

Los Santos Province



Much like neighboring Herrera Province, Los Santos is centered on the Península de Azuero and is often thought of as the heart and soul of the country. Generations ago, it was here that Panama's cry for independence was first uttered, yet the residents of 'The Saints' Province take great pride in their Spanish history and showcase it in folkloric festivals that date back to the first settlers.

The Fiesta de Corpus Christi in Villa de Los Santos and the Feria de la Mejorana Librada in Guararé are marked by exuberant displays of traditional clothing and dances born in Spain during the Middle Ages. The most intricate *polleras* (the national costume based on dresses worn by Spanish peasants during the 17th and 18th centuries) are made in the village of La Enea. In the provincial capital of Las Tablas, the annual Carnaval is a rowdy affair of unrestrained excess that cannot be rivaled by any other celebration in Panama. The festivities in Los Santos are hedonistic affairs revolving around food, drink and copious amounts of dancing and celebrating. They are some of the most publicized events of the year throughout the entire country, yet few foreign tourists venture into Panama's interior to experience them.

Aside from its festivals, Los Santos is also home to some of the country's best surf spots, though international jet-setters have been slow to catch on. While Bocas del Toro and Santa Catalina continue to attract baby-faced surfers from around the globe, Los Santos is essentially off the map. Whether you partake in centuries-old festivals or catch a ride on an empty break, chances are you'll find what you're looking for in this undertouristed province.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Kicking off your shoes, letting your hair down and living it up at the Carnaval in **Las Tablas** (p167)
- Catching a ride on an uncrowded wave at **Playa Venao** (p171)
- Spotting sea turtles by thousands during their annual nesting at **Isla de Cañas** (p173)
- Shopping for *polleras* (the national dress) in the traditional village of **La Enea** (p166)
- Crying out for independence at 'La Grita', a festival commemorating the birth of Panama, in **Villa de Los Santos** (p162)



■ POPULATION: 86,700

■ AREA: 3806 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO 950M



VILLA DE LOS SANTOS

pop 7800

This quintessential Azuero town is where Panama's first move toward independence from Spain began on November 10, 1821. Since then, residents of Los Santos have continued to honor the freedom pangs of their ancestors by throwing one of Panama's wildest parties. Of course, the fun isn't just reserved for one day – on the contrary, the calendar in Los Santos is dotted with enough local and national holidays to keep everyone liquored up and sufficiently entertained.

Aside from its festivals, Los Santos is replete with colonial structures dating back to the early days of the Spanish settlers. It is also home to a noteworthy museum dedicated to

Panamanian independence as well as one of the country's most magnificent churches.

Orientation

The Río La Villa, 4km south of downtown Chitré (p150), marks the boundary between Herrera and Los Santos Provinces. South of the river you'll come to Villa de Los Santos (or simply 'Los Santos') on the Carretera Nacional.

Information

Banco Nacional de Panamá (cnr Av 10 de Noviembre & Calle Tomas Herrera)

IPAT (☎ 966 8013; fax 996 8040; Calle José Vallarino;

☎ 9am–4pm Mon–Fri) Provides information on any upcoming celebrations in the area.

Police station (Av 10 de Noviembre)

LOS FIESTAS DE AZUERO (PART II)

Festivals in the Península de Azuero are famous throughout Panama for their traditional celebrations, many of which revolve around aspects of life in the time of the early Spanish settlers. If your visit to Panama coincides with any of the festivals listed below, it's worth making an effort to visit. You may lose a day or two to a vicious hangover, but partying in the streets with locals until the wee hours of the morning is something you'll never forget.

Some of the peninsula's best-known festivals include:

- Carnaval – The four days before Ash Wednesday in Las Tablas and Villa de Los Santos.
- Semana Santa – March/April in Villa de Los Santos.
- Feria de Azuero – late April/early May in Villa de los Santos.
- Fiesta de Corpus Christi – forty days after Easter in Villa de Los Santos.
- Fiestas Patronales de Santa Librada – July 20 in Las Tablas.
- Fiesta de la Pollera – July 22 in Las Tablas.
- Feria de la Mejorana, Festival de la Virgen de las Mercedes – September 23 to 27 in Guraré.
- La Grita de la Villa – November 10 in Villa de Los Santos.

For more information on the festivals listed above, see the various town and city listings in this chapter. For listings of festivals in Herrera Province, see p151.

Sights

MUSEO DE LA NACIONALIDAD

This modest **museum** (Calle José Vallarino; adult/child US\$1/0.25; ☎ 9am-4:30pm Tue-Sat, to 1pm Sun), opposite Plaza Simón Bolívar, occupies the former house where Panama's Declaration of Independence was signed in 1821. In the years that followed, the handsome brick-and-tile residence served as a jail, a school and a legislature. It predates the town's church, but no one knows exactly when it was built.

Inaugurated as a museum in 1974, it contains artifacts related to Panama's independence, which was declared in Los Santos 18 days before it was declared by the government. The museum also contains objects from the era of the Spanish conquest. Pre-Columbian ceramics and colonial-era religious art comprise most of the exhibits, and there's also a lovely garden courtyard.

IGLESIA DE SAN ATANACIO

Villa de Los Santos' church, also alongside Plaza Simón Bolívar, opened its doors to the public in 1782 after nearly nine years of construction. It's a fine example of the baroque style, with lots of intricately carved wood depicting cherubs, saints, Jesus and the Virgin. Almost everything in the church

is original, and some of the objects even predate the structure itself. The 12m arch in front of the altar, for example, bears its date of manufacture (1733) and the names of its two creators.

The altar is made of mahogany and rosewood and covered nearly from base to top in gold leaf. In a glass sepulchre in front of the altar is a life-size wooden statue of Christ that is carried through the streets of Villa de Los Santos on Good Friday, behind a candlelit procession.

This church was granted national monument status by the government in 1938 and is truly a national treasure.

MASKS

Carlos Ivan de Leon (☎ 966 9149; Calle Tomas Herrera; ☎ noon-1pm & 6-10pm) makes the most elaborate and frightening masks in Panama at his house near Calle Segundo Villareal. He specializes in one kind of mask; that of the devil for the famous *baile de los diablos sucios* (dance of the dirty devils; see the boxed text on p165). Most of Carlos' masks are sold to professional dancers, but increasingly they are being bought by European and American collectors. Several are on display at the IPAT office in Los Santos.



Look out for the house with a black front door and a sign featuring his family name (De Leon) nearby. Carlos speaks Spanish only.

Festivals & Events

For information on Los Santos' biggest festival, the **Fiesta de Corpus Christi**, see the boxed text, opposite.

The anniversary of the historic *grito* (cry), also known as **La Grita de la Villa** (cry of the Village), is celebrated in Los Santos on November 10. This patriotic occasion is usually overseen by the President of Panama and is highlighted by a parade, musical and dance performances and a healthy amount of drinking in the streets.

The **Feria de Azuero** (Azuero Fair, late April/early May) features folkloric dancing, agricultural attractions and various competitions among local singers performing regional songs.

Other notable festivals include **Carnaval**, celebrated four days before Ash Wednesday (February/March) and April's **Semana Santa** (Holy Week).

Sleeping & Eating

With the city of Chitré (p150) just 4km away, there are a range of other sleeping options that may come in handy when Los Santos is packed to the brim during festivals.

Kevin's Hotel (☎ 966 8276; d from US\$15-25; (P) (♿)) Set back from the Carretera Nacional, this low-key hotel features a wide range of nearly identical-looking concrete box-style rooms. Of course, the price is right, especially since you can have your choice of amenities including air-con, private hot-water bathrooms and satellite TV for just a few extra dollars. The hotel's restaurant is a popular truck stop and serves hearty dishes including grilled meats and seafood casseroles.

Hotel La Villa (☎ 966 9321; d from US\$20-35; (P) (♿) (♿)) The best hotel in Los Santos is also a low-key affair, though the swimming pool is a nice touch, especially in the dry and dusty Azuero summer. Rooms of varying sizes and shapes have steamy showers and chilly air-con, and the attached bar-restaurant serves up all of your Panamanian favorites. The best part of La Villa is its colorful design scheme, which incorporates

all of the artisan crafts you'll find at any of Los Santos' festivals.

Getting There & Around

Chitré-Las Tablas buses stop on the Carretera Nacional, and Chitré-Villa de Los Santos buses stop on Calle José Vallarino half a block from the Carretera Nacional. Fares to these destinations or anywhere in the province are usually between US\$0.50 and US\$2.

Buses to Panama City depart from Calle José Vallarino at Av 10 de Noviembre, and also from Calle Segundo Villarreal a block-and-a-half northeast of Plaza Simón Bolívar.

Taxis are a quick way to get around Villa de Los Santos and between Villa de Los Santos and Chitré. The fare won't exceed US\$3 if you stay within these cities. Taxis can usually be found near the bus stop on the Carretera Nacional and northwest of Plaza Simón Bolívar.

PLAYAS MONAGRE & EL ROMPÍO

Ten kilometers northeast of Villa de Los Santos are Playas Monagre and El Rompío, which serve as popular beach day-trips for local families. El Rompío is less frequented than Monagre and thus has less litter, but both have a lot of driftwood on them and the sand is dark and hot on sunny days. Unfortunately, the presence of strong rip currents means that swimming is not a great idea, though there's still plenty of fun in the sun to be had.

A bus leaves the Chitré station for Playas Monagre and El Rompío (US\$1, around 20km, hourly) from sunrise to sunset. This bus passes through Villa de Los Santos on the way to the beaches and can be hailed from

the Carretera Nacional in town. Look for a bus with 'Monagre' on its windshield. The fare from Villa de Los Santos to either beach is US\$0.50. A taxi ride from Chitré to either beach costs about US\$5; a taxi from Villa de Los Santos costs half that.

ROAD TO LAS TABLAS

The Carretera Nacional from Villa de Los Santos to Las Tablas runs mostly past small farms and cattle ranches, with almost no remaining forest in sight – indeed, the province is the most heavily deforested in the country. However, the drive is still scenic in its own right, especially since it passes a few much-loved Azuero institutions.

About 3km southeast of Los Santos along the Carretera Nacional is **Kiosco El Ciruelo** (☎ 6am-10pm Fri-Sun), a rustic trucker stop where everything is cooked on a wood-fire grill. Among the offerings is a traditional speciality of Los Santos Province: tamales made with corn, pork and various spices, and wrapped in plantain leaves.

From Kiosco El Ciruelo, travel another 6km until you see a bright blue public phone on the eastern side of the road. Just beyond the phone is a small hut beside a large pile of coconut husks. Located here is **La Casa de la Pipa** (The House of Coconut Juice), which sells fresh, ice-cold coconut water for US\$0.25.

As you travel the two-lane Carretera Nacional toward Las Tablas, you'll occasionally see stands with sausages dangling in front of them. The pork sausages made on the Península de Azuero are nationally famous for their high quality, and a few links of this

LOCAL LORE: FIESTA DE CORPUS CHRISTI

The **Fiesta de Corpus Christi** (The Body of Christ Festival), which is held from Thursday to Sunday, 40 days after Easter, is one of the most riotous events in the country. Although the festival has been celebrated throughout the Catholic world ever since Pope Urban IV sanctioned the event in 1264, the local version incorporates the animistic traditions of the Azuero peninsula.

As a means of converting the indigenous peoples of the region, Spanish missionaries used the festival to highlight the concept of good versus evil. At the core of the festival is a series of dances including the famous *baile de los diablos sucios* (dance of the dirty devils), which emphasizes the Christian belief in the Apocalypse. Needless to say, God, heaven and the angels win out in the end, though it doesn't prevent local artisans from creating some truly mind-blowing masks and costumes.

The entire festival attracts hundreds of performers ranging from singers and dancers to theatre troops and magicians. Although it is very much a Catholic festival, the animistic tradition of Azuero lives on in the unique lore that has been passed down from generation to generation.

delicious meat shouldn't cost you more than a dollar or so.

If you're traveling the highway around Carnaval time, you'll also see dozens of smashed-up cars on the roadside. These once belonged to the motorists killed by drunk drivers during Carnaval. Indeed, the police realize that most of the people on the road during Carnaval are intoxicated. However, instead of trying to arrest all the drunk motorists, the police display the old wrecks, hoping the sight will encourage drunks to drive slowly.

With that said, try to avoid any unnecessary highway travel during Carnaval.

GUARARÉ

pop 4200

The tiny town of Guararé, located on the Carretera Nacional between Villa de Los Santos and Las Tablas, is just another sleepy Azuero town that's easily ignored by passing motorists. That is, of course, if you arrive on any day other than the days between September 23 and 27, when the town really comes to life for Panama's largest folkloric festival, the **Feria de la Mejorana**.

Begun by Manuel Zárate in 1950 to stimulate interest and participation in traditional practices, the Feria de la Mejorana has become the best place to see Panama's folklore in all its manifestations. Dance groups from all over the country – and even some from other Latin American countries – attend this annual event, which includes a colorful parade in which participants are hauled through the streets in oxcarts.

Folkloric dances that were once part of other celebrations in other places are today sometimes seen only at this event. For example, this is the only festival in which a dance known as La Pajarita (Paper Bird) is performed. In contrast to the various exuberant devil dances, a calm, religious quality pervades La Pajarita.

A good warm-up for the festivities is a visit to the **Museo Manuel F Zárate** (adult/child US\$0.75/0.25; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Tue-Sat, to noon Sun). Zárate was a folklorist devoted to conserving the traditions and folklore of the Azuero region. The museum, in Zárate's former home, contains *polleras*, masks, *diablito* (little devil) costumes and other exhibits. It's two blocks behind the church and about six short blocks from the main road (turn off at the gas station).

Just off the Chitré-Las Tablas highway, the **Residencial La Mejorana** (☎ 994 5794; d US\$15-30;

☎ ☎) is a fairly large, fairly clean and fairly nondescript hotel, but it's a decent enough place to crash for the night. And of course, if there's a festival in town, you could only be so lucky as to get a room here. Prices vary according to the size of the room, though all are equipped with air-con and private hot-water bathrooms, and have that certain air of sterility to them.

Guararé is beside the Carretera Nacional, 20km south of Villa de Los Santos. You can hop on any bus that travels the highway in the direction of Guararé; you'll be dropped off at the town.

LA ENEA

This small village northeast of Guararé produces the finest *polleras* in Panama. Once the daily attire of Spain's lower classes in the 17th and 18th centuries, the *pollera* is today the national costume and is distinguished by its stirring beauty and elegance. Almost every part of the costume is made by hand, from the attractive embroidery on the blouse and skirt to the delicate filigree ornaments tucked around the gold combs in the hair. The traditional assortment of jewelry worn with a *pollera* can cost upwards of US\$20,000.

By convention, the *pollera* consists of two basic pieces: a blouse that rests upon the tops of the shoulders and a long skirt divided into two fully gathered tiers. Each dress requires no less than 10m of fine white linen or cotton cloth. Elaborate needlework in a single color enriches the white background.

One of the best-known makers of the national costume, Ildaura Saavedra de Espina (☎ 994 5527), lives beside Parque de La Enea, in the green-tiled house next door to the small market with 'Roxana' painted over its door. She made her first *pollera* in 1946 at the age of 16 and has been making them ever since, averaging one *pollera* every six months. Ildama sold her first dress for US\$300 – today, she charges over US\$2000 per dress.

Anyone with a keen interest in needlecraft (and a decent understanding of Spanish) is welcome to visit Ildama. She is accustomed to strangers stopping by her home to marvel at her handiwork and if you're lucky, Ildama will show you her scrapbook, containing photos of many of the dresses she's made.

If you're interested in purchasing a *pollera*, be advised that every dress is made to order – she does not have a rack of them on hand, just sections of the one she's working on.

To reach La Enea, take a taxi (US\$2) from Guararé.

LAS TABLAS

pop 9000

Las Tablas is ground zero for the street dancing, booze-soaked celebrations and all-out mayhem associated with the festivals of the Península de Azuero. Home to the country's most famous Carnival, Las Tablas is the best place in Panama to let go of your inhibitions, get your drink on and seriously cut loose.

As the capital city of Los Santos Province, Las Tablas has a fine church and a small museum devoted to former Las Tablas statesman and three-time president Belisario Porras. The city is also famous for its combined patron saint/*pollera* festival, a colorful mix of religious ceremony and beauty contest.

Orientation

Las Tablas is 31km southeast of Chitré via the Carretera Nacional, which becomes Av Laureano Lopez at the northern edge of town and reemerges as the road to Santo Domingo on the southeastern side of town. Av Laure-

ano Lopez runs for nine blocks before ending at the Museo Belisario Porras, beside the central plaza.

Almost everything of interest to travelers is within five blocks of the plaza. This includes remnants of one of the finest colonial churches on the peninsula, banks, a post office, hotels and restaurants. Further out is a bus station and taxi stands.

Information

Banco Nacional de Panamá (Av Laureano Lopez, near Calle 2)

Banistmo (Calle Belisario Porras)

BBVA (Av Belisario Porras) Bank with ATM.

Post office (Calle 2)

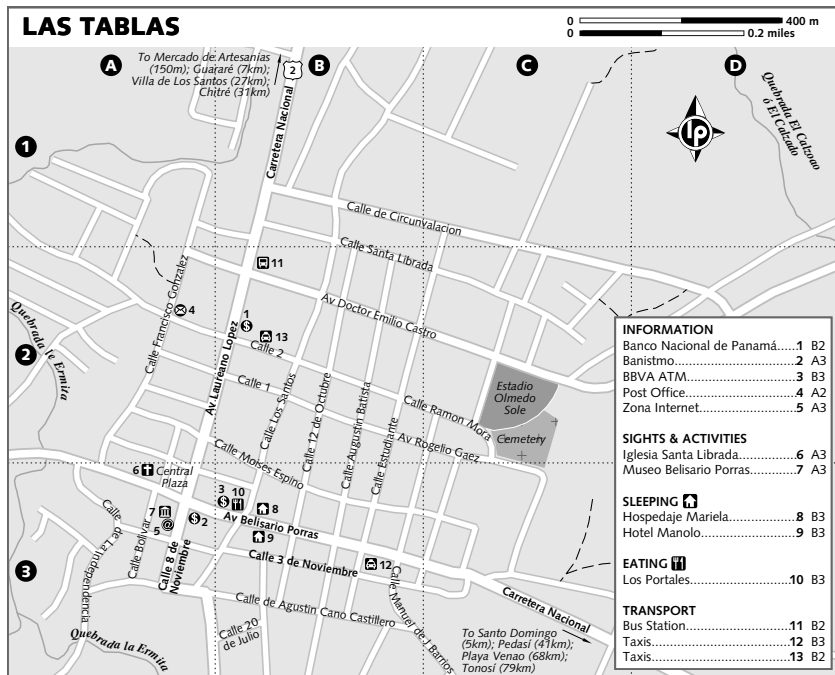
Zona Internet (Calle 8 de Noviembre; per hr US\$1;

☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat) Near the plaza.

Sights

MUSEO BELISARIO PORRAS

Opposite the Central Plaza, this **museum** (Av Belisario Porras; adult/child US\$0.50/0.25; ☎ 9am-12:30pm & 1:30-4pm Tue-Sat, to noon Sun) is in the mud-walled former home of three-time president Belisario Porras, during whose administration the



Panama Canal opened. Porras was president for all but two years from 1912 to 1924. He is credited with establishing Panama's network of public hospitals, creating a national registry for land titles and constructing scores of bridges and aqueducts.

The museum contains many artifacts from Porras' life and serves as a monument to the achievements of this widely revered man. Incidentally, the huge tomb inside the museum, which bears Porras' name, is empty; plans to move his remains here from a cemetery in Panama City were never carried out.

As an interesting aside, all of Porras' male descendants wear their whiskers in his unusual style – a thick, prideful mustache resembling the horns of a Texas longhorn steer.

IGLESIA SANTA LIBRADA

This Baroque-style church (Av Belisario Porras) near the central plaza opened its doors on March 9, 1789, but sustained major damage in 1950 during a fire. Although the church was later restored, the walls and the base of the pulpit are original. The painted faces on the ornate 23-karat gold-leaf altar are also original, but the figurines of Christ, the Virgin and the saints were added after the blaze. Cedar wood was used in the construction of the altar, which was renovated in 2001.

Festivals & Events

Las Tablas is perhaps the best place in Panama to spend **Carnaval**, which is held during the four days that precede Ash Wednesday. By tradition, the town is divided into two groups, *calle arriba* (high street) and *calle abajo* (low street), which compete intensely with each other in every aspect of the fiesta. Each *calle* has its own queen, floats and songs. Each day begins with members parading in street clothes and singing songs that poke fun at the rival group. During the parade, jokesters from both sides toss tinted water, blue dye and shaving cream at the other side. No one, onlookers included, is spared – dress expecting to get creamed.

Both sides take a rest during the heat of the day and don costumes or put finishing touches on their floats in the late afternoon. At dusk, the groups' parades begin on parallel streets, led by floats that are followed by musicians seated in the back of flatbed trucks, who are followed in turn by *calle* members. Every night, each *calle* has a different float and dif-

ferent costumes. Crowds pack the sidewalks and fireworks light up the night. The queens make their appearances on Saturday night, dressed at first in gaudily decorated costumes and later in exquisite evening gowns. Their coronation is held on Sunday. Monday is masquerade day and on Tuesday all the women in town who have *polleras* don them and fill the streets.

Another excellent time to be in Las Tablas is July 21, when the provincial capital hosts two big events: the patron saint festival and the *pollera* festival. The **Fiesta de Santa Librada** is a sacred event, and services inside the church are accompanied by street celebrations that recall a medieval fair, with gambling, dancing, singing, bullfights, and excessive eating and drinking – it's a strange juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane. The **Fiesta de La Pollera** is highlighted by a parade of beautiful young women who model the national costume as they pass through the streets, all the while being judged on their grace as well as on the artisanship, design and authenticity of their costumes.

Sleeping & Eating

Hospedaje Mariela (☎ 994 6366; fax 994 7422; Av Belisario Porras; d without/with bathroom US\$10/20; (P)) Occupying the space above an old-school barbershop, the Hospedaje Mariela is the best budget option in town. If you're not too fussy about where you lay your head, a box with a bed and a fan can be yours for next to nothing. If you're feeling a little less than frugal, spring for the private bathroom, but don't expect anything more than lukewarm at best.

Hotel Manolo (☎ 994 6372; Av Belisario Porras; d US\$20-30; (P) (♿)) If you're looking for slightly more comfortable lodgings, the Hotel Manolo was rebuilt a few years back and now features a small number of simple but functional rooms with air-con and private hot-water bathrooms. The downstairs restaurant and bar is a popular spot for locals as well as guests, so there are always people around to share a drink with. When you're checking in, be sure to ask for a room with a window – not all of them have one.

Hos Portales (Av Belisario Porras; mains US\$3-5) Housed in a handsome colonial building, this atmospheric yet low-key spot serves grilled meats and tasty seafood including *corvina ceviche* (sea bass ceviche). Before hitting the road, stop by in the morning

for a tasty farm-style breakfast to start your day the right way.

Getting There & Away

From Las Tablas' **bus station** (cnr Avs Laureano Lopez & Doctor Emilio Castro) buses run hourly to Santo Domingo (US\$0.50, 10 minutes, 5km), Chitré (US\$1, 30 minutes), Tonosí (US\$3, 1½ hours) and Pedasí (US\$2, one hour).

There are 10 daily departures to Panama City (US\$6.50, 4½ hours), with additional buses during festivals.

PEDASÍ

pop 2400

At first glance, Pedasí appears much like any other tranquil town in Azuero – the town center is dotted with historic colonial buildings and many of the town's residents appear to have nothing but time on their hands. Behind the scenes, however, Pedasí is the focus of an intensive push to develop tourism along the southwestern coastline. In case you're wondering why it is that there is so much interest in this rather nondescript place, consider the fact that Pedasí is the hometown of former president Mireya Moscoso. And of course, the nearby wilderness beaches are impossibly picturesque yet virtually abandoned.

For the time being, tourist development seems to be happening slowly in Pedasí, though there are a few major condo projects popping up outside the town limits. In the meantime, Pedasí serves as the gateway to the Azuero coastline (p171), and it's a convenient base for exploring the Refugios de Vida Silvestre Isla Iguana (p170) and Isla de Cañas (p173).

Orientation & Information

The Carretera Nacional passes down the western part of Pedasí, while the beaches start just a few kilometers to the east. A **Banco Nacional de Panama**, with an ATM, is at the northern entrance to town. A new **IPAT office** (☎ 8am–8pm) lies behind the Residencial Pedasí hotel in the north of town. Next door is an **internet café** (per hr US\$1; ☎ 9:30am–5:30pm Mon–Fri, to 4pm Sat). The **ANAM** office in the south of town can provide information about Isla Iguana and Isla de Cañas.

Activities

You can arrange to go scuba diving through the **Pedasí Scuba Center** (☎ 995 2405; www.divenfishpanama.com), which is located next door to IPAT. The

center offers diving and boating excursions to Isla Iguana or Isla Frailes (boat hire US\$80, two-tank dive US\$35), which are both surrounded by large coral reefs. Snorkeling gear (US\$10 per day) is also available for rent.

Festivals & Events

Pedasí holds **patron saint festivals** on June 29 and November 25, or the nearest Saturday to them. Although these events are nowhere near as chaotic as some of the more famous festivals in Azuero, they are nevertheless fun affairs, with long parades and lots of merriment. On July 16, a small celebration for fishers is held at Playa Arenal, a beach 3km northwest of town.

Sleeping & Eating

Residencial Moscoso (☎ 995 2203; s/d US\$8/10, s/d with air-con & private bathroom US\$15/18; ☎ ☎) Near the center of town, this pensión is surprisingly low-key considering that the owner is related to Panama's former president, Mireya Moscoso. Although it's a friendly place with personal service, it's probably not a good idea to talk politics while you're staying here. The rooms at Moscoso are fairly basic but well cared for, and you probably won't mind the cold showers one bit.

Dim's Hostel (☎ 995 2303; s/d US\$18/25; ☎) On the main road near the center of town, Dim's has a family atmosphere with a fine backyard, complete with hammocks and a shady mango tree. The delightful owners are also committed to all of their guests, so you can enjoy a fine level of service here despite the budget-friendly prices. A handful of simple rooms have good beds and tiled bathrooms with cold-water showers, though most guests spend their time congregating in the garden.

Dulcería Yely (cakes US\$0.25–2) This lovely cake shop on a side street near the Pensión Moscoso serves a variety of delectable sweets including *manjar* cake, which resembles caramel in taste and appearance and is a speciality of the region. If you're in need of something more filling, there are also tasty sandwiches available for takeout for just a few dollars.

Getting There & Away

Buses from Las Tablas leave every 45 minutes between 6am and 4:30pm (US\$2, one hour). Buses to the nearby beaches are sporadic, though generally there's one a day at around 8pm that passes the beach en route to Cañas,

returning the next morning at around 8am. However, the coastline is easily accessed by private vehicle and a taxi should cost between US\$12 and US\$16.

AROUND PEDASÍ

Refugio de Vida Silvestre Isla Iguana

This 55-hectare **wildlife refuge** is centered on a deserted island that is ringed by coral fields, though unfortunately many of the reefs died in the 1982–83 El Niño (a change in weather patterns that shifts ocean currents and starves marine life along the eastern Pacific coast).

However, the surviving coral is pretty spectacular and the water is shallow enough to be snorkeled. As with most reefs in the Pacific, the fish here are enormous.

Humpback whales also inhabit the waters around Isla Iguana from June to November. These large sea mammals, 15m to 20m long, mate and bear their young here and then teach them to dive. The humpbacks are the famous ‘singing whales’ – occasionally you can hear their underwater sounds when diving here.

Unfortunately, although the island is supposed to be maintained by ANAM,

RESCUING THE TUNA

In November of 2006, a study published in the journal *Science* suggested that nearly one-third of all global fishing stocks have already collapsed and, based on current trends, it's likely that all global fish stocks will collapse within 50 years. These findings present a sobering reality – in just a few decades, nearly all of the fish present on current menus around the world will be on the verge of extinction.

Although it's easy to dismiss these claims as alarmist, there are countless examples of collapsed fisheries the world over. In the 1970s the Peruvian anchovy fishery collapsed following an El Niño year. In 1992 the virtual extinction of cod in Newfoundland waters forced the Canadian government to impose a moratorium on fishing in the Grand Banks. Today, the sole populations in the Irish Sea and the English channel are highly threatened due to rampant overfishing.

The reason behind overfishing is simply that global seafood production cannot keep up with population growth. Unfortunately, world demand is on the rise, especially as high-quality sashimi-grade fish is increasingly sought after everywhere from North America and Europe to Asia and Australia. Although aquaculture farms act as buffers for certain species like salmon and tilapia, pelagic fish like yellowfin tuna are increasingly threatened.

Yellowfin (ahi) tuna is perhaps the most sought-after fish in the world and its commercial industry is estimated at several billion dollars. Found in subtropical and tropical waters around the world, tuna reach lengths of over 2m and can weigh upwards of 200kg. Although they are typically processed and canned, tuna is increasingly flash frozen and sold in fillets for use as sushi. If left raw, tuna is blood red in color, and has a smooth texture and a rich buttery taste.

In Panama, the Azuero coastline along the Golfo de Panamá is often referred to as the ‘tuna coast.’ Home to a large population of yellowfin tuna, the tuna coast serves as a benchmark indicator for the health of global stocks.

Thirty kilometers southwest of Pedasí, **Laboratorio Achotines** (Tuna Laboratory; ☎ 995 8166; www.iattc.org) is affiliated with the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, a global regulatory consortium on tuna fishing, and routinely sets quotas for the catches along the Pacific coast of the Americas. In 2002 the laboratory prevented commercial tuna fishing for an entire month along the Pacific coast of both North and South America, and they spent millions of dollars enforcing the ban.

The main purposes of the laboratory are to ensure the future health of yellowfin tuna populations and to promote sustainable commercial fishing. The center studies the spawning patterns of fish held in captivity as well as migratory patterns of tuna in the ocean through the use of radio transmitters. The center has also been successful in establishing an international regulatory commission on the use of certain types of fishing nets, which has played a direct role in reducing the number of dolphins that are killed by tuna fishing in the eastern Pacific, from 500,000 annually to 3000.

Laboratorio Achotines is open to the general public, though you must contact them in advance to arrange a tour of their facilities.

Panama's environmental agency, the main beach is often strewn with litter. Also, the US Navy used the island for target practice during WWII and unexploded ordnance is occasionally discovered here. Needless to say, it's unwise to stray off the island's beaten paths.

Isla Iguana is reachable by boat from Playa El Arenal, a beach 3km northwest of the Accel station in Pedasí. At the beach, boaters can take parties of up to eight people to the island for US\$20 each way. Be sure to tell your driver when to return for you.

Azuero Coastline

For information on surfing along the Azuero coastline, see the boxed text on p172.

PLAYAS EL TORO & LA GARITA

The two closest beaches to Pedasí serve as a popular day trip for residents of Pedasí, especially since the ocean here is usually safe for swimming. However, the waves can pick up if there's a strong surge coming in.

At Playa El Toro you can actually drive onto the beach if you have a vehicle, but Playa La Garita is flanked by a rocky slope, and a hike of about 100m through light scrub and dirt (which turns to mud if there's been any recent rain) is required to reach the beach. Despite their close proximity to Pedasí, both beaches are quite isolated and private. Neither offers much snorkeling – the water is simply too murky.

You can hire a taxi in Pedasí to reach these beaches; if you're driving from central Pedasí, turn east off the Carretera Nacional onto the paved street beside the Residential Moscoso and drive about 250m to the Cantina Hermanos Cedeño bar. Then take the dirt road just past the bar for 1km until the road forks. Follow the signs for 2km to the beaches.

PLAYA LOS DESTILADEROS

our pick The **cabins** (☎ 675 9715, 211 2277; d/cabin ind 3 meals US\$130; 📍) at this isolated beach are some of Panama's most charming accommodations. The painstaking work that went into these tall, thatched-roof cabins is apparent, from the lovely hand-carved washbasins to the front decks with sea views. Each cabin is fan-cooled and allows plenty of privacy, and waking up to the sights and sounds of the ocean is an experience not to be missed. The owner and designer, Philippe Atanasiades, is one of the

best chefs in Panama, which means that you will eat extremely well while you're staying here. To get here, drive through Pedasí and take the turnoff to the left in El Limon.

RESORT LA PLAYITA

This relaxed **resort** (☎ 996 2225; d/cabin US\$60; 📍), about 31km southwest of Pedasí, is more of a rustic retreat than an overbearing all-inclusive resort. The grounds are home to three lovely cabins, each beautifully designed with firm beds and private hot-water bathroom; ask for the cabin with ocean views. One thing you should know about La Playita is that the owner has a soft spot for the avian species and there are lots of birds here – particularly ostriches, spotted pigeons and several turkeys – but watch out, as the birds have the run of the grounds.

There's also a pleasant restaurant overlooking the water, and you can rent snorkeling gear (US\$6) or arrange boat trips with the owner (US\$30). Be advised that if you stay here during the weekend, you'll be sharing the beach with dozens (sometimes hundreds) of revelers who come from Los Santos to party beside the beach. During the week, however, the beach is virtually abandoned aside from the odd fisher or two.

VILLA MARINA

The next driveway past La Playita leads to **Villa Marina** (☎ 211 2277; www.playavenado.com; d/master bedroom ind 3 meals US\$140/150; 📍 🚰), a stunner of an ocean-side B&B that is set amidst tranquil gardens. The standard guestrooms are bright and airy, particularly when the morning light and ocean breezes fill up the room, while the larger master bedroom has French doors that open toward the beach. All of the rooms have luxurious private facilities, and guests can spend their days lounging around on hammocks, horseback riding on the beach, snorkeling and surfing in the sea or on boating and fishing excursions.

PLAYA VENAO

Playa Venao is a long, curving protected beach that's very popular with surfers – there are almost always waves to surf and they break in both directions.

The Playa Venao turnoff is 33km by road southwest of Pedasí, or 2km past the Resort La Playita turnoff. Facilities here are limited to an open-sided restaurant-bar and a nameless

SURFING IN LOS SANTOS PROVINCE

Although few among the international surfing community know about Los Santos, the province is home to some serious surf. The most popular destination for Panamanians is the coastline near Pedasí, though there is no shortage of wicked surf spots to choose from – you may have to work hard to get out here, but it'll be worth it when you see the lack of crowds. The beaches listed below are featured on Map pp68–9.

- **Playa Lagarto** At Pedasí. Beach bottom. Breaks at all tides. Good rights, lefts. Closes out when surf too big.
- **Playa El Toro** Near Pedasí. Rock-bottom point break with lefts, rights. Gets big with a strong swell. Best surfed at medium tide.
- **Playa Los Destiladeros** Near Pedasí. Right point over rock bottom, left point over rock bottom, beach break with pebble bottom. Best at medium tide.
- **Ciruelo** Before Venado. Rock-bottom point break, rarely surfed. Can get really good left tubes when there is a strong swell and no wind.
- **Playa Venao** South of Venado. Sand-bottom beach break popular with local surfers. This spot catches just about any swell. Best surfed at medium to high tide.
- **Playa Madroño** A 30-minute walk from Venado. Surf can get really good, with hollow tubes at low tide. Need to arrive early in the day before the wind picks up.
- **Playa Guánico** A 45-minute walk south of Venado. Two rock-bottom point breaks with rights and lefts. One beach break with rights and lefts.
- **Playa Raya** One hour past Venado. Waves 4m to 5m on big swells with serious tubes. Many big sharks here as well.
- **Playa Cambutal** Beyond Tonosí. Beach breaks with rights and lefts. Catches just about every swell. Best at medium to high tide.
- **Playa Negra** West of Playa Cambutal, around the first point. Point break over rocks, best during medium to high tide.
- **411** West of Punta Negra. Locally famous point break with a long right over a rock ledge. Best during medium to high tide.
- **Dinosaurios** Next to 411. Rock-bottom break with rights, lefts at medium to high tide. Can get very big with strong swells.
- **Horcones Beach Break** West of Dinosaurios. Sand-bottom beach break with rights, lefts. Good most tides.
- **Dos Rocas** Near Horcones. Rock-bottom point break beside two jutting boulders. Can get good rights at medium tide.
- **Corto Circuito** At road's end toward Cerro Hoya. Rock-bottom point break with powerful peak. Breaks over a rock ledge and throws a huge tube, then peels for about 100m with a great wall.

cabaña (per night US\$16) that has definitely fallen on hard times – if you stay here, bring a mosquito net. A better option is to bring a tent and camp beside the beach for free, though hardcore Panamanian surfers prefer to sleep in their cars.

Getting here by bus is challenging. One bus from Cañas passes in the morning (between 8am and 9am) en route to Pedasí (US\$2). The

bus makes the return journey in the evening (Pedasí to Cañas) though it's much easier to take a taxi from Pedasí (US\$12 to US\$14).

PLAYAS CAMBUTAL & GUÁNICO

Playas Cambutal and Guánico, 16km and 22km away from Tonosí respectively, are two excellent surfing beaches along the southern coast of the Península de Azuero. Both are

reachable by dirt road from Tonosí, but access is difficult as neither is served by bus.

If you have your own transportation, give some thought to camping on the beaches between late August and early September as you'll likely see some nesting sea turtles. Since there aren't any stores near the beaches, be sure to take some food with you.

Isla de Cañas

From the end of August through November, thousands of olive ridley sea turtles come ashore at night to lay eggs in the sand on the broad beach of Isla de Cañas (Cane Island). This is one of five places that these endangered turtles nest in such numbers – the others are two beaches on the Pacific side of Costa Rica, and two beaches in Orissa, India, on the Bay of Bengal.

The turtles arrive late at night, so there's no point in hiring the guide during daylight hours. Instead, agree on a meeting place and an hour when the guide can take you. When that time arrives, the guide will walk you across the island to the beach, and if you're lucky, you'll arrive at the same time as the expectant mothers. Please keep in mind that sea turtles are easily frightened, particularly by bright lights such as flashlights and cameras. Instead of hoping to resist the temptation to use these items, just leave them behind – your eyes will adjust to the moonlight and you can take plenty of mental pictures.

You can arrange tours to the island through the Pedasí branch of IPAT (p169) – expect to pay about US\$30 for a small group.

There's a small restaurant on the beach as well as some nameless **cabañas** (per person US\$10) if you wish to stay on the island. Bring a mosquito net and lots of insect repellent, long pants, a windbreaker or bug jacket and mosquito coils if you have them.

The turnoff for Isla de Cañas is easy to miss. It's beside a bus stop on the south side of the Carretera Nacional, 6.5km west of the turnoff for the town of Cañas; next to the bus stop, there's a brown-and-yellow sign that reads 'Bienvenidos Isla de Cañas via Puerto 2.5km.' The bus stop is served by Toyota Coaster buses that travel between Las Tablas and Tonosí hourly from 7am to 4pm.

From the turnoff, a 5km drive or hike on a dirt road takes you to the edge of a mangrove

forest. There's usually a boater there who will shuttle you to and from the island for US\$5 per party. If there's no boater to greet you, find the truck wheel hanging from a tree at the mangrove's edge and hit it hard five times with the rusty wrench atop it. If the sun's out and the tide's up – if there's water in the mangrove – a boater will fetch you.

Once you reach the island, you will be approached by a guide. As a rule every foreign visitor must be accompanied by an island guide, who will likely charge US\$10 an hour per group when working. If they couldn't make money from the turtles in this way, these people would sell all the turtle eggs they could find on the black market. As it is, about half of the eggs that are laid on the beach are dug up and sold illegally in Panama City – the other half are placed in hatcheries to ensure survival.

MACARACAS

pop 3000

Forty kilometers southwest of Chitré, the tiny town of Macaracas is the site of an annual **folkloric festival** (from January 5 to 10), which is highlighted by several dramatic theatre performances including the popular story of *The Three Wise Men*.

Aside from the festival, the main attraction in Macaracas is the nearby **Riío La Villa**, a secluded river just outside of town that is a great place for taking a swim. It's pretty empty during the week, aside from a few kids ditching school, but it's the place to be on weekends. To get there, take a right off the main road at the San Juan gas station. Continue for 750m until you pass over a metal bridge, then turn right into the gravel lot.

The town's sole lodging is the **Pensión Lorena** (☎ 995 4181; s/d with fan US\$8/12, with air-con US\$12/15; 📍 🚻), which is located above the pharmacy on the main road through Macaracas. Spartan rooms feature bare beds and cold-water showers, though it'll do in a pinch if you just need a place to lie down for the night. The attached restaurant also serves up hot meals, but don't expect anything more than Panamanian staples.

Buses run between Macaracas and Chitré (US\$2, one hour, hourly), and Macaracas and Tonosí (US\$2, one hour, hourly) from 7am to 4pm.

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