

Chiriquí Province



Chiricanos claim to have it all and there's an element of truth to what they claim: Panama's tallest mountains, longest rivers and most fertile valleys are in Chiriquí. The province is also home to spectacular highland rainforests and the country's most productive agricultural and cattle-ranching regions.

Bordering Costa Rica to the west, Chiriquí is often the first province in Panama encountered by overland travelers and serves as a subtle introduction to the not-so-subtle beauty Panama has to offer. Although the mist-covered mountains near Boquete are slowly being colonized by waves of North American and European retirees, the town is a good base for exploring the flanks of Panama's highest point, Volcán Barú (3478m). The town is also the center of Panama's coffee industry, which means that a potent cup of shade-grown Arabica is never more than a café away.

Chiriquí is home to the Parque Internacional La Amistad, which offers excellent hiking through lush rainforests that are largely unfettered by tourist crowds. If you're a serious white-water rafter, the region boasts over 20 different runs, yet sees a fraction of the river-runners that descend annually on Costa Rica.

As if this wasn't enough of a tourist draw-card, the province is also home to the pristine Golfo de Chiriquí, which boasts powder-white sand beaches and a rich diversity of marine life. With so much to offer, it's no surprise that some Chiricanos dream of creating an independent República de Chiriquí (Chiriquí Republic).

HIGHLIGHTS

- Fueling yourself with mountain-grown coffee in **Boquete** (p201), the town of eternal spring
- Climbing to the top of **Volcán Barú** (p209) and spotting both coastlines – if the weather is clear!
- Hiking through cloud forests along the **Sendero Los Quetzales** (p209) in search of the elusive quetzal
- Wondering why you're the only one around in the pristine but under-touristed **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p213)
- Island-hopping in the national marine park in the **Golfo de Chiriquí** (p198), the 'other side' of Chiriquí



■ POPULATION: 397,000

■ AREA: 8653 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO 3478M

HISTORY

When the Spaniards first visited Chiriquí in the early 15th century, they were astonished by what they found. Instead of discovering one or two main population groups, they encountered a large number of tribes living in relative isolation. Often separated by only a few kilometers, each group maintained a distinct language, culture and religion.

Of course, this didn't stop Spanish missionaries from doing what they did best, namely converting everyone they laid eyes on to Christianity. In the early 17th century, Spanish missionaries led by Padre Cristóbal Cacho Santillana rounded up 626 natives from across the region. Hoping that his work would be easier if he could identify similarities in the languages, Santillana started to record a vocabulary of the most common words, and he was successful in identifying six distinct languages.

Sadly, measles brought by the colonists swept through the towns and killed half the study population. The survivors, having had enough of the Spaniards, their linguistic studies and their religion, took to the hills. Unfortunately, their fate was already sealed – of the Cotho, Borisque, Dorasque, Utelae, Bugabae, Zune, Dolega, Zariba, Dure and others, only the Ngöbe-Buglé survived. Today, the Ngöbe-Buglé are the most populous of Panama's seven indigenous groups, though their numbers are but a fraction of what they once were.

During the 17th century and into the 18th century, Chiriquí Province was the subject of pirate attacks, much like the rest of Panama. It was just outside Remedios in 1680 that English buccaneer Richard Sawkins, attempting to lead an assault against the well-defended city, was fatally wounded. Six years later, English privateers from Honduras sacked the towns of Alanje and San Lorenzo. Even the Miskito tribes from up north behaved like pirates after invading the region in 1732, and plundering and burning the city of David.

In the 19th century, farmers from North America and Europe viewed the climate and slopes of the Chiriquí highlands as prime for coffee, timber and other crops and their descendants still work the fields today. Although the wave of immigration hasn't subsided, recent arrivals are mainly foreign retirees and real-estate speculators, which has led many Chiricanos to question

who it is that actually owns the land they love so much.

THE NGÖBE-BUGLÉ

The Ngöbe-Buglé are comprised of two separate ethno-linguistic categories, the Ngöbe and the Buglé, though the distinction is minor, and both are commonly referred to in conjunction with one another. As Panama's largest indigenous population, the Ngöbe-Buglé number close to 200,000, and retain their own *comarca* or autonomous region. Like the Kuna, the Ngöbe-Buglé implement their own system of governance and economy while still maintaining their language, representation in the Panamanian legislature and full voting rights.

The Ngöbe-Buglé are largely confined to the Chiriquí highlands, and predominantly survive on subsistence agriculture, much like their pre-colonial descendants. Their social structure is based on a system of small villages comprised of *chozas* or thatched huts with dirt floors. In the villages, men practice slash and burn agriculture in order to produce staple crops such as plantains, bananas, corn, cassava and rice. During the coffee harvest season, many of the younger men work as migrant laborers in the fields around Boquete, which generates a significant amount of income for the village.

In the villages, women are primarily responsible for raising the children, though many work as skilled artisans, especially since their crafts can fetch a high price. The two most common items produced by Ngöbe-Buglé women are the *chacara*, a woven bag of plant fibers that is meant to mimic the landscapes of the rainforest; and the *naguas*, a traditional dress of hand-sown appliqué that is traditionally worn by both women and girls. Throughout Chiriquí Province, you can find both items for sale in traditional markets and shops.

Like other indigenous groups in Panama, the Ngöbe-Buglé are struggling to maintain their cultural identity, especially as foreign pressures continue to descend on the *comarca* (district). However, although the Ngöbe-Buglé are not as politically organized as the Kuna, they are far greater in number, and they control large tracts of undeveloped land. As a result, the Ngöbe-Buglé have been more successful than other groups such as the Emberá and Wounaan in maintaining their cultural identity and resisting the drive to modernize.

GETTING TO COSTA RICA

The most heavily trafficked Panama–Costa Rica border crossing is at **Paso Canoas** (🕒 24hr), 53km west of David on the Interamericana. Allow at least one to two hours to get through the formalities on both sides. Buses from David depart frequently for the border (US\$1.50, 1½ hours, every half hour) from 4:30am to 9:30pm. On the Costa Rican side of the border, you can catch regular buses to San José or other parts of the country.

The least trafficked crossing into Costa Rica is the border post at **Río Sereno** (🕒 9am–5pm Mon–Sat, 9am–3pm Sun), located 47km west of Volcán. Buses to the border depart from David and travel via La Concepción, Volcán and Santa Clara (US\$4, three hours, every 30 minutes). On the Costa Rican side of the border, you can take a 15-minute bus or taxi ride to San Vito, where you can catch buses to regional destinations.

Note that you can be asked for an onward ticket if you are entering Costa Rica. If you do not possess one, it is acceptable to buy a return bus ticket back to Panama. Also note that Costa Rica is one hour behind Panama – opening and closing times in this box are given in Panama time.

LOWLANDS

Chiriquí is much more than its famous highland rainforests – the lowlands are home to Panama's second largest city as well as large stretches of striking Pacific coastline.

DAVID

pop 124,000

Although it feels more like a country town, David is Panama's second-largest city, the capital of Chiriquí Province and a major agricultural center. David is rapidly growing in terms of wealth and importance as a result of the powerful wave of foreign capital flowing into Chiriquí. With tens of thousands of North American and European retirees expected to settle in the region in the years to come, David's economy is expected to boom.

For most travelers, David serves as an important transportation hub for anyone heading to/from Costa Rica, the Chiriquí highlands, Golfo de Chiriquí, Panama City and Bocas del Toro. Although the city has few attractions in its own right, David is a pleasant enough place to stay, and there's no shortage of interesting things to see and do in the surrounding area.

Orientation

David is halfway between San José (Costa Rica) and Panama City – about seven hours by road from either place. The Interamericana does not go through the town, but skirts around its northern and western sides.

The city's heart is its fine central plaza, the Parque de Cervantes, about 1.5km southwest of the highway.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Livraria Regional (Av Bolívar) This modest bookstore stocks a handful of titles in English.

CONSULATE

Costa Rican consulate (☎ /fax 774 1923; cosurica@chiriqui.com; cnr Calle B Norte & Av 1 Este; 🕒 8am–3pm Mon–Fri)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Fast Track (Av 2 Este; per hr US\$1; 🕒 24hr)
Planet Internet (Calle Central; per hr US\$1; 🕒 9am–midnight)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Chiriquí Hospital (☎ 777 8814; Calle Central & Av 3 Oeste) One of the best hospitals in the country.

MONEY

Banistmo With branches on Calle C Norte near the park and on Av Obaldía north of the bus station.

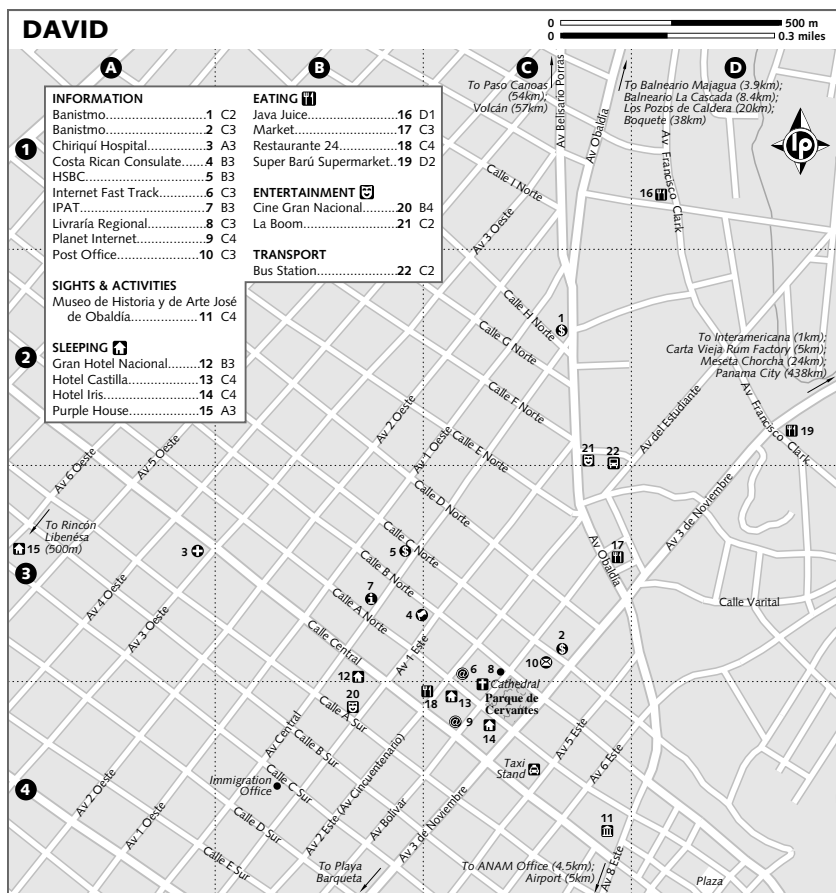
HSBC (Av Central)

POST

Post office (Calle C Norte; 🕒 7am–6pm Mon–Fri, to 4:30pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

ANAM (Autoridad Nacional de Ambiente; ☎ 775 7840; fax 774 6671; 🕒 8am–4pm Mon–Fri) Provides tourist information and advice, and gives permits to camp in the national parks.



DAVID

INFORMATION

1	Banistmo	1	C2
	Banistmo	2	C3
	Chiriquí Hospital	3	A3
	Costa Rican Consulate	4	B3
	HSBC	5	B3
	Internet Fast Track	6	C3
	IPAT	7	B3
	Livraria Regional	8	C3
	Planet Internet	9	C4
	Post Office	10	C3

EATING

	Java Juice	16	D1
	Market	17	C3
	Restaurante 24	18	C4
	Super Barú Supermarket	19	D2

ENTERTAINMENT

	Cine Gran Nacional	20	B4
	La Boom	21	C2

TRANSPORT

	Bus Station	22	C2
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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Museo de Historia y de Arte José de Obaldía.....11 C4

SLEEPING

2	Gran Hotel Nacional	12	B3
	Hotel Castilla	13	C4
	Hotel Iris	14	C4
	Purple House	15	A3

IPAT (☎ 775 2839; Av Central; 🕒 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) Provides information on Chiriquí Province.

Sights & Activities

Despite its size and role as a provincial capital, most of David's attractions lie outside the city. However, David serves as a great base for exploring the Chiriquí lowlands, and it's likely you'll pass through here a few times during your travels in Panama. For tips on how to explore the area, see the boxed text p197.

David's sole attraction is the modest **Museo de Historia y de Arte José de Obaldía** (Av 8 Este btwn Calles Central & A Norte; admission US\$1; 🕒 8:30am-noon & 12:45-4:30pm Mon-Sat), a two-story colonial home that was constructed in 1880, and is furnished with original art and

decor. Named after the founder of Chiriquí Province, the museum also houses local archaeological artifacts and old photos of the canal constructions.

If you're looking to get your adrenaline fix, consider spending the day **white-water rafting** on the Río Chiriquí or the Río Chiriquí Viejo. Tour operators in Boquete pass by David on their way to the launch point, and with advanced notice, they'll be happy to pick you up at your accommodation. For more information, see p204.

Festivals & Events

Feria de San José de David This big international fair is held for 10 days each March; contact the IPAT tourist office for exact dates, as they vary from year to year.

Concepción A half-hour drive west of David, Concepción celebrates its patron saint's day on 2 February (or the following Saturday if the 2nd lands on a weekday).

Sleeping

Hotel Iris (☎ 775 2251; Calle A Norte; r from US\$12; P ♻️) The faded three-story Iris has definitely seen better days, and its fairly worn rooms are unfortunately starting to show their age. However, it's a good deal, especially if you're looking for a bit of privacy, and you're not too fussy about where you lie down to sleep. It's also conveniently located across from the park, so it's easy enough to flop down here for the night and get out early in the morning.

Purple House (☎ 774 4059; www.purplehousehostel.com; cnr Calle C Sur & Av 6 Oeste; dm US\$8.80, r US\$18-23; P ♻️) Owned and managed by a warm and welcoming Peace Corp veteran named Andrea, the Purple House (yes, it's all purple!) is a popular spot to link up with other backpackers. Andrea provides guests with a communal kitchen, an outdoor patio, Cable TV, DVD rentals and free internet, and she is an incredible source of information on the surrounding area. Located in the San Mateo commercial area, the Purple House is also close to lots of restaurants, supermarkets and pharmacies. There is limited availability in October – call or email first. The Purple House also offers private transportation on request for both guests and non-guests to the port for Isla Boca Brava in the Golfo de Chiriquí (p198) – from here, you can catch a water taxi out to this gorgeous island. If you're not staying at Purple House and you'd like to arrange transport, call a day before the desired departure to make a reservation. Prices start at US\$30 for one to two people, and decrease depending on the size of the party. Note that there is a US\$2 surcharge for non-guests.

Hotel Castilla (☎ 774 5260; Calle A Norte; r from US\$30; P ♻️) Although rooms at the Castilla are more expensive than the Iris, this centrally located hotel is one of the best values in David. Every room at the Castilla is fairly cheap, cheerful and equipped with air-con, private hot-water bathrooms and cable TV. You'll have to dig a little deeper to stay here, but it might be worth it if you're in need of some creature comforts.

Gran Hotel Nacional (☎ 775 2222; Calle Central; d from US\$60; P ♻️) David's most upscale

hotel is a modest affair at best, and its offering of modern yet fairly sterile rooms are more suited to traveling domestic businessmen than to discerning upscale tourists. But the hotel isn't short on amenities, and the on-site bar-restaurant, pizzeria, casino and secure parking sweeten the deal considerably. David also has the somewhat warranted reputation as the hottest city in Panama, which is something you won't have to give much thought to while you're doing laps in the hotel's large swimming pool.

Eating

If you're looking for cheap produce, look out for the bustling market near the junction of Avs Bolívar and Obaldía. Self-caterers can head to the **Super Baru** (Cnr Avs Francisco Clark & 3 de Noviembre), a large American-style supermarket.

Restaurant 24 (Av 2 Este; mains US\$2-3; ☎ 24hr) Popular with locals for its grilled meats and inexpensive lunch specials, this is the perfect spot to get your fill without breaking the budget. But don't come here in a rush as some staff members aren't in a hurry to take your order before the kitchen closes.

Java Juice (Av Francisco Clark; mains US\$2.50-4) Iced coffee, fresh-fruit smoothies, healthy salads and juicy grilled burgers are the fare at this charming outdoor café northeast of the bus terminal. Like its sister store in Boquete (p208), Java Juice seems more suited to Northern California than to Chiriquí but the satisfied customers aren't complaining.

Rincón Libenésa (Interamericana; mains US\$4-7) Located three blocks past the McDonald's on the Interamericana, this authentic Lebanese restaurant provides welcome relief from a steady diet of rice and beans. Homemade hummus, tabouleh and *baba ghanooj* will make you stop and wonder if you're in the Middle East – 15 seconds later, the sounds of blaring reggaeton will remind you where you are.

Entertainment

La Boom (Av Obaldía, near Av 1 Este) David's largest bar and disco features a sleek dance floor packs in young crowds on Friday and Saturday night. Things can definitely get rowdy here, but a good time can be had assuming you don't pull anyone's date out onto the dance floor.

Cine Gran Nacional (Av 1 Este) This aging movie theater is the perfect spot to catch up on all

EXPLORE MORE OF THE DAVID AREA

Tired of the tourist crowds? Looking for a bit of an adventure? Here's a list of Lonely Planet author-tested excursions to spice up your travels:

- **Rest those tired bones in the Los Pozos de Caldera hot springs** Take a bus to the town of Caldera, hike along the dirt road for 45 minutes and soak up the health-giving properties of the spring; see p198.
- **Learn to appreciate rum before you down a tumbler or two** Contact Mr Garcia (☎ 772 7073) to arrange a private tour of the Carta Vieja rum factory, which is located on the outskirts of town.
- **Swim with Chiricanos at Balneario Majagua and Balneario La Cascada** Hop on a Boquete-bound bus and jump off at either of these popular local swimming spots; see below
- **Beat the David heat with a trip to nearby Playa Barqueta** Grab some friends and take a taxi to the lovely dark-sand beach of Playa Barqueta for a day of fun in the sun; see p198.

the 'latest' Hollywood films, especially since the majority are spoken English with Spanish subtitles.

Getting There & Away

AIR

David's airport, the Aeropuerto Enrique Malek, is about 5km from town. There are no buses to the airport; take a taxi (US\$2).

Air Panama (☎ 721 0841; www.flyairpanama.com/tickets) and **Aeroperlas** (☎ 721 1195; www.aeroperlas.com) fly direct from Panama City to David (US\$60, 45 minutes). Air Panama has two daily flights from Monday to Saturday and one flight on Sunday while Aeroperlas has two flights daily. Aeroperlas also has one daily flight from Monday to Friday to Bocas del Toro via Changuinola (US\$35, 35 minutes).

BUS

The David **bus station** (Av del Estudiante) is about 600m northeast of the central plaza.

Boquete (US\$1.50; 1hr; every 30min, 6am-9:30pm)

Caldera (US\$1.50; 45min; hourly, 8:15am-7:30pm)

Cerro Punta (US\$3; 2¼hr; every 20min, 5am-8pm)

Changuinola (US\$12.50; 4½hr; hourly, 5am-6:30pm)

Guadalupe (US\$3; 2½hr; take the Cerro Punta bus, which continues on to Guadalupe)

Horconcitos (US\$1.50; 45min; 11am & 5pm)

Las Lajas (US\$2; 1½hr; 4 per day, 11:45am-5:20pm; from Las Lajas take a taxi, US\$5, to the beach)

Panama City (US\$12.60; 7-8hr; every 45min, 6:45am-8pm; Express (US\$15; 6hr; 10:45pm & midnight)

Paso Canoas (US\$1.50; 1½hr; every 10min, 4:30am-9:30pm)

Puerto Armuelles (US\$3; 2½hr; every 15min, 5am-9pm)

Santiago (US\$6; 3hr; hourly, 7am-9pm)

Río Sereno (US\$4; 2½hr; every 30min, 5am-5pm)

Volcán (US\$2.50; 1¾hr; take the Cerro Punta-bound bus)

Tracopa (☎ 775 0585) operates direct buses between David and San José, Costa Rica. Buses depart every day at 8:30am from the David bus station and arrive in San José about eight hours later. From San José, buses depart for the return trip to David at 7:30am. The fare is US\$12.50 one way. Bus tickets can be purchased up to two days in advance.

Getting Around

David has a complex network of local buses, though the easiest way to get around is by taxi – fares within the city are generally around US\$1, and it's only US\$2 to reach the airport. If you're planning on renting a car, all of the major car rental companies have booths at the airport.

THE ROAD TO BOQUETE

If you're heading up to Boquete (p201), there are a number of interesting attractions to check out along the way. If you have your own wheels, you'll be able to go at your own pace and really explore the area, though all of the following places can be accessed via public transportation.

There's no doubt about it – David bakes in the sun virtually year round, which is why the locals have taken to cooling off in the nearby waterfalls. Along the road to Boquete, there are two popular swimming spots: just under 4km north of David is the **Balneario Majagua**, a stretch of waterfall-fed river that's been outfitted with a bar that serves refreshments.

Not to be outdone by its neighbor, **Balneario La Cascada**, just over 8km north of David, offers similar waterfall-side swimming, and also features a small bar. Both spots can get very crowded on weekends, though the atmosphere is always 'family fun in the sun.' If you don't have your own wheels, one of the Boquete-bound buses can drop you off at either swimming spot.

If you're in need of a good book, the small town of **Dolega**, about halfway between David and Boquete, boasts a fine second-hand bookshop. The **Book Mark** (☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) stocks mostly English-language titles (with a handful of Spanish books as well), including some old and rather obscure works. It's worth stopping in for a browse, especially if you've been re-reading the same Harry Potter book for weeks on end. Once again, any Boquete-bound bus can drop you off in Dolega.

The area's most famous attraction is the **Los Pozos de Caldera** (admission US\$1), natural hot springs that are renowned for their health-giving properties. The springs are located on private land near the town of Caldera, 14km east of Boquete.

To get to the springs, take a bus or drive to the town of Caldera (the turnoff to Caldera is 13km south of Boquete). From where the bus drops you off, continue to the end of town, where you'll see a sign indicating the turnoff to the springs. You'll turn right along this rugged dirt road, accessible by 4WD only. If you're walking it's about 45 minutes from here. Continue along the road until you reach a suspension bridge. Cross it, and take the first left leading up the hill. After 100m, you'll see a gate which marks the entrance to the property.

If you're driving, don't leave anything in the car as there have been reports of break-ins here. If you get overheated in the springs, the pleasant Rio Caldera is just a stone's throw away, and is a pleasant spot to cool off. Hourly buses run from both David and Boquete (both US\$0.75, 45 minutes) to the town of Caldera.

PLAYA BARQUETA

This long and lovely dark-sand beach southwest of David is a popular weekend escape for city-folk, though you'll have the place all to yourself if you stop by here during the week. As inviting as the ocean seems, the riptides can really pick up here, but this is

a great place to break out your surfboard if you've got one. With that said, wading in up to your ankles sure beats sweating through your socks on the David streets.

Capping the eastern end of the beach is the **Las Olas Resort** (☎ 772 3000; www.lasolasresort.com; s/d US\$134/180, ste s/d US\$144/200; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎), a low-impact, ecologically-minded resort that was designed to protect the neighboring mangroves and their population of migratory birds. The resort itself is comprised of a number of terraced rooms and suites that are decorated with soft, natural color and feature sweeping ocean views. There is also an extensive facilities list including a number of bars and restaurants, a spa, gym, yoga center, equestrian center and marina. Room rates are cheaper in the low season (April to November), and all-inclusive deals are available if you book via the internet.

Unfortunately, there is no public transportation connecting Playa Barqueta to David, though it's easy to access by private vehicle or taxi (US\$20, one hour). If you can fill the cab, you should be able to negotiate a reasonable price, especially if you arrange for a pick-up and a ride back to David.

GOLFO DE CHIRIQUÍ

The undisputed gem of the Chiriquí lowlands is the Golfo de Chiriquí, which is home to the **Parque Nacional Marino Golfo de Chiriquí**, a national marine park with an area of 14,740 hectares protecting 25 islands, 19 coral reefs and abundant wildlife. The marine park also protects the 3000-hectare **Isla Boca Brava**, a lovely little island that is criss-crossed by hiking trails and is home to monkeys, nesting sea turtles and 280 recorded bird species. Whether you want to lie on the beach, snorkel clear waters or go wildlife-watching underneath the rainforest canopy, there's something for everyone in this off-the-beaten-path destination.

A great place (and the only place) to stay on Boca Brava is at the **Restaurante y Cabañas Boca Brava** (☎ 676 3244; r US\$10, cabins US\$18-35, hammock per person US\$3), which is comprised of four spacious cabins with private bathrooms and four rustic rooms with shared bathrooms. Owners Frank and Yadira Köhler speak English, German and Spanish. Reservations are not accepted, but they'll always find you a place to stay if you're willing to sleep in a hammock.

The breezy **restaurant-bar** (meals US\$4) features a large selection of seafood (such as red snap-

SURFING IN CHIRIQUÍ PROVINCE

Owing to difficult access, surfing in Chiriquí is not as popular as in other provinces, though there is still some great surf to be had here. The following list will help you get started, though it's best to hire a local guide or contact a tour operator if you really want to explore the region. The following surf spots are featured on Map pp68–9:

- **Isla Silva de Afuera** Remote island off the coast. Two breaks: one right, one left. Right is a big peak breaking over a shallow rock ledge at medium tide. Occasionally throws a big tube with steep drops and no wall. Other break is a good left that breaks over a rock reef at medium tide. This spot catches almost every swell.
- **Isla Silva de Adentro** Remote island off the coast. A right-hand break over a rock reef that can get really big with strong swell.
- **Morro Negro** Near Morro Negro town. About five breaks, variety of lefts and rights with occasional tubes.
- **Playa Las Lajas** East of David. Beach-bottom break with rights and lefts, but in infrequent waves.
- **Playa Barqueta** Near David. Beach-bottom break with rights and lefts. Breaks at all tides, but medium to high tide is best.
- **Punta Burica** On Costa Rican border. Four left points that break along the point for long, tubing rides. Catches any swell. Better waves than Pavones of Costa Rica and less crowded.

per), and Frank and Yadira can arrange any number of excursions around the islands, involving snorkeling, whale-watching or just lounging on a gorgeous uninhabited island (prices range from US\$12 to US\$70 depending on the tour and the number of participants). From the restaurant, you're a stone's throw from the boundary of the national marine park.

To reach the island, take a bus to the Horconcos turnoff, which is 39km east of David. You can also take any bus going by the turnoff (any bus heading from David to Panama City), as long as you tell the driver to drop you at the Horconcos turnoff.

From the turnoff, take a pickup-truck taxi 13km to the fishing village of Boca Chica (US\$15; one hour). If you see no taxis at the turnoff, walk into Horconcos and call either **Jovené** (☎ 653 1549) or **Roberto** (☎ 628 0651); both are taxi drivers in the area. At the Boca Chica dock, hire a water taxi (per person US\$1) to take you 200m to the island.

With advance notice, the Purple House (p196) in David are able to arrange all of your transportation.

If you drive your own vehicle, you can safely leave it near the village dock, but the road between Horconcos and Boca Chica is impassable save for 4WD vehicles.

PUNTA BURICA

This lush peninsula jutting into the Pacific is a lovely spot for absorbing the beauty of both the rainforest and the coastline.

our pick **Mono Feliz** (☎ 595 0388; mono_feliz@hotmail.com; cabin 1st night/every night thereafter per person US\$20/15, campsite per person per day US\$5; **P** **Q**) offers visitors a chance to enjoy this untouched natural beauty. Wildlife is a key feature here, and the Mono Feliz (happy monkey) certainly has its share of its namesake.

Facilities include three stand-alone cabins – two in the garden and one on the beach. There is also a large pool (fed by cool spring water, and you may be surrounded by monkeys at times), fresh water showers and an outdoor kitchen for guest use. Those who'd rather not cook can pay US\$20 per day extra for three home-cooked meals, ranging from fresh seasonal fish to conch or lobster when available (individual meals available for US\$6/8/10 breakfast/lunch/dinner). Beds have mosquito nets. Camping on the beach is also available (bring your own gear), and you have access to pool and bathrooms.

The friendly American and Canadian owners (Allegra and John or 'Juancho' as he's known to locals) offer a range of activities including nature walks (an excursion to Isla Burica at low tide is a highlight), fishing, surfing,

bird-watching and horseback riding. Remedial massage and yoga is available for guests in need of deeper relaxation. All activities are free, except horseback riding (US\$5 an hour). English, French and Spanish are spoken.

Owing to its isolation, Mono Feliz requires a bit of work getting there. You'll first need to go to the small coastal town of Puerto Armuelles. Services from David to Puerto Armuelles leave every 15 minutes (US\$2.75, 2½ hours). Be sure to arrive in Puerto Armuelles no later than noon. The bus drops you off in the *mercado municipal*, and from there you'll take a truck to Bella Vista. From here, it is approximately a one-hour walk down the hill to Mono Feliz. You can also get off at El Medio, the last stop before the trucks go inland to Bella Vista. From El Medio it's an hour's walk along the beach. Mono Feliz is directly in front of the island Isla Burica.

If you have a 4WD, you can drive directly to Mono Feliz in the dry season (mid-December to mid-April). From Puerto Armuelles keep heading south along the coast toward Costa Rica. Go through the Petroterminal and then veer directly onto the beach (attempt this only at low tide). About 15km along you will pass through Limones, Puerto Balsa and then, around 20 minutes later, El Medio. Keep going on the beach for another 10 minutes and you will see where the dirt road starts, marked with a 'Mono Feliz' sign. Keep to this road and 30 minutes later, when you cannot go any further, you will reach Mono Feliz.

PLAYA LAS LAJAS

Playa Las Lajas, 51km east of David and 26km south of the Interamericana, is one of several long, palm-lined beaches along this stretch of the Pacific coast. Playa Las Lajas gathers crowds on the weekends, but often lies empty during the week, when you can have some serious stretches of sand all to yourself.

Although several new accommodations are currently in the works, in the meantime you can stay at **Las Lajas Beach Cabins** (☎ 720 2430 & 618 7723; dm/d US\$6.50/35, cabin US\$25). There are nine small rustic *cabañas* (cabins) right on the beach, a clam's toss from the surf, while the bathrooms are communal in a nearby concrete structure. There is also an additional concrete structure 50m back from the beach with six private rooms and two dormitories.

Back where the road dead-ends at the beach sits **La Estrella del Pacífico** (dishes from US\$3), the only

restaurant in the area. Simple fish dishes are especially good when the catch is fresh, though you can count on great ocean views anytime.

To reach Las Lajas, take any bus from David (US\$2, 90 minutes, hourly) that travels by the Las Lajas turnoff on the Interamericana. At the turnoff, take a taxi (US\$5) to where the road reaches the sea. Turn right and proceed 1.5km until you arrive at the cabins.

Ngöbe-Buglé people sell **handicrafts** in a wooden-walled structure 500m west of the turnoff – most of the residents of San Félix, 3km north of here, are Ngöbe-Buglé.

THE ROAD TO VERAGUAS PROVINCE

If you're heading out to Veraguas Province (p174), there are a number of interesting attractions to check out along the way. If you have your own wheels, you'll be able to go at your own pace and really explore the area, though all of the following places can be accessed via public transportation.

Twenty-four kilometers east of David, on the northern side of the Interamericana, is the enormous **Meseta Chorcha** (Chorcha Plateau), which photographers won't want to miss. As you approach the plateau from the west, you'll see a white streak running down its glistening granite face – a closer look reveals that this streak is actually an extremely tall waterfall. Unfortunately, the highway is as close to the falls as you can get without trespassing. The land between the highway and the foot of the falls belongs to a rancher who doesn't like strangers on his property, and it's advisable that you respect his wishes. If you don't have your own wheels, peer at the view from the window while on any eastbound bus.

Nearly opposite the turnoff for Playa Las Lajas is **Cerro Colorado**, one of the world's largest copper mines – mineralogists estimate that there's approximately 1.4 million tons of it in the mine. Although the mine isn't open for tours, it's worth stopping for a moment to size up the mountain, and dream about how many copper pennies could be minted from its stash. Again, if you don't have your own wheels, peer out the window while on any east-bound bus.

If you're looking to soak your travel-worn bones, the **Pozos de Galique** (Springs of Galique) are three no-frills hot springs, each of which can accommodate several people. Bring lots of cold drinks with you, and try

to reach them in the early morning before the day heats up and the crowds arrive. The easy-to-miss turnoff for the road to the springs (which requires a 4WD vehicle to access) is 4km east of the turnoff for Playa Las Lajas. The 3.8km-long turnoff leading to the springs is 30m west of a small bridge with 'Galique' written on it.

About 5km west of the town of Tolé is a turnoff for El Nancito, a small community known for its **rock carvings**. Locals say that the carved boulders were made more than 1000 years ago, though no one really knows for sure since the carvings have yet to be studied – few people outside Chiriquí even know about their existence.

From the Interamericana, turn north onto the road to El Nancito. When you reach the 'Cantina Oriente' sign, turn west and drive 75m until you come across some rather large boulders. If you are relying on public transportation, jump off any east-bound bus at El Nancito, and then hike the 1.5km to the

boulders. Be careful doing this in the late afternoon as you'll have difficulty catching a return bus after sunset.

HIGHLANDS

The highland rainforests are the heart of Chiriquí Province – from the rugged mountains of Parque Internacional La Amistad to the misty hills of Boquete, the highlands seem to have it all.

BOQUETE

pop 5000

The mountain town of Boquete is known throughout Panama for its cool, fresh climate and pristine natural setting. Flowers, coffee, vegetables and citrus fruits flourish in Boquete's rich soil, and the friendliness of the locals seems to rub off on everyone who passes through.

HIGHER GROUNDS

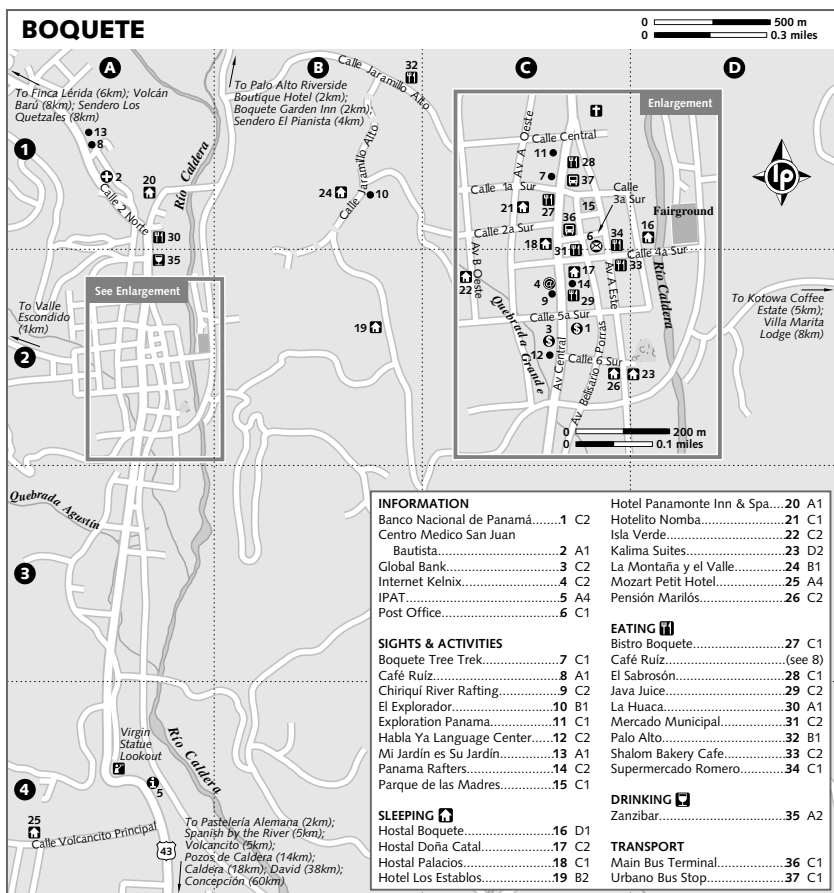
During the 19th century, farmers from North America and Europe discovered that the cool climate and rich volcanic soil of Chiriquí were perfectly suited for the cultivation of coffee. Since dried beans are relatively non-perishable and thus easy to ship, coffee quickly surpassed other cash crops, and became an important source of revenue for the area. Although Panamanian coffee has never attained the popularity of Costa Rican coffees, it is still highly praised for its high caffeine content and acidic, multi-dimensional flavor.

In the past 20 years, however, the Panamanian coffee market, along with other Central American countries, has suffered greatly. Following a collapse in the world quota cartel system, the world coffee price plummeted nearly 40% in just a few years. Although the market eventually stabilized in 1994, this was the same year that Vietnam entered the world market following the lifting of the US trade embargo. Since the market rewarded the efficiency of Vietnamese coffee suppliers, many coffee-exporting nations (Panama included) lost a large percentage of their traditional market share.

Today, Panamanian coffee continues to be grown in Chiriquí Province. Harvesting occurs primarily in the dry season, and is dependent on cheap, seasonal labor that predominantly consists of Ngöbe-Buglé. Once picked, the ripened berries are transported to *beneficos* (processing plants) where they are separated from the fruit and sun-dried. Green coffee beans are then vacuum sealed to retain their characteristic acidity, and shipped to roasters throughout the world.

In recent years, it's ironic that the price of green coffee beans plummeted at the same time that the price of a cup of coffee skyrocketed. While coffee suppliers like Starbucks continue to run lucrative enterprises, coffee farmers (not to mention migrant workers) are receiving an absurdly small percentage of the profits. This phenomenon initiated a push for free trade, which is an economic (and increasingly political) term referring to the unhindered flow of goods and services between countries. When a coffee advertises itself as free trade, it is usually sold at a higher price to ensure that profits are more evenly distributed.

With the consequences of the CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Agreement) already being felt, trade barriers are about to be redefined throughout the Americas. However, since Panama is a comparatively small player in Latin America, it is difficult to say whether this legislation will be enough to secure a market niche in light of the growing production capabilities of countries like Brazil.



Boquete was very much intent on remaining a small town, but was faced with changes beyond anyone's control – Baby Boomers started getting old. When *Modern Maturity* magazine of the American Association for Retired Persons chose Boquete in 2001 as one of the four top places in the world to retire, a flock of foreign retirees started snatching up mountain plots. Today, gated communities dot the hillsides, and the face of Boquete is slowly being transformed.

For travelers, Boquete is one of the country's top destinations for outdoor lovers. From Boquete, you can hike, climb, raft, visit coffee plantations, soak in hot springs, study Spanish or go on a canopy tour. And of course, there's nothing quite like starting your day with a

glass of freshly squeezed OJ, or perking up with a cup of locally grown coffee.

Orientation

Boquete's central area is only a few square blocks. The main road, Av Central, comes north from David, passes along the western side of the plaza and continues up the hill past the church.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Kelnix (Av Central; per hr US\$1)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Centro Medico San Juan Bautista (☎ 720 1881)

MONEY**Banco Nacional de Panama** (Av Central)**Global** (Av Central)**POST****Post office** (☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat)**TOURIST INFORMATION**

IPAT (☎ 9:30am-6pm) Before arriving in Boquete (about 1.5km south of town), this office sits atop a bluff overlooking town. You can pick up maps here and obtain information on area attractions. On the 2nd floor is an exhibit detailing the history of the region (Spanish only).

Sights

With its flower-lined streets and forested hillsides, Boquete is an ideal spot for taking picturesque strolls. A quick jaunt around town will bring you to the **Parque de las Madres**, which is home to flowers, a fountain and a children's playground. It's also worth exploring the attractive fairgrounds and riverside, where you'll come across an old railway and an exhibition wagon that's left over from the days when a train linked Boquete with the coastal town of Puerto Armuelles.

COFFEE PLANTATIONS

A trip to Boquete just isn't complete without learning the secrets of a perfectly blended cup of joe.

Café Ruíz (☎ 720 1392; www.caferuiz.com; 3hr tour US\$14), located on the main road about 600m north of the town center, is Panama's most famous coffee-grower. It offers a tour that includes transportation to a nearby coffee plantation, a presentation on the history of coffee in Boquete, a tour of a roasting facility and the obligatory tasting session. Tours depart at 9am daily except Sundays and holidays, but you have to make advance reservations.

Kotowa Coffee Estate (☎ 720 1430; 2½hr tour US\$19) is a gourmet grower offering the most comprehensive coffee-estate tour in the area. It features a description of the estate's history (beginning with a Canadian's arrival in 1918), a full tour of the production facilities and processing mill, and again, the obligatory tasting session. The estate requests 24 hours' notice prior to your visit.

GARDENS

Just uphill from Café Ruíz, **Mi Jardín es Su Jardín** (admission free; ☎ daylight hr) is a magnificent garden surrounding a luxurious private estate. The

residence is off-limits to the public, but you are free to stroll about the gardens unhindered.

The private garden of **El Explorador** (☎ 775 2643; Calle Jaramillo Alto; admission US\$2; ☎ 10am-6pm daily mid-Dec-mid-Apr, Sat & Sun only mid-Apr-mid-Dec) is located in a hilly area about 45 minutes' walk from the town center. The gardens are designed to look like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*, and there's no shortage of quirky displays to catch your eye.

HOT SPRINGS

Boquete is a good base for exploring the **Los Pozos de Caldera** (admission US\$1; ☎ dawn-dusk), an undeveloped hot spring that is rumored to have health-giving properties. A taxi cab from the town center to the hot springs should cost about US\$6 roundtrip.

Activities**HIKING**

With its breathtaking vistas of mist-covered hills and nearby forests, Boquete is one of the most idyllic regions for hiking and walking. Several good paved roads lead out of town into the surrounding hills, passing coffee plantations, fields and farms, gardens and virgin forest.

Although saunterers will be content with picturesque strolls along the river, the more ambitious can climb **Volcán Barú** (3478m). There are several entrances to the park, but the trail with easiest access to the summit starts near Boquete. For more information, see p209.

You can also access the **Sendero Los Quetzales** (Quetzals Trail) from Boquete, though the trail is uphill from here – you'll have an easier time if you start hiking from Cerro Punta (see p212). For more information on the Sendero Los Quetzales, see p209.

A pleasant day hike is along the **Sendero El Pianista** (Pianist Trail), which winds through dairy land and into humid cloud forest. To access the trailhead, take the first right fork out of Boquete (heading north) and cross over two bridges. Immediately before the third bridge, about 4km out of town, a track leads off to the left between a couple of buildings. You need to wade across a small river after 200m, but then it's a steady, leisurely incline for 2km before you start to climb a steeper, narrow path. The path winds deep into the forest, though you can turn back at any time.

RAFTING

Those who seek a bit of adventure shouldn't miss the excellent white-water rafting within a two-hour drive of Boquete. The Río Chiriquí and the Río Chiriquí Viejo both flow from the fertile hills of Volcán Barú, and are flanked by forest for much of their lengths. At some places, waterfalls can be seen at the edges of the rivers, and both pass through narrow canyons with awesome, sheer rock walls.

The Río Chiriquí is most often run from May to December, while the Chiriquí Viejo is run the rest of the year; the rides tend to last four and five hours, respectively. Depending on the skill level of your party, you can tackle thrilling class 3 and class 4 rapids or some seriously scary class 5 rapids.

The country's two best white-water rafting outfits are **Chiriquí River Rafting** (☎ 720 1505; www.panama-rafting.com; Av Central) and **Panama Rafter**s (☎ 720 2712; www.panamarafters.com; Av Central), both of which are located in downtown Boquete. Both companies staff bilingual employees, so you can get all the information you need in either English or Spanish. All-day trips are offered for US\$75 to US\$100, depending on the run and the size of the party.

CANOPY TOURS

Although canopy tours are about as prevalent as rice and beans in Costa Rica, they're still quite new to the Panama tourist scene. For the uninitiated, a canopy tour consists of a series of platforms anchored into the forest canopy that are connected by zip lines. Although they were originally used by biologists to study the rainforest canopy, today they function primarily as a way for gringos to get their eco-kicks.

If you're game to strap yourself into a harness and zip along the tree line, the **Boquete Tree Trek** (☎ 720 1635; www.aventurist.com; 3hr US\$60; Av Central) is located in secondary forest, and consists of 14 platforms, 13 zip lines, a rappel and a Tarzan-swing. Although the company stresses fun instead of ecology, these lines pick up some serious speed, so you might want to consider going a little heavy on the hand-break.

BIRD-WATCHING

Finca Lérica (p207), located about 6km north-west of town, is a coffee farm owned by the Collins family, who are long-time residents

of Boquete. Bordering their farm is prime habitat for the quetzal, the national bird of Guatemala that's nearly extinct there, but has found refuge in Chiriquí Province. In total, several hundred bird species have been identified in these woods, which makes Finca Lérica one of the premier birding spots in Panama. The per-person cost of US\$150 (party of one), US\$75 (party of two) or US\$65 (party of four to six people) includes lunch and transportation. The quetzals are most likely to be seen January through August. For more information on accommodations, see p207.

BOAT TOURS

Exploration Panama (☎ 720 2470; www.explorationpanama.net; Av Central) offers a wide variety of excursions in and around the Golfo de Chiriquí. Aboard a 50ft vessel, which is a former US Coast Guard Search & Rescue ship, you can take a 'jungle cruise' (per person US\$75, four-person minimum), exploring the mangroves, small rivers and coastal forests south of David. Ron Mager, the owner-captain of *Exploration Panama*, also offers sea-kayaking trips (led by personnel from Chiriquí River Rafting), fishing trips and scuba-diving trips. He's a very safe and reliable captain – he has his US Coast Guard license and is a former Green Beret. His ship can accommodate up to six passengers on overnight trips, which allow for excursions into some gorgeous unexplored waters.

TRUCK TOURS

Boquete Mountain Cruisers (☎ 720 4697; boquetecruisers@hotmail.com) is an expat-owned outfit offering two daily tours through some scenic back-country roads in its open-air trucks. The first leaves at 8:30am (per person US\$20) and makes a number of stops in and around Boquete – highlights include coffee, basalt formations and waterfalls. The second tour departs at 2pm (per person US\$15), and heads straight for the Caldera hot springs. Both tours last four hours. There is no booking office, so call for reservations; trips include pickup at your hotel.

Courses

Spanish by the River (☎ /fax 720 3456; www.spanishbythesea.com) is the sister school to the

popular Spanish school in Bocas del Toro (p225). Rates for group/private lessons are US\$70/130 for two hours a day, five days a week, although cheaper rates are also available for more comprehensive packages and longer stays. The school also offers a popular traveler's survival Spanish course (US\$40) that includes six hours of instruction. Home-stays can be arranged (US\$12 per night with breakfast) or you can rent one of their simple dorms (US\$7.50 per night) or private rooms (US\$12 per night). Spanish by the River is located 5km south of Boquete near the turnoff to Palmira.

The reader-recommended **Habla Ya Language Center** (☎ 720 1294; www.hablayapanama.com; Central Av) offers both group and private lessons. Five hours of group/private lessons starts at US\$50/75, though significant discounts are given for lengthier programs – 25 hours of group/private lessons is only US\$200/300. The language school is also well-connected to local businesses, so students can take advantage of discounts on everything from accommodations to tours.

Festivals & Events

The town's annual festival is the **Feria de las Flores y del Café** (Flower and Coffee Fair), held for 10 days each January. Another popular event is the **Feria de Las Orquídeas** (Orchid Fair), held every April. Contact IPAT (p203) for exact dates of both events as they vary.

Sleeping

Because of the cool climate, all of the places to stay in Boquete have hot-water showers, but don't waste too much time looking for the air-conditioner – you're not going to need it.

BUDGET

Camping

Nights are chilly here, and temperatures can drop to near freezing – pack some warm clothes if you plan to camp. You can also camp in nearby Parque Nacional Volcán Barú (p209).

La Montaña y el Valle (☎ 720 2211; information@coffeeestateinn.com; Calle Jaramillo Alto; campsites 1-/2-people US\$7/10, extra person US\$3; (P)) This working coffee

LOCAL VOICES: CHIRIQUÍ IS FOR KAYAKERS

John Miller has made more first descents of Panama's white-water rivers than anyone else. The instructor trainer for US-based **Nantahala Outdoor Center** (☎ 800-232-7238 in USA; www.noc.com), the world's largest kayaking school, John is an expert kayaker – especially when it comes to Panama's rivers. He prepared the following report:

There are other rivers in Panama, but nothing compares to Chiriquí. If someone wants to paddle in Panama, this is where they should go.

The Chiriquí Province of Panama has three elements that make it a paddler's paradise: terrain, rainfall and accessibility. During the rainy season (mid-April through mid-December), the area around Boquete has over 20 different runs within a two-hour drive of this small mountain town, varying from easy Class 1 or 2 to scary Class 5. The Cordillera Central ranges from over 10,000ft near the Costa Rican border in the west to around 6000ft at the border with the Veraguas Province in the east. The river gradient is steep and consistent almost to the Pacific Ocean, resulting in long continuous stretches of white water. In addition, Volcán Barú towers over Boquete at 11,500ft on the Pacific side of the Cordillera Central. This dormant volcano tends to attract rainfall and has six runnable rivers draining its flanks.

Most of the watersheds in this area are small, but thanks to the bountiful precipitation in the rainy season, they are usually runnable every day during the rainy season. During the dry season, only the two biggest watersheds, the Río Chiriquí and the Río Chiriquí Viejo, have enough water to be runnable, and most of the paddling in Panama is found in these two watersheds. By far, the best time of year to paddle is from September through November.

Almost all of the rivers in this area follow a very predictable pattern. They are very steep and continuous at the higher elevations, tending to be small, steep streams. As the rivers flow down the mountains, the gradient gradually levels off, and the rivers pick up tributaries and grow in volume and width. As you approach sea level, the rivers are high-volume but also drop or pool. You can generally gauge how difficult the run will be by the elevation. The hardest runs start as high as 5000ft while anything below 1000ft tends to be no harder than Class 3.'

estate, 2.5km from town, has camping on a weather-permitting basis (usually January through March). There are three tent sites, and facilities include hot showers, flush toilets, electricity and a covered cooking area. You must call ahead to let the owners know you're coming.

Hotels

Pensión Marilós (☎ 720 1380; marilos66@hotmail.com; cnr Av A Este & Calle 6 Sur; s/d US\$7/11, with bathroom US\$10/14; **P**) This cozy, family-run spot is a good choice for travelers looking for a little bit of peace and quiet. Rooms are warmly decorated with assorted knick-knacks and doo-dads, and are somewhat reminiscent of the guest bedroom at your grandma's house. The pleasant owner, Frank Glavas, knows Chiriquí like the back of his hand, and can help you make the most of your time in Boquete.

Hotelito Nomba (☎ 720 1076; Av A Oeste; dm/r per person US\$6.60/8.80; **P**) The self-proclaimed chill-out hostel is bare-bones, fairly sterile and has about as much personality as a fluorescent-lit cubicle. Of course, if you're on a tight budget, it's certainly cheap, and fairly popular among the shoestrapping crowd. The management is also laid-back, and a good time can be had here if you meet the right people.

Hostal Palacios (☎ 720 1653; Av Central; dm/r per person US\$6.60/8.80; **P**) This long-standing budget guesthouse has a friendly and vibrant atmosphere, thanks in part to the energetic owner, Pancho. From check-in until check-out, Pancho will personally ensure that you're having a good time, and that all your questions about what to do are answered. Although the rooms have definitely seen better days, this place is well-suited to backpackers, especially since there is a shared kitchen, room to pitch a tent and a fireplace out back where you can stay warm while chatting up other travelers.

Pensión Topas (☎ 720 1005; schoeb@chiriqui.com; Av Belisario Porras; s/d from US\$10/15; **P**) Built around a small organic garden, this German-run pension features a variety of rooms to suit all budgets. Cheaper rooms share an outdoor solar-heated bathroom, while the more expensive rooms have private bathrooms with steamy showers. In true German fashion, this budget inn is well-run and kept spic-and-span.

Hostal Doña Catal (☎ 720 1260; Av Central; d with shared/private bathrooms US\$10/15; **P**) On the central plaza, the faded-blue Hostal Doña Catal is

suffering from a bit of wear and tear, though the price is right, especially if you splurge for the upstairs rooms. For a few bucks more, you can enjoy a private bathroom and a balcony overlooking the park. It's not as cozy as some of the other family-run guest houses in town, but it's certainly more private, and you can't beat the park-side location.

Hostal Boquete (☎ 720 2573; Calle 4a Sur; s/d US\$15/20; **P**) Overlooking the Río Caldera, this quaint country inn is excellent value, especially if you want a quiet location away from the town center. The interiors of the rooms are utterly basic and none too exciting, though they do have attractive terraces overlooking the river. If you're a light sleeper, this is the place for you – just close your eyes at night and drift off to sleep to the sounds of the flowing water.

Mozart Petit Hotel (☎ 720 3764; coyaldps@hotmail.com; Calle Volcancito Principal; camping US\$5, cabins from US\$20; **P**) Located near the IPAT office about 1.5km from the town center, this adorable little hotel is a bit far from the action, though it's a great choice if you're rural to slow down a bit and soak up the rural ambience. Consisting of several self-contained cabins with rustic furnishings, terraced patios and sweeping views that reach as far as the Pacific (on a clear day of course!), these cabins epitomize the idea of a mountain retreat. If you really want to get close to nature, you can even pitch a tent here in the well-groomed campsite.

MIDRANGE

Kalima Suites (☎ 720 2884; www.kalimasuites.net; Av A Este; d US\$40, each additional person US\$5.50; **P** **📺**) This all-suites hotel features 10 modern suites decorated with simple but sturdy furniture and including a bedroom, living room and kitchenette. Although there are definitely more atmospheric midrange options, it's hard to beat the price here, especially if you're planning on self catering. The terrace out back serves as a communal meeting area, and there's an internet café next door that's free for guests.

Isla Verde (☎ 720 2533; islaverde@cwpanama.net; Av B Oeste; small/large cabins US\$50/65; **P** **📺**) These centrally located cabins are one of the best deals in Boquete. Set in a beautiful, lushly landscaped garden are a clutch of Alpine-inspired two-story cabins, with vaulted ceilings, professional kitchens and roomy tiled-bathrooms. Although you're only a few blocks from the

town center, the gardens here are a veritable oasis, though it can be hard to drag yourself out of bed here – the mattresses are about as plush as you'll find in these parts.

Villa Marita Lodge (☎ 720 2165; www.panamainfo.com/marita; d from US\$55; (P) (Q)) These seven stand-alone cabins on the edge of a plateau overlook a vast expanse of coffee farms, and have striking views of Volcán Barú (when it's not cloudy). Well-maintained by their proud owner, each gorgeous cabin contains a comfortable sitting area, hardwood accents and country-inspired furnishings. There's also an on-site restaurant and gathering room that's perfect for mingling with other guests and swapping stories over a home-cooked meal.

Hotel Panamonte Inn & Spa (☎ 720 1327; www.panamonteinnandspa.com; d from US\$65; (P) (Q)) Located on a quiet road at the northern end of town, this historic inn with dollhouse-like charm lies in perfect harmony with its surroundings. The hotel has handsomely furnished guestrooms, a fine restaurant-bar complete with a stone fireplace and landscaped gardens that make excellent use of the local flora. The hotel also features a highly recommended day-spa that's the perfect complement to your mountain-top getaway.

Boquete Garden Inn (☎ 720 2376; www.boquetegardeninn.com; d US\$75-90; (P) (Q)) Perched on the edge of the Río Palo Alto, this garden inn is overflowing with blossoming tropical flower beds. Airy and romantic rooms are awash in earthy tones, though they're brightened up each morning with the addition of fresh-cut flowers. The biggest perk, however, is the riverside gazebo, which doubles as a lounge-bar, and is the perfect spot for a reflective glass of wine.

Finca Lérica (☎ 720 2285; www.fincalearida.com; Calle 2 Norte; B&B r US\$65-120, ecolodge r US\$146-162 with 2 meals; (P) (Q)) Famous throughout Panama for its legendary bird-watching, Finca Lérica is a working coffee plantation that happens to be one of the best spots in the country to see quetzals, though hundreds of unique species have been spotted here. Finca Lérica consists of two premises, a Scandinavian-inspired B&B that's centered on a fireplace-warmed living room, and a recently constructed ecolodge that's nestled in the middle of the coffee plantation. Regardless of which one you choose however, the real reason you're here is to explore the avian hotspot that is Finca Lérica (see also p204).

TOP END

Valle Escondido (☎ 720 2897; www.valleescondido.biz; cabin from US\$90; (P) (Q) (R)) Part of a large, gated expat community on the edge of town, the resort at Valle Escondido is definitely not everyone's cup of coffee. The cabins here are an exercise in hedonistic luxury, though the retiree-atmosphere is about as un-Panamanian as you can get. But, if you're looking for a resort holiday, the amenities here can't be beat – Valle Escondido is the only place in town with an 18-hole golf course, athletic center, equestrian center and pool complex.

La Montaña y el Valle (☎ 720 2211; www.coffeeestatesinn.com; Calle Jaramillo Alto; d US\$130; (P)) Also known as the Coffee Estate Inn, 'The Mountain & the Valley' consists of three luxury bungalows outfitted with a professional kitchen, an enormous living room and dining area, a separate bedroom and a private terrace with breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains and the valley below. The estate is also home to a working coffee farm, and there is an extensive network of trails here that winds into the surrounding forest. According to one reader, the best part of staying here is the fresh coffee and oranges, both of which come from the estate, as well as the incredibly attentive services of the delightful owners, Jane and Barry.

Hotel Los Establos (☎ 720 2685; www.losestablos.net; d/ste US\$130/230; (P) (Q)) One of Boquete's two boutique hotels, Los Establos is an elegant country affair that has the air of a Tuscan villa. Although it was originally built to serve as stables, the lavish quarters here bear no traces of its former purpose, though its history lives on in the equestrian decorations that dot the property. Each of the four guest bedrooms and two suites is immaculately furnished with classically elegant furnishings and private terraces, though the best part of staying here is soaking away those chilly mountain nights in the outdoor glass-enclosed Jacuzzi that seats six.

Palo Alto Riverside Boutique Hotel (☎ 720 1076; www.paloaltoriverside.com; Calle Jaramillo Alto; ste US\$165-250; (P) (Q)) Boquete's most upscale boutique hotel is a casual stunner of white-washed walls, exposed wooden beams, original hanging artwork, elegant picture windows and a hewn-stone fireplace. With six individually decorated guestrooms to choose from, the atmosphere at the Palo Alto Riverside Hotel is

relaxed and intimate, and you expect a high level of personal attention here. Guests can also take advantage of the attached gourmet restaurant, which highlights a variety of world cuisines, as well as the holistic wellness center, which is the perfect spot for healing the body and the mind.

Eating & Drinking

Boquete has a numerous well-priced restaurants to choose from, and the produce and coffee here is among the best in Panama. However, you can hear a pin drop at night, so don't expect a wild night out on the town.

The area's fresh produce is sold at the mercado municipal, on the northeastern corner of the plaza. **Supermercado Romero** (Av A Este), a block east of the plaza, has all your basic groceries.

Café Ruiz (Calle 2 Norte; coffee US\$1-2) The outdoor patio at Ruiz is a good spot to sip a cappuccino and watch the mist move across the mountains. It's also the epicenter of Panama's most famous coffee industry, so you can be sure that your brew had its origin in the surrounding hillsides.

Pastelería Alemana (pastry US\$1-2; ☎ 8am-noon) On the main road 2km south of town, this gorgeous spot serves decadent fresh-baked pies alongside strong cups of coffee. If you're missing the motherland, this is also the best place in Boquete to buy authentic German breads.

Shalom Bakery Cafe (Calle 4a Sur; bagels US\$1-2) There's no doubt about it – a bagel is a coveted food here in Latin America, and no matter how much rice and beans you eat, it just doesn't compare. It's hard to go past the poppy seeds with an extra smear of veggie cream cheese, but go ahead and have it any way you want.

El Sabrosón (Av Central; mains US\$2-3) This much-loved local institution cooks up cheap and filling Panamanian cuisine served cafeteria style. Although Boquete is rapidly being colonized by gringo-friendly boutique eateries, this is one local institution that stays true to its roots.

Java Juice (Av Central; sandwiches US\$3-4; ☎ 9am-10pm) Java Juice is your spot for veggie burgers, fresh salads, juices, iced cappuccinos and tasty milkshakes.

La Huaca (Av Central; pizzas US\$5-7) North of the plaza, La Huaca is set in a beautifully restored colonial-style building with river and mountain views. It's locally famous for its tasty

stone-baked pizzas, and if you phone ahead, they'll deliver one right to your door.

Bistro Boquete (Av Central; mains US\$5-9; ☎ 11am-10pm) This handsome yet casual bistro in the center of town serves a range of eclectic cuisine ranging from grilled mountain trout to chili-rubbed filet mignon. For those with lighter appetites, Bistro Boquete also offers a variety of gourmet sandwiches and salads as well as a rich dessert selection.

Palo Alto (Calle Jaramillo Alto; mains US\$6-12) This rustic charmer occupies an open-air spot alongside the rushing Río Palo Alto. The eclectic menu here receives high marks from the local expat community, and emphasizes fresh produce and locally raised meats.

Zanzibar (Av Central; drinks US\$1-2) Nightlife in Boquete is about as common as a bad cup of coffee, though this low-key jazz bar has the cure for what ails ya. Your best chance of hearing live music is on weekends, though most of nights of the week you'll find a friendly face sitting at the bar.

Getting There & Around

Buses to Boquete depart from David's main bus terminal regularly (US\$1.50, one hour, every 30 minutes) from 6am to 9:30pm. Buses to David depart from the northern side of Boquete's plaza every 30 minutes from 5am to 6:30pm. A taxi between David and Boquete costs around US\$12.

Boquete's small size lends itself to easy exploration, and walking is a great way to see the area. The local (*urbano*) buses winding through the hills cost US\$0.50. They depart on the main road one block north of the plaza. Taxis charge US\$1 to US\$2 to get to most places around town.

PARQUE NACIONAL VOLCÁN BARÚ

This 14,300-hectare national park is home to Volcán Barú, which is Panama's only volcano as well as the dominant geographical feature of Chiriquí. Although Volcán Barú is no longer active (there is in fact no record of its most recent eruption), it has not one but seven craters. Its summit, which tops out at 3478m, is the highest point in Panama, and on a clear day it affords views of both the Pacific and Caribbean coasts.

The national park is also home to the Sendero Los Quetzales, one of the most scenic treks in the entire country. As its name implies, the trail is one of the best places in

LOCAL LORE: THE RESPLENDENT QUETZAL

The Central American lore of the resplendent quetzal originated during the era of the Maya and the Aztecs, who worshipped a deity known as Quetzalcoatl (Plumed Serpent). This mythical figure was often depicted as wearing a crown of male quetzal tail feathers, and was believed to be responsible for bestowing corn upon humans.

A popular legend regarding the scarlet-red breast of the quetzal originated during the colonial period. In 1524 in the highlands of Guatemala, the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado defeated Tecun Uman, the last ruler of the Quiché people. As Uman lay dying, his spiritual guide, the quetzal, stained its breast with Uman's blood and then died of sadness. From that day on, all male quetzals bore a scarlet breast, and their song hasn't been heard since.

Even today, quetzals are regarded in Central America as a symbol of freedom, and it's commonly believed that they cannot survive if held in captivity. In Guatemala, the quetzal is the national bird, and its image is still depicted on the currency. And in Panama, the quetzal is something of a legend as birders from far and wide continue to brave the elements for the chance to see the most famous bird in Central America.

Central America to spot the rare resplendent quetzal, especially during the dry season (November to April). However, even if the Mayan bird of paradise fails to show, the park is home to over 250 bird species as well as pumas, tapirs and the *conejo pintado*, a spotted raccoon-like animal.

Information

Admission to the park (US\$3) is paid at either of the trailheads leading to the summit or at the ranger station on the Cerro Punto side of the Sendero Los Quetzales.

The best time to visit is during the dry season, especially early in the morning when wildlife is most active.

Be advised that overnight temperatures can drop below freezing, and it may be windy and cold during the day, particularly in the morning – dress accordingly.

Sights

VOLCÁN BARÚ

There are entrances to the park, with summit access, on the eastern and western sides of the volcano. The eastern access to the summit, from Boquete, is the easiest, but it involves a strenuous uphill hike along a 14km dirt/mud road that goes from the park entrance – about 8km northwest of the center of Boquete – to the summit. If you drive or take a taxi as far up as you can and then walk the rest of the way, it takes about five or six hours to reach the summit from the park gate; walking from town would take another two or three hours each way. It's best to camp on the mountain at least one night; and you should be prepared

for the cold. Camping will also allow you to be at the top during the morning, when the views are best.

The other park entrance is just outside the town of Volcán, on the road to Cerro Punta. The rugged road into the park here – which soon becomes too rough for anything but a 4WD vehicle – goes only a short way off the main road, to the foot of the volcano. The view of the summit and the nearby peaks from this entrance is impressive, and there's a lovely loop trail that winds through secondary and virgin forest. The climb from this side is steep and technical.

SENDERO LOS QUETZALES

The park's most accessible trail is the scenic Sendero Los Quetzales (Quetzals Trail) near Cerro Punta. One of the most beautiful in Panama, this trail runs for 8km between Cerro Punta and Boquete, crossing back and forth over the Río Caldera. The trail can be done in either direction, but is easiest from west to east: the town of Cerro Punta is almost 1000m higher than Boquete, so hiking east is more downhill. A guide is not necessary as the trail is very well maintained and easily visible.

The trail itself takes about four to five hours walking west to east, though getting to and from the trailhead will take another couple of hours of walking on either side. A 4WD taxi can take you to the start of the trail on the Cerro Punta side for about US\$12; taxi drivers know the area as Respingo. The trail is 5km uphill from the main road and 2km from the last paved road. When you exit the trail,

PAVING THE QUETZALS TRAIL

Ex-President Mireya Moscoso didn't exactly win the hearts and minds of Panamanians during her troubled tenure.

As Panama celebrated its centenary in 2003, nearly 20% of the country was unemployed, the social security system was in shambles and Colombian guerrillas were running amok in the Darién. In fact, about the only thing Moscoso was able to accomplish during her time as president was paying US\$10 million to bring the Miss Universe pageant to Panama while parts of the country went without food. Of course, conservationists (and anyone with the slightest bit of regard for the environment) remember Moscoso best for her failed attempts to create a road between Boquete and Cerro Punta, which would have involved paving the Sendero Los Quetzales (Quetzals Trail).

Moscoso celebrated the New Year in 2002 by awarding US\$4.6 million dollars in construction contracts to a selection of firms. Although the Quetzals Trail is the main artery of Parque Nacional Volcán Barú, and is home to hundreds of breeding pairs of one of the rarest birds in Central America, Moscoso changed the regulations on the national park in order to circumvent a lawsuit by ANCON, the country's largest private conservation organization. However, ANCON didn't relent, and instead created a broad coalition ranging from concerned citizens to left-wing activists. Although previous environmental issues were not mainstream news stories, the future of the Quetzals Trail became the hottest topic on the streets.

Fortunately, plans to pave the Quetzals Trail were put to rest following tremendous public uproar, though the reasons behind Moscoso's proposal remain unknown. Moscoso acted quickly, especially considering the project received national emergency status at its inception to speed along the ratification process. The end result was a triumph of conservation over development, though the environmentally conscious Panamanians fear that the battle is over, but the war is just beginning.

it's another 8km along the road to Boquete, though you may be able to catch a taxi along the road. In total, the hike is about 23km, so plan accordingly if you intend to walk the length of the trail.

After arriving in Boquete, you can stay overnight or take a bus to David and then Cerro Punta; note that the last Cerro Punta bus leaves David at 6pm. You can also leave your luggage at one of the hotels in David (the Purple House will store luggage, as will others) and save yourself the hassle of backtracking. Take only the bare essentials with you on the walk (and a little cash for a good meal and/or lodging in Boquete).

Sleeping

Camping (US\$5) is available in the park and on the trail to the summit from the Boquete side, along the Sendero Los Quetzales or at the ranger station at the entrance to the Sendero Los Quetzales on the Cerro Punta side. You can also stay in bunk beds at the **ranger station** (dm US\$5); bring your own food and bedding. If you plan to stay in the station, let them know you're coming by calling the **ANAM office** (☎ 775 3163) in David.

Getting There & Away

The trailhead leading to the summit of Volcán Barú is best accessed from the town of Boquete (p201) while the Sendero Los Quetzales is best approached from Cerro Punta (p212).

BUENA VISTA

If you're heading north towards Cerro Punta, Guadalupe or the entrance to the Parque Internacional La Amistad, an excellent place to stop for a few nights is the tiny hamlet of Buena Vista, which is located 16km north of the turnoff from the Interamericana. Here, you'll find the **Buena Vista B&B** (☎ 770 5605; claasendc@email.com; d/ste US\$40/45; **P** **☎**), a hidden gem of a country inn. Owned by a friendly Canadian couple named Dorothy and Claus, this mountain inn has two guestrooms and one suite that boast engrossing views of the Pacific Ocean and Volcán Barú – there's even an above-ground swimming pool on the grounds if you want to cool off after a hike through the forests.

The guestrooms are available for rent from 15 November through 15 May, while the whole house can be rented for the rest of the year. The tranquil town is perfect for

anyone who's looking for a quiet refuge, or for a temporary home base in the Chiriquí highlands. Note that there is a minimum stay of three nights.

VOLCÁN

pop 8000

Volcán is the first town of major size that you pass along the route to La Amistad, though the town is dwarfed by its namesake. Clinging to the flanks of the towering Volcán Barú, the town of Volcán has a pleasant feel and serves as a good base for excursions, though there isn't a whole lot to do in the town itself. However, if you're feeling nostalgic for the days when Boquete was just another mountain town in Chiriquí, this may be the perfect stop for you.

The road that links Concepción and Volcán forks in the center of town: one arrow points left toward Río Sereno, on the Costa Rican border (47km); the other points right toward Cerro Punta (16km), the entrance to the Sendero Los Quetzales.

There's no tourist information in Volcán, though **Highland Adventures** (☎ 771 4413; ecoaizpurua@hotmail.com; Av Central, Volcán; ☎ 7am-8pm) is a good source of information on the area (however biased they may be). With that said, Highland Adventures offer a rather good variety of guided tours and activities including rappelling beside a river, bicycle rides through the rainforest, kayaking and water tubing excursions, and guided climbs to the top of Volcán Barú. Most of the tours cost between US\$30 and US\$50, and are very fairly priced.

On the western side of the Concepción-Volcán road, 3km south of Volcán, you'll see **Arte Cruz Volcán – Artesanía en Madera** (☎ 623 0313; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5:30pm), where artist José de la Cruz González makes fine-quality signs, sculptures and furniture out of wood as well as impressive etchings on crystal and glass. José was trained in fine arts in Italy and Honduras, and his work has been commissioned by buyers worldwide. Visitors are welcome, and José is happy to demonstrate and explain his art. Items are for sale, and he's more than happy to make you a personal souvenir in just a few minutes.

The ruins of the pre-Columbian culture at **Barriles** are about a five-minute drive from the center of town – the ruins are located on private land, but the family who lives there

accepts visitors. Major artifacts from the archaeological site, including statues, *metates* (flat stone platforms used for grinding corn), pottery and jewelry are currently on display in the Museo Antropológico Reina Torres de Araúz (p87) in Panama City, though there's nothing like getting a sense of the area where they came from.

Four-and-a-half kilometers from Volcán is the **Area Silvestre Protegida Lagunas de Volcán**, the highest lake system (1240m) in Panama. The two lakes here swell in the rainy season, and are extremely picturesque, with lush, virgin forest at their edges and Volcán Barú rising majestically in the background. The lakes and the woodlands around them are excellent sites for bird-watching – of special interest are the masked duck, the northern jacana, the rose-throated becard, the pale-billed woodpecker and mixed flocks of tanagers, flycatchers and antbirds. To get to the lakes from the Concepción-Volcán road, turn west onto Calle El Valle (near central Volcán) and follow the signs. No buses go to the lakes, but you can hire a taxi in Volcán to bring you here. If you take your own vehicle, be advised that there have been reports of thefts of belongings from vehicles here.

About 2.3km from the turnoff for Volcán is **Cabañas Las Huacas** (☎ 771 4363; cabins US\$30-90; 📍), which consists of five cutesy two-story cottages, each with a kitchen and a private hot-water bathroom. The cabins are scattered around a peaceful woodland setting, and there's even a small goose pond and a beautiful mountain vista to complete the scene. Cabins can accommodate one to eight people, and are fairly priced according to the size of your party.

Across from the Shell station near the Hotel Las Huacas, **Acropolis** (mains US\$4-5) serves superb plates of traditional Greek food (souvlaki, moussaka and pastitsio), with some fantastic baklava for dessert. It's a charming little place and the friendly owners, Elisabet and George Babos, have a wealth of information about Volcán and the rest of Panama.

Buses from Volcán to David depart from the Shell station on Av Central every 15 minutes from 5am to 7:30pm (US\$2.50, 1¼ hours). There are also pickup truck taxis available by the Río Sereno-Guadalupe fork in the road.

SANTA CLARA

About 30km from Volcán, on the highway to Río Sereno, is the tiny village of Santa Clara, which is little more than a grocery store and a gas station. Although a passing motorist would never think twice about stopping here for the night, Santa Clara is home to the reader-recommended **Finca Hartmann** (☎ 775 5223; www.finchahartmann.com; cabins US\$70; **P**), a working shade-grown coffee farm that is situated in highland rainforest, and is home to a rich variety of wildlife on the grounds.

The owners, Ratibor Hartmann and his sons and daughter, are ardent supporters of conservation, and over the years they have hosted a number of Smithsonian-affiliated scientists. Currently the family rents out basic but handsomely constructed cabins for those wishing to enjoy the fantastic surroundings. Although there's no electricity here, the cabins have clean potable spring water, flush toilets and even hot showers.

The bird-watching here is simply superb, with over 280 unique species spotted on the grounds. Also, since the property is located between elevations of 1300m and 2000m, there are a number of accessible hiking trails that pass through a variety of habitats. Sr Hartmann is also an excellent host with a wealth of information – ask to see his 'museum' (a lifetime's collection of Panamanian insects and pre-Columbian artifacts).

The entrance to Finca Hartmann is located a few hundred meters past the gas station, on the left-hand side – look for the small sign.

PASO ANCHO

Continuing on along the road to the Parque Internacional La Amistad, another great place to stop for a few nights is **Las Plumas** (☎ 771 5541; www.las-plumas.com; guesthouses US\$60-130; **P**), a friendly Dutch-owned spot that rests on the edge of Paso Ancho village. Las Plumas occupies a tranquil setting on 2.3 hectares of land, and consists of several roomy guesthouses that can accommodate four people in two bedrooms. Each guesthouse is beautifully furnished with solid wooden furniture, leather couches, tiled-bathrooms and orthopedic mattresses – there's even satellite TV, though this shouldn't distract you too much from the beauty of the surrounding forest. Note that there is a minimum stay of three nights.

Discounted weekly and monthly rates are also available.

BAMBITO

There's no shortage of tiny mountain towns along this route, though Bambito is worth a quick look, even if only to visit the **Truchas de Bambito** (admission US\$0.50), a rainbow trout farm where thousands of fish are raised in outdoor ponds. A kilogram of fresh fish costs less than US\$5, and the chilly spring-water-fed ponds produce some healthy (and very meaty) trout.

Just over 3km past Bambito in the hamlet of Nueva Suiza is **Hostal Cielito Sur B&B** (☎ 771 2038; www.cielitosur.com; r US\$70-80 with breakfast; **P**) which is a great place to stop and recharge your body for the night. Owned by a friendly Panamanian-American couple, this delightful B&B offers four spacious guestrooms that have such incredible amenities as hot-water bathtubs, living rooms with fireplaces and private riverside patios. There's also a *bohío* (rustic hut) that's strung up with hammocks, and a shared bathhouse that's outfitted with a large Jacuzzi.

Before leaving Bambito, look for a small store 1.5km north of the Hotel Bambito named **Alina**, which sells fruit jam, candy and milkshakes using the region's famous wild strawberries. It's a charming spot that any local can point out to you – be sure to stock up on some edible goodies if you're on your way to an expedition in Parque Internacional La Amistad.

CERRO PUNTA

At an altitude of 1800m, this tranquil highland town is reminiscent of an Alpine village. Indeed, you'd be forgiven for thinking you were in Switzerland – as you near Cerro Punta, everything starts to look European, with meticulously tended agricultural plots and European-style houses with steep-pitched tin roofs. Not surprisingly, a Swiss colony was founded here many decades ago, and you can still hear Swiss-German spoken in the area.

Visitors come to Cerro Punta primarily during the dry season (January to April) in order to access the two nearby parks: Volcán Barú and La Amistad. However, the town itself makes a charming stop, especially since the area is known for its succulent strawber-

ries – be sure to pick up a few at either **Fresa de Cerro Punta** or **Fresas Manolo**, both of which are located in the town center.

If you find yourself crashing here for the night, the **Hotel Cerro Punta** (☎ 771 2020; hotelcer@hotmail.com; s/d US\$20/30; (P)) is located on the main road in town, and has your standard-issue concrete rooms, though picture windows and views of the surrounding hillsides definitely brighten up the rooms a bit. Plus, if you're on your way to either national park, enjoy the private hot-water bathroom – it's the last one you'll see for awhile. Whether you stay here or not, drop by the restaurant for a strawberry smoothie, a slice of strawberry pie or pancakes with strawberry compote. You get the idea by now – the local strawberries are delicious.

A bus runs from David to Cerro Punta en route to Guadalupe (US\$3, 2¼ hours, every 15 minutes, from 5:30am to 6pm), stopping at Volcán and Bambito along the way. If you're coming from Costa Rica, you could catch this bus at the turnoff from the Interamericana at Concepción. If you're in Volcán, catch one of these buses at the parking lot opposite the Shell station.

If you're driving, the main road continues through Cerro Punta and ends at Guadalupe, 3km further. Another road takes off to the west, heading for the Las Nubes entrance to Parque Internacional La Amistad, 6.8km away – the turnoff is marked by a large wooden sign.

GUADALUPE

Three kilometers past Cerro Punta, Guadalupe is the end of the road, though it's a glorious area where you can walk among meticulously tended farms and gardens. This little community is full of flowers, and the agricultural plots curling up the steep hillsides are out of a picture book. With that said, please do respect the signs that read: 'Esteemed Visitor: we are making all Guadalupe a garden – please don't pick the flowers.'

About 600m beyond the Hotel Los Quetzales at the turnoff to the Cabañas Los Quetzales cabins, lies the **Finca Dracula Orchid Sanctuary** (☎ 771 2070; tour US\$7), one of Latin America's finest orchid collections. There are over 2000 species on display here, and the extremely knowledgeable staff takes great pride in showing off this impressive sanctuary to interested guests.

The reader-recommended **Los Quetzales Lodge & Spa** (☎ 771 2182; fax 771 2226; www.losquetzales.com; r from US\$120 per person with 3 meals; (P) (Q)), located in the center of town, is a favorite among hikers heading out to the Sendero Los Quetzales. Each of the rooms and dorms at Quetzales features vaulted ceilings, wood furnishings and private hot-water bathrooms, though most of the guests tend to congregate around the bar-restaurant and lounge. If you're traveling with your significant other, go ahead and splurge on one of the five cedar-walled suites, which feature a romantic hewn-stone fireplace, private bathtub and rainforest-facing balcony. All guests also have access to the on-site full-service spa, as well as access to a private network of trails inside the Parque Nacional Volcán Barú, less than an hour's walk from the hotel – the hotel can also provide transportation. Also on the premises are three riverside whirlpool spas and an equestrian center. WiFi is available.

A bus runs from David to Guadalupe (US\$3, 2¼ hours, every 15 minutes from 5:30am to 6pm) via Volcán, Bambito and Cerro Punta. If you're driving, Guadalupe is the end of the road.

PARQUE INTERNACIONAL LA AMISTAD (LAS NUBES)

The 407,000-hectare Parque Internacional La Amistad was established jointly in 1988 by Panama and Costa Rica – hence its name, La Amistad (Friendship). In 1990, La Amistad was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site, and later became part of the greater Mesoamerican Biological corridor. In Panama, the park covers portions of Chiriquí and Bocas del Toro Provinces, contains seven of the 12 classified life zones and serves as a refuge for a great number of endangered flora and fauna.

Although most of the park's area is high up in the Talamanca Mountains and remains inaccessible, there is no shortage of hiking and camping opportunities available for intrepid travelers. Unlike the Wekso entrance in Bocas del Toro Province (see p237), the Las Nubes sector is home to an established trail network, and is more accessible to independent hikers. However, the Naso population has a more established presence in Wekso, so it's better to approach the park from Bocas if you're interested in spending some time with this indigenous group.

WATCHING WILDLIFE

Panama has long been established as a top destination for watching wildlife – nowhere else in the world are rainforests as easily accessible as they are in this tiny sliver of a country.

In the neotropical rainforests of Central America, over 300 different species of mammals have been tallied by scientists. In fact, this rapidly vanishing ecosystem is one of the few places on Earth where new species are still being uncovered. With the exception of a few versatile colonists from North America such as coyotes and white-tailed deer, the great bulk of mammals in Panama are new world specialists. The Neotropics are also the only place in the world where you can find two early experiments in mammalian evolution, namely sloths and anteaters. The forests of Central America are also home to eight species of primates and 24 species of carnivores, including six species of cat.

Of course, Central America's mammals aren't as diverse or conspicuous as its birds, and it's no secret that the region is firmly entrenched on the world birding circuit. In particular, Panama is home to over 500 species of birds, and is arguably the best destination in Central America for spotting rare endemics. However, as the land-bridge for the continents of North and South America, Panama offers the unique opportunity to spot migrant species in a completely new setting.

To make the most of your wildlife-watching experience, it's recommended that you pick up a good field guide, though the following list will help you get started:

- **Two- & Three-toed Sloths** Found only in Neotropical rainforests, sloths are the ancient remnants of a unique group of mammals that arose when South America was an isolated island. Curled up high above the rainforest floor, sloths can be hard to distinguish, though male three-toed sloths have a distinctive black and yellow patch on their back. True to their name, sloths spend about 16 hours a day asleep or inactive, but most of this time is devoted to digestion.
- **Mantled Howlers** Howler monkeys greet sunrise and sunset with deafening, booming calls that resonate through the forest for kilometers. These unmistakable calls, which become immediately familiar to travelers in the Neotropics, are thought to help space out different family groups. However, howlers are incredibly vocal animals, and will give a hoot and holler if they're disturbed or excited, especially if they see humans traipsing about on the forest floor. They're also good indicators of weather – howlers will cause a ruckus if there are thunder clouds on the horizon.
- **Jaguars** The jaguar is the largest cat in the Americas and the third-largest in the world, though unfortunately size does not convert into visibility. By virtue of their supreme position in the feeding hierarchy, jaguars are incredibly rare and elusive animals, though their evidence is all around, from dried spoors to fresh tracks. Interestingly enough, jaguars are the only big cat that routinely kills its prey by using its massive jaws to bite through the top of the victim's skull – most other cats simply suffocate their prey.
- **Parrots & Macaws** Even non-birders know a parrot or a macaw when they see one, and there's no better place in the world to observe these colorful birds than the Neotropics. Nearly half of the world's 332 species live exclusively in the region, and over 20 species including five macaws can be found in Panama. Although their basic form varies little, parrots range greatly in size, from the 12.5cm long parrotlet to the enormous macaws. Apart from their size, macaws can be identified by their huge bills, bare facial patch and long, tapered tails.
- **Toucans** Toucans are arguably the most recognizable birds in the Neotropics – a toucan's most outstanding feature is of course its spectacular multi-colored bill. Although in some species the bill looks as if it is too heavy for the bird, it is in fact full of air cavities and quite lightweight. Colorful and comical it may be, but the toucan bill is a powerful tool. Serrations on the upper mandible help grip slippery fruits, and help to intimidate the hapless birds whose nests are being raided.

Orientation & Information

Admission to the **park** (admission US\$3, parking US\$1, camping US\$5; ☎ 8am-4pm) is paid at Las Nubes, near Cerro Punta (p212). Permits to camp in the park are payable at the ranger station.

If you plan to spend much time at Las Nubes, be sure to bring a jacket. This side of the park, at 2280m above sea level, has a cool climate – temperatures are usually around 24°C (75°F) in the daytime and drop to about 3°C (38°F) at night.

Activities

HIKING

Three main trails originate at Las Nubes ranger station. The **Sendero La Cascada** (Waterfall Trail) is a 3.4km roundtrip hike that takes in three *miradores* (lookout points) as well as a 45m-high waterfall with a lovely bathing pool. The **Sendero El Retoño** (Rebirth Trail) loops 2.1km through secondary forest, crosses a number of rustic bridges and winds through bamboo groves. The **Vereda La Montaña** (Mountain Lane) is a more strenuous 8km roundtrip hike that ascends Cerro Picacho.

WATCHING WILDLIFE

Although most of Parque Internacional Amistad is inaccessible terrain high up in the Talamanca, the park is home to a recorded 90 mammal species (including all six cat species) and more than 400 bird species (including resplendent quetzals and harpy eagles). For more, see the boxed text on the opposite page.

Sleeping & Eating

A **ranger station** at Las Nubes has a dormitory room with bunk beds where tourists can stay for US\$5 per night. Due to the popularity of these beds among school groups from Canada and the USA, reservations are well advisable. To reserve a spot, call the **ANAM** (☎ 775 3163) in David or the co-op **restaurant** (☎ 771 2566) at the park entrance. Guests have access to the kitchen, so you'd be wise to stock up on provisions in Cerro Punta. You'll also need to bring your own bedding, and a mosquito net would also be a good idea.

Near the entrance to the park is a wonderful **restaurant** (dishes US\$2-3) that is run by a local women's co-op, and has outdoor seating on a wooden patio where you can watch

hummingbirds buzzing nearby. You can get plates of fresh-cooked foods like soup, rice and beans, and grilled cheese. In addition to bottled water, the restaurant also serves hot tea, which hits the spot on a chilly day, as well as homemade strawberry jam. The co-op restaurant is also a good place to inquire about local guides who can lead inexpensive excursions into primary rainforest.

Getting there & Away

The Las Nubes entrance is about 7km from Cerro Punta; a sign on the main road in Cerro Punta marks the turnoff. The road starts out good and paved, but by the time you reach the park, it's a rutted track suitable only for 4WD vehicles. A taxi will bring you from Cerro Punta for US\$4 for up to two people, then US\$2 per extra person.

FINCA LA SUIZA

If you travel along the paved road that crosses the Cordillera Central from the Interamericana to Chiriquí Grande, providing access to Bocas del Toro, you will pass a wonderful accommodation option that boasts some incredible hiking opportunities.

Located high in the Talamanca range about 41km from the Interamericana is **Finca La Suiza** (☎ 615 3774, 774 4030 in David; afinis@chiriqui.com; s/d with private bathroom US\$31/40; ☎ closed Jun, Sep & Oct), a highly recommended place to stay that features 200 hectares of cloud forest and some of the best mountain views in Panama. The lodge has three clean, comfortable rooms with private hot-water bathrooms and large picture windows. On a clear day, you can see the islands in the Golfo de Chiriquí and the bright blue expanse of the Pacific Ocean. The enthusiastic and warm German owners – Herbert Brillman and Monika Kohler – will also provide a home-cooked breakfast for about US\$3.50 and dinner for US\$9.

Also on the property are several kilometers of well-marked hiking trails, which pass through primary forest. The scenery features towering trees, hundreds of bird species and views of the Fortuna Park Forest Reserve, the Chiriquí mountains and the Pacific islands. Highlights include waterfalls, dipping ponds and superb vantage points across the forest canopy. Be advised that the owners keep dogs that roam freely at night, and for morning bird-watching, you'll need to ask for them to be tied up. Entrance to

the trails costs guests US\$8 for the duration of their stay; non-guests pay US\$8 per day.

English, Spanish and German are spoken. Be sure to make reservations in advance as it's a long way to the next available lodging in Chiriquí Grande or David. For phone calls, the best time to call is between 7pm and 9pm. Note that the lodge and trails are closed throughout June, September and October – the area's wettest months.

To get to these accommodations, take any Changuinola-bound bus from David (hourly starting at 5am) and ask the driver to drop you off. Coming from the Interamericana, the lodge is to the right just after the Accel gas station (the only gas station on this road). Coming from the north, the lodge is on the left 1.3km after a toll plaza for trucks. You can leave luggage with the caretaker near the entrance gate while hiking.