

Central Honduras



Honduras' central region, especially the department of Olancho, is known as the 'Wild West' of Honduras. People from the rest of the country view the region with a certain uneasiness, like Americans might view Texas. (Ironically, both the US and Honduras elected cowboy presidents from those very regions.) Like any stereotype, there's a germ of truth – rivalries here are legendary for their longevity and notorious for ending in violence, and many people own guns.

Then again it's easy to put too much emphasis on such stories. Most people you meet in Olancho are perfectly nice (and unarmed) and travelers are very unlikely to be drawn into the region's personal and political machinations. And Central Honduras has remarkable natural beauty with hiking that rivals that in the rest of the country.

The region's blue-ribbon attraction is La Picucha, the highest mountain in Olancho and the centerpiece of the Parque Nacional Sierra de Agalta. It's a challenging multiday hike to the top, passing various microclimates to a summit with commanding views of the surrounding mountain range. There's more great hiking in El Boquerón Natural Monument.

Another attraction is central Honduras' cave systems. In Catacamas, Cueva de Talgua houses the famous 'Glowing Skulls of Talgua' – one of the most important recent archaeological discoveries in Honduras. The Cuevas de Susmay outside of Gualaco are also worth exploring.

Olancho is also the departure point for two of the country's great journeys: rafting down the Río Plátano or Río Patuca. Both trips last a week or more, passing through the largest and most pristine rain forest north of the Amazon, before emerging on the famed Mosquito Coast.

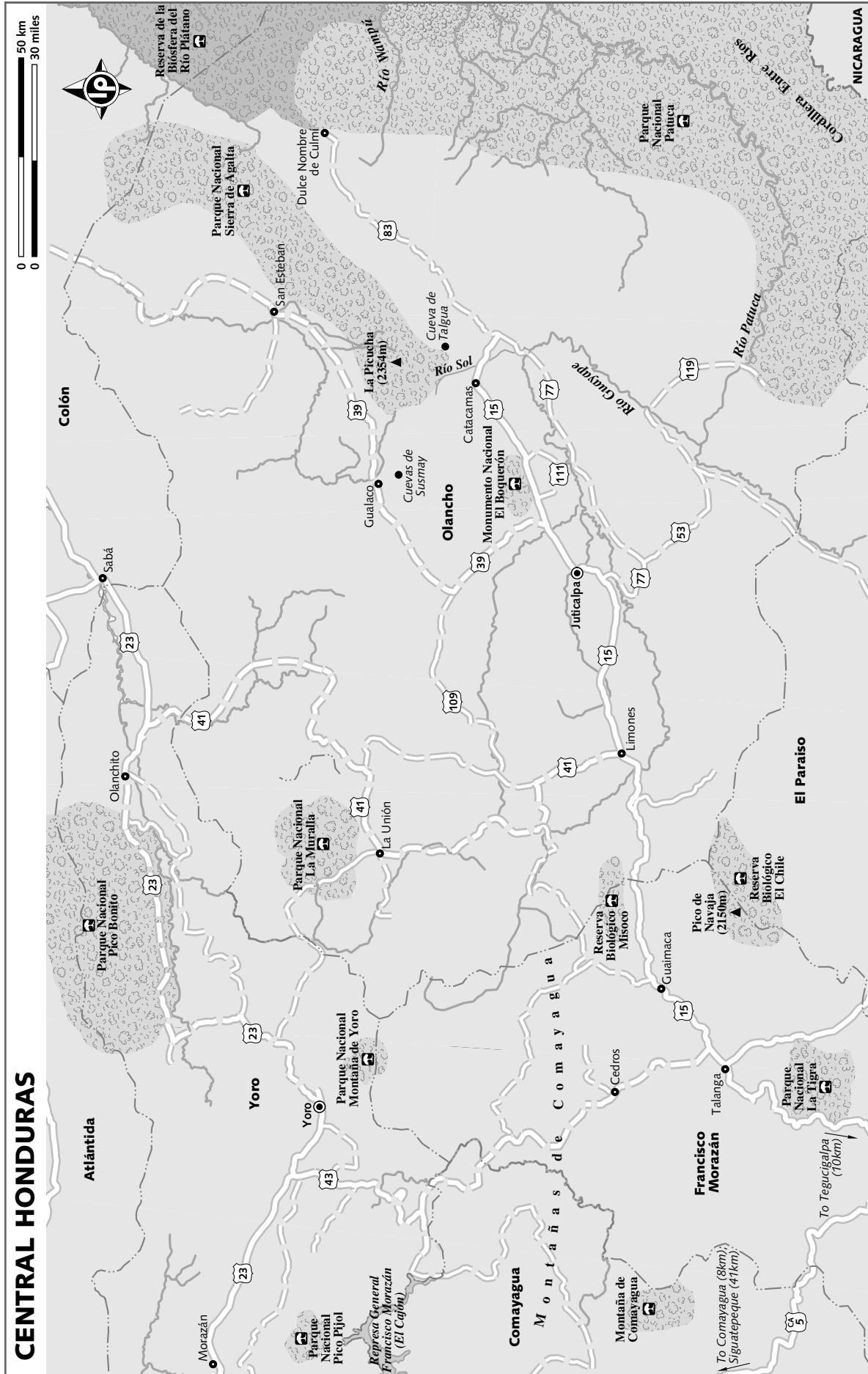
Central Honduras and Olancho present travelers with many obstacles, but those up for the challenge will discover a side of Honduras few ever see, let alone appreciate.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hike up **La Picucha** (p118) in the Parque Nacional Sierra de Agalta, passing through seven ecosystems, from dripping rain forest to a bizarre dwarf forest at the summit.
- Explore **Monumento Natural El Boquerón** (p113), a huge protected area of cloud forest, river valleys and small-time coffee plantations.
- Take a tour within the **Cueva de Talgua** (p117), where amateur spelunkers discovered dozens of 'glowing skulls' left there three thousands years ago.
- Follow a bone-chilling river to the incredible limestone formations at the **Cuevas de Susmay** (p119) near Gualaco, Olancho.
- Be baffled by the Yoro's legendary **Rain of Fish** (p110).



CENTRAL HONDURAS



CENTRAL HIGHLANDS & BEYOND

Heading east from Tegucigalpa, a single paved highway climbs into the country's central highlands to Olancho. Not far from the capital, however, are two biological reserves that see very few travelers. And cutting north from the highway, a country road leads to the former mining town of Cedros then continues over the mountains to the city and department of Yoro. There travelers can explore at least one of two national parks and, with a little luck, witness Yoro's baffling *lluvia de peces* (rain of fish).

RESERVA BIOLÓGICO EL CHILE

This small biological reserve is the first you pass on the highway headed out of Tegucigalpa toward Olancho, at the town of Guaimaca. It's a beautiful and rugged stretch of highland forest, still largely pristine though threatened by pinewood logging, legal or otherwise. The protected area includes several peaks, including Pico de Navaja (2150m) and numerous rivers and important watersheds.

Access to the reserve is through San Marcos, a town of a thousand people about an hour and half by rough dirt road from Guaimaca. There's a small visitors center in San Marcos where you may be able to hire a guide. Two trails leave from San Marcos, a one- to two-hour hike to a set of waterfalls near the village of Piñuela and to a smaller waterfall known as Majastre II.

You may be able to camp at or near the visitors center in San Marcos, or in a small cabin in Piñuela. There are very few travelers here so you'll probably have to ask around for help and information.

The park has a second entrance on its far side via the town of Teupasenti, near Danlí. There, a short but steep hike from the community of El Aguantal leads to an impressive waterfall of the same name. Hiking across the reserve is possible but very difficult – rangers had done it recently on our visit but even they had gotten lost for nearly a full day.

Admission to the reserve is free but it's a good idea to stop in the local **Honduran Corporation for Forest Development** (COHDEFOR; ☎ 8am-

noon 1-4pm Mon-Fri) before heading in. The office is 300m off the highway (behind a plywood factory, ironically) about 2km west of Guaimaca.

Getting There & Away

Any bus between Juticalpa and Tegucigalpa can drop you at the turnoff to Guaimaca. From there, buses leave for San Marcos (US\$1, 1½ hours) at 1:30pm only; the return bus departs from San Marcos at 7am. Should you choose to hitch, mornings are best.

RESERVA BIOLÓGICA MISOCO

This even-smaller reserve has one maintained trail and is known for its howler monkeys. The turnoff is 750m east from Guaimaca and the reserve itself is at the hamlet of Arenales up an extremely rough road. A visitors center there has simple accommodation where you may be able to hire a guide.

CEDROS

pop 1039

The history of Cedros, which is printed on the side of the kiosk, starts with the town's founding in 1537 by a Spanish captain named Don Alonso de Láceres Guzmán. The country's first *Asamblea Nacional Constituyente* (National Constitutional Assembly) was held here on August 28, 1824. Cedros was the birthplace (in 1839) of pioneering journalist Álvaro Contreras, who is today the namesake of Honduras' top journalism prize. There's very little to do in Cedros, however, other than soak in the sleepy small-town atmosphere. Mining engineers from the US and elsewhere turn up in town now and then, looking for abandoned or unfinished mines that may still be coaxed into production. If you do decide to poke around the surrounding hills, be extremely careful of unfenced, unmarked mine shafts.

The **police** (☎ 24hr) and **Hondutel** (☎ 7:30am-9pm Mon-Sat) are located on the parque central.

Sights & Activities

Across from the police station is the **Casa de Cultura** (☎ 9am-noon & 2-4:30pm Mon-Fri), which occasionally has photo exhibits of the area.

El Cerrito is the name of a small hill in the center of town. At the top, there's a

large shady kiosk and a rather obtuse cell phone tower. The view of the town church on one side and the pine-covered valley on the other, is quite nice. The walk there and up only takes a few minutes.

Sleeping & Eating

Doña Elinda (☎ 917 3138; r with shared bathroom per person US\$2.75) Located in a simple home behind the *iglesia* (church), this guesthouse is the only place to stay in town. It's a lucky thing that it's comfortable. Five modest but spotless rooms – all with windows overlooking the colonial village – share an equally clean bathroom. There is a *pila* (laundry station) where guests can hand wash their clothes and the owner (who is also the place's namesake) will cook up tasty Honduran meals upon request (US\$2 to US\$3).

Restaurante Típicos (mains US\$2-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) The name pretty much says it all. Located catercorner from the *alcaldía* (city hall), this simple restaurant occupies part of a long low building. A plaque a few doors down informs you that this is the building where the first national constitutional assembly was held.

Just something to think about over your eggs and beans.

Getting There & Away

There are daily buses to Tegucigalpa that leave from Cedros' parque central (US\$1.60, 2½ hours, 3am, 4am, 5am and 2pm). From Tegucigalpa to Cedros, buses leave daily at 6am, 7am, 10am, 3pm and 4:40pm (US\$1.60, 2½ hours).

YORO

pop 16,221

A dusty, back-country town on the way to nowhere, Yoro is a good place to check out some off-the-beaten-track hikes and spelunking. It is also the site of one of the more bizarre phenomena in Honduras: the rain of fish (below).

Information

On the southeast corner of the park, **Banco Atlántida** (☎ 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30-11:30am Sat) has an ATM and does cash advances on Visa cards. **Hondutel** (☎ 671 2116; ☎ 7:30am-9pm Mon-Sat) and **Honducor** (☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) are side-by-side opposite the bank. Located across the street from the

LOCAL LORE: RAIN OF FISH

On a given day in June or July, dark storm clouds will gather over the small town of Yoro and unleash a tremendous summer rainstorm. In the downpour, in the low-lying neighborhood of El Pántano, will appear thousands of silvery fish flopping on the ground. Some residents rush out with baskets to collect the fish (a type of sardine, no more than 11cm long) while others come out just to witness the event. It happens virtually every year and is known as the *aguacero de pescado* or *lluvia de peces* – 'rain of fish'.

Yoreños believe the phenomenon is nothing less than an act of God. They trace its origin to a 19th century Spanish missionary named Manuel Jesús de Subirana, who prayed fervently for three days and three nights for a miracle to feed the local indigenous people, who were facing starvation. God answered his pleas with the rain of fish, which has continued ever since.

Biologists say it can be explained scientifically. Several theories have been proposed, including that the storm conditions briefly create a small waterspout that sucks the fish out of a lake or river and deposits them in El Pántano. However, that would mean smaller fish and other aquatic debris should appear as well, which they do not.

A more widely accepted theory is that this species of fish lives in the ocean but instinctually swims up the Río de Aguán at the end of its life. The same drop in barometric pressure that accompanies the storm season may also signal the fish to begin their upstream journey. As the rain pours down, the low lying fields of El Pántano flood slightly and the fish press onward through the shallow puddles. The water recedes as quickly as it had risen, stranding the fish.

Various teams of scientists have studied the phenomenon, even a film crew from National Geographic. Locals stick to their beliefs. In any case, it's an occasion for a party: since 1997, the annual Festival de la Lluvia de Peces has been held around the middle of June and includes parades, music and, thank God, lots of fried fish.

DAY TRIP TO PICO PIJOL

Rarely visited by tourists, Parque Nacional Pico Pijol is a lush cloud forest with two imposing peaks – Pico Pijol (2282m) and Cerro El Sargento (1852m). In 1987 it was set aside as a 122 sq km reserve in order to protect its natural resources, namely four rivers, which are a major water source for San Pedro Sula.

The park offers no tourist services or hiking trails, however. The only way to visit it is with a guide and his machete; it's an adventure to say the least. Above 1800m, visitors are treated to the view of an untouched cloud forest heavy with vegetation and teeming with wildlife and tropical birds, including a few families of quetzals.

In Yoro, **Eco-Aventuras No Solo Grotte** (below), offers day trips in the park which can be organized with a couple of days' notice. **AECOPIJOL** (below) manages the park and offers information about visiting the park.

Hotel Marquez, the Internet café **Business Net** (Calle Principal; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-11pm) offers fast connections and web-based calls to the US and Canada (US\$0.16 per minute), Europe (US\$0.32 per minute) and Australia (US\$0.53 per minute).

Activities

Based out of the Tortuga Veloz eatery, **Eco-Aventuras No Solo Grotte** (Not Just Caves Eco-Adventures; ☎ 671 0012; nosologrotte@hotmail.com; parque central; ☎ 9am-9pm) offers hiking, rappelling and, yes, caving trips in the region. Most tours are to nearby waterfalls and caves, though guides also take visitors to nearby Parque Pico Pijol (above). Most trips last from 7am to 6pm and cost US\$35 per person (four person minimum) but overnight camping trips also can be arranged. A guide, transportation and food are usually included in the rates. Call a day or two in advance to book a tour. English and Italian spoken.

If No Solo Grotte is booked, the **Asociación Ecológica para la Protección del Parque Nacional Pico Pijol** (AECOPIJOL; ☎ 691 0412; aecopijol@yahoo.es; Parque Central), the management arm of Pico Pijol National Park, can provide general information about the park and help track down a guide.

Parque Nacional Montaña de Yoro lies south of the town of Yoro. It's a small but rugged park with dense forest and numerous caves, as well as a small number of trails. Unfortunately it is also widely known for its illicit marijuana production and the gun-toting men who patrol the area. The **Asociación Ecológica Amigos de la Montaña de Yoro** (AMY; ☎ 671 2199; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) has an office on the 2nd floor of the kiosk in

the central park, but they and others tend to discourage casual travelers from visiting the area.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Palace (☎ 671 2229; Calle Principal; s/d US\$9.50/13.25; 📍) Located on the main road in town, the Hotel Palace offers plain and cramped rooms above one of the biggest pulperías in town. The beds are decent and the breezy common area helps but this is by no means a charmer.

Hotel Marquez (☎ 671 2804; fax 671 2815; Calle Principal; r/tw US\$19/25; 📍 📺) Further down the main street, this place looks nicer on the outside than it really is. Rooms are clean, but the beds are saggy, the paint looks slapped on and many of the curtains are holding on by just a thread. There is air-conditioning in all the rooms but overall it's not particularly good value. At least there's a restaurant onsite.

For eats, head to the parque central, where several comedores serve *típica* meals three times a day.

Getting There & Away

Ordinary buses leave for San Pedro Sula (US\$3.50, 3½ hours, every 90 minutes, 4:45am to 3pm) from out the front of Supermercado Cabañas on the main drag. A block west of the supermarket, **Transportes Urbina** (☎ 671 2532) offers direct service to San Pedro Sula (US\$6; three hours) at 4:45am, 7am and 9am. Return buses depart from its terminal at 8a Calle and 1a Avenida in San Pedro Sula at 11am, 1pm and 3pm daily.

Buses to Tegucigalpa leave once daily at 7am (US\$6, six hours), or take any bus to

LOS TOLUPANES

The Tolupán people of Yoro may be one of the oldest living cultures in the Americas. Many linguists believe their language is descended from the Hokun Sioux tribe of North America, which dates back more than 5000 years. However, other researchers say the Tolupán are part of the Chibcha-speaking migration from South America around 3000 years ago that also gave rise to the Pech, Tawahka and Miskito groups today found in La Moskitia.

What is certain is that the Tolupán territory once extended over most of present-day Honduras. But with the appearance of Spanish colonizers – and the brutality and suffering they brought with them – the Tolupán receded further and further into the mountains and forests of central Honduras.

Today there are only about 19,000 Tolupán left and of those only 700 speak their ancestral language. Deeply reclusive, most live in small villages in the departments of Yoro and Francisco Morazán departments, surviving through subsistence farming, mostly on communal property, growing corn, beans, manioc and coffee.

the highway turnoff at Santa Rita (*ordinario* US\$3, direct US\$4.25, 2½ hours) and catch a Tegucigalpa-bound bus there.

There is somewhat erratic service, usually once or twice per day, to La Unión and to Olanchito. Departures are usually in the morning and depend on the weather and road conditions.

OLANCHO

Olancho is famous throughout Honduras for its cowboy mentality and Wild West ways. But its outdoor opportunities are no less noteworthy. Monumento Natural El Boquerón and Parque Nacional Sierra de Agalta have great one-day and multiday hikes, including caves, waterfalls, cloud forests and more.

JUTICALPA

pop 34,644

The only major town in northeastern Honduras is Juticalpa, the capital of the department of Olancho. There are two bus terminals, across the street from one another, at the entrance to town. From there it's a congested kilometer to the city park, which is surprisingly pleasant, flanked by a huge modern church and filled with trees and benches. There's nothing much to see here – it's mostly a jumping-off point to Gualaco, Catacamas and the Sierra de Agalta – but with a couple of good hotels and restaurants, it's a fine place to spend the night. The annual festival is held on December 8.

Information

Banco Atlántida (parque central; ☎ 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30-11:30am Sat) One 24-hour ATM but no currency exchange services.

Farmacia Nueva (☎ 785 2093; 2a Calle near 5a Av NE; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) Half a block from the parque central.

Graphitech (Parque Central; per hour US\$0.80; ☎ 8am-5pm) Web-based calls to the USA and Canada (US\$0.11 per minute), Europe (US\$0.21 per minute) and Australia (US\$0.53 per minute).

Hondutel (5a Av near 1a Calle; ☎ 7:30am-9pm Mon-Sat)

Police (☎ 785 2110; 3a Av SO at 4a Calle; ☎ 24hr)

Post Office (Parque Central; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, 8am-11am Sat)

Sleeping

Hotel Posada del Centro (☎ 785 3414; www.olanchoweb.com; Calle Perulapán at 8a Av SO; r/tw US\$22.50/33; 🚽) A true find, the Hotel Posada del Centro is one of the best hotels around. Rooms have all the little details you'd expect in a nice midrange place: recessed lighting, matching bedspreads, good beds, silent air-conditioners, big TVs, in-room phones, even extra towels. Rooms on the 3rd floor open onto a leafy, open-air courtyard with hammocks and comfy chairs – perfect for relaxing after a bumpy bus ride. Breakfast is included. If you can swing the price, it's excellent value.

Hotel Honduras (☎ 785 1331; fax 785 1456; 4a Av SE near 4a Calle; s US\$11-12, d US\$12-13, s/d with air-con US\$17/18.50; 🅇 🚽) Not much to look at on the outside, the rooms at this hotel are a pleasant surprise: high ceilings, spacious, renovated bathrooms and very clean. Most open onto an interior-facing hallway, which makes them dark but quiet.

Hotel Reyes (☎ 785 2232; 7a Av SO near Calle Perulapán; r with shared bathroom per person US\$3.25, r per person US\$4.25) A sad-looking hotel with a dark cement courtyard and worn but relatively clean rooms. Each room has a sink, which is a nice feature if you've opted to share a bathroom. For three bucks a person, it's tough to complain.

Hotel Antúnez Anexo (☎/fax 785 2034; 7a Av NO near 2a Calle; s/d with shared bathroom US\$4.25/7, s with private bathroom US\$6-8, d with private bathroom US\$13.25) In the process of being renovated at time of writing, this is (or was?) a small, fairly clean place, with a breezy courtyard in the middle. The renovations looked promising – new tile floors, fresh paint, even talk of air-conditioning – just be sure to get a room with a real bed (as versus a cot).

Eating

Oregano's (2a Calle near 8a Av NO; mains US\$4-5; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) It would be easy to miss this teeny-tiny restaurant, just 6ft wide and 20ft deep, with a dining area consisting of a single faux-granite counter and six stools. But you know the moment you walk in, beneath an arched ceiling painted with clouds, that you're in for a treat. The menu is a creative and welcome break from *típica*: try the peanut-and-almond-encrusted chicken or *morir soñando*, literally 'to die dreaming,' a Caribbean-inspired dish of shrimp flambé prepared with rum, coconut flakes and coconut milk. A husband-wife operation, the service can be very slow, especially if there are other people ahead of you, but it's well worth the wait.

Restaurante El Rancho (☎ 785 1202; 4a Av SE near 2a Calle; mains US\$2-5; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Located directly behind the *iglesia*, the picnic tables are always hopping at this open-air restaurant. Grilled meats are the specialty – try the Pincho al Rancho (US\$5) for a mouthwatering beef kabob. The chicken sandwich (US\$2.75) is pretty good too, just beware of bones.

Queen's Burger (☎ 785 3518; 1a Calle near 4a Av NE; mains US\$1.50-3; ☎ lunch & dinner) A hamburger haven serving up all sizes of beef patties. If you're hungry try the enormous Queen Special burger – roughly the size of a personal pan pizza – with all the fixin's (US\$2). Regular hamburgers are a little thin; be sure to order a side of fries so you leave satisfied. Delivery available.

Entertainment

Cine Maya (2a Calle near 3a Av NO; US\$1) Despite the odd *problemas técnicos* (technical problems), this old-timer still creaks out Hollywood releases every night.

Getting There & Away

The main bus terminal is about 1km from town on the entrance road from the highway. Buses leave from there for Limones, La Unión, Manguile, Gualaco, San Estéban, Tocoa, Trujillo and La Ceiba. **Transportes Aurora/Discovery** (☎ 785 2237) has its own terminal across the street, with ordinary and 1st-class service to Catacamas and Tegucigalpa. Plenty of taxis run between town and both stations (US\$0.80).

Daily service from the two stations include the following.

Catacamas US\$1, 40 minutes, 40km, every 30 minutes, 7:30am to 6pm

Gualaco US\$2.25, two hours, hourly, 3:30am to 3pm; take any Gualaco-, San Estéban-, or Trujillo-bound bus

La Ceiba US\$7, nine hours, 4am and 6am

Tegucigalpa ordinario US\$2.75, three hours, 170km, hourly, 5am to 6pm, *directo* US\$3.75, 2½ hours, 6:15am, 8:30am, 9:15am, 10:15am, 1:15pm, 2:15pm and 5pm

Trujillo US\$6, seven hours, 278km, 9:30am; catch on highway

MONUMENTO NATURAL EL BOQUERÓN

Monumento Natural El Boquerón is a 4000-hectare protected zone, anchored by two river canyons and the 1433m Cerro de Agua Buena. The protected area contains primary and secondary tropical forests as well as cloud forests. It also boasts the scenic Río Olancho running through the middle. A number of small farming settlements are found within the protected area, sustained mostly by small plots of corn, beans and coffee, for which parts of the preserve have been cleared or thinned.

The area around present-day El Boquerón town was once known as San Jorge de Olancho and functioned as the department capital in the 16th and 17th centuries. It was a rich and vibrant town, fueled by gold mined from the surrounding hills – locals still uncover tools and other artifacts while plowing their fields. However, legend has it that the townspeople grew miserly and, in an act of divine justice, a volcanic eruption sent a wave of burning lava down the hillside, burying the town and killing its residents. That San Jorge

de Olancho was mysteriously obliterated is well known, but the volcano story is unlikely – for starters, there are no volcanoes in the area. A more likely scenario, supported by recent geologic surveys, is that a mudslide from Cerro de Agua Buena's steep flanks was responsible for the tragedy.

Information

This is a great place for dayhikes without the need for guides. Following the loop 'backwards' – that is, heading toward El Bambú first – the trail is clear as far as La Avispa. The section along the Río Olancho is harder to follow, faded in places and criss-crossed by hunting trails.

Jose 'Joche' Mendoza and his son Tonito Mendoza are both experienced and recommended local guides. They live in the community of El Boquerón, on the highway at the foot of the protected area. Neither has a phone, but any passerby can help you locate them. Joche doubles as a COHDEFOR park guard and both he and Tonito know virtually every inch of the park. They've guided a number of foreign visitors on daylong and multiday excursions. They typically charge US\$5.50 per day per person.

If you do go sans guide, make it a habit to talk with every local you see, to double check that you're headed in the right direction. It's much slower going, but you'll have some good conversations and will be much less likely to veer too far, or for too long, off your path.

Hiking

Trails in the protected area form a large loop. Starting at El Boquerón community, the trail follows the Río Olancho through old-growth forest and passes several swimming holes. A half-hour detour leads to Cueva de Tepisquintle, prickled with stalagmites and stalactites – the path isn't well marked, but any passing local will be able to point you in the right direction. There are numerous butterfly and bird species visible here; while butterflies are most active in the hottest hours, birds emerge mostly at dawn and dusk.

The trail eventually leaves the riverbank and climbs up the main canyon to the small community of La Avispa. There are a few simple comedores there if you get hungry – it takes most casual hikers around three hours to get here from the highway.

Locals in La Avispa can point you to the trail leading to Cerro de Agua Buena and the park's nuclear zone. The ascent is through a thick cloud forest, teeming with birds, including quetzals, toucans and motmots. The summit of Cerro de Agua Buena offers spectacular views of the protected zone.

Along the way you'll pass a temporary settlement, also called Agua Buena. Empty most of the year, the settlement swells between January and March, for the *cosecha de café* (coffee harvest). If you're there then, many workers are happy to chat, even to explain how coffee is cultivated and harvested. You can also buy simple meals of beans-and-rice from local families who have come for the season. From Agua Buena, a pleasant side hike is to the COHDEFOR radio antennae. Campesinos can point you in the right direction; a trail leads away from the coffee areas and deeper into the natural forest.

Otherwise, the trail continues over Cerro Agua Buena and winds down to the tiny hamlet of El Bambú, at last count just three families strong. From there it's a 45-minute walk down a rough dirt road back to El Boquerón.

Sleeping

You can camp for free at a number of points within the protected area. The zone near the community of Agua Buena, or near the summit of Cerro de Agua Buena, are the most common spots.

Getting There & Away

Monumento Natural El Boquerón is halfway between Juticalpa and Catacamas. Any Juticalpa–Catacamas buses can drop you there (from either side US\$0.60, 20 minutes).

CATACAMAS

pop 34,119

At the end of the paved road, deep in Olancho, Catacamas is a small attractive city with a somewhat rough-and-tumble vibe. It is best known for the Cuevas de Talgua, where dozens of skulls left there more than 3000 years ago were discovered by amateur explorers in 1994. The skulls were covered in calcite – the stuff of stalactites and stalagmites – that gave them an eerie

iridescent glow when lit by flashlights. The skulls are off-limits but the cave is still a popular sight. More recently, Catacamas has been used as a jumping-off point for a machete-hacking ascent of La Picucha, the tallest mountain in the department and the centerpiece of the impressive Sierra de Agalta national park.

Orientation

There are no street signs in Catacamas; in fact you don't have to go far from the center for the streets to turn from pavement to dirt. The road from the highway into town is Calle Independencia, which quickly bumps into the parque central. A huge beautiful tree spreads its branches over much of the park, providing shade to the benches below. Just before reaching the parque central, Calle Independencia intersects with Blvd La Mora, an impressive paved and divided roadway that extends, well, five or so blocks before turning to dirt. Three blocks down Blvd La Mora is a stoplight; to your right is the *mercado municipal* (city market), to your left is the road that leads to the steps up to La Cruzicita. Continuing straight at the stoplight brings you to the Cuevas de Talgua – a sign at the Independencia–La Mora intersection points the way.

To orient yourself, remember that Blvd La Mora runs east to west and Avenida Independencia north to south.

Information

BGA (☎ 8:30am–3:30pm Mon–Fri, 8:30–11:30am Sat)

A half-block from Hotel Papabeto, the BGA has an ATM and can extend cash advances on Visa cards.

Clínica Campos (☎ 799 5303; ☎ 24hr) Located just past the municipal market, opposite Plaza Monise.

COHDEFOR office (☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri) The director is helpful and very knowledgeable about the area but can be hard to track down.

CyberAs.com (☎ 754 7477; Av Independencia; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8am–8pm Mon–Sat) The sign outside has it spelt 'Siberas.com'.

Farmacia Catacamas 2 (☎ 799 5106; Av Independencia; ☎ 8am–9pm Mon–Sat, 8am–noon Sun)

Post office (Av Independencia; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri, 8am–11am Sat)

Sights & Activities

In town, the main sight is La Cruzicita also known as Cerro de la Cruz. Follow the road straight past the COHDEFOR – you can't

miss the long flight of green steps climbing the hillside to the cross and altar. It's a nice enough walk, with a great view of city and surrounding countryside.

Ten kilometers outside of Catacamas is its main attraction, the **Cuevas de Talgua** (US\$5, ☎ 9am–5pm, no entry after 4pm; closed Mon), a huge limestone cave system made famous by the discovery, in 1994, of hundreds of prehistoric skeletons arranged in chambers deep inside. Over the course of three millennia, water dripping from the roof encased the skeletons in a milky calcite that glows when lit up (p117).

The area of the skeletons is closed to the public, unfortunately, but you can tour the cave up to that point. The 45-minute guided tour of the cave includes a more detailed account of the discovery and of the cave system itself, which is thought to be over 100 million years in the making. There's electric lighting and a walkway over uneven parts. A small museum near the entrance has good displays (in Spanish only) of the area's geology, archaeology and present-day life. There are photos of the glowing skulls, but no actual examples. There is another cave a short distance away which your guide can take you to for a few extra lempiras.

The caves are within the boundaries of the Sierra de Agalta National Park and you can also hike a short distance past the visitors area. Three tiny communities – Talgua Arriba, La Florida and Los Ángeles – are strung along a couple hours' hike from the visitors center. If you take the 6am bus from Catacamas, you can do some hiking and bird-watching before the cave opens; you'll avoid paying the rather inflated park fee, too. Calixto Ordóñez (p117) lives in Talgua Arriba and is an excellent guide. See p116 for information on reaching the caves.

La Cascada de Los Jutes (Snail Shell Falls) is an 80m beauty within the Sierra de Agalta National Park. There are a number of places to swim along the way and the especially adventurous of the group can clamber up the waterfall's sheer rock face. Calixto Ordóñez guides this trip for US\$6.50 per group.

You can also climb **Pico La Picucha** from Catacamas, thanks to a new route forged by Peace Corps volunteers and local guides. See p117 for details.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Meyling (☎ 799 4746; fax 799 4523; Av Independencia; s/d US\$12.25/16, s/d with air-con US\$13.75/18.50; **P** 🚽) Opened in 2003, the Meyling is a modern hotel offering plain but spotless rooms with high ceilings, cable TV and in-room telephone. A restaurant onsite offers three meals a day at very reasonable prices; a good option if you arrive late or want to get an early start. Located two blocks south of the parque central.

Hotel Colina (☎ 799 4488; s/d US\$9/9.50; **P**) Located half a block south of the parque central. Opening onto a long, sparse courtyard, rooms are dated but very clean. They also come with hot water, cable TV and fans – a good deal.

Hotel Papabeto (☎ 799 5060; hgarciadiaz@yahoo.com; s/d US\$27/32; **P** 🚽 🚿) The best hotel in town, with 10 large rooms, spotless bathrooms and lovely soft beds. There's a pool, complete with a swim-up bar and breakfast is sometimes included in the fare. You gotta wonder what a hotel like this is doing in Catacamas, though it certainly makes a nice splurge after hiking La Picucha.

Hotel Juan Carlos (☎ 799 4212; www.hoteljuan-carlos.net; s/d with fan US\$12.50/15.50, with air-con US\$24.75; **P** 🚽) Located 1km down the road heading to the caves. Popular with conferences and visiting tour groups, the San Juan is large, modern, clean and forgettable. High-ceilinged rooms with ceramic floors and firm beds open onto two long, open-air corridors with a row of greenery in the middle. It's a good alternative for midrange travelers if the Papa Beto is full but the location is inconvenient if you don't have a car.

Comedor Be-Thel (mains US\$1.50-3; Parque Central; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This simple family-run comedor serves exactly what you'd expect it to – hello eggs and beans! – at plastic tables looking onto the central park.

Taki-Mex (mains US\$0.50-2; ☺ lunch & dinner) Two blocks west of Blvd La Mora on the road that leads to La Cruzicita, this corner restaurant serves good cheap Mexican and Honduran food in a spotless dining area.

Hotel Papabeto (☎ 799 5060; hgarciadiaz@yahoo.com; mains US\$5-7; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The restaurant has an oddly sterile dining area – think hospital cafeteria – but the food is highly recommended. The English-speaking chef, who was a tour guide before taking up

cooking, offers a creative and ever-changing menu, from beef fajitas to stuffed bell peppers.

Su Hogar Supermercado (☺ 8am-9pm) Stock up on supplies for a La Picucha climb at this large supermarket. To get here from the central park, go up a block on Av Independencia, turn right at the post office and walk another 2½ blocks.

Drinking

Olancho has a not-undeserved reputation as the 'Wild West' of Honduras, so the drinking scene here is necessarily a bit rowdy. Nights in Catacamas usually begin with tailgating at the Texaco (yes, as in the gas station), which puts up speakers and serves a mean Philly cheese steak. The party eventually moves to **Vaqueros** (Parque Central; ☺ 10pm-2am Thu-Sat) which has a small dance floor that gets packed Friday and Saturday nights. A local Peace-Corps volunteer admitted that there was the occasional, um, shooting or stabbing, but that he regularly took guests there with no problem, especially from 10pm to midnight. After that, alcohol and testosterone start to get the better of some patrons.

Getting There & Away

Transportes Aurora & Discovery (☎ 899 4393) has a terminal on the road leading into town from the highway; it's a 15-minute walk from the center or a US\$0.75 cab ride. Direct buses to Tegucigalpa (US\$4.50, 3½ hours, every 30 minutes, 5:45am to 4:45pm) pass Juticalpa on the way. Of the two lines, Discovery tends to be more comfortable.

Second class buses shuttle between Catacamas and Juticalpa (US\$1, 40 minutes, every 30 minutes, 7:30am to 6pm). It's also pretty easy to catch a *jalón* (hitch) out on the highway.

There is no direct service to Gualaco. Instead take any Juticalpa/Tegucigalpa bus to the Gualaco turnoff (US\$0.90, 45 minutes) which is notable for the large 'American' gas station at the corner. From here, wait for buses coming from Juticalpa, which pass hourly from 6am to 3:30pm.

For the Cuevas de Talgua (US\$0.75, 30 minutes), a converted school bus leaves Catacamas at 6am, 11am and 3pm from a bus stop near Comercial Palmira, two blocks east and a block north of the stop-

THE SKULLS OF TALGUA

Two-thousand feet into the dark and then-undeveloped Talgua caves, a group of two Hondurans and two Americans saw what appeared to be a chamber at the top of a wall. Standing on one another's shoulders they clambered up the wall and into history – literally.

What those amateur spelunkers found that April 1994 day was an archaeological treasure trove: a cache of human skeletons, painted red and gathered into small bundles. And when they first trained their flashlights on the remains, the skulls seemed to glow eerily. The effect (besides probably scaring the bejesus out of the foursome) was caused by a layer of translucent calcite that had been deposited over the centuries by water dripping from the chamber's limestone roof – the same way stalactites are formed. The remarkable sight gave the spot its common name: los Craneos Brillantes de Talgua, or the Glowing Skulls of Talgua.

To date, 23 deposits containing more than 200 skeletons have been discovered in these and nearby caves. By analyzing charcoal fragments found with the deposits – probably fallen from wood torches used while preparing the sites – archaeologists believe the remains date back an incredible 3000 years, to around 980 to 850 BC. Many of the bones were painted red and arranged in bundles along with jade and ceramic items. Researchers uncovered evidence of a densely populated village not far from the cave and theorize that the skeletons are the remains of that settlement's elite and were placed there as part of an elaborate secondary burial rite. Ironically, the calcite cap that makes the skeletons so distinctive also makes them extremely difficult to extract and study; most remain where they were found.

light on Blvd La Mora. The same bus leaves the caves at 7am, noon and 4pm. A taxi there should cost around US\$5.50. You can usually hitch a ride all or part of the way there too.

PARQUE NACIONAL SIERRA DE AGALTA

The Sierra de Agalta range forms a steep mountainous spine down the middle of Olancho, and extends (under a different name) nearly to the Caribbean Sea. Its forested flanks give rise to the Río Guayape to one side and the Río Grande on the other, both of which help nourish the massive Moskitia rain forest. The park protects an amazing range of climates and ecosystems – hiking here is tough, but certainly never dull.

Orientation

There are two main entrances to the Sierra de Agalta National Park – Gualaco and Catacamas – located on opposite sides of the protected area, separated by the jagged mountain spine that runs down its center.

Gualaco is the traditional and more frequently used entrance, especially for climbing La Picucha. The trail is better marked and maintained (though far from perfect) and the ascent is steep but manageable. There are a number of one-day and overnight trips possible as well.

Catacamas is a more recent entry-point; climbing La Picucha from this side is steeper and more overgrown and much of the hike requires hacking through ground cover with a machete. Like Gualaco, the area has several shorter hikes as well.

Information

It is highly recommended that you have a guide for hikes of any length in Sierra de Agalta National Park. The trails are poorly maintained in places, grown over with brush and trees and many paths that are visible are in fact hunting trails that do not lead where you'll be hoping they do. And if following the trail is hard, relocating it once you've gone off is even harder.

In Gualaco, Ramón 'Moncho' Velíz (☎ 789 2377) does most of the guiding; he's a friendly, reliable guy who speaks a little English and knows the park well. Francisco Urbina (☎ 901 3400) is another good choice and as head of the local COHDEFOR office, extremely knowledgeable on the area. However, his second job – evangelical minister – means he's very busy and can be hard to track down. Both charge around US\$11 per day, plus food. The folks at Comedor Sharon can help locating either guide.

It's also worthwhile locating the local Peace Corps volunteer – just ask anyone where you can find *el voluntario de Cuerpo*

de Paz. They have long served as the de facto tourism contact in town – in fact some bus drivers take it upon themselves to drop arriving backpackers at the current volunteer's front door.

For hikes from the Catacamas side, contact Calixto Ordóñez (calixtoo77@yahoo.com) an extremely reliable and enthusiastic man who has worked with Peace Corps volunteers on developing the Catacamas–Picucha route. Calixto lives in Talgua Arriba, a tiny hamlet about a kilometer past the Talgua caves – enter as you would to visit the park and follow the well-trodden path at the back of the visitors area. His house is across a small river, which you'll actually cross twice before arriving; ask as you go. He typically charges US\$7 per day for La Picucha. He also offers a number of other hikes that take in activities including **bird-watching** (US\$5), **nearby waterfalls** (US\$6.50) and a tour of his own **coffee farm** (US\$6).

Dangers & Annoyances

The biggest danger in the park is getting lost which is why guides are recommended for hikes of any length. River and spring water is fairly abundant, at least on the Gualaco side, but you should fill up whenever possible, always using a filter or purification pills. Bring a change of dry clothes including a warm layer for nighttime. Do not attempt this hike if it has rained in the last two days as the trail grows extremely muddy and the rivers may be too high to ford safely.

Sights & Activities

Climbing La Picucha is, of course, the main draw but there are several shorter hikes along the edges of the park, starting from either Catacamas (p115) or Gualaco (opposite) that let you explore the area without taking on such a difficult climb. See those sections for details.

PICO LA PICUCHA

La Picucha is a mother of a mountain and, at 2354m, the highest point in Olancho. It is most commonly climbed from the Gualaco side, a difficult three- to four-day hike. Since 2003, Peace Corps volunteers in Catacamas have worked with local guides to forge a path from there, though it remains a very tough adventure route.

The trail starts about 16km north of town, near the village of El Pacayal. From a small road sign reading 'Sendero a La Picucha', it's an hour and half of level and moderately inclined hiking to the official park entrance. From here, it's another hour and a half – and at least two river crossings – to the first campsite. The site runs alongside the Río Sol (good for a swim) and has a tin-roofed shelter and fire ring.

For those summit-bound, you may want to make it a bit further so the following day isn't so long; however, the second campsite is a good five to six hours further on. Fortunately, there are a number of decent places between the two camps to pitch a tent and refill your water bottle. This part of the trail climbs steadily and is hard to follow in places; the second campsite is also somewhat hidden, below and to the right of the trail. The next day, leave your gear at the second campsite and head for the summit, another two to three hours of tough climbing through a dripping cloud forest. It's beautiful but so steep in places you'll be using branches and tree roots to pull yourself up. At the very top is a bizarre *bosque enano* (dwarf forest) and stunning views of the forested, cloud-wisped valleys below. It's possible to camp on the summit but that would mean dragging your pack and supplies up here as well – no easy task.

The hike from the **Catacamas** side is easier to describe – stay close to your guide and just keep going up. The first day starts at the Cuevas de Talgua, passing the cluster of homes known as Talgua Arriba about 15 minutes past the visitors center (guide Calixto Ordóñez lives here) and La Florida in another hour and a half. From there it's five hours of steady climbing on a well-marked path to the first camp. Dubbed *el Hotel de Lujo*, it is anything but a 'Hotel of Luxury', with rough hewn wood walls, dirt floor and no latrine. The setting, however, could hardly be more beautiful: a thick tropical forest teeming with howler monkeys, toucans, even quetzals.

Day two is when things get tough: a full day of slow steady climbing with all your gear while your guide hacks a path through the underbrush. Starting early, you can get to the summit by 2pm, with time to set up camp amid the dwarf forest and explore the summit area. The following day you should

be able to make it all the way back to the Cuevas de Talgua visitor center and the bus back to Catacamas.

Sleeping

Climbing La Picucha takes a minimum of two days and most people take three or four – in any case, you'll be spending at least one or more nights on the trail. Ideally you have your own camping gear; if not, guide Francisco Urbina (p117) rents some basic equipment, but he's hard enough to get a hold of that you can't depend on it. The Peace Corps volunteers in either Gualaco or Catacamas town may be able to help but again it's no sure thing.

On the Catacamas side, you can also stay overnight at guide Calixto Ordóñez's house, where there's a simple room with cement floor, tin roof and room for six (US\$5.50), or you can pitch a tent nearby (US\$1.75 per person). In either case, it's latrine toilet only; bring a flashlight and candles. Calixto's wife will make simple meals for a few extra lempiras too.

You also can camp at the Talgua Caves visitors center for as many days as you like, for the price of admission. Not as homey as at Calixto's but you do have access to the center's flush toilets.

GUALACO

pop 3666

A tiny dirt-road town that sustains itself by ranching and logging and associated enterprises like wood pulp and butchering (no joke). It lies at the foot of the Sierra de Agalta National Park and has been the site of bitter and sometimes violent conflict between environmentalists and loggers/developers. For travelers, it is most notable as a point of departure for a multi-day hike up La Picucha.

Orientation & Information

At the town entrance is a triangular intersection known simply as *el triángulo*; the parque central is just beyond there. There is an Internet café on the parque central, **Cibermass** (per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-9m), that also offers telephone service to the US (US\$0.21 per minute). Hondutel was just setting up service when we passed through, so there should be more a comprehensive telephone service by the time you read this. Unfor-

tunately there is no bank in town – take out money in Juticalpa or San Francisco de la Paz.

Sights & Activities

Gualaco is best known to travelers as the main jumping-off point for climbing **Pico La Picucha**, the highest mountain in Olancho department. See p117 for details on climbing the peak from Gualaco, or taking an even more challenging route from Catacamas. **La Chorrera** is pretty little waterfall a short distance from the first campsite on the Gualaco-La Picucha trail. A nice one-night trip would be to hike here in the morning, pitch your tent at the campsite and spend the afternoon relaxing by the falls.

Would-be spelunkers can get some thrills at the **Cuevas de Susmay**, a series of caves, each known according to its prevailing feature: Water, Sand and Dry (not to be confused with Earth, Wind, & Fire). The Water cave has a large cavern a short distance inside, but to get there you have to wade and swim through the bone-chillingly cold river that gives the cave its name. Around your ankles swim tiny black fish while overhead sleep thousands of bats – not for the faint of heart, by any stretch. Dry cave is a short but steep clamber above Water cave and has two entrances. Sand cave is also nearby, its floor covered in ankle-deep sand.

Just finding the entrances can be a little tricky – you'll walk about 90 minutes toward the village of Jicalapa, then cut through two pastures to a short forest path that leads to the cave entrances. It's recommended that you go with a guide, especially if you are interested in entering the caves. The local Peace Corps volunteer may well be free to take you, or can set you up with a guide. You can also ask at Comedor Sharon; in fact, one of the pastures you have to cut through belongs to the same family.

North of Gualaco on the road to San Esteban, the **Chorros de Babilonia** were once a beautiful series of eight waterfalls tumbling 50m down; a dam built upriver has left the falls a wisp of their former selves and not really worth the effort. The dam was deeply controversial when it was approved in 2001 – among other things, opponents argued it would ruin the falls while developers insisted it would not. One of the dam's most

outspoken opponents, 28-year-old Carlos Roberto Flores, was gunned down in his home in broad daylight.

Sleeping & Eating

The establishments listed are all located on the highway.

Hotel Mi Palacio (☎ 948 9130; r/tw US\$6.50/8; 📍) Opened in 2005, the twelve rooms in this place still seem brand new; they've got gleaming tile floors, nice hot-water bathrooms, firm beds, fans and big TVs. It's run by a friendly couple. Look for the peach building just past *el triángulo*.

Hotel Los Encuentros (☎ 913 7918; s/d US\$7/11, r with air-con US\$8.50; 📍 🚽) Just a few hundred meters from Mi Palacio, this hotel has five rooms over a hardware store and several out back around a gravel parking lot. The latter are less appealing, but have air-con. All are smallish but very clean, with new beds and a bright pink paint job. To stay the night – and to buy barbed wire – stop in the hardware store.

Comedor Sharon (mains US\$2-3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A large, dimly lit eatery serving *típica* at wood tables covered with red table clothes. Photos of area hikes are mounted on the wall and owners Santiago and Delicias have helped many travelers find guides and make arrangements for climbing La Picucha.

Restaurante El Muelle (mains US\$1.50-4.25; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This new restaurant is fast becoming a favorite among locals, mostly because of the variety. Every day, customers can choose from smoked pork chops, sausage, steak, fried chicken, even fish. The desserts in the display case are tempting too. Located in a bright yellow house with pillars, facing *el triángulo*.

Getting There & Away

Buses come and go from *el triángulo* on the highway. Buses to Juticalpa (US\$2.25, 2 hours) leave at 6:45am, 7am, 8am, 9am, 10am, noon, 1pm, 2pm and 4pm. There is no direct service to Catacamas; instead take any Juticalpa bus to the highway intersection (US\$2.25, two hours, look for the 'American' gas station) and wait for a Catacamas bus there (US\$2.25, 45 minutes, last bus at around 5pm).

From Juticalpa, take any Gualaco-, San Esteban-, Trujillo-bound bus from the 2nd-class bus station. Between the three, there's a bus leaving roughly every hour from 5:30am to 3pm.

Two ordinary buses leave daily for Tegucigalpa at 5:40am and 7am (US\$4.50; five hours) and at least one bus a day passes by en route from Trujillo. However the quickest route to the capital is to go to Juticalpa first and catch a direct bus from there.

JOURNEY INTO LA MOSKITIA & BEYOND

One of the truly great adventures in Honduras is rafting from Olancho down the Plátano or Patuca rivers, a one- to two-week journey through the heart of La Moskitia. Both trips offer unparalleled wildlife viewing and pristine rain-forest experience, floating for days on end without seeing a single human trace. And the rivers are sights unto themselves – the Patuca is the second-longest in Honduras (after the Río Coco) and the Plátano includes some legitimate Class III whitewater. Omega Tours and La Moskitia Ecoaventuras, both in La Ceiba, offer both tours (p215).

From Dulce Nombre de Culmí, it's a one- to two-day hike to the headwaters of the **Río Plátano**. From there, you paddle downriver for five to six days through the totally uninhabited biosphere reserve, with a good chance of spotting monkeys, river otter, tapir, deer and more. Side hikes to caves and waterfalls are possible. The river varies from wide and slow to narrow and roiling and nights are spent camped on the beach. You eventually arrive at Las Marías, stopping at the petroglyphs along the way. The next day, you'll motorboat to Rais Ta and fly or overland out. Alternatively, you can probably arrange to stay on at Las Marías for extra hiking.

Most trips on the **Río Patuca** start outside of Juticalpa, where the Guayape and Guayambre rivers converge to form the Patuca. Paddle for six to seven days through Parque Nacional Patuca and Tawahka Biosphere Reserve. There's great bird- and animal-spotting, spending nights camped on the beach. Arrive at Krausirpe, the largest Tawahka community (all of 300 people!). Switch to a motorized canoe for the trip to Ahuas and catch a flight home. You can extend this by getting off at Wampusirpi, or flying to Belén for additional trips from there.

LA UNIÓN

pop 3114

La Unión is a small, typical Honduran mountain town, nestled into a valley surrounded by pine-covered mountains. It's the gateway to Parque Nacional La Muralla and makes a convenient stopover on the scenic route between Tegucigalpa and Trujillo.

A note of caution: La Unión isn't particularly dangerous, but the long lonely highway on either side of it has a reputation for highway robberies (see boxed text right). Police say the problem has abated, but do not stop for strangers, or drive in the area alone or at night.

Activities

Although the main attraction here is the La Muralla National Park, there are a couple other worthwhile jaunts you can take. **El Chorrón** is a pleasant and refreshing waterfall, only about 6m high but with a fine swimming hole at the bottom. To get there take the road to La Muralla until it crosses a small river, the Río Camote. The falls are 150m along the river from there. You also can hike to the nearby village of **Los Encuentros** (4km) where many houses are decorated with interesting hand-painted designs. If you're there during the sugar cane harvest in March, you may be able to see old wooden *trapiches* (ox-driven sugar mills) in use.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Karol (s/d US\$2.30/3.50) Basic rooms surround a shady courtyard – brace for avocados crashing onto the corrugated tin roof. Cleanish shared bathrooms have padded seats, perhaps the only ones in the country. There's no sign, but the building is painted purple. It's two blocks south of the *iglesia*, across from *BanhCafé*. **Hotel La Muralla** (r US\$2.50) is another suitable option.

There are a handful of comedores and street food stands around town and the *parque central*, that serve fried chicken and other standard fare plus hot drinks in the early morning.

Getting There & Away

Bus traffic is decidedly light in La Unión, especially in the afternoon. Arrival/departure times might vary with weather, day

EL CAMINO DE LA MUERTE

Olancho's north-south highways have been the scene of numerous roadside assaults; the one via La Unión has the unsettling nickname *camino de la muerte*, or 'road of death.' The problem has abated somewhat – and President Zelaya, an Olanchano, has proposed paving these roads – but avoid driving here if possible and certainly don't do so at night.

etc. Wherever you're headed, you'll likely have one to three transfers, so get an early start to avoid getting stuck in the middle of nowhere.

From Tegucigalpa, take a Juticalpa-bound bus and transfer at Limones (US\$1.75, two hours). From Juticalpa, only two buses go to La Unión (US\$3, 3½ hours, noon and 1pm) or take any bus to Limones and transfer.

To Tegucigalpa, one direct bus leaves La Unión around 5am, or take a Limones bus and transfer. Alternatively, two Tegucigalpa-bound buses from Sonaguera pass La Unión at 9am-ish and 11am-ish (US\$5.50, five hours).

For the north coast, take the 6:45am bus that's bound for Olanchito (US\$3.25, 3½ hours); transfer at Mamé to reach La Ceiba (US\$1.75, two hours); to reach Trujillo continue to Olanchito, where you can catch a direct bus, or connect through Savá and Tocoa.

PARQUE NACIONAL LA MURALLA

Deep in the heart of Olancho, Parque Nacional La Muralla used to be one of the gems of the national park system – a spectacular virgin cloud forest and a well-organized COHDEFOR office that did a good job maintaining trails, cabins, camping sites, even a youth guide service. For a number of reasons – not the least of which was ongoing and sometimes violent conflict between environmentalists and illegal loggers – the visitors center was closed and maintenance halted.

The park remains a gorgeous piece of the planet. And it is credit to the ship-shape condition of the park before the problems started that it is still, in fact, in pretty good shape. Four well-maintained trails start at or near the visitors center – at

least one short loop is relatively easy to follow, though the longer trails have started to fade, criss-crossed by fallen trees and branches, or swallowed up by fast-growing bamboo. Toucanettes and quetzals can be seen from certain spots on the trails. February is the best time for seeing birds; you'll see the most wildlife if you come early in the morning.

Information

The COHDEFOR office in La Unión and the visitors center at the park entrance were closed indefinitely at the time of research. It's worth stopping by both, in case they have since reopened. If it's open, the visitors center has photos, maps and other information on hiking in the park, though remember the trails are falling into disrepair. You may be able to hire a guide in La Unión for about US\$10 per trip. Be sure to bring along a sweater or jacket, good hiking boots and rain gear; it's quite cool in the park.

Sleeping & Eating

The office will probably discourage you from camping at the sites near the visitors center; inquire about any potential problems, even though numerous travelers and Peace Corps volunteers camped without a hitch. The visitors center once had basic rooms (cots, no electricity), but they were closed at last report; ask in La Unión for the latest. Either way, bring all your own food, water, supplies, etc. There are also simple hotels in La Unión.

Getting There & Away

The park entrance and visitors center is a long 14km from La Unión along a good dirt road. It's uphill the entire way, so allow at least four hours to walk it. If you stay a night in La Unión, you usually can hitch a ride on pickups carrying coffee workers beginning at 5:30am; the stop is several blocks north of the park so ask to be sure you're in the right place. A taxi will cost upwards of US\$20. A ride back can be trickier, especially if you're making this a day trip: ask the driver in the morning when the last truck returns, but in general you should be on the road with your thumb out by 1pm or plan on hoofing it.

OLANCHITO

pop 26,867

This tidy agricultural town has very little in the way of tourist attractions but can be a good stopover on your way to or from the interior.

Orientation & Information

Olanchito has a surprisingly pretty parque central, with well-tended plants and paths and benches beneath large leafy trees. A charming little church completes the scene. **Banco Atlántida** (1a Av; ☎ 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30-11:30am Sat) has an ATM and is located on the main road into town, across from the Esso gas station. There also is an Internet café on the parque central, **Internet Satelital** (per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-9pm Sun).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Colonial (☎ 446 6972; 1a Av NE; r with shared bathroom US\$5.50; s/d US\$8/8.50, s/d with air-con US\$13.75/14.50; Ⓟ ☎) A simple hotel with two courtyards: one doubles as a parking lot, the other is lined with car seats, which are actually pretty comfy. The 45 rooms are worn but clean. There is a good restaurant onsite, which is perfect if you want to get an early start. Popular with traveling business people; call for a reservation during the week.

Hotel Olimpico (☎ 446 2487; 1a Av NE; s/d US\$9.25/13.25, r with air-con US\$16; Ⓟ ☎) Across the street from the Colonial, this is a decent option if its neighbor is full. The rooms are bigger but the upkeep is hit or miss – some of the bathrooms are notably grubby and the beds are on the saggy side. Definitely check out a few rooms before committing.

Comidas Rápidas El Centro (Parque Central; mains US\$1.75-3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A tiny place serving up quick eats like *baleadas* (tortillas with beans and butter), tacos and enchiladas. The service is a bit gruff but the food is good. Across the street from the *iglesia*.

Pupusería La Unica (mains US\$0.50; ☎ lunch & dinner) Half a block from parque central and next to Comidas Rápidas, this restaurant serves up hot and fresh Salvadoran *pupusas* (cornmeal mass stuffed with fillings) every day. Choose between the standards: *queso* (cheese), *queso y frijoles* (cheese and beans), *chicharrón* (pork), or *revueltas* (cheese,

beans and pork). Two to three *pupusas* plus a fruit shake fill most people up.

Getting There & Away

Christina (☎ 446 2861) has a terminal three blocks south and one block west of the stoplight on the main drag. First class buses to Tegucigalpa (US\$12, nine hours) leave at 4:10am and 7am Monday to Saturday and at 7am and 9am on Sunday.

All other buses leave from the main terminal, a half-block from the Dippsa gas-line station on the main drag.

La Ceiba *directo* US\$2.75, two hours, *ordinario* US\$2.25, three hours, every 30 to 60minutes, 5:30am to 3pm

La Unión Take any Tocoa or Trujillo bus and transfer at desvío Sococo.

San Pedro Sula US\$6.75, 5½ hours; 10 departures, 3am to 12:45pm, plus 2pm Sat to Sun

Sava *directo* US\$1.50, *ordinario* US\$1.25, 45 minutes; take any La Ceiba or Tocoa bus

Tocoa US\$2; 1½ hours, 10 departures, 7am to 5:30pm

Trujillo US\$2.75, 3 hours, 8:45am only, or take any Tocoa bus and transfer

Yoro US\$3.75, 3 hours, 5am, 10am and 3:45pm