

The Pacific Slope



Divided from the highlands by a chain of volcanoes, the flatlands that run down to the Pacific are known universally as La Costa. It's a sultry region – hot and wet or hot and dry, depending on the time of year – with rich volcanic soil good for growing coffee at higher elevations and palm oil seeds and sugarcane lower down.

Archaeologically, the big draws here are Abaj Takalik and the sculptures left by pre-Olmec civilizations around Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa.

The culture is overwhelmingly ladino, and even the biggest towns are humble affairs, with low-rise wooden or concrete houses and the occasional palm thatched roof.

A fast highway, the Carretera al Pacífico (Hwy 2), roughly parallels the coast all the way from Ciudad Tecún Umán on the Mexican border to Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado on the El Salvador border. The 250km from Ciudad Tecún Umán to Guatemala City can be covered in five hours by bus – much less than the 345km of the Interamericana (Hwy 1) through the Highlands from La Mesilla.

Guatemalan beach tourism is seriously underdeveloped. Monterrico is the only real contender in this field, helped along by a nature reserve protecting mangroves and their inhabitants. Almost every town on the beach has places to stay, although more often than not they're very basic affairs. Sipacate gets the best waves and is slowly developing as a surf resort, although serious surfers find much more joy in Mexico or El Salvador.

TOP FIVE

- Getting away from absolutely everything at the one-hotel town of **Tilapita** (opposite)
- Investigating the bridge in history between the Olmec and the Maya while strolling through the grassy **Parque Arqueológico Abaj Takalik** (p197)
- Spotting wildlife among the mangrove-lined canal and lagoons of the **Biotopo Monterrico-Hawaii** (p206)
- Checking out the big mysterious heads carved by the non-Mayan Pipil culture at **Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa** (p199)
- Getting wet at **Parque Acuático Xocomil** (p197) and dizzy at **Parque de Diversiones Xetulul** (p197), two fun parks near Retalhuleu.



History

Despite it being one of the first settled areas in Guatemala, relatively little is known about the Pacific region's early history. Many archaeological sites are presumed overgrown by jungle; others have been destroyed to make way for agriculture.

What is known is that the Olmecs were among the first to arrive, followed by the Ocós and Iztapa, whose cultures appear to have flourished around 1500 BC.

Although these cultures were much more humble than those of their northerly counterparts, they developed a level of sophistication in stone carving and ceramics. It's also thought that the coastal region acted as a conduit, passing cultural advances (like the formation of writing and the Mayan calendar) from north to south.

Between AD 400 and 900, the Pipil moved in, most likely displaced by the turmoil in the Mexican Highlands, and began farming cacao, which they used to make a (rather bitter) chocolate drink. They also used cacao beans as currency.

Towards the end of the postclassic period, the K'iche', Kaqchiquel and Tz'utujil tribes began moving in as population expansion in Guatemala's highlands had made food scarce and land squabbles common.

Pedro de Alvarado, the first Spaniard to land in Guatemala, arrived here in 1524, passing briefly to fight the K'iche' as a sort of forerunner to a much larger battle around present-day Quetzaltenango. Franciscan missionaries were dispatched to the region and began a lengthy, largely unsuccessful attempt to convert the locals.

Further agricultural projects (mostly indigo and cacao) were started around this time, but it wasn't until independence that the region became one of the country's main agricultural suppliers, with plantations of coffee, bananas, rubber and sugarcane.

In the languid tropical climate here, not much changes, particularly the social structure. The distribution of land – a few large landholders and many poorly paid, landless farmer workers – can be traced back to these early post-independence days. You'll see the outcome as you travel around the region – large mansions and opulent gated communities alongside squalid, makeshift workers' huts.

CIUDAD TECÚN UMÁN

This is the preferable and busier of the two Pacific Slope border crossings, having better transport connections with other places in Guatemala. A bridge links Ciudad Tecún Umán with Ciudad Hidalgo (Mexico). The border is open 24 hours daily, and several basic hotels and restaurants are available, but you should aim to be clear of the border well before dark. The town has all the trademarks of the seedy border town. Banks here change US dollars and traveler's checks.

From Ciudad Tecún Umán frequent buses depart until about 6pm along the Carretera al Pacífico to Coatepeque, Retalhuleu, Mazatenango, Escuintla and Guatemala City. There are direct buses to Quetzaltenango (US\$3.50, 3½ hours) up until about 2pm. If you don't find a bus to your destination, take one to Coatepeque or, better, Retalhuleu, and change buses there. On the Mexican side, buses run from Ciudad Hidalgo to the city of Tapachula (US\$1.50, 45 minutes) every 20 minutes from 7am to 7:30pm.

EL CARMEN

A bridge across the Río Suchiate connects El Carmen with Talismán (Mexico). The border is open 24 hours daily. It's generally easier and more convenient to cross at Tecún Umán. There are few services at El Carmen, and those are very basic. Most buses between here and the rest of Guatemala go via Ciudad Tecún Umán, 39km south, and then along the Carretera al Pacífico through Coatepeque, Retalhuleu and Escuintla. On the way to Ciudad Tecún Umán, most stop at Malacatán on the road to San Marcos and Quetzaltenango, so you could try looking for a bus to Quetzaltenango there, but it's more dependable to change at Coatepeque (US\$2.50, two hours from El Carmen) or Retalhuleu.

On the Mexican side, minibuses run frequently between Talismán and Tapachula (US\$1.20, 30 minutes) until about 10pm.

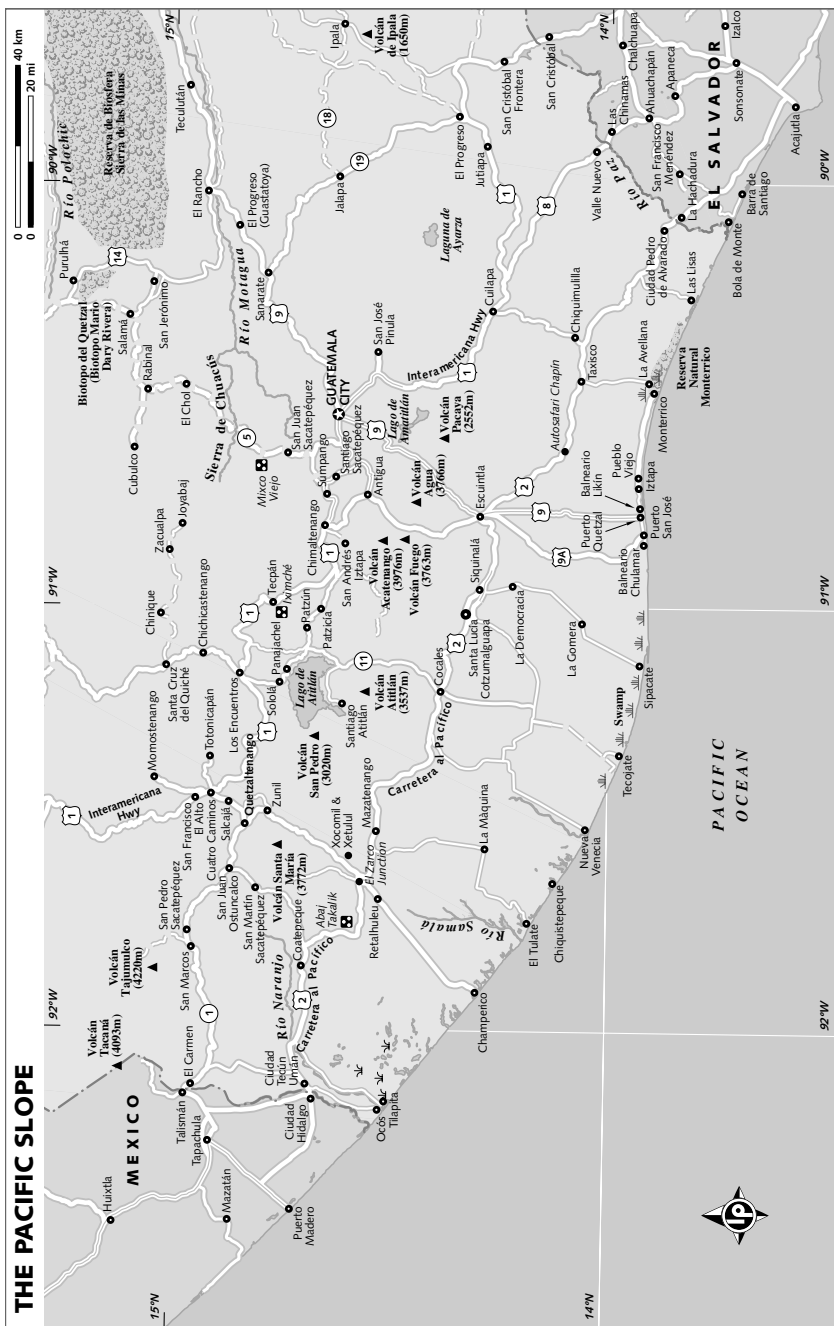
TILAPITA

Just south of the Mexican border, this little fishing village is the place to come for some seriously laid-back beach time. There's exactly one hotel here (and it's a good one) and it's a world away from the often hectic, scruffy feel of other towns along the coast.

The village, which sits on a sandbar cut off from the mainland by the Ocós estuary,

THE PACIFIC SLOPE

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LOCAL VOICES: JUAN HERNÁNDEZ, RETURNED UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT

Every year, thousands of Guatemalans make the long, dangerous journey as illegal immigrants to the United States. Juan Hernández* has done it three times. We spoke to him about his experiences.

When was the first time you went to the States?

It was about 20 years ago. It was easier then, but still hard. It took me 18 days to get there. I got caught by immigration in the States and deported to Mexico, so I crossed again and made it through.

What was the journey like?

It was tough. We were sleeping under bridges, walking at night. We went every which way – by bus, train, in cars and taxi. We did a lot of walking. We got robbed and ripped off, beaten by police and immigration. I turned 30 in the desert and ate half an orange for my birthday.

At the border it was crazy. There were 20 immigration vans waiting on the other side, with spotlights and hundreds of us waiting till nightfall. There were women selling food and drinks and clothes. Once night fell, every half-hour a group would make a run for it.

When I got caught and sent back to Mexico I had nothing. I was starving and exhausted. I went to the church but the priest kicked me out. I had no option but to keep going north.

How was life in the States?

I was really lucky. I met some good people straight away. They gave me somewhere to stay and helped me find a job. I was one of the lucky ones. I scrubbed pots in a Chinese restaurant, earning US\$3.50 an hour. After seven months I saved \$2000. I missed my wife and kids, so I came back to Guatemala, bought some land and built a house. A year later I went back.

Was it hard to fit in there?

You know, LA is a lot like here. You don't have to speak English to survive. Latinos there – we lived like backpackers, always doing things the cheapest, everybody sleeping in the same room.

*Not his real name

is only reachable by boat from the town of Tilapa. There's some excellent swimming to be had here, although as with all the beaches along this coast, the undertow can be quite serious and there are no lifeguards. If you're not a strong swimmer, don't go too far out.

There's not a whole lot to do (which is kind of the point), but local fishermen offer fascinating boat tours of the estuary, mangroves and adjoining **Reserva Natural El Manchón** for US\$13 per boat per hour. There are no guarantees, but local wildlife includes iguanas, crocodiles, white herons, egrets and kingfishers.

Back in Tilapita, the **Tortugario Tilapita**, across the path from Hotel El Pacífico, is fighting an uphill battle to preserve the local sea turtle population, and would be quite happy for whatever help they can get if you're looking for some volunteer work.

One of the best accommodation deals along the coast, **Hotel El Pacífico** (☎ 5914 1524; www.playatilapa.com; r with bathroom US\$8; ♿) is nothing fancy, but it has decent-sized, clean concrete rooms. Delicious meals (US\$4) are served in an oversized thatched-roof *palapa*

(thatched palm-leaf shelters), and generally consist of the catch of the day – shrimp, fish and *caldo de mariscos* are always a good bet. The good-sized swimming pool is a welcome addition as things can get slightly warm here.

Coming from the Mexican border, your best bet is to get off the bus at the turnoff and wait for a Tilapa-bound bus there. Direct buses run from Coatepeque to Tilapa (US\$1.50, 1½ hours). Once you get to Tilapa, turn left down the side street and follow it to the end, where you will find *lanchas* (small boats) waiting. The 10-minute ride to Tilapita costs US\$0.80 per person in a shared *lancha*, or you can hire a private one to make the trip for US\$4. Tell the *lancharo* you are going to *el hotel* (although he will probably know that already). If you get stuck, there are cheap, not so lovely hotels in Tilapa.

Pullman drivers doing the Guatemala City–Tecún Umán run often stop in at Tilapa. If you're headed straight for the capital or anywhere in between, ask around to find out when the next departure is.

COATEPEQUE

pop 48,700

Set on a hill and surrounded by lush coffee plantations, Coatepeque is a brash, fairly ugly and chaotic commercial center, noisy and humid at all times. If you read the papers, the name Coatepeque should be familiar. A major stopover on the Columbia–Mexico drugs ‘n’ guns route, this town probably has more gang-related activity than any other outside of Guatemala City. Barely a day goes by without somebody getting shot in a turf war or revenge killing. Tourists are never the target, and rarely get caught in the crossfire (although one foreign volunteer did quite literally in 2006).

It is another facet of Guatemala, and probably not one you want to get too acquainted with. If you’re here to see the ruins at Abaj Takalik, Retalhuleu is a much better bet. If you really want to stay here or (more likely) get stuck, there are a couple of places in the relatively quiet town center that will put you up admirably.

Maya Expeditions (see p81) runs rafting expeditions on the nearby Río Naranjo for US\$85 per person per day.

Hotel Baechli (☎ 7775 1483; 6a Calle 5-45, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$11/15; (P)) has cool, simple rooms with fan. **Hotel Villa Real** (☎ 7775 1308; 6a Calle 6-57, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$15/20; (P)) is slightly more elaborate, but the payoff is in the smaller rooms. Both are a block or so uphill from the main park.

Good restaurants (mostly in the steakhouse and/or Chinese vein) are scattered around the park.

Coatepeque is a major transport hub for the Pacific slope and bus connections here are good. The bus terminal blends into the market, and has departures to El Carmen (US\$2.50, two hours), Tecún Umán (US\$2.50, two hours), Quetzaltenango (US\$3, 2 ½ hours, Tilapa (US\$2, 1½ hours) and Retalhuleu (US\$2, one hour), among others. Several Pullman bus companies stop here on the Guatemala City–Tecún Umán run, providing much more comfort and possibly a welcome spot of air-conditioning in the tropical heat. They stop on the street one block east of the bus terminal and charge US\$7 for the four-hour run to Guatemala City.

WELCOME HOME, GANGSTER

Talk to anyone about crime in Guatemala and the conversation will eventually turn to gangs. Gang membership and activity has skyrocketed over the last decade, despite the ‘*mano dura*’ (iron fist) policies of successive governments.

It’s got so that every year the *Prensa Libre* publishes a map of Guatemala City, showing where the respective gang territories are. There are neighborhoods where the police will not enter.

The end of the civil war played a big part in the formulation of the gangs – there were plenty of guns lying around, going cheap, and plenty more orphans and disaffected youth looking for a sense of belonging.

The two biggest gangs here are the Mara 18 and the Salvatruchas. No doubt you will see their graffiti around the place. The gangs’ main activities are drugs, guns, kidnapping and extortion. Tourists are very small fry for these guys and you’d have to be very unlucky to ever bump into them.

One of the main reasons cited for the increase in gang membership is the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, a US law passed in 1996 that gives wide scope to immigration officials to deport criminals – both undocumented and legally registered – who are convicted of gang-related activities.

Exacerbating the problem is a lack of information-sharing between governments, meaning that Guatemalan authorities are not told why somebody has been deported and cannot therefore keep an eye on gang members when they return to Guatemala.

It’s a situation that Guatemalans view with mixed feelings – on the one hand, they’d like to deport the gangbangers, too. On the other, they see the States as a training ground for gangsters, where not enough is being done to eradicate the gang problem in Latino neighborhoods.

They feel their kids go to the States, get involved in gangs there, learn the tricks of the trade and then come back, all schooled up and ready to join the local chapter of the gang they belonged to up north.

RETALHULEU

pop 42,000 / elev 240m

Arriving at the bus station in Retalhuleu, or Reu (*ray-oo*) as it's known to most Guatemalans, you're pretty much guaranteed to be underwhelmed. The neighborhood's a tawdry affair, packed out with dilapidated wooden cantinas and street vendors.

The town center, just five blocks away, is like another world – a majestic, palm-filled plaza, surrounded by some fine old buildings. Even the city police get in on the act, hanging plants outside their headquarters.

On the outskirts are the homes of wealthy plantation owners, impressive weekend get-aways and the gated communities that are springing up all over the country.

The real reason most people visit is for access to Abaj Tahalik, but if you're up for some serious downtime, a couple of world-class fun parks are just down the road (see p197).

Tourists are something of a curiosity in Reu and are treated well. The heat is fairly stifling, and if you can splurge for digs with a pool, you'll be happy for it; at the very least, make sure your room has a fan.

Orientation & Information

The town center is 4km southwest of the Carretera al Pacifico, along Calzada Las Palmas, a grand boulevard lined with towering palms. The bus terminal is on 10a Calle between 7a and 8a Aves, northeast of the plaza. To find the plaza, look for the twin church towers and walk toward them.

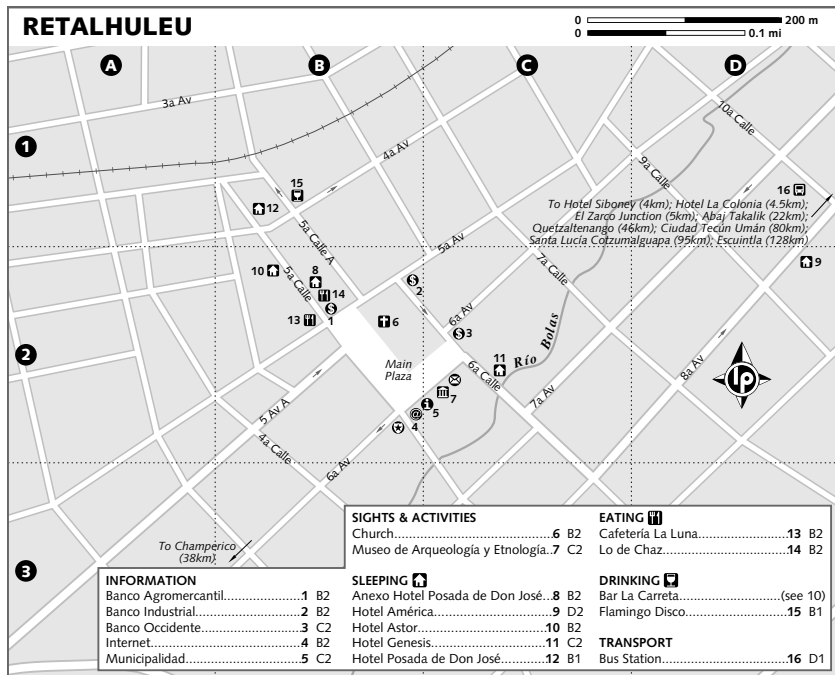
There is no official tourist office, but people in the Municipalidad (Town Hall), on 6a Av facing the east side of the church, will do their best to help.

Banco Industrial (cnr 6a Calle & 5a Av; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) and **Banco Occidente** (cnr 6a Calle & 6a Av) change US dollars and traveler's checks and give cash advances on Visa cards. Banco Industrial has a Visa ATM. **Banco Agromercantil** (5a Av), facing the plaza, changes US dollars and traveler's checks and has a MasterCard ATM.

Internet (cnr 5a Calle & 6a Av; per hr US\$0.80) provides internet access.

Sights & Activities

The **Museo de Arqueología y Etnología** (6a Av 5-68; admission US\$1.30; ☎ 8am-5:30pm Tue-Sat) is a small



LOCAL LORE: THE STONE MERMAID

Alba Lucretia lived in Retalhuleu, back when it was just a small town. She was young and charming and much sought after by local gentlemen, but she was bored of small-town life.

One day Gunther, a German archaeologist, arrived to study the local area. Little by little they got to know each other. He was captivated by her simple charms and she thought he was handsome, and her ticket out of Retalhuleu.

Semana Santa was approaching. One of Alba's neighbors said that after the festivities, Gunther would return to the capital to marry his fiancé.

Alba was stunned. She began making a fine dress to wear on Good Friday, to capture Gunther's heart forever.

The day before Good Friday, Alba was bathing in the patio when her mother came home.

'Good thing that you're bathing today,' her mother said. 'You know it's a sin to bathe on Good Friday.'

'What do I care?' said Alba. 'Tomorrow I'll bathe as well, to smell sweet for Gunther.'

'Don't you dare!' cried her mother. 'You know you'll turn to stone.'

Early the next morning, Alba's parents heard somebody bathing in the patio. Scared, they ran outside. There was their beautiful daughter, turned into a stone mermaid.

The neighbors took her and put her in a fountain in the plaza, as a lesson to future generations to respect the holy days.

museum of archaeological relics. Upstairs are historical photos and a mural showing locations of 33 archaeological sites in Retalhuleu department.

You can **swim** at the Siboney and La Colonia hotels (see right and right) even if you're not staying there. The cost is US\$1.30 at the Siboney and US\$2 at La Colonia, where there's also a poolside bar.

Sleeping

Out on the Carretera al Pacífico are several other hotels. These tend to be 'tropical motels' by design, with bungalows, pools and restaurants. They are convenient if you have a car or can get a bus to drop you on the spot.

Hotel América (☎ 7771 1154; 8a Av 9-32, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$11/15) A trusty budget option just down the street from the bus terminal, the América has spotless rooms with fan and TV.

Hotel Genesis (☎ 7771 2855; 6a Calle 6-27, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$15/28; ♿) A good-value hotel sporting plenty of homely features (but not so many windows) and an excellent, central location.

ourpick Hotel Posada Don José (☎ 7771 0180; posa dadonjose@hotmail.com; 5a Calle 3-67, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$20/26; ♿ ♿ ♿) A beautiful colonial-style hotel built around a huge swimming pool. Swan dives from the top balcony are tempting, but probably unwise. Rooms are spacious and comfortable, if a bit dated.

Hotel Astor (☎ 7771 2559; hotelastor@terra.com.gt; 5a Calle 4-60, Zona 1; s/d with bathroom US\$23/36; ♿ ♿) While the shady courtyard/pool area is by far the best thing about this place (drop in for a drink, even if you aren't staying here), the rooms are good enough. Slightly cramped, but nicely done out in ochre paints and dark woods. Cocktails can be had in the hotel's air-conditioned Bar La Carreta.

Hotel Siboney (☎ 7771 0149; Cuatro Caminos, San Sebastián; s/d US\$27/34; ♿ ♿ ♿ ♿) There's a good blend of tropical and modern themes going on here. Poolside rooms fill quickly, especially on weekends, so you might want to book ahead. You'll find it 4km northeast of town where Calzada Las Palmas meets the Carretera al Pacífico. Coming from Quetzaltenango or the south, ask the bus to drop you here to avoid backtracking.

Hotel La Colonia (☎ 7771 6482; Carretera al Pacífico Km 178; s/d US\$40/50; ♿ ♿ ♿) A few hundred meters east of the Siboney, La Colonia has a fairly luxurious layout. The sweet little duplex bungalows seem trapped in the '70s, but they still offer a pretty good deal. The big swimming pool with poolside bar doesn't go astray in this heat.

Eating & Drinking

Reu seems to be slightly obsessed with pizza – 5a Av north of the plaza is almost wall-to-wall pizzerias.

Cafetería La Luna (5a Calle 4-97; lunch incl drink US\$2.90, dinner US\$3.50; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Opposite the west corner of the plaza, this is a town favorite for simple but filling meals in a low-key environment.

Lo de Chaz (5a Calle 4-65; mains US\$3-4; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A simple place, right off the plaza, serving up good breakfasts, icy beer, soups, snacks and seafood.

Bar La Carreta (5a Calle 4-50) For cocktails, check out this bar, next to the Hotel Astor.

Flamingo Disco (4a Av & 5a Calle A; ☺ Wed-Sat 10pm-1am) Reu's biggest disco really gets going on Fridays, but Saturdays are a good bet, too.

Getting There & Away

Most buses traveling along the Carretera al Pacífico detour into Reu. Departures include the following:

Champerico (US\$0.60, one hour, 38km, buses every few minutes, 6am to 7pm)

Ciudad Tecún Umán (US\$2, 1½ hours, 78km, every 20 minutes, from 5am to 10pm)

Guatemala City (US\$6, three hours, 196km, every 15 minutes, from 2am to 8:30pm)

Quetzaltenango (US\$1.50, one hour, 46km, buses every 30 minutes, from 4am to 6pm)

Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa (US\$2.50, two hours, 97km) Some Escuintla- or Guatemala City-bound buses might drop you at Santa Lucía; otherwise get a bus to Mazatenango ('Mazate') and change there.

Local buses go to El Asintal (for Abaj Takalik).

AROUND RETALHULEU

Parque Acuático Xocomil & Parque de Diversiones Xetulul

If you have children along, or simply if the heat is getting to you, head out to the **Parque Acuático Xocomil** (☎ 7772 9400; www.irtra.org.gt; Carretera CITO Km 180.5; adult/child US\$10/7; ☺ 9am-5pm Thu-Sun), a gigantic water park in the Disneyland vein, but with a distinct Guatemalan theme. Among the 10 water slides, two swimming pools and two wave pools are re-creations of Mayan monuments from Tikal, Copán and Quiriguá. Visitors can bob along a river through canyons flanked with ancient temples and Mayan masks spewing water from the nose and mouth. Three real volcanoes – Santiaguito, Zunil and Santa María – can be seen from the grounds. Xocomil is very well executed and maintained, and kids love it. Xocomil is at San Martín Zapotitlán on the Quetzaltenango road, about 12km north of Reu.

Next door to Xocomil on the same road is the even more impressive **Parque de Diversiones Xetulul** (☎ 7722 9450; www.irtra.org.gt; Carretera CITO Km 180.5; adult/child US\$26/13; ☺ 10am-6pm Thu-Sun). It's a theme park with representations of a Tikal pyramid, historical Guatemalan buildings and famous buildings from many European cities, plus restaurants and many first-class rides. You need an extra US\$6.50 ticket for the rides.

These two attractions are both run by Irtra, the Instituto de Recreación de los Trabajadores de la Empresa Privada de Guatemala (Guatemalan Private Enterprise Workers' Recreation Institute), which administers several fun sites around the country for workers and their families. Between them, Xocomil and Xetulul comprise the most popular tourist attraction in Guatemala, with over a million visitors a year.

Any bus heading from Retalhuleu toward Quetzaltenango will drop you at Xocomil or Xetulul.

Parque Arqueológico Abaj Takalik

About 30km west of Retalhuleu is the **Parque Arqueológico Abaj Takalik** (admission US\$4; ☺ 7am-5pm), a fascinating archaeological site set on land now occupied by coffee, rubber and sugarcane plantations. Abaj Takalik was an important trading center in the late Preclassic era, before AD 250, and forms a historical link between Mesoamerica's first civilization, the Olmecs, and the Maya. The Olmecs flourished from about 1200 to 600 BC on Mexico's southern Gulf coast, but their influence extended far and wide, and numerous Olmec-style sculptures have been found at Abaj Takalik.

The entire 6.5 sq km site spreads over nine natural terraces, which were adapted by its ancient inhabitants. Archaeological work is continuing outside the kernel of the site, which is the Grupo Central on terrace No 2, where the most important ceremonial and civic buildings were located. Classic-era stream baths and multicolored floors were discovered here in late 2005. The largest and tallest building is Estructura 5, a pyramid 16m high and 115m square on terrace No 3, above No 2. This may have formed one side of a ball court. Estructura 7, east of Estructura 5, is thought to have been an observatory. What's most impressive as you move around the park-like grounds, with its temple mounds, ball courts and flights of steps paved with rounded river stones, is

the quantity of stone sculpture dotted about, including numerous representations of animals and aquatic creatures (some in a curious pot-bellied style known as *barrigón*), miniature versions of the characteristic Olmec colossal heads, and early Mayan-style monuments depicting finely adorned personages carrying out religious ceremonies.

Abaj Takalik, which had strong connections with the city of Kaminaljuyú (in present-day Guatemala City), was sacked about AD 300 and its great monuments, especially those in Mayan style, were decapitated. Some monuments were rebuilt after AD 600 and the site retained a ceremonial and religious importance for the Maya, which it maintains to this day. Maya from the Guatemalan highlands regularly come here to perform ceremonies.

To reach Abaj Takalik by public transportation, catch a bus from Retalhuleu to El Asintal (US\$0.25, 30 minutes), which is 12km northwest of Reu and 5km north of the Carretera al Pacífico. The buses leave from a bus station on 5a Av A, 800m southwest of Reu plaza, about every half-hour, 6am to 6pm. Pickups at El Asintal provide transportation on to Abaj Takalik, 4km further by paved road. You'll be shown round by a volunteer guide, whom you will probably want to tip. You can also visit Abaj Takalik on tours from Quetzaltenango (see p169).

Nueva Alianza

This fair-trade **coffee farm** (☎ 5047 2238, Quetzaltenango 5819 2282; www.comunidadnuevaalianza.org; dm/s/d US\$7/10/20) was taken over by its employees when the owner went bankrupt and ran off with their back wages. They now offer a range of tours around the farm and local countryside as well as workshops detailing the community's fascinating history and present. Set on a hillside overlooking the coast, the farm has gorgeous views, and the hike to the nearby waterfall comes with some very welcome swimming at the end of it. The easiest way to get here is by contacting the office in Quetzaltenango and coming when a Spanish school comes on tour (most weekends). Otherwise it's easy enough from Retalhuleu. Buses leave at midday (but get there early) from the main terminal – look for the one that says 'Hochen' – it's about a one-hour ride out to the farm.

CHAMPERICO

pop 7900

Built as a shipping point for coffee during the boom of the late 19th century, Champerico, 38km southwest of Retalhuleu, is a tawdry, sweltering, dilapidated place that sees few tourists. Nevertheless, it's one of the easiest ocean beaches to reach on a day trip from Quetzaltenango, and beach-starved students still try their luck here. Beware of strong waves and an undertow if you go in the ocean, and stay in the main, central part of the beach: if you stray too far in either direction you put yourself at risk from impoverished, potentially desperate shack dwellers who live towards the ends of the beach. Tourists have been victims of violent armed robberies here. Most beachgoers come only to spend the day, but there are several cheap hotels and restaurants. **Hotel Neptuno** (☎ 7773 7206; s/d US\$6/8), on the beachfront, is the best bet. The last bus back to Retalhuleu leaves at about 6:30pm.

MAZATENANGO

pop 46,800 / elev 370m

Mazatenango, 23km east of Retalhuleu, is the capital of the Suchitepéquez department. It's a center for the farmers, traders and shippers of the Pacific Slope's agricultural produce. There are a few serviceable hotels if you need to stop in an emergency. Otherwise just keep on keeping on.

TULATE

Another beach town that's yet to make it onto travelers' radar is Tulate. The great thing about this beach is that, unlike others along the coast, the water gets deep very gradually, making it a great place to swim and just hang around and have some fun. The waves rarely get big enough to surf, but bodysurfers should be able to get a ride any time of the year. To get to the beach you have to catch a boat (US\$0.50) across the estuary. Once on the other side, the water's 500m in front of you, straight down the only paved street.

There are two hotels in Tulate worth mentioning. Both have restaurants, but the best, most atmospheric dining is at the little shacks right on the beach front where good fresh seafood meals start at around US\$4.

Villa Victoria (☎ 5704 6825; r US\$17, with bathroom & air-con US\$33; 🍷 🍷), on the main street, halfway between the boat landing and the beach, is a

EXPLORE MORE OF THE PACIFIC COAST

The coast is, logically, all about the beach. The two most popular beach spots for travelers happen to be the ones closest to Quetzaltenango and Antigua – Champerico and Monterrico respectively, and they suffer for their popularity, both with foreign and Guatemalan tourists.

There are, however, plenty of little beach towns that are worth considering, where quite often you'll have the place to yourself:

- Tilapita – literally a one-hotel village, this is a great place to get away from it all and take a couple of mangrove tours while you're at it (p191).
- Tulate – the coastline's gentle slope into the ocean makes this one of Guatemala's best swimming beaches (opposite).
- Sipacate – Guatemala's surf capital goes off year round, especially between December and April (p203).
- Chicago – a mellow little beach town with an excellent community project that's always looking for volunteers.

reasonable deal. Rooms are fresh and simple, with two double beds. It also doubles as a Turicentro, meaning that local kids come and use the pool (which has an awesome waterslide, by the way) and they crank up the music ridiculously early on weekends.

Playa Paraiso (☎ 5985 0300; bungalows US\$47; 📍), by far the more refined of the two, is about 1km down the beach to the left. The extremely comfortable bungalows here have two double beds, a sitting room and laid-back little balconies out front. There are hammocks strung around the property and a good, if somewhat pricey, restaurant serves meals any time. Things can get a little hectic on weekends, but midweek you may just have the place to yourself.

Buses run direct to Tulate from Mazatenango (US\$1.80, two hours) along a good, newly paved road. Coming from the west, it's tempting to get off at Cuyotenango and wait for a bus there to avoid backtracking. The only problem with this is that buses tend to leave Mazatenango when full, so you might miss out on a seat.

CHIQUISTEPEQUE

On a virtually untouched stretch of beach, this little fishing village is home to the **Hamaca y Pescado Project** (☎ 7858 2700; www.hamacaypescadoesp.blogspot.com; s/d US\$15/30), a grass-roots education and environmental awareness project. You can come to volunteer in one of the many programs they have running, or you can just hang out on the beach. Accommodation is in comfortable rustic beachside cabanas, and

rates include three meals daily. If you're coming from Tulate, get off at La Máquina and change buses there. Otherwise, it's best to get to Mazatenango for one of the two daily buses (10:30am and 1:30pm) to Chiquistepeque (three hours, US\$1.50).

SANTA LUCÍA COTZUMALGUAPA

pop 26,500 / elev 356m

Another 71km eastward from Mazatenango is Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa, an important stop for anyone interested in archaeology. In the fields and *fincas* (plantations) near the town stand great stone heads carved with grotesque faces and fine relief scenes, the product of the enigmatic Pipil culture that flourished here from about AD 500 to 700. In your explorations you may get to see a Guatemalan sugarcane *finca* in full operation.

The town, though benign enough, is unexciting. The local people around here are descended from the Pipil, an ancient culture that had linguistic and cultural links with the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of central Mexico. In early Classic times, the Pipil who lived here grew cacao, the money of the age. They were obsessed with the ball game and with the rites and mysteries of death. Pipil art, unlike the flowery, almost romantic style of the Maya, is cold, grotesque and severe, but still very finely done. When these 'Mexicans' settled in this pocket of Guatemala, and where they came from, is not known, though connections with Mexico's Gulf Coast area, whose culture was also obsessed with the ball game, have been suggested.

Orientation & Information

Santa Lucía is now bypassed to the south by Hwy 2, but the original highway running through the south of town is still known as the Carretera al Pacífico, and the best places to stay are on and just off it. The main plaza is 400m north from the highway, along 3a or 4a Avs.

There are three main sites to visit, all outside town: El Baúl hilltop site, about 4.5km north; the museum at Finca El Baúl, 2.75km further north; and the Museo Cultura Cotzumalguapa, off the highway 2km northeast of town.

Taxi drivers in Santa Lucía's main square will take you round all three sites for about US\$25 without too much haggling. In this hot and muggy climate, riding at least part of the way is the least you can do to help yourself.

Banco Industrial (cnr 4a Av & 4a Calle), a block north of the plaza, changes US-dollar cash and traveler's checks and has a Visa ATM.

El Baúl Hilltop Site

This site has the additional fascination of being an active place of pagan worship for local people. Mayan people regularly, and especially on weekends, make offerings, light fires and candles and sacrifice chickens here. They will not mind if you visit as well, and may be happy to pose with the idols for photographs in exchange for a small contribution.

Of the two stones here, the great, grotesque, half-buried head is the most striking, with its elaborate headdress, beaklike nose and 'blind' eyes with big bags underneath. The head is stained with wax from candles, splashes of liquor and other drinks, and with the smoke and ashes of incense fires, all part of worship. People have been coming here to pay homage for more than 1400 years.

The other stone is a relief carving of a figure with an elaborate headdress, possibly a fire god, surrounded by circular motifs that may be date glyphs.

To get there you leave town northward on the road passing El Calvario church. From the intersection just past the church, go 2.7km to a fork in the road just beyond a bridge; the fork is marked by a sign saying 'Los Tarros.' Buses heading out to Finca El Baúl, the plantation headquarters, pass this sign. Take the right-hand fork, passing a settlement called Colonia Maya on your right. After you have gone 1.5km from the Los Tarros sign, a dirt track crosses the road: turn right here, between two concrete posts. Ahead now is a low mound topped by three large trees: this is the hilltop site. After about 250m, fork right between two more identical concrete posts, and follow this track round in front of the mound to its end after some 150m, and take the path up on to the mound, which is actually a great ruined temple platform that has not been restored.

A CHICKEN BUS IS HATCHED

If you rode the bus to school 10 years ago or more in the US, you might just end up meeting an old friend in Guatemala, resurrected and given new life as a chicken bus. Love 'em or hate 'em, chicken buses (*camionetas* or *parrillas* to Guatemalans) are a fact of life in traveling around Guatemala. A lot of times there is no alternative.

As you can probably tell by the signs that sometimes remain in these buses ('anyone breaking the rules will lose their bus riding privileges'), these buses really did used to carry school kids. In the US, once school buses reach the ripe old age of 10 years, or they do 150,000 miles, they're auctioned off. This is just the first step in the long process to hitting the Guatemalan road. They then get towed through the States and Mexico, taken to a workshop here where they are refitted (bigger engine, six-speed gearbox, roof rack, destination board, luggage rack, longer seats) and fancied up with a paint job, CD player and chrome detailing.

Drivers then add their individual touches – anything from religious paraphernalia to stuffed toys and Christmas lights dangling around the dashboard area.

Thus, the chicken bus is ready to roll, and roll they do. The average bus works 14 hours a day, seven days a week – more miles in one day than it covered in a week back on the school run.

If you've got a choice of buses to go with, looks *are* important – chances are that if the paint is fresh and the chrome gleaming, the owner also has the cash to spend on new brakes and regular maintenance. And, with a conservative estimate of an average of one chicken-bus accident per week in Guatemala, this is something you may want to keep in mind.

Museo El Baúl

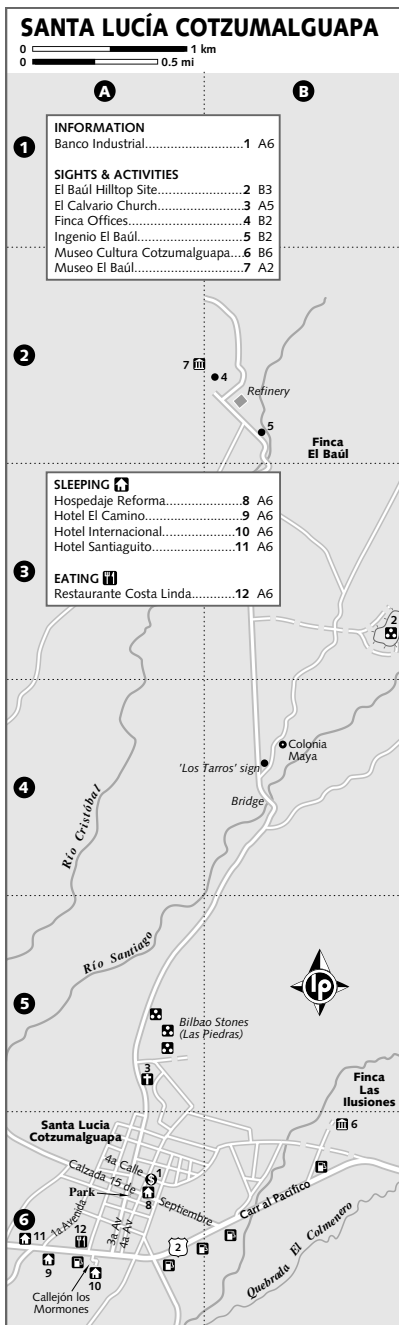
About 2.75km on foot, or 5km by vehicle, from the hilltop site is **Museo El Baúl** (admission free; ☒ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat). It comprises a very fine open-air collection of Pipil stone sculpture collected from around Finca El Baúl's sugarcane fields. A large stone jaguar faces you at the entrance. Other figures include four humans or monkeys with arms folded across their chests, a grinning, blank-eyed head reminiscent of the one at the hilltop site, carvings of skulls, and at the back a stela showing a personage wearing an animal headdress, standing over a similarly attired figure on the ground: seemingly winner and loser of a ball game. Unfortunately, nothing is labeled.

To get there, if driving, return to the fork with the Los Tarros sign. Take the other fork this time (what would be the left fork as you come from Santa Lucía), and follow the paved road 3km to the headquarters of the Finca El Baúl sugarcane plantation. Buses trundle along this road every few hours, shuttling workers between the refinery and the town center. (If you're on foot, you can walk from the hilltop site back to the crossroads with the paved road. Cross the road and continue along the dirt track. This will eventually bring you to the asphalt road that leads to the *finca* headquarters. When you reach the road, turn right.)

Approaching the *finca* headquarters (6km from Santa Lucía's main square), you cross a bridge at a curve. Continue uphill and you will see the entrance on the left, marked by a guard post and a sign 'Ingenio El Baúl Bienvenidos.' Tell the guards that you would like to visit the *museo*, and you should be admitted. Pass the sugar refinery buildings to arrive at the museum on the right.

Museo Cultura Cotzumalguapa

At the headquarters of another sugarcane plantation, Finca Las Ilusiones, is **Museo Cultura Cotzumalguapa** (admission US\$1.30; ☒ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat). The collection here, of sculptures found around Las Ilusiones' lands, has some explanatory material and you'll probably be shown around by the caretaker. It includes a reconstruction of a sacrificial altar with the original stones, and photos of some fine stelae that were removed to the Dahlem Museum in Berlin in 1880. The most impressive exhibit, Monumento 21, is actually a glass-fiber copy



of a stone that still stands in the fields of Finca Bilbao (part of Las Ilusiones' plantations), depicting what may be a shaman holding a sort of puppet on the left, a ball-game player in the middle with a knife in one hand, and a king or priest on the right holding what may be a heart. Another copy of this stone, along with one of Monumento 19, lie on the ground across the street from the museum. Along the road just before the bridge to the *finca* house are copies of some of the sculptures from the El Baúl museum.

About 1.5km east of the town center on Carretera al Pacifico (Hwy 2), shortly before an Esso station on the left (not to be confused with other Esso stations on the right), take a side track 400m to the left (north) to find the museum.

Bilbao Stones

Monumento 21, whose copy is in the Museo Cultura Cotzumalguapa, still stands with three other fine sculpted stones dotted about the Finca Bilbao cane fields to the northeast of El Calvario church, on the north edge of Santa Lucía town. In the past, tourists have regularly visited these stones, often guided through the tall cane to Las Piedras (the Bilbao Stones) by local boys. Unfortunately, locals say it is now dangerous for tourists to go into these fields because of recent assaults. So unless you receive convincing information to the contrary, we don't recommend it.

Sleeping & Eating

The best hotels around are out on the entrance to town. You're not missing much by being out here.

Hospedaje Reforma (4a Av 4-71; s/d US\$4/7) This hotel has exactly three things going for it: it's cheap, central and the patio is decorated with stuffed boars' heads. And if you like sleeping in dark and airless little concrete cells, make that four.

Hotel Internacional (☎ 7882 5504; Callejón los Morrones; s/d US\$10/12.50; 📍 🚻) Down a short lane (signposted) off Carretera al Pacifico is the best budget hotel in town. It has clean, good-sized rooms with a fan, cold showers and a TV. Air conditioning costs US\$10 extra.

Hotel El Camino (☎ 7882 5316; Carretera al Pacifico Km 90.5; s/d with fan US\$14/18; 📍 🚻) About 200m east along the highway from the Santiaguito, Hotel El Camino's rooms are almost ridiculously large, with a few sticks of furniture

like clothes racks and writing tables. You could organize a game of five a side with the rest of the floor space, but don't tell management it was our idea.

Hotel Santiaguito (☎ 7882 5435; Carretera al Pacifico Km 90.4; s/d US\$50/60; 📍 🚻 🚿) On the highway on the west edge of town, the Santiaguito is fairly lavish for Guatemala's Pacific Slope, with spacious tree-shaded grounds and a nice swimming pool (open to nonguests for US\$2.50). The large rooms have huge, firm beds and are set around a jungle patio/parking area. The spacious restaurant is cooled by ceiling fans and serves up slightly overpriced meals and good cheeseburgers (US\$4).

Restaurante Costa Linda (Carretera al Pacifico; 📍 lunch & dinner) On the highway about 150m east of Hotel el Camino, this friendly and clean place serves tasty meat and seafood at reasonable prices.

The Hotel Santiaguito has a good **restaurant** (mains US\$10-12) and a swimming pool that nonguests can use for US\$2.50 per day.

Getting There & Away

As Hwy 2 now bypasses Santa Lucía, a lot of buses along it do not come into town. Coming to Santa Lucía from the east, you will almost certainly need to change buses at Escuintla (US\$0.80, 30 minutes). From the west you will probably have to change at Mazatenango (US\$1.50, 1¼ hours). At Cocales, 23km west of Santa Lucía, a road down from Lago de Atitlán meets Hwy 2, providing a route to or from the Highlands. Eight buses daily run from Cocales to Panajachel (US\$2, 2½ hours, 70km, between about 6am and 2pm).

LA DEMOCRACIA

pop 5800 / elev 165m

La Democracia, a nondescript Pacific Slope town 10km south of Siquinalá, is hot day and night, rainy season and dry season. During the late Preclassic period (300 BC to AD 250), this area, like Abaj Takalik to the northwest, was home to a culture showing influence from southern Mexico.

Sights

Facing the plaza, along with the church and the modest Palacio Municipal, is the small, modern **Museo Regional de Arqueología** (admission US\$3; 📍 9am-4pm Tue-Sat), which houses some fascinating archaeological finds. The star of

the show is an exquisite jade mask. Smaller figures, yokes used in the ball game, relief carvings and other objects make up the rest of this small but important collection.

At the archaeological site called Monte Alto, on the outskirts of La Democracia, huge basalt heads and pot-bellied sculptures have been discovered. These heads resemble crude versions of the colossal heads that were carved by the Olmecs on Mexico's southern gulf coast some centuries previously.

Today, these great **Olmecoid heads** are arranged around La Democracia's main plaza. As you come into town from the highway, follow signs to the Museo.

Sleeping & Eating

Guest House Paxil de Cayala (☎ 7880 3129; s/d with bathroom US\$7/10) Half a block from the plaza, La Democracia's only place to stay is OK for the night, with big, mosquito-proofed rooms.

Burger Chops (mains US\$3-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Also just off the square, this is as close as the town gets to a restaurant.

The flour tortillas stuffed with meat from the little roadside stands around the plaza are delicious, and a bargain at US\$2.50.

Getting There & Away

The Chatía Gomerana company runs buses every half-hour, 6am to 4:30pm, from Guatemala City's Terminal de Autobuses to La Democracia (US\$2.50, two hours) via Escuintla. From Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa, catch a bus 8km east to Siquinalá (8km) and change there.

SIPACATE

An hour and a half down the road from Santa Lucía is Guatemala's surf capital. Waves here average 6ft, the best time being between December and April. The town is separated from the beach by the Canal de Chiquimulilla. Oddly unexploited, the beach here has only a couple of hotels, the most accessible being **Rancho Carillo** (☎ 5517 1069; www.marmaya.com; cabins from US\$40; ☎), a short boat ride (US\$2.80 return) from town. The only trouble you'll have sleeping is from the noise of crashing waves. Call ahead and you'll probably be able to get a better price. Surfboards are available for rent here. There are a couple of cheaper, basic *hospedajes* (budget hotels; single/double US\$4/7) in town, but remember you'll be paying for the boat ride every day. Buses from Guatemala City (US\$4,

3½ hours) pass through La Democracia en route to Sipacate every two hours.

ESCUINTLA

pop 116,100

Surrounded by rich green foliage, Escuintla should be a tropical idyll where people swing languidly in hammocks and concoct pungent meals of readily available exotic fruits and vegetables. In fact, it's a hot, shabby commercial and industrial city that's integral to the Pacific Slope's economy but not at all important to travelers, except for making bus connections.

Banco Reformador (cnr 4a Av & 12a Calle; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat), two blocks north of the bus station, changes US-dollar cash and traveler's checks and has a Visa ATM. Escuintla has some marginal hotels and restaurants. If stranded, try the **Hotel Costa Sur** (☎ 5295 9528; 12a Calle 4-13; s/d with private bathroom US\$12/16; ☎), a couple of doors from Banco Reformador, which has decent, cool rooms with TV and fan. Air-con costs an extra US\$3.

All buses from the terminal pass along 1a Av, but if you really want to get a seat, head to the main bus station in the southern part of town, just off 4a Av. The station entrance is marked by a Scott 77 fuel station. Buses depart from Antigua (US\$1.20, one hour) about every half-hour, from 5:30am to 4:30pm. Buses going to Guatemala City (US\$2.30, 1½ hours) go about every 20 minutes from the street outside, from 5am to 6pm. Buses to Puerto San José (US\$1, 45 minutes), some continuing to Iztapa, have similar frequency. Buses coming along the Carretera al Pacífico may drop you in the north of town, necessitating a sweaty walk through the hectic town center if you want to get to the main station.

AUTOSAFARI CHAPÍN

About 25km southeast of Escuintla, **Autosafari Chapín** (☎ 2363 1105; Carretera al Pacífico Km 87.5; admission adult/child US\$6/4.50; ☎ 9:30am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a drive-through safari park and animal conservation project earning high marks for its sensitivity and success breeding animals in captivity. Species native to Guatemala here include white-tailed deer, tapir and macaws. Around the grounds also roam non-native species such as lions, rhinos and leopards. There is a restaurant and pool, and it makes a good day if you're traveling with kids. It's more fun if you have your own vehicle, but if

not, a 20-minute cruise through the park in a minibus is included in the admission price. **Delta y Tropical** (cnr 1a Calle & 2a Av, Zona 4, Guatemala City) runs buses here from the capital (US\$2, 1½ hours), every 30 minutes, from 6am to 6:30pm, via Escuintla.

PUERTO SAN JOSÉ & LIKÍN

Guatemala's most important seaside resort leaves a lot to be desired. But if you're eager to get into the Pacific surf, head 50km south from Escuintla to Puerto San José and neighboring settlements.

Puerto San José (population 14,000) was Guatemala's most important Pacific port in the latter half of the 19th century and well into the 20th. Now superseded by the more modern Puerto Quetzal to the east, Puerto San José languishes and slumbers, except at weekends and holidays when thousands of Guatemalans pour into town. The beach, inconveniently located across the Canal de Chiquimulilla, is reached by boat.

It's smarter to head west along the coast 5km (by taxi or car) to Balneario Chulamar, which has a nicer beach and also a suitable hotel or two.

About 5km east of Puerto San José, just past Puerto Quetzal, is Balneario Likín, Guatemala's only upmarket Pacific resort. Likín is much beloved by well-to-do families from Guatemala City who have seaside houses on the tidy streets and canals of this planned development.

IZTAPA

About 12km east of Puerto San José is Iztapa, Guatemala's first Pacific port, used by none other than Pedro de Alvarado in the 16th century. When Puerto San José was built in 1853, Iztapa's reign as the port of the capital city came to an end, and it relaxed into a tropical torpor from which it has yet to emerge.

Iztapa has gained renown as one of the world's premier **deep-sea fishing** spots. World records have been set here, and enthusiasts can fish for marlin, sharks and yellowfin tuna, among others. November through June is typically the best time to angle for sailfish. **B&B Worldwide Fishing Adventures** (☎ in the US 888 479 2277; www.wheretofish.com; 14161/2 E 10th Pl, Dalles, OR 97058) and **Fishing International** (☎ in the US 800 950 4242; www.fishinginternational.com; 184 S Fourth St, Santa Rosa, CA 95404) run all-inclusive deep-sea fishing tours to Iztapa from the USA. It is also possible to

contract local boat owners for fishing trips, though equipment and comfort may be non-existent and catch-and-release could prove a foreign concept. The boat owners hang out at the edge of the Río María Linda – bargain hard. Yellowfin tuna will likely be out of reach for the local boats, as these fish inhabit the waters some 17km from Iztapa.

There's not much to do in Iztapa. The best thing to do is get a boat across the river to the sandbar fronting the ocean, where the waves pound and a line of palm-thatch restaurants offer food and beer.

Sleeping

Rancho Maracaibo (s/d US\$7/14) On the beach, Maracaibo offers probably the worst accommodation deal in Guatemala, with very basic *cabañas*, sporting a bed with reed mat instead of a mattress.

Sol y Playa Tropical (☎ 7881 4365/6; 1a Calle 5-48; s/d with bathroom US\$10/20; 📺) Should you want to stay, the Tropical has tolerable rooms with fan and a bathroom, on two floors around a swimming pool that monopolizes the central patio.

Getting There & Away

The bonus about Iztapa is that you can catch a bus from Guatemala City all the way here (US\$3, three hours). They leave about every half-hour, from 5am to 6pm, traveling via Escuintla and Puerto San José. The last bus heading back from Iztapa goes around 5pm.

You can reach Monterrico by paved road from Iztapa: follow the street 1km east from Club Cervecero bar, where the buses terminate, and get a boat across the river to Pueblo Viejo (US\$0.80 per person in passenger *lanchas*; US\$4 per vehicle, including passengers, on the vehicle ferry). From the far side buses leave for the pretty ride to Monterrico (US\$1.50, one hour) at 8am, 11:30am, 2pm, 4pm and 6pm.

MONTERRICO

The coastal area around Monterrico is a totally different Guatemala. Life here is steeped with a sultry, tropical flavor – it's a place where hanging out in a hammock is both a major endeavor and goal. Among the main cash crops here is *pachete* (loofah), which get as big as a man's leg. In season, you see them everywhere growing on trellises and drying in the sun. The architecture, too, is different,

THE ONE THAT DIDN'T GET AWAY

Somewhere between 5 and 40 miles off the coast of Iztapa, chances are that right now a sport fisher is hauling in a billfish. This area is recognized as one of the world's top sport fishing locations – the coastline here forms an enormous, natural eddy and scientists who have studied the area have concluded this might be the largest breeding ground for Pacific sailfish in the world.

Catches of 15 to 20 billfish per day are average throughout the year. During high season (October to May) this number regularly goes over 40.

Guatemala preserves its billfish population by enforcing a catch-and-release code on all billfish caught. Other species, such as dorado and tuna, are open game, and if you snag one, its next stop could well be your frying pan.

If you'd like to get lessons, or you're looking for an all-inclusive accommodations-and-fishing package, check www.greatsailfishing.com.

Fish here run in seasons. There's fishing all year round, but these are the best months:

- May to October – dorado
- June to September – roosterfish
- September to December – marlin
- September to January – yellowfin tuna
- October – sea bass
- October to May – sailfish

As in any part of the world, overfishing is a concern in Guatemala. The prime culprits here, though, are the commercial fishers, who use drag netting. Another concern, particularly for inland species and shrimp, is the practice of chemical-intensive agriculture. Runoff leeches into the river system, decimating fish populations and damaging fragile mangrove ecosystems.

It's estimated that Guatemala's Pacific coast has lost more than 90% of its original mangrove forests. The mangroves serve as nurseries for fish and shellfish and the trees maintain water quality and prevent erosion. They also provide food and income for local populations, but all along the Pacific coast, commercial shrimp farming is moving in. Over the past decade, commercial shrimp farms have consumed about 5% of all the remaining mangroves in the world.

with rustic wooden slat-and-thatched roofed houses instead of the dull cinder block, corrugated-tin models common elsewhere. When the sky is clear, keep your eyes peeled for the awesome volcanoes that shimmer in the hinterland. This part of Guatemala is also treated to sensational lightning storms from around November to April.

Monterrico is a coastal village with a few small, inexpensive hotels right on the beach, a large wildlife reserve and two centers for the hatching and release of sea turtles and caimans. The beach here is dramatic, with powerful surf crashing onto black volcanic sand at odd angles. The odd-angled wave-print signals that there are rip tides; deaths have occurred at this beach, so swim with care. Strong swimmers, however, can probably handle and enjoy the waves. Behind the town is a large network of mangrove swamps and canals, part of the 190km Canal de Chiquimulilla.

Monterrico is probably the best spot for a weekend break at the beach if you're staying in Antigua or Guatemala City. It's fast becoming popular with foreigners. On weekdays it's relatively quiet, but on weekends and holidays it teems with Guatemalan families, and everything seems a bit harried. Monterrico has a real problem with trash, something that local businesses are trying to sort out.

Orientation & Information

From where you alight from the La Avellana boat, it's about 1km to the beach and the hotels. You pass through the village en route. From the *embarcadero* (jetty) walk straight ahead and then turn left. Pickups (US\$0.25) meet scheduled boats or *lanchas*.

If you come by bus from Pueblo Viejo, from the stop walk about 300m toward the beach on Calle Principal. At the beach, head left to reach the cluster of hotels.

There is no bank, but there is a **post office** (Calle Principal) on the one real road in Monterrico. Internet access is available from **Walfer** (per hr US\$1.80) on the main street.

Biotopo Monterrico-Hawaii

Sometimes called the Reserva Natural Monterrico, **Biotopo Monterrico-Hawaii** is administered by Cecon (Centro de Estudios Conservacionistas de la Universidad de San Carlos), and is Monterrico's biggest attraction. This 20km-long nature reserve of coast and coastal mangrove swamps is bursting with avian and aquatic life. The reserve's most famous denizens are the endangered leatherback and ridley turtles, who lay their eggs on the beach in many places along the coast. The mangrove swamps are a network of 25 lagoons, all connected by mangrove canals.

Boat tours of the reserve, passing through the mangrove swamps and visiting several lagoons, take around 1½ to two hours and cost US\$10 for one person, US\$6.50 for additional people. It's best to go just on sunrise, when you're likely to see the most wildlife. If you have binoculars, bring them along for bird-watching. January and February are the best months for bird-watching. Locals will approach you on the street (some with very impressive-looking ID cards), offering tours, but if you want to support the Tortugario (who incidentally have the most environmentally knowledgeable guides), arrange a tour directly through the Tortugario Monterrico (see below).

Some travelers have griped about the use of motorboats (as opposed to the paddled varieties), because the sound of the motor scares off the wildlife. If you're under no time pressure, ask about arranging a paddled tour of the canal.

Tortugario Monterrico

The Cecon-run **Tortugario Monterrico** (admission US\$1.20; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm) is just a short walk east down the beach from the end of Calle Principal and then a block inland. Several endangered species of animals are raised here, including leatherback, olive ridley and green sea turtles, caimans and iguanas. There's an interesting interpretative trail and a little museum with pickled displays in bottles. The staff offer lagoon trips (see above) and will accept volunteers.

Parque Hawaii

This nature reserve operated by **Arcas** (Asociación de Rescate y Conservación de Vida Silvestre, Wildlife Rescue & Conservation Association; ☎ in Guatemala City 2478 4096; www.arcasguatemala.com) comprises a sea-turtle hatchery with some caimans 8km east along the beach from Monterrico. It is separate from and rivals Cecon's work in the same field. Volunteers are welcome year round, but the sea turtle nesting season is from June to November, with August and September being the peak months. Volunteers are charged US\$50 a week for a room, with meals extra and homestay options. Jobs for volunteers include hatchery checks and maintenance, local school education sessions, mangrove reforestation, basic construction and data collection. Most of the egg collection happens at night. It's a way out of town, but there are usually other volunteers to keep you company and while you're here you can use the kayaks, go on village trips and go fishing in the sea and mangroves.

A bus (US\$0.50, 30 minutes) leaves the Monterrico jetty at 6am, 11am, 1:30pm and 3:30pm (and 6:30pm, except Saturday) for the bumpy ride to the reserve. Pickups also operate on this route, charging US\$3.25 per person. Check out the Arcas website for more information.

Language Courses

Proyecto Lingüístico Monterrico (☎ 5558 9039; Calle Principal), about 250m from the beach, is quite professional. Classes are generally held outdoors in a shady garden area. You can study in the morning or afternoon, depending on your schedule. Courses here run at US\$125 per week with 20 hours of tuition, and accommodation with access to a kitchen, or US\$75 for classes only. It has useful maps of the town.

Sleeping

All hotels listed here are on the beach, unless otherwise stated. To save a difficult, hot walk along the beach, take the last road to the left before you hit the beach. All these hotels either front or back onto it. The majority have restaurants serving whatever is fresh from the sea that day. Many accommodations offer discounts for stays of three nights or more. Reserve for weekends if you want to avoid a long hot walk while you cruise around asking for vacancies. Weekend prices are given here. Midweek, you'll have plenty more bargaining power.

Johnny's (☎ 7762 0015; johnnys@backpackamericas.com; dm US\$6, s & d with bathroom US\$23, bungalows for 4 US\$43; 📍 📍 📍) A lot of people are unimpressed by Johnny's – it's the first place you come to turning left on the beach, and one of the biggest operations here. It's got a decent atmosphere though, and attracts a good mix of backpackers and family groups. Every pair of bungalows shares a barbecue and small swimming pool. There's also a larger general swimming pool. The rooms are not glamorous but have fans and screened windows. Its bar-restaurant overlooks the sea and is a popular hangout: the food is not gourmet but there are plenty of choices and imaginative *licuados* and other long cool drinks.

Brisas del Mar (☎ 5517 1142; s/d with bathroom US\$7/14; 📍 📍) Behind Johnny's, one block back from the beach, this popular newcomer offers good-sized rooms and a 2nd-floor dining hall with excellent sea views.

El Kaiman (☎ 5517 9285; r per person with bathroom US\$7; 📍 📍) Further along the beach you'll find this other cheapie, which is much more worn around the edges. Rooms are in a two-story concrete block set back from the beach. The beachfront area is much more appealing, with hammocks and a decent restaurant.

El Mangle (☎ 5514 6517; r with bathroom & fan US\$26, with bathroom & air-con US\$50; 📍 📍 📍) Eclectic decorations fill the grounds of this friendly little place 100m further along the beach. Rooms are decent sized, with hammocks strung on individual porches. There's a big open space, with a very pleasant pool, for hanging out and it's quiet. The seafront restaurant here pumps out some very tasty wood-fired pizza.

Dulce y Salado (☎ 5817 9046; cabins with bathroom per person, incl breakfast & lunch US\$27; 📍 📍) The furthest from town, about 2km east of the center. Neat little thatched-roof cabins are set around a good-sized swimming pool. The place is Italian owned, so the restaurant out front does good pastas (US\$6) and excellent coffee. Midweek, prices halve, but don't include meals.

Hotel Pez de Oro (☎ 5204 5249; s/d US\$50/60; 📍 📍) Further down the beach, this is the funkier looking place in town, with comfortable little huts and bungalows scattered around a shady property. The color scheme is a cheery blue and yellow and the rooms have some tasteful decorations and big overhead fans. The excellent restaurant, with big sea views, serves up great Italian cuisine and seafood dishes. Pastas cost from US\$6, whole fish from US\$6.50.

FREE AT LAST?

A local tradition in Monterrico is the Saturday night baby turtle race, hosted by the Tortugario Monterrico. You buy a baby turtle, let it go and the first person's turtle to reach the finish line wins dinner in a local restaurant.

On the surface, it's a good deal. The *tortugario* (turtle sanctuary) raises funds, the turtles go free and the punters go home with a warm fuzzy feeling.

There's a problem here, though. Turtles can hatch on any day of the week, so the *tortugario* keeps them in holding tanks until race day on Saturday.

Now, turtles are born with their tiny metabolisms racing, biologically amped up to make it from their nests, across the sand, through the waves and out into the currents that will (hopefully) carry them to safety. In the holding tanks, they burn off a good deal of body fat and energy swimming aimlessly around, waiting to be released. By the time they finally make it down the beach and into the ocean, they're worn out, and if you pay attention, you'll notice that many can't even make it past the breaking waves and keep getting washed back up on shore.

And given that, under perfect conditions, baby turtles stand about a one in 1000 chance of making it to adulthood, giving them an extra obstacle hardly seems fair.

The *tortugario* doesn't want to stop the Saturday night races because it's an excellent fundraiser, but if you really want to save a turtle, there are a few alternatives:

- Donate the money to the *tortugario* and explain why you aren't interested in the race.
- Buy a turtle and release it on your own, explaining why you don't want to wait till Saturday.
- Donate your time and/or money to the other turtle sanctuary in the area, at Hawaii (see opposite), which takes a much more low-key, serious approach to conservation issues.

Dos Mundos Pacific Resort (☎ 5847 4840; 2mundos.pacific@yahoo.com; bungalows with bathroom US\$100; 📍 📷 📺) The biggest complex around is pushing resort status – manicured grounds, two swimming pools, a gorgeous beachfront restaurant. The bungalows are spacious and simply but beautifully presented, with wide shady balconies out front.

Going in the opposite direction from these hotels, heading right from Calle Principal, are more options.

Set all under one big thatched roof, the rooms at **Café del Sol** (☎ 5810 0821; www.café-del-sol.com; s/d US\$24/27; 📍 📷) are a bit disappointing compared to the rest of the place. Still, they're good enough – spacious, with a few sticks of furniture. The restaurant's menu has some original dishes; try risotto with mushrooms (US\$6) or fish fillet with tomatoes, peppers (capsicums) and olives (US\$8). Eat on the terrace or in the big *palapa* dining area.

A cheery little option right on the beachfront, **Eco Beach Place** (☎ 5611 6637; ecobeachplace@hotmail.com; s/d US\$24/31; 📍 📷) has rooms of a decent size, with huge clean bathrooms, and the place is very secure. There's also a steakhouse restaurant (mains US\$7 to US\$17) on the premises and a bright, shady terrace overlooking the beach.

Eating

There are many simple seafood restaurants on Calle Principal. For the best cheap eats, hit either of the two nameless *comedores* on the last road to the right before the beach, where you can pick up an excellent plate of garlic shrimp, rice tortillas, fries and salad for US\$4.

All of the hotels have restaurants. See listings for details.

Our pick **Taberna El Pelicano** (mains US\$7-10; 📍 lunch & dinner Wed-Sat) By far the best place to eat in town, with the widest menu and most interesting food, like seafood risotto (US\$8), beef carpaccio (US\$6) and a range of jumbo shrimp dishes (US\$14).

Drinking

El Animal Desconicido (📍 8pm-late Thu-Sat) Really the only bar in town, this gets very happening on weekends, with happy hours, cocktails and excellent music. Comfy seating fills up early out front, and the rest of the place starts rocking around 11pm. To find it, go down the main street till you hit the beach, then walk 200m to your right.

Getting There & Away

There are two ways to get to Monterrico. You can take a bus to Iztapa (four hours from Guatemala City), then catch a *lancha* across the canal to Pueblo Viejo and hop on another bus to Monterrico (US\$1, one hour). This is the longer alternative, but it's a pretty journey, revealing local life at a sane pace.



The other option is to head to La Avellana, where *lanchas* and car ferries depart for Monterrico. The Cubanita company runs a handful of direct buses to and from Guatemala City (US\$4, four hours, 124km). Alternatively, you reach La Avellana by changing buses at Taxisco on Hwy 2. Buses operate half-hourly from 5am to 4pm between Guatemala City and Taxisco (US\$3, 3½ hours) and roughly hourly from 7am to 6pm between Taxisco and La Avellana (US\$1, 40 minutes), although taxi drivers will tell you that you've missed the last bus, regardless of what time you arrive. A taxi between Taxisco and La Avellana costs around US\$6.50.

Shuttle buses also serve La Avellana. You can take a round-trip from Antigua, coming on one day and returning the next (2½ hours, US\$9 one way). Voyageur Tours (see p101) comes to La Avellana three or four times weekly in the low season, daily in high season, with a minimum of three passengers. On Saturday and Sunday they pick up in Monterrico (not La Avellana) from outside Proyecto Lingüístico Monterrico at 3pm, for the round-trip. They charge US\$6.50 from Monterrico to Antigua, so it's best not to buy a round-trip ticket in Antigua; they'll take you on to Guatemala City (US\$11) if you wish. Other shuttle services also make the Antigua–Monterrico trip.

From La Avellana catch a *lancha* or car ferry to Monterrico. The collective *lanchas* charge US\$0.60 per passenger for the half-hour trip along the Canal de Chiquimulilla, a long mangrove canal. They start at 4:30am and run more or less every half-hour or hour until late afternoon. From Monterrico they leave at 3:30am, 5:30am, 7am, 8am, 9am, 10:30am, noon, 1pm, 2:30pm and 4pm. You can always pay more and charter your own boat. The car ferry costs US\$13 per vehicle.

AROUND MONTERRICO

East down the coast from Monterrico, near Las Lisas, is the Guatemalan Pacific coast's best-kept secret, **Isleta de Gaia** (☎ 7885-0044;

www.isleta-de-gaia.com; 2-/4-person bungalows US\$80/160;  ). It's a bungalow-hotel built on a long island of sand and named for the Greek earth goddess. Overlooking the Pacific on one side and a romantic and silent lagoon with mangroves on the other, this small, friendly, ecological, French-owned resort is constructed from natural materials. There are 12 bungalows, on one and two levels, with sea, lagoon or pool views. Each has good beds, fan, a bathroom, balcony and hammock; decorations are Mexican and Costa Rican. The seafront restaurant offers Italian, Spanish and French cuisine with fresh fish naturally the star. It has boogie boards and kayaks for rent and a big boat for fishing trips (US\$140 for two people). Reserve your stay in this little paradise by email four days in advance. The staff run a shuttle service to and from Guatemala City and Antigua. From Monterrico there is no road east along the coast beyond Hawaii, so you have to backtrack to Taxisco and take Carretera al Pacifico for about 35km to reach the turnoff for Las Lisas. From the turnoff it's 20km to Las Lisas, where you take a boat to Isleta de Gaia.

Chiquimulilla & the El Salvador Border

Surfers found in this part of Guatemala will likely be heading to or from La Libertad in El Salvador. Most people shoot straight through Escuintla and Taxisco to Chiquimulilla and on to the Salvadoran border at Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado/La Hachadura, from where it is about 110km along the coast of El Salvador to La Libertad. Be sure about whether or not you need a visa to enter El Salvador.

Buses leave Taxisco for the border every 15 minutes until 5pm. There are two serviceable *hospedajes* in La Hachadura on the El Salvador side of the border, but the *hostales* (budget hotels) in Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado on the Guatemalan side are not recommended. Should you need to stop for the night before crossing the border, you could do worse than head to the friendly cowboy town of Chiquimulilla, some 12km east of Taxisco. There isn't much going on here, but it's a decent enough place to take care of errands and regroup. The new bus terminal is way out on the outskirts of town – ask to be dropped off in *el centro*. Failing that, shared *tuk tuk*s take you anywhere you want to go in town for US\$0.25.

The family-run **Hotel San Juan de Letrán** ( 7885 0831; cnr 2a Av & 2a Calle; s/d US\$8/12; ) is

a clean place offering fair-sized rooms with a fan and bathroom. There are also less-attractive rooms with a shared bathroom. Drinking water is provided and there are nice plantings. The *cafetería* attached serves some of the iciest drinks in Guatemala, which are very welcome in this sweltering heat, and big plates of tasty, cheap food. Buses run every hour between Taxisco and Chiquimulilla, and also hourly, until 6pm, from Chiquimulilla to the border (US\$1.50, 45 minutes).

The other option for getting to El Salvador is to turn north from Chiquimulilla and take local buses through Cuilapa to the border at Valle Nuevo/Las Chinamas, traveling inland before veering south to La Libertad.

CUILAPA

pop 18,300

Surrounded by citrus and coffee plantations, the capital of Santa Rosa department isn't much of a tourist attraction in its own right, although the area's fame for woodcarvings, pottery and leather goods may turn up a couple of decent souvenirs.

People coming this way are usually headed for the border with El Salvador, but there are a couple of volcanoes just out of town that are easily climbed and afford some excellent views. Cuilapa is connected by a good road with Guatemala City. Buses (US\$2.50, 2½ hours) leave from the bus terminal in Zona 4.

Volcán Cruz Quemado

This dormant volcano towers 1700m over the tiny village of Santa María Ixhutatán at its base. Coffee plantations reach about one third of the way up its slopes, after which you move into thick rainforest. The summit, littered with radio towers, offers excellent views of the land running down to the coast, the Cerro la Consulta mountain range and the nearby Tecuamburro volcanic complex (see p210).

From Santa María it's an easy-to-moderate climb to the top that should take about three hours. The 12km hike is possible to do on your own, asking plenty of directions along the way. Alternatively, guides can be hired in Santa María – ask at the taxi stand on the main square.

To get to Santa María, catch a bus to Cuilapa, then a minibus (US\$0.80, 25 minutes) from there.

Tecuamburro

The Tecuamburro volcanic complex comprises various peaks, including Cerro de Miraflores (1950m), Cerro la Soledad (1850m) and Cerro Peña Blanca (1850m). This last, which has several small vents releasing steam and sulfur, provides the most interesting climb, although thick forest on its slopes means you'll have to wait till you're almost at the top for views of the surrounding fields, the coastline and nearby volcanoes.

Buses and minibuses (US\$2, 1½ hours) leave regularly for the village of Tecuamburro from Cuilapa. From there it's a two- to three-hour hike (14km) to the summit.

LAGO DE AMATITLÁN

Lago de Amatitlán is a placid lake backed by a looming volcano, and situated a mere 25km south of Guatemala City, making it a good day trip. After suffering years of serious neglect, the lake is slowly being rejuvenated, thanks mainly to local community groups who hope to see it once again function as a tourist attraction. On weekends, people from Guatemala City come to row boats on the lake (its waters are too polluted for swimming) or to rent a hot tub for a dip. Many people from the capital own second homes here.

A **teleférico** (chairlift; adult/child return US\$2/0.80; ☒ 9am-5pm Fri-Sun) heads out over the lakeshore then pretty much straight up the hillside. It's a half-hour ride with some stunning views of the surrounding countryside from the top.

Boat tours are about the only other thing to do here – full boats can be rented for tours of the lake (US\$7/13 per half-hour/two hours). If you're feeling energetic, rowboats rent from US\$4 per hour.

If you have a car and some spare time, a drive around the lake offers some pretty scenery.

Down on the waterfront several *comedores* and small restaurants serve up tasty, filling meals from US\$3. Placita Nilda seems to be the one favored by locals.

Getting There & Away

The lake is situated just off the main Escuintla–Guatemala City highway (Hwy 9). Coming from Guatemala City (one hour, US\$0.80), just ask to be dropped at the *teleférico*. The waterfront is about half a kilometer from the signposted turnoff. Coming from Escuintla, or heading back to Guatemala City, buses stop on the main road, about 1km away. It's an easy 10- to 15-minute walk, and taxis are rare.

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