but generally run US\$25

to US\$65 per person. Make sure your tour includes entry fees to the park and hot springs, which could easily add another US\$25 to the total. Also remember that there's a better-than-even chance that Arenal will remain demurely wrapped in cloud cover for the duration of your trek. There are no refunds if you can't see anything, but nighttime soaks in the hot springs are pretty damn great anyway.

Most agencies in town can also arrange jeep-boat-jeep transportation to Monteverde (see p241), which is the easiest, most scenic way to visit the cloud forests.

The tour operators listed below are a few of the more established agencies, but this list is by no means exhaustive.

Aventuras Arenal (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9133; www.arenaladventures.com; ☹ 6:30am-9pm) Has been around for 15 years, organizing a variety of local day tours via bike, boat and horseback.

Eagle Tours (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9091; www.eagle-tours.net; ☹ 6:30am-9pm) Budget travelers rave about this professionally run tour agency, with an office about 150m west of the church.

Exploradores Outdoors (Map p232; ☎ 2479 7500; www.exploradoresoutdoors.com; ☹ 6am-10pm) Specializing in rafting trips on the Río Pacuare, it has a desk at Arenal Backpackers Resort.

Jacamar Tours (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9767; www.arenal-tours.com) Recommended for its incredible variety of naturalist hikes.

Pura Vida Tours (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9045; www.pura-vidatours.com; ☹ 7:30am-9pm)

Sunset Tours (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9800; www.sunset-tourccr.com; ☹ 6:30am-9pm) This is La Fortuna's most established tour company, recommended for high-quality tours with bilingual guides.

Sleeping

Costa Rican holidays call for merrymaking and explosions, and what better fireworks show is there than the famous lava of La Fortuna? Visitors both foreign and domestic are drawn to La Fortuna for the chance to see the volcano spit some magma, particularly on weekends and holidays, so for those times try to make advance reservations.

There are a bajillion places to stay in town, and we've only listed a handful. The great thing about La Fortuna is the number of small, family-run places, usually a few simple rooms with electric showers and maybe a private bathroom, offering meals by arrangement and good conversation. You may hear about them through word of mouth or just by roaming

around for a few minutes. These places will help arrange local tours and are a good way to help locals cash in on the tourism boom. Hotel touts meet the buses and can be more strong-armed than in most of Costa Rica; not all are trustworthy (see boxed text, p230).

If you're driving, consider staying on the pastoral road to Cerro Chato, a few kilometers south of town, where several appealing hotels have cropped up. Note that hotels west and south of town are listed separately.

Rates given are high-season prices, but low-season rates plummet by as much as 40%.

IN TOWN

Budget

Prices are quoted here with taxes excluded, since paying in cash usually means no taxes.

Gringo Pete's (Map p232; ☎ 2479 8521; gringopetes2003@yahoo.com; camping per person US\$2, dm US\$3, r per person with/without bathroom US\$5/4; (P)) With a clean and cozy vibe, it's hard to believe that this purple hostel, 100m south of the school, is so cheap! Whether you're in the comfy dorms sleeping four or your own private room, you'll flock to the breezy covered common areas, which are great spots to chat with other backpackers. Pete, from Washington State, can point you toward cut-rate tours and store your bags for you while you're on them. There's also a book exchange, and lockers in every room. If it's full, stroll about 750m along the river toward Arenal and see if there's room at Gringo Pete's Too.

our pick Arenal Backpackers Resort (Map p232; ☎ 2479 7000; www.arenalbackpackers.com/home.html; Av Central; camping US\$6, dm US\$10, d/tr/q US\$50/60/72; (P) ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹) This self-proclaimed 'five-star hostel' 300m west of the church is among the cushier hostels in Costa Rica. Dorm rooms have private hot-water bathrooms, and you'll sleep easy on the thick, orthopedic mattresses. Private rooms definitely cater to midrange travelers, though with flat-screen TVs and tiled-bathrooms, they're worth the splurge. But the real draw is the landscaped pool where backpackers spend lazy days lounging with a cold beer. Other amenities include wi-fi, a professional-quality shared kitchen and pool table. Some readers have complained of impersonal service here.

Sleep Inn Guesthouse (Map p232; ☎ 8394 7033; msterlavalava@hotmail.com; Av Arenal; r with/without bathroom per person US\$7/5) If you're looking for a welcoming Tico family to stay with, you've found

them – Cándida will invite you into her home, 250m west of MegaSuper, as if it were yours, and Carlos, whose nickname is Mr Lava-Lava Man, guarantees you'll see lava (or you get to go again for free), and his tours (US\$25) are the cheapest in town.

Hotel Dorothy (Map p232; ☎ 2479 8068; www.hotel-dorothy.com; r per person incl breakfast downstairs/upstairs US\$8/10; (P) ☹ ☹) Although it's a bit far from town, at 300m south next to the bullring, and a little rough around the edges, this spot is highly recommended simply because Noel, the bilingual Limónese owner, is positively beaming with Caribbean warmth. Noel is also something of a local hero – upon noticing that the nearby bullring was on fire, Noel alerted the fire department, saving the scores of undocumented Nicaraguan workers who were being detained inside.

La Choza Inn (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9091; www.la-chozainnhostel.com; Av Fort btwn Calles 2 & 4; dm US\$5, s/d/tr US\$8/10/15, with bathroom & air-con US\$20/30/40; (P) ☹ ☹ ☹) This popular budget inn 100m west of Parque Central has a great variety of rooms, a well-stocked communal kitchen, an extremely personable staff and is consistently packed with discriminating travelers. The on-site location of the recommended Eagle Tours (opposite) is a huge bonus.

Mayol Lodge (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9110; www.mayol-lodge.com; Av Arenal; s/d with fan US\$18/30, with air-con US\$30/45; (P) ☹ ☹) Small, bright rooms done up in cheery blue-and-yellow tile are centered on a cool, refreshing pool with volcano views. It's 200m southeast of Parque Central.

Cabinas La Riviera (Map p234; ☎ 2479 9048; Av Fort; camping per tent US\$6, s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$20/30/40; (P) ☹ ☹) A pretty 10-minute walk east from town, this recommended spot has nine basic, fan-cooled cabinas scattered around absolutely fantastic gardens, where fruit trees attract all manner of birds.

Cabinas y Soda El Río (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9341; Av Arenal; r with fan/air-con US\$25/35; ☹ ☹) Next to the river and run by a friendly family, rooms here are secure, homey and comfortable. Plus there's the *soda* out front, open 6am to 9pm.

Midrange

All of the listed accommodations have private bathrooms with hot water.

Pura Vida Hotel (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9495; www.hotel-puravida.net; s/d/tr US\$25/35/50; (P) ☹ ☹) Although Pura Vida is nothing too out of the ordinary, it's reasonably priced and extremely

comfortable with features like good shower pressure and firm mattresses. The Chinese family that owns the hotel also runs a – wait for it – Chinese restaurant (US\$3 to US\$10) downstairs.

Hotel Las Colinas (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9305; www.lascolinasarenal.com; Calle 1 btwn Avs Central & Arenal; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast from US\$29/42/60/75; ☹ ☹ ☹) The superfriendly owners of Las Colinas have completely remodeled this hotel, creating modern, airy rooms and a 2nd-story terrace with great views of the volcano. All rooms have cable TV and solar-generated hot water, but rates increase with amenities like air-con, minibar and sitting rooms.

Hotel Pepito's Place (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9238; Calle 2; s/d US\$30/40; (P) ☹ ☹ ☹) A cute family-run choice with flowerpots on the balconies, this is a good deal on the lower end of this price range. Find it 100m south of the church.

Hotel Sierra Arenal (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9751; Av Central; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$40/50/60; (P) ☹ ☹ ☹) Everything you're looking for is right here – hot showers, good mattresses, cable TV, internet access, private balconies and some of the best volcano views in town. Rooms upstairs have better volcano views and cost about US\$10 extra. The Tico owners are laidback and really helpful.

Hotel Monte Real (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9357; www.monterealhotel.com; Av Arenal btwn Calles 3 & 5; d US\$50-75; (P) ☹ ☹ ☹) Next to the Río Burio with a pool in the middle of the landscaped grounds, this comfortable hotel is run by an attentive Tico couple named Francisco and Nury. Pricier rooms are larger and have balconies with river or volcano views, and the setting means that you'll sometimes see sloths hanging out in the hotel trees.

Hotel San Bosco (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9050; www.arenal-volcano.com; Av Volcán; s/d incl breakfast US\$66/77; (P) ☹ ☹ ☹) The most established hotel in town is also the priciest, though the perks include free wi-fi in all the spotless rooms, free coffee and tea all day, a guarded parking lot, lovely pool and superfriendly staff.

Hotel Arenal Carmela (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9010; www.hotelarenalcarmela.com; Av Central; s/d incl breakfast US\$50/60; (P) ☹ ☹ ☹) They've crammed quite a few rooms into this small area – if anyone's on the balcony while you take a dip in the pool, you may feel like a performing seal. But the rooms are modern and clean, if on the small side, and as it's just across from the church it's right in the center of town.

WEST OF TOWN

There are a few recommended places to stay along the road to Arenal, some of which have more character than others. Note that hotels are listed according to their distance from La Fortuna.

Hotel Las Flores (Map p234; ☎ 2479 9307; camping per person US\$5, s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$20/30/40; (P) ♿) This is a great budget option! Attractive, wood-paneled cabins 2.5km west of town with hot-water bathrooms are pleasantly located on a quiet farm, which is a world away from La Fortuna. If you have a tent, feel free to pitch it here.

Cerro Chato Lodge (Map p234; ☎ 2479 9522; www.cerchato.com; r incl breakfast US\$30-60; (P) ♿) Owned by Miguel Zamora, an avid naturalist who delights in leading tourists on nature tours. Rooms here are simple and sweet, with hot-water bathrooms and great views of the volcano. About 1.5km west of La Fortuna, you'll see the lodge's turnoff, after which it's another 800m to the lodge. Miguel can pick you up for free from La Fortuna.

Los Erupciones B&B (Map p234; ☎ 2460 8000; s/d incl breakfast US\$65/75; (P) ♿) The colorful cabins at this appealing B&B are adorned with ornamental tiles and windows facing the volcano. And each one comes with its own private patio with chairs, looking onto the green scenery or the volcano. There's even a Jacuzzi at this sweet spot, 9km west of La Fortuna.

Arenal Oasis Eco Lodge (Map p234; ☎ 2479 9526; www.arenaloasis.com; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$50/65/80; (P) ♿) The Rojas Bonilla family, which operates a sustainable farm, has five cute cabins about 800m south of the highway. All are equipped with hot water and bathtubs, and the family is warm and hospitable. There are walking trails through the surrounding rain forest, and the property itself is set in a beautiful botanic garden.

Arenal Volcano Inn (Map p234; ☎ 2461 2021; www.arenalvolcanoinn.com; s/d/tr incl breakfast from US\$82/95/107; (P) ♿) The beautifully landscaped grounds of this quaint inn surround a pool and bungalow-style rooms, about 6.5km from La Fortuna. The tiled rooms are simple but include kitchenette and cable TV, and the management do all they can to make your stay relaxing and comfortable.

Lomas del Volcán (Map p234; ☎ 2479 9000; www.lomasdelvolcan.com; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$95/100/120/140; (P) ♿) Although Lomas del Volcán is one of the original resorts lining this stretch

of road, it's recommended because of its quiet location (you can hear monkeys in the trees) and stunning volcano views (especially when you're soaking in the outdoor hot tub). Comfy, hardwood cabins have private hot-water bathrooms with stained-glass accents, and there are plenty of opportunities for hiking through the surrounding primary forest. Find it about 2km west of La Fortuna and then another signposted 1.5km down a dirt road.

Hotel el Silencio del Campo (Map p234; ☎ 2479 7055; www.hotelsilenciodelcampo.com; d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$119/134/149; (P) ♿) This lovely resort 4km west of town was built by the same owners as Eco-Termals and reflects the same understated elegance that makes its hot springs so memorable. Cabins here are luxurious without being showy, and have attractive tiling, plush bedding and soft lighting. Bonus: if you stay here, you get a discount at Eco-Termals. When last we checked, there was a hideous hotel rudely putting up walls right next to the property, but hopefully it won't affect the peaceful atmosphere here.

Tabacón Lodge (Map p234; ☎ 2256 1500; www.tabacon.com; d incl breakfast US\$302-466; (P) ♿) Guests staying at Tabacón have unlimited access to the hot springs, which is where you'll want to spend most of your time if you stay here. Though the rooms are adequate for a higher end, they do not justify these over-the-top rates. But, if you're going to blow the cash to stay here, do it right and book a suite. The resort is 13km west of La Fortuna.

SOUTH OF TOWN

Just a few kilometers south of town, a mostly dirt road trundles up to the base of Cerro Chato, and hotels now dot either side of the path where before there were fincas. A few of these hotels are listed in order of distance from the main road.

Even further flung is the village of Chachagua, about 8km south along the road to San Ramón. Crisscrossed by local rivers, this area is a quiet place in the rain forest, away from the touristy brouhaha of La Fortuna.

Cabinas La Catarata (Map p234; ☎ 2479 9753; s/d US\$25/30; (P)) About 1km further up the road, you'll see a few places offering cabinas; of these, this riverside, family-run spot is by far the best value. Though the wood-walled cabins are simple, they're spotlessly clean and

come with fully equipped kitchen, TV and hot water. Some sleep up to eight people, and the setting is peaceful and rustic.

Catarata Eco-Lodge (Map p234; ☎ 2479 9522; www.cataratalodge.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$35/54; (P) ♿) Well, they do recycle and don't automatically throw your linens in the wash every day; apart from that the 'eco' of this lodge extends to simply caring about the environment. But it has a gorgeous setting at the base of Cerro Chato, and the staff takes beautiful care of the garden, pool and guests.

Villas Josipek (Map p234; ☎ 2430 5252, 2479 9555; www.costaricavillasjosipek.com; d/tr US\$60/75; (P) ♿) In the village of Chachagua, these immaculate, simple wooden cabins with volcano views are surrounded by private rain forest trails that penetrate the Bosque Eterno de los Niños. All eight of the cabins have full kitchens, and the largest sleeps up to 12. There's a well-kept pool on the quiet, jungle-fringed property, and the family can arrange tours in the region.

Chachagua Rainforest Hotel (Map p234; ☎ 2468 1010; www.chachaguarainforesthotel.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$82/92; (P) ♿) This hotel is a naturalist's dream, situated on a private reserve that abuts the Bosque Eterno de Los Niños. Part of the property is a working orchard, cattle ranch and fish farm, while the rest is humid rain forest that can be accessed either through a series of hiking trails or on horseback. Request the older, Frank Lloyd Wright-esque wooden cabins, which have low windows for watching the birds. There's also a pool within the exquisitely lush grounds, as well as two restaurants (meals US\$8 to US\$16) that feature some produce and meats raised on the premises. The 2km dirt road forking off the main road may require 4WD in the rainy season.

Casa Luna Lodge (Map p234; ☎ 2479 7368; www.casalun lodge.com; r incl breakfast US\$95; (P) ♿) Wooden doors open into elegant rooms tiled in terra-cotta. Some rooms are wheelchair-accessible, and all of which have large orthopedic beds. There's wi-fi access and secure parking, and the pleasant pool area is edged with landscaped garden walkways leading to an open-air restaurant. It's 1.5km from the main road, on the right.

Eating BUDGET

Mi Casa (Map p232; ☎ 2479 7115; Calle 3; pastries US\$1-2; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat, 7am-5:30pm Sun) This European-style café, rounded out with plenty

of Tico charm, has a good variety of strong coffees, *batidos* and supersweet homemade pastries. It's 200m east of Parque Central.

Rainforest Café (Map p232; ☎ 2479 7239; Calle 1 btwn Avs Central & Arenal; pastries US\$1-3; ☎ 7am-8:30pm) Superb coffee and espresso is served in what feels like an industrial tent, all glass walls and aluminum bathroom door. There's a dash of urban coffeehouse atmosphere as well, in the burlap coffee bags on the floor and coffee beans under the glass tabletops. The pastry case is a marvel, and the menu has some sandwich-type items along with specialty coffee drinks.

Soda La Mesa de Mamá (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9727; Av Arenal btwn Calles 3 & 5; mains US\$2-5; ☎ 6am-10pm) Probably the best *casados* in La Fortuna are served here – judge for yourself, but try to arrive before or after the noontime feeding frenzy.

Soda Linda Vista (Map p234; ☎ 2468 0660; mains US\$2-5; ☎ 8am-10pm) Down in Chachagua, this roadside *soda* with fabulous views is about 500m south of Villas Josipek. The nice ladies running this place serve typical Costa Rican dishes.

Lava Rocks Café (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9222; Av Central; mains US\$2-7; ☎ 7am-10pm) This popular café dishes out big breakfasts, hearty *casados* and fresh salads, and has breezy, open-air seating in the shade. It's a magnet for tourists, who can also book tours from the desk here.

Restaurante El Jardín (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9360; cnr Av Central & Calle 3; mains US\$2-7; ☎ 5am-1pm) You can either relax over a shrimp pizza in this bustling eatery 100m east of the Parque Central, or grab a chair beneath the Pollo Pito Pito sign and snack on a few pieces of greasy (but delicious) fried chicken.

Chelas (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9594; mains US\$3-7) This popular, open-air spot next to Valle Cocodrilo has great *bocas* (small, savory dishes), including *chicharrones* (stewed pork) and *ceviche de pulpo* (raw octopus marinated in lemon juice). The bar stays open until 1am, so wash your meal down with a cold Imperial (or four).

Soda La Parada (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9547; Av Central; mains US\$2-8; ☎ 24hr) Facing Parque Central and all the street action, this popular *soda* serves great steak *casados*, decent pizza and a couple of bizarre Tico health drinks – *chan* (slimy) and *linaza* (good for indigestion) – to after-hours revelers and folks waiting for their buses.

Down to Earth Coffee Shop (Map p232; ☎ 2479 7328; godowntoearth.org; Av Fort; ☎ 9am-8pm) Owner Matías Zeledón's family has been growing coffee since 1883, and this gregarious guy is happy to share his knowledge of the heavenly bean as well as other Costa Rican specialties. Not only can you kick back with a cup of his homegrown, pair it with a great sandwich, take home a pound of his organic beans (or chocolate-covered peaberries, mmm) and have him explain the etymology of Tico slang. He runs a socially responsible company – ask him about the golden rules.

For groceries, stop by the well-stocked **Super Cristian 2** (Map p232; cnr Av Central & Calle 1; ☎ 7am-9pm) on the southeast corner of Parque Central; there's another **branch** (Map p232; cnr Av Arenal & Calle 2; ☎ 7am-9pm) down by the river.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

La Chozo de Laurel (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9231; www.lachozodelaurel.com; mains US\$4-9; ☎ 6:30am-10pm) This place serves good, reasonably priced *comida típica* (typical food), and it always seems to be bustling. Live large and order a banana split, served on the half-shell of a pineapple.

Lava Lounge (Map p232; ☎ 2479 7365; Av Central btwn Calles 2 & 4; mains US\$4-11; ☎ 11am-10:30pm) One of the newer restaurants in cuisine-poor Fortuna, this hip, open-air restaurant is a breath of fresh air when you just can't abide another casado. There's pasta, fish and a fair selection of other such well-executed international standbys, brought to you by friendly waiters.

Restaurante Rancho La Cascada (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9145; Av Fort; mains US\$4-15; ☎ 7-11am & 6pm-2am) This thatched-roof landmark is probably a better bet for an evening beer or cocktail as dishes are pricey and unmemorable. But if you've got the cash, it's got a decent list of imported wines.

Mirador Arenal Steak House (Map p234; ☎ 2479 9023; mains US\$5-12; ☎ 6:30am-10pm) Go West, young (wo)man! If you're craving a good *churrasco* (steak), that is. This *sabanero*-themed steakhouse has the grilling technique down pat.

Restaurante Los Nenes (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9192; Calle 5; mains US\$5-15; ☎ 10am-11pm) This classic La Fortuna establishment 200m east of Parque Central is adored by locals and tourists alike. If you're in the mood for fine dining, the seafood platters here can't be beat, and the *ceviche* (US\$3) is as good as it gets.

Las Brasitas (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9819; Av Central; mains US\$5-15; ☎ 11am-11pm) Sometimes you just need some good Mexican food – nothing against

Lizano sauce, but there's just no burn. Check out this breezy but elegant open-air spot 200m west of Parque Central, with good fajitas (US\$6) and something called a *choriqueso* (sort of like a sausage fondue). Hey, if you're going to have a heart attack, go happy.

Pizzeria Luigi's (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9909; cnr Av Central & Calle 4; breakfast US\$5, dinner US\$6-15; ☎ 7-9:30am & 11am-11pm) This spacious, Italian restaurant 200m west of Parque Central is formal enough to justify buttoning up your shirt and putting on a little lipstick (or at least washing your hair for once). The buffet breakfast is a popular option if you've got a long day of hiking ahead of you, though the pizzas, calzones and pastas are a better bet. The bar-casino stays open till 3am or so.

Restaurante Don Rufino (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9997; www.donrufino.com; cnr Av Central & Calle 3; mains US\$3-30; ☎ 10am-11pm) Continental cuisine with judiciously applied Tico flavor makes up the menu here – skip the dressed-up casado, and opt instead for seafood with garlic and cognac, or maybe the prime rib. Half-in and half-out, the bar is also a prime place to chill with a cocktail (as late as 2:30am, if you're in that kind of mood).

Drinking & Entertainment

Despite the tourist influx, La Fortuna unfortunately remains a cultural wasteland. Occasionally, offerings are advertised at Lunatica (p231), though entertainment in the area tends to be more of the liquid kind, and is aimed more at locals looking to get hammered and hopefully score with a gringa.

Volcán Look (Map p234; ☎ 2479 9690; ☎ 8pm-2:30am Wed-Sat) This club is reportedly the biggest discotheque in Costa Rica outside of San José. It's about 5km west of town, though it's virtually abandoned except on weekends and holidays, but don't bother showing up until after 11pm unless you want to dance cumbia alone.

Lava Lounge (Map p232; ☎ 2479 7365; Av Central btwn Calles 4 & 2; ☎ until 10:30pm) On the west side of town, this cool spot has a few romantic tables at which you can gaze over your margarita into someone's eyes – but also, the food's good, the ambience is lively and it's a welcome addition to evenings in La Fortuna.

Vagabondo (Map p234; ☎ 2479 9565; ☎ 8:30pm-late) Has a small disco bar that's popular with travelers and Ticos working in the tourist industry. It's 1.5km west of La Fortuna, and

if you're out this way, it also makes wood-fired pizza and good pasta dishes.

Don Rufino (Map p232; cnr Av Central & Calle 3; ☎ until 2:30am) Mingle with locals and other travelers at this inviting streetside bar.

Restaurante Rancho La Cascada (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9145; Av Fort; ☎ until 2am) This is one of La Fortuna's more established places to have a beer at night; occasionally it transforms into a disco or movie theater.

Bar-Restaurant El Brete (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9982; ☎ 11am-late) Just south of town on the road to San Ramón, this bar has ladies' nights and other specials on cheap beer.

Getting There & Away

BUS

All buses currently stop at Parque Central, though a real bus terminal is currently in the works.

Keep an eye on your bags, particularly on the weekend San José run.

Ciudad Quesada (Auto-Transportes San José-San Carlos) US\$1, one hour, departs 5am, 8am, noon and 3pm.

Monteverde US\$2, six to eight hours, departs 8am (change at Tilarán at 12:30pm for Monteverde).

San José (Auto-Transportes San José-San Carlos) US\$3, 4½ hours, departs 12:30pm & 2:30pm.

Tilarán (Auto-Transportes Tilarán) US\$1.85, 3½ hours, departs 8am and 12:30pm.

HORSEBACK

Several companies also make the trip partially by horseback, including Desafío Adventure Company (p235). There are a few other options, one of which is not always recommended. See boxed text, p188, for a full description of the trip.

JEEP-BOAT-JEEP

The fastest route between Monteverde–Santa Elena and La Fortuna is the sexy-sounding jeep-boat-jeep combo (US\$13 to US\$20, three hours) – the 'jeep' is actually a minivan with the requisite yellow 'turismo' emblazoned on the side. Jeep or not, it's a terrific transportation option and can be arranged through almost any hotel or tour operator in either town. The minivan from La Fortuna takes you to Laguna de Arenal, meeting a boat that crosses the lake, where a 4WD taxi on the other side continues to Monteverde. This is increasingly becoming the primary transportation between La Fortuna and Monteverde as it's incredibly

scenic, reasonably priced and it'll save you half a day of travel over rocky roads.

Getting Around

BICYCLE

Some hotels rent bikes to their guests, though **Bike Arenal** (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9454; www.bikearenal.com; Av Volcán; half-/full day US\$52/75) has the best-maintained mountain and road bikes in town. It also offers guided bike tours, including beautiful rides to El Castillo and around Laguna de Arenal. Note that cycling after dark is illegal in La Fortuna.

The classic mountain-bike trip to La Catarata (about 7km from town) climbs to a fairly brutal, if nontechnical, last few kilometers, although we've heard stories of hardy pack-a-day smokers who've made it (just barely).

CAR

La Fortuna is easy to access by public transportation, but nearby attractions such as the hot springs, Parque Nacional Volcán Arenal and Laguna de Arenal require a bit more of an effort without internal combustion. Luckily, you can rent cars at **Alamo** (Map p232; ☎ 2479 9090; www.alamocostarica.com; cnr Av Central & Calle 2; ☎ 7:30am-6pm) or **Poas Rent-a-Car** (Map p232; ☎ 2479 8418; www.carentals.com; Calle 2), 100m west of the church, for similar rates to those you will find in San José or in Liberia. We really think it's worth having your own wheels while you're here.

PARQUE NACIONAL VOLCÁN ARENAL

Arenal was just another dormant volcano surrounded by fertile farmland from about AD 1500 until July 29, 1968, when something snapped. Huge explosions triggered lava flows that destroyed three villages, killing about 80 people and 45,000 cattle. The surrounding area was evacuated and roads throughout the region were closed. Eventually, the lava subsided to a relatively predictable flow and life got back to normal. Sort of.

Although it occasionally quiets down for a few weeks or even months, Arenal has been producing menacing ash columns, massive explosions and streamers of glowing molten rock almost daily since 1968. Miraculously, the volcano has retained its picture-perfect conical shape despite constant volcanic activity, though its slopes are now ashen instead of green.

The degree of activity varies from year to year and week to week – even day to day. Sometimes there can be a spectacular display of flowing red-hot lava and incandescent rocks flying through the air; at other times the volcano subsides to a gentle glow. During the day, the lava isn't easy to see, but you might still see a great cloud of ash thrown up by a massive explosion. Between 1998 and 2000, the volcano was particularly active (which is when many of those spectacular photos you see in tourist brochures were taken), and while the lava of late hasn't been quite that photogenic, it's still an awe-inspiring show.

The best nighttime views of the volcano these days are from its southwestern side, which you can appreciate by taking a night tour or by spending the night at either the Arenal Observatory Lodge (right) or one of several accommodations in El Castillo (see p245). However, be aware that clouds can cover the volcano at any time, and on rainy days a tour can be a miserably cold affair – thank goodness for all those hot springs!

Orientation & Information

The **ranger station** (☎ 2461 8499; admission to the park US\$6; ☞ 8am-4pm) is on the western side of the volcano. Most people arrive as part of a group tour, but you can reach it independently. Drivers (who have at least a half-tank of gas!) can head west from La Fortuna for 15km, then turn left at the 'Parque Nacional' sign and take a 2km dirt road to the entrance. You can also take an 8am bus toward Tilarán (tell the driver to drop you off at the park) and catch the 2pm bus back to La Fortuna.

From the 'Parque Nacional' sign off the main road, a 2km dirt road leads to the ranger station, information center and parking lot. From here, trails lead 3.4km toward the volcano. Rangers will tell you how far you are allowed to go. At the time of writing, this area was not in a danger zone.

From the ranger station and information center, the road splits – head left unless you want to go back to the main highway or to the park headquarters. After heading right for about 5.5km, you'll come to another split in the road – left will bring you to Arenal Observatory Lodge (about 9km), right will bring you to the village of El Castillo (about 4km). Even in the dry season, this is most definitely 4WD country. A taxi to either the lodge or to El Castillo will run about US\$20.

Sights & Activities

Arenal was made a national park in 1995, and it is part of the Area de Conservación Arenal, which protects most of the Cordillera de Tilarán. This area is rugged and varied, and the biodiversity is high; roughly half the species of land-dwelling vertebrates (birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians) known in Costa Rica can be found here.

Birdlife is very rich in the park, and includes such specialties as trogons, rufous motmots, fruitcrows and lancebills. Commonly sighted mammals include howlers, white-faced capuchins and surprisingly tame coatis (though tempting, don't feed the wild animals; see boxed text, p355).

ARENAL OBSERVATORY LODGE

The **Arenal Observatory Lodge** (☎ reservations 2290 7011, lodge 2479 1070; www.arenalobservatorylodge.com; day use US\$7; ☐) was built in 1987 as a private observatory for the University of Costa Rica. Scientists chose to construct the lodge on a macadamia-nut farm on the south side of Volcán Arenal due to its proximity to the volcano (only 2km away) and its relatively safe location on a ridge. Since its creation, volcanologists from all over the world, including researchers from the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC, have come to study the active volcano. Today, the majority of visitors are tourists, though scientists regularly visit the lodge, and a seismograph in the hotel continues to operate around the clock. The lodge is also the only place inside the park where you can legally bed down.

The lodge offers massages (from US\$60), guided hikes and all the usual tours at good prices. You can swim in the pool, wander around the macadamia nut farm or investigate the pine forest that makes up about half of the 347-hectare site. You can also rent horses for US\$8 per hour.

A tiny **museum** (admission free) on the old observation deck has a seismograph and some cool newspaper clippings.

HIKING

From the ranger station (which has trail maps available), you can hike the 1km circular **Sendero Los Heliconias**, which passes by the site of the 1968 lava flow (vegetation here is slowly sprouting back to life). A 1.5km-long path branches off this trail and leads to an overlook, though the view here

FEELIN' HOT, HOT, HOT!

Volcanoes are formed over millennia as a result of the normal shifting processes of the earth's crust. For example, when oceanic crust slides against continental crust, the higher-density oceanic crust is pushed into a deep region of the earth known as the asthenosphere. This process, along with friction, melts the rocky crust to form magma, which rises through weak areas in the continental crust due to its comparatively light density. Magma tends to collect in a chamber below the Earth's crust until increasing pressure forces it upward through a vent and onto the surface as lava. Over time, lava deposits can form large, conical volcanoes with a circular crater at the apex from which magma can escape in the form of gas, lava and ejecta.

Although our understanding of volcanoes has greatly progressed in the past few decades, scientists are still unable to predict a volcanic eruption with certainty. However, it is possible to monitor three phenomena – seismicity, gas emissions and ground deformation – in order to predict the likelihood of a volcanic eruption. Seismicity refers to the ongoing seismic activity that tends to accompany active volcanoes. For example, most active volcanoes have continually recurring low-level seismic activity. Although patterns of activity are difficult to interpret, generally an increase in seismic activity (which often appears as a harmonic tremor) is a sign that an eruption is likely to occur.

Scientists also routinely monitor the composition of gas emissions as erupting magma undergoes a pressure decrease that can produce a large quantity of volcanic gases. For example, sulfur dioxide is one of the main components of volcanic gases, and an increasing airborne amount of this compound is another sign of an impending eruption. Finally, scientists routinely measure the tilt of slope and changes in the rate of swelling of active volcanoes. These measurements are indicators of ground deformation, which is caused by an increase in subterranean pressure due to large volumes of collecting magma.

Since Volcán Arenal is considered by scientists to be one of the 10 most active volcanoes in the entire world, comprehensive monitoring of the volcano occurs daily. Although there is constant activity and frequent eruptions, nothing has thus far rivaled the deadly 1968 eruption. In recent years, the lava flow switched directions to the southwest (much to the chagrin of hotel owners in La Fortuna), though scientists are predicting that the flow might reverse itself in years to come.

is foreshortened (but the explosions sure do sound loud!).

The **Sendero Las Coladas** also branches off the Heliconias trail, and wraps around the volcano for 2km past the 1993 lava flow before connecting with the **Sendero Los Tucanes**. This trail extends for another 3km through the tropical rain forest at the base of the volcano. To return to the car-parking area, you will have to turn back. You'll get good views of the summit on the way back since you're now at a better angle to view it.

From the park headquarters (not the ranger station), there is also the 1.2km **Sendero Los Miradores**, which leads you down to the shores of the lake, and provides a good angle for viewing the volcano.

Every once in a while, perhaps lulled into a sense of false security by a temporary pause in the activity, someone tries to climb to the crater and peer within it. This is very dangerous – climbers have been killed and maimed

by explosions. The problem is not so much that the climber gets killed (that's a risk the foolhardy insist is their own decision) but rather that the lives of Costa Rican rescuers are placed at risk.

If you're not staying at Arenal Observatory Lodge, it's worth visiting as there are 6km of **trails** in total, and it's only US\$7 to enter. A handful of short hikes include views of a nearby waterfall, while sturdy souls could check out recent lava flows (2½ hours), old lava flows (three hours) or the climb to Arenal's dormant partner, Volcán Chato, whose crater holds an 1100m-high lake only 3km southeast of Volcán Arenal (four hours). For the best nighttime views, a guided hike is suggested. Maps and local English-speaking guides are available for these hikes. The lodge also has a 4.5km bike trail that winds through secondary forest, as well as a 1km sidewalk trail that is completely wheelchair accessible.

Note that camping is not allowed inside the park, though people do camp (no facilities) off some of the unpaved roads west of the volcano by the shores of the lake.

Sleeping & Eating

Arenal Observatory Lodge (Map p234; 📞 reservations 2290 7011, lodge 2692 2070; www.arenalobservatorylodge.com; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast La Casona US\$68/81/95/111, standard r US\$95/108/116/136, Smithsonian r US\$128/142/151/162, junior ste US\$155/163/172/182, White Hawk Villa 8 people US\$495; 📍 🚻 🚰 🚰) Although most of the lava flows are on the southwest side of Arenal (the lodge is positioned to the west), the views of the eruptions are excellent, and the constant rumbling is enough to make you sleep a bit uneasily at night. The lodge has a variety of rooms spread throughout the property, five of which are wheelchair accessible (along with the pool and several trails – this lodge hasn't slouched). Rates include a buffet breakfast and guided hike. La Casona is about 500m away in the original farmhouse. It now houses four rustic double rooms sharing two bathrooms; there are volcano views from the house porch. Standard rooms, adjacent to the main lodge, were originally designed for researchers

but have been renovated to acceptably plush standards. Smithsonian rooms, accessible via a suspension bridge over a plunging ravine, are the best and have the finest views. The White Hawk Villa, with a kitchen and several rooms, is perfect for groups.

The restaurant (lunch/dinner US\$10/25), though overpriced, has a good variety of international dishes and is decorated with jars of venomous snakes in formaldehyde.

EL CASTILLO

The tiny mountain village of El Castillo is a wonderful alternative to staying in La Fortuna – it's bucolic, untouristed and perfectly situated to watch the southwesterly lava flows. There are also some delightful accommodation options, a number of worthwhile sights and a promising ecotourism venture that will bring a tear of hope to the most jaundiced eye (see boxed text, below).

On the road to El Castillo, **SkyTrek** (Map p234; 📞 2645 7070; www.skytrek.com; adult/student/child tram only US\$55/44/28, canopy tour US\$66/52/42; 🕒 7:30am–4pm) runs canopy tours on the south side of Arenal. This canopy tour gives stellar views of Laguna de Arenal, the volcano and the lush

rain forest. A silent gondola (the SkyTram) slowly conveys visitors up above the canopy, and at the top you can either tram it back down or fly down the zip lines.

On the only road in town, you'll find two noteworthy ecological attractions. The **El Castillo-Arenal Butterfly Conservatory** (📞 2479 1149; www.butterflyconservatory.org; with/without guide US\$10/8; 🕒 8am–5pm) is run by an American expat named Glenn, whose conservation project far exceeds your normal butterfly garden. He is seeking to understand life cycles and hatching times for different species, and routinely works with students and volunteers to rigorously catalog every scrap of data. Here you'll find seven different gardens pertaining to each habitat as well as a ranarium, an insect museum, a medicinal herb garden, botanic garden trails and a river walk. The conservatory has one of the largest butterfly exhibitions in Costa Rica, and is one of the few places that raises all of the butterflies and frogs on exhibit. The center proportionally releases these species for repopulating habitats within the area. Glenn is also actively involved in local reforestation programs, and is always looking for a few good volunteers.

Next door is the **Jardín Zoológico de Serpientes del Arenal** (📞 8358 6773; admission US\$8; 🕒 8:30am–5:30pm), where local snake-handler Victor Hugo Quesada will introduce you to six species of frog, four species of turtle, 35 species of snake and a fair number of lizards and iguanas.

Sleeping & Eating

Majestic Lodge (📞 8350 7431; www.arenalmajesticlodge.com; r incl breakfast US\$35–50; 📍 🚻) On the road to Rancho Margot, this gringo-run lake-view lodge has DirecTV in its small, spotless guest rooms. The attractive wood deck is perfect for stargazing and socializing. Creative dinners are sometimes thrown together for guests, and the small balconies provide private nooks for when you're not feeling so social.

Cabanitas El Castillo Dorado (📞 2692 2065; s/d US\$40/55; 📍) Here you'll find simple cabins with private warm-water bathrooms and volcano views through enormous picture windows. The onsite restaurant (mains US\$2 to US\$6) is recommended for its fresh tilapia and, needless to say, great vistas.

Hotel Linda Vista del Norte (📞 2692 2090, 8380 0847; www.hotellindavista.com; s/d incl breakfast standard US\$63/73, ste US\$95/105; 📍 🚻 🚰) The first accom-

modations you'll pass on the road into town is a lodge consisting of 11 simple rooms with smashing views, perched high on a mountain-top (though only some of the rooms look onto the volcano). Even better is the restaurant-bar (mains US\$10 to US\$15), which is lined with picture windows and has spectacular views of the lava flows from Arenal.

Nido del Colibrí (📞 8835 8711; www.hummingbirdnestbb.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$50/75; 📍) At the entrance to town, you'll see a small path that leads up the (steep) hill to one of our favorite B&Bs in all of Costa Rica. It's owned by Ellen, a former Pan Am stewardess and all-round world traveler who has finally found a small slice of paradise to call her own. Her quaint little home has two guest bedrooms with private hot showers and enough frilly pillows to make you miss home – but that's not even the best part! In her immaculately landscaped front garden, you can soak the night away in a huge outdoor Jacuzzi while watching the lava flow down Arenal. You can even arrange to have a massage (US\$45) while watching the lava. Ellen (who's also charming and full of grace) is active in the local schools, and is a good person to talk to about volunteering in the area.

Café Jardín Escondido (🕒 lunch & dinner) On the road from the Majestic Lodge, look for the sign leading to this lovely pizzeria, where John, a friendly American, also whips up delicious homemade ice cream.

LAGUNA DE ARENAL AREA

About 18km west of La Fortuna, you'll arrive at a 750m-long causeway across the dam that created Laguna de Arenal, an 88-sq-km lake that is the largest in the country. Although a number of small towns were submerged during the lake's creation, the lake currently supplies valuable water to Guanacaste, and produces hydroelectricity for the region. High winds also produce power with the aid of huge, steel windmills, though windsurfers and kitesurfers frequently steal a breeze or two.

If you have your own car (or bicycle), this is one of the premier road trips in Costa Rica. The road is lined with odd and elegant businesses, many run by foreigners who have fallen in love with the place, and the scenic views of lakeside forests and Volcán Arenal are about as romantic as they come. Strong winds and high elevations give the lake a temperate feel, and you'll be forgiven if you suddenly imagine

RANCHO MARGOT

This 152-hectare **ranch** (📞 2479 7259, 8302 7318; www.ranchomargot.org), which is just past El Castillo in the village of Pueblo Nuevo, is home to one of the most exciting development projects in the entire country (see also boxed text, p246). According to Juan, the Chilean mastermind behind this incredible venture, Rancho Margot is 'a sustainable, self-sufficient working ranch.' Indeed, you only need to speak with Juan for a moment to grasp the beauty and depth of his grand vision.

At the ranch, electricity is produced by turbines, dairy cows are raised for cheese and milk, orchards and organic gardens are sown for produce, pigs and chickens are being raised for food, biodigestors are converting animal waste into energy to heat thermal pools, native fish species are being reintroduced into the waters (the list goes on and on).

And, as if this wasn't impressive enough, Juan also flexes his muscle in the local community, and has already paid off school debts, purchased shuttle buses, reforested hillsides, and built an animal rescue center, veterinary hospital and a ranger station. Although the ranch is still a work in progress, it is already attracting students, researchers, farmers, horticulturists, backpackers and high-end tourists alike.

If you're interested in spending the night on the ranch (and we highly recommend that you do!), Juan offers immaculate **bunkhouses** (per night US\$40) complete with orthopedic mattresses and handmade wooden fixtures, as well as elegantly crafted **bungalows** (s/d US\$100/130, extra person US\$30) that are perched dramatically on the hillsides. Guests are also invited for **meals** (lunch/dinner US\$15/17), which prominently feature locally raised meats and produce grown on the ranch.

As this is a working ranch, Juan can also organize a variety of horseback **riding trips** (from US\$35) into the surrounding rain forest. If you're looking for holistic healing, the ranch is also home to a stunning **yoga center** that is built on stilts over a babbling brook.

If you don't have your own transportation, Juan can arrange free bus pick-up to and from La Fortuna as well as private hotel transfers (US\$25) with prior arrangement.

JUAN SOSTHEIM ON RANCHO MARGOT

Juan Sostheim, the visionary behind Rancho Margot, is aiming to reshape the very definition of sustainable tourism. Over a sifter glass of fine rum, Juan shared his vision for a greener Costa Rica.

What is the driving concept behind Rancho Margot? The big message is that we are a working ranch that aims to educate and inspire our guests about the consequences of their lifestyle. Although we don't subscribe to any particular dogma, Rancho Margot is all about awareness. We hope that all of our guests come here with an open mind, and leave fully aware of the impact of their actions on this planet. Ultimately, I envision turning this ranch into a life-skills university where people can come and learn about topics such as alternative energies, organic farming and reforestation.

What is your definition of sustainable tourism? The big problem in Costa Rica is that words like sustainable, green and eco are often abused. To me, the fundamental idea behind these terms is that an individual must have the least possible impact on the natural environment. For example, all of the building materials that we are using here on the ranch are locally derived. We are strictly using lumber that has been raised for the purpose of milling, ceramic tiles that have been recovered from old houses and caña brava, a bamboo-type plant that quickly regenerates when you cut it.

How do Costa Ricans view Rancho Margot? As a Chilean living in Costa Rica, I believe that it is my responsibility to set a positive example for others to follow. When Costa Rican families visit us here, they are almost always struck by the tremendous beauty of their natural patrimony. When they see how much love and care we give to this place, we hope that they will be inspired by our actions, and perhaps take better care of their own environment. It's easy to point your finger

yourself in the English Lakes District or the Swiss countryside.

But (you already know what's coming), things are changing – quickly. Baby boomers, lured to the area by the cool climate and premier fishing, are snapping up every spot of land with a 'For Sale' sign on it. The problem is that Costa Rican law does not require would-be-realtors to possess a valid real-estate license, and these days it seems like every other schmoe is looking to speculate in the hopes of turning a quick buck. Costa Ricans are not happy about the impending loss of their lakeside paradise, and it doesn't seem likely that the construction boom is going to slow.

Most of the road is paved and in decent condition, though you'll encounter some big potholes. Buses run about every two hours, and hotel owners can tell you when to catch your ride. If you're heading to Monteverde via the jeep-boat-jeep transfer, you're in for a lovely ride.

Dam to Nuevo Arenal

This beautiful stretch of road is lined on both sides with cloud forest, and there are a

number of fantastic accommodations strung along the way.

AROUND THE DAM

Unlike the fly-by view you'll get on a zip-line canopy tour, a walk through **Puentes Colgantes de Arenal** (Arenal Hanging Bridges; Map p234; ☎ 2479 9686; www.hangingbridges.com; adult/student/child under 12yr US\$22/12/free; ☎ 7:30am-4:30pm) allows you to explore the rain forest and canopy from trails and suspended bridges at a more natural and peaceful pace. Reservations are required for guided birding tours (three hours, from 6am) or informative naturalist tours (8am and 2pm).

The bridges are easily accessible by car and well signed, though most tourists arrive on a package tour from La Fortuna. The Tilarán bus can drop you off at the entrance, but it's a 3km climb from the bus stop.

If you want to stay in the area, **Arenal Lodge** (Map p234; ☎ 2460 1881; www.arenallodge.com; s/d incl breakfast standard US\$83/91, junior ste US\$145/152, chalet US\$150/159, matrimonial ste US\$184/191; 📍 🚻 🚿) is 400m west of the dam, at the top of a steep 2.5km, though the entire lodge is awash with views of Arenal and the sur-

rounding cloud forest. Standard rooms are just that, but junior suites are spacious, tiled and have wicker furniture, a big hot-water bathroom and a picture window or balcony with volcano views. Ten chalets sleep four and have kitchenette and good views. The lodge also has a Jacuzzi, a billiards room, a sophisticated restaurant (mains US\$6 to US\$15), complimentary mountain bikes and private tables.

What kind of people are you seeking to attract? Rancho Margot operates as a community where everybody contributes in their own unique way. We invite people to come here, and to foster a particular skill set, while simultaneously developing as an individual. For the most part, our guests are mature and well-educated people who have the sensibility to understand what is going on in the environment, and feel compelled to do something about it. The type of visitor that is not for Rancho Margot is the package holidaymaker arriving here on a tour, or the checklist traveler who just wants to rush in and rush out.

Why do you think interest in the ranch is increasing? The beauty of what we're doing here is that anyone, regardless of their age, can take part in our ongoing social experiment. Rancho Margot is equally attractive to baby boomers who have the time to think about what their lives have meant, as well as backpackers who are in the process of forming their own identities. The common link between all of our guests is that they question some of the old wisdoms, and are willing to support a place that can provide them with a small measure of truth.

Are you optimistic about the potential impact of this project? When you hear someone proclaim that they want to influence the way people live their lives, it is certainly an enormous mouthful to swallow. Although some people may think that my dreams are hollow, I believe that I have the right intentions. Of course, I don't always get the right results, but the possibility of a greener Costa Rica is a goal that we should all be striving to achieve. In the end, my deepest hope is that my children and my children's children will learn from and follow my example.

Alternatively, **Ourpick Lost Iguana Resort** (Map p234; ☎ 2461 0122; www.lostiguanaresort.com; r/ste US\$215/297, villa US\$460-535, all incl breakfast; 📍 🚻 🚿) is easily the area's most stylish place to lay your head. This resort occupies a serene mountainside that affords phenomenal volcano views, sequestered far from the activity in La Fortuna. Even the standard rooms have private balconies looking out on Arenal, beds boasting Egyptian cotton sheets, satellite TV, and an invaluable sense of peace and privacy. Surrounded by rain forest, the rooms are tastefully decorated with bamboo furniture, open-beamed ceilings and large windows. Reception and restaurant areas are romantic enough to appeal, even if leaving your cozy casita seems a tragedy.

UNIÓN AREA

A serene, German-run escape, **La Ceiba Tree Lodge** (☎ 2692 8050, 8814 4004; www.ceibatree-lodge.com; d US\$49; 📍) is 21km west of the dam and centered on a 500-year-old ceiba tree. Its five spacious, cross-ventilated rooms are entered through Maya-inspired carved doors and decorated with original paintings. Views of Laguna de Arenal, the lush, tropical gardens and utterly lovely dining-hangout area make this mountaintop spot a tranquil retreat from whatever ails you. A small apartment (price negotiable) is also available for rent

You can't miss **Hotel Los Héroes** (☎ 2692 8012/3; www.hotellosheroes.com; d with/without balcony US\$65/55, tr US\$85, apt US\$115, all incl breakfast; 📍 🚻 🚿), a slightly incongruous alpine chalet 14km west of the dam, complete with carved wooden balconies and Old World window shutters – and that's just on the outside. Large, immaculate rooms with wood paneling and private hot bathrooms are decorated with thickly hewn wood furniture that may make Swiss-Germans a little homesick, particularly when viewing paintings of tow-headed children in lederhosen smooching innocently. There are also three apartments (each sleeps

up to six) with full kitchen, huge bathroom and balcony overlooking the lake. Facilities include a Jacuzzi, swimming pool, a church complete with Swiss chimes, and a restaurant (mains US\$5 to US\$12, open 7am to 3pm and 6pm to 8pm) that gets Swiss folks on the road too long to indulge in authentic *Zürcher Geschnetzeltes* (Zurich-style veal served over potatoes) and fondues. The owners have even built a miniature train (US\$10) that brings you up a hill to an underground station beneath the Rondorama Panoramic Restaurant (mains US\$8 to US\$15), a revolving restaurant (seriously!) that's reportedly one-of-a-kind in Mexico and Central America. There's also a hiking trail that leads to the restaurant and is great for wildlife-watching.

Another accommodation option is **Villa Decary B&B** (☎ 2694 4330, 8383 3012; www.villadecary.com; s/d US\$90/107, caseta with kitchen US\$164, extra person US\$15, all incl breakfast; (P)), an all-round winner with bright, spacious, well-furnished rooms, delicious full breakfasts and fantastic hosts. Five rooms have private hot showers, a queen and a double bed, bright Latin American bedspreads and artwork, and balconies with excellent views of the woodland immediately below and the lake just beyond. There are also three separate *casetas* with a kitchenette. Paths into the woods behind the house give good opportunities for birding and wildlife-watching, and there's a good chance that howlers will wake you in the morning. Guests can borrow binoculars and a bird guide to identify what they see. Jeff, one of the US owners, has gotten the bird bug and can help out with identification. His partner, Bill, is a botanist specializing in palms (Decary was a French botanist who discovered a new species of palm). Come prepared – credit cards are not accepted.

A few kilometers past Villa Decary on the left-hand side of the highway is **Nuevo Arenal** (camping per tent US\$5), a small lakeside park with campsites, cold showers and bathrooms.

Rates for the simply gorgeous two-person cottages – works of art, really – at **La Mansion Inn Arenal** (☎ 2692 8018; www.lamansionarenal.com; cottages incl breakfast US\$204-640; (P) (♿) (♿)) also include a champagne breakfast, fruit basket, welcome cocktail, canoe access and horse rides, all conspiring with the magnificent views to make this the most romantic inn in the region. The cottages feature huge split-level rooms with private terraces, lake views, high

ceilings, Italianate painted walls and arched, bathroom doors. There's also an ornamental garden featuring Choroteqa pottery, an infinity swimming pool that appears to flow into the lake, a pool table, a formal restaurant (four-course dinner excluding wine US\$35) and a cozy bar shaped like the bow of a ship. It's 17km west of the dam.

For an espresso and heavenly macadamia chocolate brownies try **Toad Hall** (☎ 2592 8001, 2692 8020; www.toadhall-gallery.com; mains US\$3-8; (♿) 8am-5pm). The restaurant, 16km west of the dam, overlooks the forest and lake and serves a short, delicious and beautifully presented menu that tends toward California cuisine, incorporating homegrown organic veggies and homemade focaccia; take some time to enjoy a bite and one of its fruit drinks outdoors. While there, you can browse the bookstore and art gallery, which has a high-quality collection of local and indigenous art and jewelry, and hosts an artist-in-residence program. Just beyond Toad Hall, a dirt road to the right goes to the Venado Caves, which can be explored with guides.

If you're a gourmand suffering from a lack of memorable cuisine, make absolutely sure to book dinner reservations at the new **our pick Gingerbread Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 2694 0039, 8351 7815; www.gingerbreadarenal.com; r incl breakfast US\$100; (♿) 5-8pm Tue-Sat, lunch by reservation only), arguably the best restaurant in northwestern Costa Rica (if not the entire country). Better yet, stay at the charming boutique hotel, where the beds are sumptuous and the rooms adorned with murals by renowned local artists – this way, you'll get homemade preserves and pastries at breakfast. With the freshest local fare providing the foundation of his weekly menus, Chef Eyal turns out transcendent meals (mains US\$11 to US\$20, wines US\$30 to US\$200) and is choosy about his wine list, emphasizing top Chilean and Spanish vino. And yet there's no pretension in this very cozy, out-of-the-way, lake-view dining room with walls covered in paintings by artists in the community (including manager Coryn). A word to the wise: do not pass up dessert.

Nuevo Arenal

The only good-sized town between La Fortuna and Tilarán is the small Tico settlement of Nuevo Arenal, which is 29km west of the dam. In case you were wondering what happened to the old Arenal (no, it wasn't wiped out by the

volcano, but good guess), it's about 27m below the surface of Laguna de Arenal. In order to create a large enough reservoir for the dam, the Costa Rican government had to make certain, er, sacrifices, which ultimately resulted in the forced relocation of 3500 people. Today, the humble residents of Nuevo Arenal don't seem to be fazed by history, especially since they now own premium lakeside property.

Nuevo Arenal is something of a rest stop for travelers heading to Tilarán and points beyond, though it's certainly a pleasant (and cheap) place to spend the night. The tiny downtown also has a gas station, a Banco de Costa Rica, SuperCompro and a bus stop near the park.

SLEEPING & EATING

Cabinas Rodríguez (☎ 2694 4237; r per person with bathroom US\$6) Near the soccer field, this is pretty much the cheapest place you're going to find in the whole Laguna de Arenal region. Rooms are clean though a bit dark, and guests can share the kitchenette.

Cabinas Catalina (☎ 8819 6793; d US\$20; (P)) Find these budget digs across from the gas station (where you should enquire about rooms if no one's around the cabinas), which consist of sterile cabinas with concrete walls and warm-ish showers that will do in a pinch.

Hotel Lago de Arenal (☎ 2694 4319; www.hotellagoarenal.com; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$70/79/87; (P) (♿) (♿)) Considering its hillside location with expansive lake views, this hotel feels like it could be so much more, but is simply too tired to fulfill its full potential (le sigh). But if you must stop in Nuevo Arenal for the night, it's infinitely more comfortable than the town's budget options. It's a bumpy 1.5km from the main road.

Bar y Restaurant Bambú (☎ 2694 4048; mains US\$2-4; (♿) 6am-10pm) In addition to doing good *casados* and *gallos* (not to mention another round of beer on Friday night when there's live music), the owner has tourist information and can arrange tours, including fishing trips, guided hikes and horse rides.

Lava Java (☎ 2694 4753; per hr US\$1; (♿) 6am-8:30pm) Check your email here on the main road as you sip a fresh smoothie or slurp down a quick coffee.

Restaurant La Casa de Doña Celina (☎ 2694 4609; mains US\$4-8; (♿) 7am-9pm) This is just your basic *soda*, next door to Lava Java, but the views make your lunch taste better, as do the retro

diner tables on the patio, and you can work up your appetite with a game of pinball.

Tom's Pan (☎ 2694 4547; mains US\$1-6; (♿) 7am-4pm Mon-Sat; (P)) This German bakery is a famous rest stop for road-trippers heading to Tilarán. Its breads, strudels and cakes are all homemade and delicious, though heartier eaters will rave over the big German breakfasts, goulash with homemade noodles, and a deli stocking *Leiberkäs* and *Weisswurst*. Behind the restaurant, there is a cozy double room for rent (US\$55 per night, with breakfast) with huge windows and an outdoor Jacuzzi.

After you've had your fill, browse **Ellen's Indigenous Souvenir Shop** (☎ 2694 4582; ellenssouvenir.de; (♿) 10am-7pm) next door, where the goods are '100% not made in China.'

Nuevo Arenal to Tilarán

Continue west and around the lake from Nuevo Arenal, where the scenery becomes even more spectacular just as the road gets progressively worse. Tilarán is the next 'big' city, with a reasonable selection of hotels and restaurants, plus roads and buses that can take you to Liberia, Monteverde or beyond.

SLEEPING & EATING

La Rana de Arenal (☎ 2694 4031; www.dorislakearenal.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$30/45; (P)) Watch out for the hairpin turnoff at the driveway to La Rana, a quaint German-run spot with seven comfortable rooms. The restaurant (mains US\$6 to US\$11, open 11am to 10pm) serves good international food, with an emphasis on German cuisine, in an airy upstairs pub-style dining room. There are tennis courts on the property, which is excellent for bird-watching, and the staff can arrange horseback and boat tours.

Chalet Nicholas (☎ 2694 4041; www.chaletnicholas.com; d incl breakfast US\$79, extra person US\$15; (P) (♿) (♿)) This attractive mountain chalet 2km west of Nuevo Arenal is owned by Catherine and John Nicholas, though their co-owners, five very playful Great Danes (don't be alarmed when they come bounding out to greet you), really know how to steal the show. Two downstairs rooms have private bathroom, while the upstairs loft has two linked bedrooms (for families or groups) and shares a downstairs bathroom. On clear days, all rooms have views of the volcano at the end of the lake. The owners enjoy natural history and have a living collection of dozens of orchids, which

WORLD-CLASS WIND

Some of the world's most consistent winds blow across northwestern Costa Rica, and this consistency attracts windsurfers from all over the world. Laguna de Arenal is rated one of the three best windsurfing spots in the world, mainly because of the predictability of the winds. From December to April, the winds reliably provide great rides for board sailors who gather on the southwest corner of the lake for long days of fun on the water. Windsurfing is possible in other months, too, but avoid September and October, which are considered the worst.

Although there are plenty of fly-by-night operators, there are really only two places you should consider for all your surfing needs. The best company for windsurfing is **Tico Wind** (☎ 2695 5387; www.ticowind.com; rentals incl lunch half-/full day US\$38/68), which sets up a camp on the western shores of the lake each year from December 1 to April 15. It has state-of-the-art boards and sails that are replaced every year. There are 50 sails to allow for differing wind conditions, experience and people's weights, but it rents only 12 at a time so that surfers can pick and choose during the day as conditions change – a class act. Staff will arrange nearby hotel accommodations. Serious surfers book boards weeks ahead of time; newbies and those wishing to improve their skills can take lessons. Tico Wind also offers rentals and lessons through Ecoplaya Beach Resort (p228) on the Bahía Salinas, Costa Rica's second windsurfing destination.

Hotel Tilawa (below) has emerged as a popular destination for windsurfers (and increasingly kitesurfers, too), and has an excellent selection of sailboards for rent at comparable rates. Although some folks think that the high winds, waves and world-class conditions are too much for a beginner to handle, the folks at Tilawa disagree. They run a reader-recommended **windsurfing and kitesurfing school** (half-/full day US\$100/150), and if you don't enjoy your first day of lessons, which takes place on land using stationary boards, they'll refund your money. After the first day, lessons become more expensive (US\$60 per hour) and cater to all skill levels – once you've learned the basics, self-motivated practice with short instructional periods is the best way to learn. If you're staying at the hotel, you can also take advantage of discount rates on rental equipment (half-/full day US\$45/55).

It gets a little chilly on Laguna de Arenal, and rentals usually include wet suits, as well as harnesses and helmets (serious boarders bring their own for the best fit, just renting the board and sail). For a warm change, head down to Bahía Salinas on Costa Rica's far northwestern coast. Resorts here offer windsurfing year-round, and though the wind may not be quite as world class as at Laguna de Arenal, it comes pretty close. The seasons are the same as for the lake.

attract numerous species of birds. This place has many repeat guests.

Lago Coter Ecologie (☎ 2440 6768; www.eco lodgecostarica.com; s/d/tr standard US\$76/87/99, cabin US\$93/105/122, all incl breakfast; 📍 🚿) This environmentally friendly lodge caters mostly to visitors that come on a complete package, including meals, rental equipment and guided naturalist hikes. Standard rooms with private hot showers are in a handsome wood-and-stone lodge that has a large fireplace and a relaxation area with billiards, TV and a small library. There are also 14 larger cabins that have picture windows overlooking the lake. Go 5km west of Nuevo Arenal then turn 3km down an unpaved road.

Mystica Resort (☎ 2692 1001; mystica@racs .co.cr; s/d incl breakfast US\$76/81, villa US\$163; 📍) This Mediterranean-style retreat lies on a hill 1km after the Tierras Morenas turnoff, and is an-

other good midrange option. The resort has several comfortable, colorful rooms with blue tiles, vibrant woven bedspreads, hot showers and volcano views. Even if you're not staying here, it's a great place to stop for a wood-fired pizza lunch (mains US\$5 to US\$10, open noon to 9pm). The Essence, a yoga and meditation center, is on the grounds for all your holistic-healing needs.

Hotel Tilawa (☎ 2695 5050; www.hotel-tilawa.com; d US\$68-98; 📍 🚿 🚿 📺 📺) It's something of a legend among windsurfers and kitesurfers, and whether you're semiprofessional or just starting out, you'll find a great community of wind warriors here. As for the rooms, well, they're definitely spacious and they cater to different budgets, though the Grecian theme – frescoes and all – is sort of over-the-top. Tilawa also has the best collection of amenities on the lake, including a huge

skateboard park, pool, tennis courts and free bike rental.

Lucky Bug B&B and Caballo Negro Restaurant (☎ 2694 4515; www.luckybugcr.com; r incl breakfast US\$79-140; 📍) Set on a rain-forest lagoon, the bungalows at the Lucky Bug are not only blissfully isolated but feature unique art and decorative details by local artisans. The Caballo Negro (Black Horse; mains US\$3 to US\$10, open 8am to 8pm) serves excellent organic, vegetarian and European fare handcrafted by owner Monica, who speaks English and German and makes a mean schnitzel. Also here is the fabulously quirky Lucky Bug Gallery, which features high-quality work from local and national artisans, not least of whom are Monica's triplets Kathryn, Alexandra and Sabrina. The artistry really is outstanding, and should you fall in love with a painting of a bug or something bigger, they can ship it for you. It's 3km west of Nuevo Arenal.

Café y Macadamia de Costa Rica (☎ 2692 2000; cafeymacadamia@yahoo.com; mains US\$2-8; 🕒 7:30am-5pm) Pull over for a cup of coffee – and maybe a salad or Thai chicken curry, and leave room for a tasty pastry – all best savored along with the spectacular views of the lake (or clouds and fog, as the weather dictates). The gigantic, wood-floored room and equally large outdoor terrace alone make it worth a stop to stretch your legs.

Equus Bar-Restaurant (mains US\$4-8; 🕒 11am-dose) This lakeside spot 13km west of Nuevo Arenal is perennially popular among windsurfers looking to brag about their exploits over a cold Imperial. There's a good mix of Costa Rican and Western dishes, and on some nights there's live music here.

TILARÁN

Near the southwestern end of Laguna de Arenal, the small town of Tilarán has a prosperous air to it – probably because it has served as a regional ranching center since long before there was a lake to speak of. Every year, this tradition is honored on the last weekend in April with a rodeo that's popular with Tico visitors, and on June 13 with a bullfight-filled fiesta that's dedicated to patron San Antonio.

Because it's situated on the slopes of the Cordillera de Tilarán, this little hub is a much cooler alternative (in climate and atmosphere) to, say, Cañas, and makes a pleasant stop between La Fortuna and Monteverde.

Check email while waiting for your bus at **Cybercafé Tilarán** (☎ 2695 9010; per hr US\$1.25; 🕒 9am-10pm Mon-Sat), which has computers with speedy connections, 25m west of the bus terminal.

Sleeping & Eating

All of the hotels listed following have private warm(ish) showers.

Hotel Tilarán (☎ 2695 5043; r shared/private bathroom US\$6/10; 📍) If you can get one of the rooms toward the back, this is a decent budget choice on the west side of Parque Central. The tiny rooms have cable TV and are clean enough to lay your head for a night.

Hotel Mary (☎ 2695 5479; d US\$25; 📍) On the south side of Parque Central, Hotel Mary is an excellent option with clean rooms that feature the kind of linens your grandma would love. Plan on street noise in the parkside rooms, or just enjoy it from the balcony. The attached restaurant (mains US\$3 to US\$6, open 6am to midnight) has a mix of some Tico and Chino favorites.

Hotel El Sueño (☎ 2695 5347; s/d standard US\$20/30, with balcony US\$25/35) Near the bus terminal, this beautiful hotel (in an ageing, baroque sort of way) has antique decorated rooms, but it's worth splurging for the balcony where you can bask in the faded glory. Downstairs is Restaurante El Parque (☎ 2695 5425, mains US\$3 to US\$5, open 7am to 11pm) with a selection of *bocas* that discriminating barflies also appreciate.

Hotel Guadalupe (☎ 2695 5943; www.hotelguadalupe .cr.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$25/40; 📍) Quiet, clean rooms with cable TV are arranged around the secure parking area at this well-maintained hotel a block-and-a-half southeast of the park. The downstairs cafeteria (mains US\$2 to US\$6, open 6am to 9pm Monday to Friday, 7am to 5pm Saturday) is consistently packed with hungry locals.

Hotel La Carreta (☎ 2695 6593; s/d incl breakfast US\$40/55; 📍 🚿) Owners Rita and Ed have beautifully refurbished these skylit rooms, installing orthopedic beds, reading lights and hand-painted murals by local artists. In addition to the indoor dining area, there's a pleasant garden terrace for sipping coffee and reading something you've picked up from the book exchange in the front room. Breakfasts feature homemade pastries, and nonguests can also stop by for lunch. Look for the painted *carreta* (oxcart) out front, 150m south of Banco de Costa Rica.

Restaurant Casa Antigua (☎ 2695 6053; mains US\$5-14; ☎ 7am-9:30pm Mon-Sat, 3-9:30pm Sun) This stylish blue-and-white café creates an elegant ambience with its dark-wood interior and espresso bar. Serving pastas, salads and steaks alongside the usual *comida típica*, this is a great place for a romantic supper. Find it kitty-corner to the gas station in town.

Cheap meals can be found in the *mercado* (market), beside the bus terminal, or pop into the **SuperCompro** (☎ 8am-8pm), just across from the park, for groceries.

Getting There & Away

Tilarán is usually reached by a 24km paved road from the Interamericana at Cañas. The route on to Santa Elena and Monteverde is unpaved and rough, though ordinary cars can get through with care in the dry season.

Buses arrive and depart from the bus terminal, which is half a block west of Parque Central. Be aware that Sunday-afternoon buses to San José may be sold out by Saturday. The route between Tilarán and San José goes via Cañas and the Interamericana, not the Arenal-La Fortuna-Ciudad Quesada route. Regular services go to the following locations:

Cañas US\$0.50, 30 minutes, departs 5am, 6:40am, 7:30am, 8am, 10am, 11:30am and 3:30pm.

Ciudad Quesada, via La Fortuna US\$2.50, four hours, departs 7am and 12:30pm.

Nuevo Arenal US\$0.75, 1¼ hours, departs 5am, 6am, 8am, 9am, 10am, 11am, 1pm, 2:30pm and 3:30pm.

Puntarenas US\$2.50, two hours, departs 6am and 1pm.

San José (Auto-Transportes Tilarán) US\$3.50, four hours, departs 4:45am, 7am, 9:30am, 2pm and 5pm.

Santa Elena US\$1.75, three to four hours, departs 12:30pm.