

Central Gulf Coast



Set in the crook of Mexico's curve, the central Gulf coast is easily overlooked by tourists searching for the best sun-lounger and a fat piña colada. Yet, decadent opportunities await the adventurer in this tourist-industry wallflower where the locals aren't talking economy when they say, 'We are very rich.'

They are referring to their landscapes: deserted coastline lapping tranquilly, forests Swiss-cheesed with caves, and towering volcanoes propelling rivers and waterfalls. They are talking about their jostling, honking cities, like Xalapa with its anthropology museum and its urbane sensibilities or Veracruz whose atmosphere, thick with marimba, mariachi and *danzón*, and also humidity, enchants you like undulating Latin dance. Their wealth is their architecture: evocative colonial edifices, niched pyramids and even surrealist stairways spiraling skyward. The opulence of this region is their diversity: gorgeous skin shades from Europe, Africa and indigenous communities have melded together in the wake of Cortés' conquest and destruction.

However, the people themselves, both generous and quick to laugh, prove most precious. Don't be surprised to see strangers greet each other or to be offered a ride on the back of a moped. Though you might summit Mexico's highest peak here, your most vivid memories could be of a grandmother you meet in a chaotic market who lets you try her *mole* from a 100-year-old family recipe, or stumbling into a village fiesta during traditionally costumed dances.

Whatever your endeavor, you'll find that the richness of the central Gulf coast is to be encountered, not just served to you over ice with an umbrella...though you'll savor it all the same.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Time-travel through Mexican civilizations at Xalapa's **Museo de Antropología** (p679)
- Climb around gigantic surrealist structures and dip in exquisite swimming holes of Las Pozas in **Xilitla** (p665)
- Walk a wistful coastal boulevard early in the morning and dance salsa deep into the night in **Veracruz** (p684)
- Gape at the extensive ruins of **El Tajín** (p672).
- Exploring the rainforests, volcanoes, waterfalls and deserted coastline of **Reserva de la Biosfera Los Tuxtlas** (p708)



■ VERACRUZ JANUARY DAILY HIGH: 25.6°C | 78.1°F

■ VERACRUZ JULY DAILY HIGH: 30.6°C | 87.1°F

History

The Olmecs, Mesoamerica's earliest known civilization, built their first great center around 1200 BC at San Lorenzo in southern Veracruz state. In 900 BC the city was violently destroyed, but Olmec culture lingered for several centuries at Tres Zapotes. During the Classic period (AD 250–900) the Gulf coast developed another distinctive culture, known as the Classic Veracruz civilization. Its most important center was El Tajín, which was at its peak between AD 600 and 900. Classic Veracruz appears to have been particularly obsessed with the ball game (see boxed text, p73), and its hallmark is a style of abstract carving featuring pairs of curved and interwoven parallel lines. In the Postclassic period the Totonacs established themselves in the region south of Tuxpan. North of Tuxpan, the Huastec civilization flourished from 800 to 1200. During this time, the warlike Toltecs also moved into the Gulf coast area. In the mid-15th century, the Aztecs overtook most of the Totonac and Huastec areas, exacting tributes of goods and sacrificial victims and subduing revolts.

When Cortés arrived in April 1519, he made Zempoala's Totonacs his first allies against the Aztecs by vowing to protect them against reprisals. Cortés set up his first settlement, Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz (Rich Town of the True Cross), and by 1523 all the Gulf coast was in Spanish hands. Forced slavery, newly introduced diseases and the ravages of war severely reduced indigenous populations.

Veracruz harbor became an essential trade and communications link with Spain and was vital for anyone trying to rule Mexico, but the climate, tropical diseases and pirate threats inhibited the growth of Spanish settlements.

Under dictator Porfirio Díaz, Mexico's first railway (1872) linked Veracruz to Mexico City, stimulating industrial development. In 1901 oil was discovered in the Tampico area, and by the 1920s the region was producing a quarter of the world's oil. In the 1980s the Gulf coast still held well over half of Mexico's reserves and refining capacity. Today, the region is not as large a player as it used to be, but is still a significant contributor to Mexico's oil economy.

Climate

The central Gulf coast region is generally warm and humid. It's hotter along the coast and wetter in the foothills – the hottest and

wettest of all regions being in the southeast. Two-thirds or more of the rain falls between June and September. Veracruz receives about 1650mm of rain annually. From April to October it features temperatures well over 30°C, falling into the teens at night only from December to February. Tuxpan and Tampico, on the north coast, are a bit drier. In the mountainous region inland it can range from 4°C to 15°C in winter.

Parks & Reserves

The Parque Nacional Pico de Orizaba (p699) protects Mexico's tallest mountain (5611m), a dormant volcano 25km northwest of Orizaba. Just north of here the Parque Nacional Cofre de Perote (p683) encompasses another volcano. In the south, the Reserva de la Biosfera Los Tuxtlas (p708) is 155 sq km of protected land that encompasses volcanoes and 11 ecosystems.

Dangers & Annoyances

Crime isn't a huge problem in this region, but travelers should remain wary of petty theft in cheap hotel rooms and pickpocketing in crowded market areas. More ominous is the hurricane potential. Check out the National Hurricane Center's website (www.nhc.noaa.gov) for the latest. Mosquitoes in coastal regions carry dengue fever, especially in central and southeastern Veracruz.

Getting There & Around

Veracruz port has a modern international airport, with national flights to Mexico City, Monterrey, Reynosa and Villahermosa, Tampico and Poza Rica. From the US, Continental has direct flights to Tampico and Veracruz from Houston, Texas.

Frequent 1st-class buses go just about everywhere within the region and link the main cities here with Monterrey, Mexico City, Puebla and Oaxaca. The main company serving this area is ADO, with a super-deluxe fleet (UNO) and a deluxe fleet (ADO GL) as well as normal 1st-class buses. Greyhound buses run between the US and Mexico through its Mexican affiliates. Routes include Brownsville, Texas, to Tampico.

The central Gulf coast region's highways are generally in great shape. But don't expect to go speeding through the countryside: the ubiquitous *topes* (speedbumps) will make you smell the roses.

TAMPICO & THE HUASTECA

Industrial, developed Tampico contrasts sharply with the verdant Huasteca inland where the coastal plain meets the fringes of the Sierra Madre Oriental. Spread over the states of southern Tamaulipas, eastern San Luis Potosí, northern Veracruz and small corners of Querétaro and Hidalgo, the Huasteca is named after the indigenous people of the region.

Heading inland from the Huasteca, four steep, winding routes cross the sierra: Hwy 70 from Ciudad Valles to San Luis Potosí; Hwy 120 from Xilitla toward Querétaro; Hwy 85 from Tamazunchale to Ixmiquilpan (near which you can turn off toward Querétaro, Pachuca and Mexico City); and Hwy 105 from Huejutla to Pachuca and on to Mexico City via Hwy 85.

TAMPICO & PLAYA MIRAMAR

📍 833

At the southern tip of Tamaulipas state, a few kilometers upstream from the Río Pánuco's mouth, Tampico (population 316,000) is Mexico's busiest port. The strengthening presence of US fast food, hotel and commercial chains here is disconcerting in that oh-crap-the-world-is-homogenizing kind of way.

However, the Plaza de la Libertad's newly renovated 19th-century, French-style buildings and the Plaza de Armas' daunting rose-colored kiosk are impressive, even if built recently to bolster tourism. A true jewel of the city is the Metro cultural center. Additionally, you can join the fiesta at Playa Miramar (officially part of Ciudad Madero) over vacations and holidays, but other times you'll have it all to yourself.

History

In the 1530s a mission was established in Tampico to convert the Huastecs. The town was destroyed by pirates in 1684 but refounded in 1823 by families from Altamira. After the 1901 discovery of oil in the area, Tampico suddenly became the world's biggest oil port – rough, tough and booming. Tampico's heyday was in the 1920s, and foreign investors reaped the oil profits until 1938 when the industry was nationalized by President Lázaro Cárdenas. To this day, the Tampico–Ciudad Madero refineries and harbor remain important.

Orientation

Tampico is ringed by extensive marshland, several lakes and numerous estuaries. Going south, the spectacular Puente Tampico (Tampico Bridge) crosses the Río Pánuco into Veracruz state.

PURSUING OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

On the central Gulf coast, don't mistranslate *deportes extremos* as meaning extreme sports, which are commonly associated with images of kayakers plunging down 20m waterfalls or rock climbers tackling an overhang. In this region, the much-advertised *deportes extremos* are basically any activity done in nature with a piece of outdoor equipment. Being lowered by a rappelling device, paddling flat water on blow-up kayaks and biking down a fire road all constitute *deportes extremos*.

This makes sense. The privilege of having time and money to hone an outdoor sport is inaccessible to many people here, and there's also an *extreme* lack of interest. However, the Pico de Orizaba–Cofre de Perote region, the Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve and the Huasteca offer a treasure trove of gorgeous waterfalls, jewel-like swimming holes, lush backroads, craggy mountains, whitewater galore, paragliding spots and hundreds of caves. The majority of these are rarely explored with recreational intention. The DIY possibilities are limited only by your caution.

A helpful resource could be **INEGI** (www.inegi.gob.mx) where you can buy topo maps for every inch of Mexico. Offices are in Veracruz (☎ 935-43-99; Víctimas del 5 y 6 de Julio 1045) and Xalapa (☎ 814-64-59; Av Camacho 236). If you have cycling in mind, try www.bicimapas.com.mx, which provides routes with some passable maps and directions. Tourist offices can sometimes point you in an *extreme* direction as well.

Many *deportes extremos* outfits advertise a huge list of activities, including, say, mountain biking because their cousin tried it five years ago. Usually, direct communication will inform you about what's really available.

Downtown Tampico centers on two plazas: the *zócalo* (Plaza de Armas) and the Plaza de la Libertad. South of Plaza de la Libertad are the market, docks, dive bars with their wayward crowds and delicious food court Centro de Gastronomía. This area is best explored during the day.

Huge hotels and commercial chains dapple the Av Hidalgo strip roaring with traffic running north to south. Eight kilometers northeast of central Tampico is Ciudad Madero, with Playa Miramar another 7km away, on the Gulf of Mexico. The third town in this million-plus industrialized metropolitan area is Altamira, 17km northwest of Tampico.

Information

Numerous banks are scattered around the central plazas, and all have 24-hour ATMs. Public telephones can be found in both plazas, and there are 24-hour lockers at the bus station.

Beneficencia Española, AC (☎ 241-23-63; www.bene.com.mx; Hidalgo 3909) Provides quality medical care.

Canarias Cybercafé (Carranza 214; per hr M\$10)

Post office (☎ 212-19-27; Madero 309)

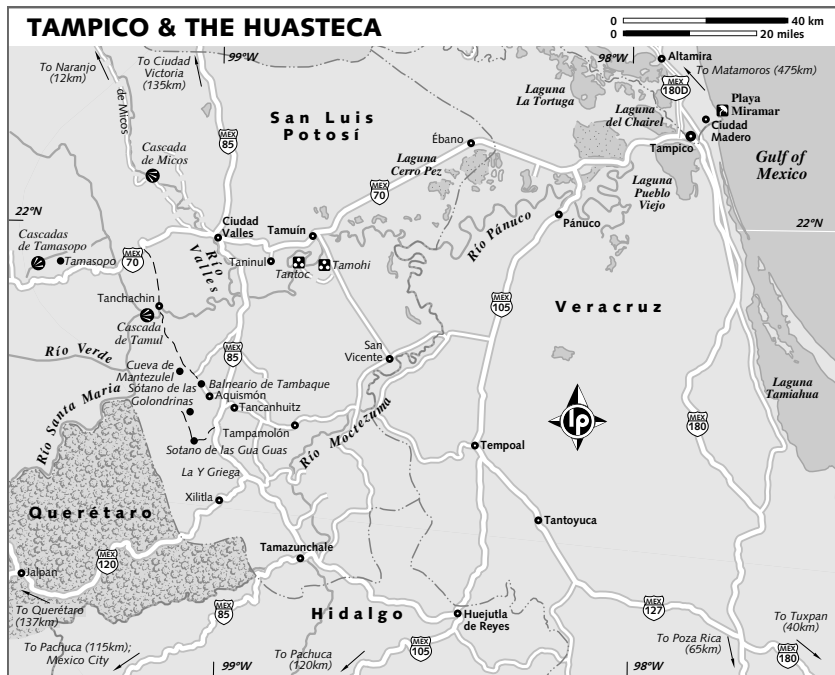
Tourist Office (☎ 217-89-40; www.tampico.gov.mx; Ave Hidalgo 2703; ☎ 9am-5:30pm Mon-Fri) Inconveniently located northwest of the city center near the Holiday Inn Express. The staff doesn't seem to know a lot but provides good city maps.

Tampico Cultural (www.tampicocultural.com.mx) Guide to the cultural happenings in the city.

Sights

The two central squares have some elegant New Orleans-style buildings with intricate wrought-iron balconies. Those on the Plaza de la Libertad seem slightly disjointed with a chaotic market almost spilling in from the south.

The Espacio Cultural Metropolitano, known as **Metro** (☎ 126-08-88; www.metro.tamauipas.gov.mx; Blvd Adolfo López Mateos s/n; ☎ 10am-6pm), is an extremely well done cultural center. Within this modern, spotless building you'll find couple of art galleries with ongoing exhibits (some with a minor entrance fee). Additionally, there are two theatres, the main one being formal and fit for a symphony and the other one being casual, aimed at experimental theatre and literary readings.



Metro also houses the **Museo de la Cultura Huasteca** (☎ 210-22-17; admission M\$37; 🕒 10am-4:45pm Tue-Sat), which displays well-organized exhibits and artifacts of the Huastec religion and culture and the Mesoamerican fertility cult. It's 2km from Tampico overlooking Lago Carpintero; take a 'Central Camionera' bus from Olmos and get off at the Parque Metropolitano stop. Walk down Topiltzin over a pedestrian bridge. A taxi cost M\$30.

Museo Exposición (Edificio de la Aduana; www.tampico1829.org; admission M\$10; 🕒 9-12 & 3-6pm) is a concentrated one-room museum that has informative displays and a video telling the history of Tampico's proud victory over the Spaniards in 1829. If the attendant is available, they'll show you around the museum and the **Edificio de la Aduana Tampico**, an old customs building (where the museum is housed) constructed in 1902 at the whim of vicious dictator Porfirio Díaz. Its internationally influenced architecture was built with materials imported from New Orleans, USA, France and England. To walk there from the Plaza de Libertad, follow Aduana toward the river. You'll see it on the left as you cross the railway tracks on the pedestrian bridge.

If you're in town on a Saturday the **Jardín Del Arte** (☎ 229-27-46; Plaza Morelos btwn Obregón & Morelos) is a rich event where painters and sculptors from the city congregate and sell or trade their works.

ACTIVITIES

In the heart of the city is **El Parque Metropolitano** where you can run or walk on paths bordering Lake Carpintero or take a lake tour on a little wooden barge (M\$35). If you're lucky, you'll spy one of the park's crocodiles lounging lakeside.

Five kilometers northwest of the city center is **Lago Chairel**, adjoined by pleasant Parque Gray Andrés de Olmos where you can take windsurfing lessons (M\$150 for three hours) from Umberto Salinas or wakeboarding lessons from **Safaris Tamesí** (☎ 140-12-04; www.wakecamp.com.mx; Parque Gray Andrés de Olmos), which trains wakeboarders at a competitive level. Tour companies might advertise these activities, but they will charge you much more and probably go through these guys anyway. A taxi costs M\$25.

Tampico Adventures (☎ 217-81-02; www.tampicoadventures.com) offers guided activities such as water skiing, rafting excursions, spa pack-

TOP PLACES TO FIND GREEN IN THE CITY

- **Parque Ecológico Macuiltépetl** (Xalapa, p679) Set on a verdant hill just north of the city, this is a runner's haven and urban retreat with volcano views galore.
- **Lago Chairel** (Tampico, left) Five kilometers from the city center, you can hang out lakeside with a picnic in Gray Andrés Olmos Park.
- **Parque Alameda** (Orizaba, p698) Green and statue-filled, this expansive city park serves as a track, social scene and host to pick-up soccer games.

ages, city tours and fishing trips. Or there's **Interexplora** (☎ 229-35-65; www.interexplora.com; Av Hidalgo 2000), a new shoot-off of a travel agency that offers trips to El Cielo biosphere reserve (p423), rafting on Río Micos outside Ciudad Valles in the Huasteca and Río Filobobos, popularly accessed from Tlapacoyan, and excursions to El Tajin (p672).

Playa Miramar is about 15km from downtown Tampico. The 10km broad sandy beach is pretty clean and the cobalt water is clear, if not crystalline. Beachside restaurants rent shady *palapas* and specialize in *mariscos* (seafood dishes) and margaritas. On holidays and weekends the beach spills over with families and is thick with vendors. At other times there's hardly a soul. From central Tampico, you can take a 'Playa' bus (M\$4.50) on Olmos, a *colectivo* (M\$4.50) north on Alfaro, or a taxi (M\$40).

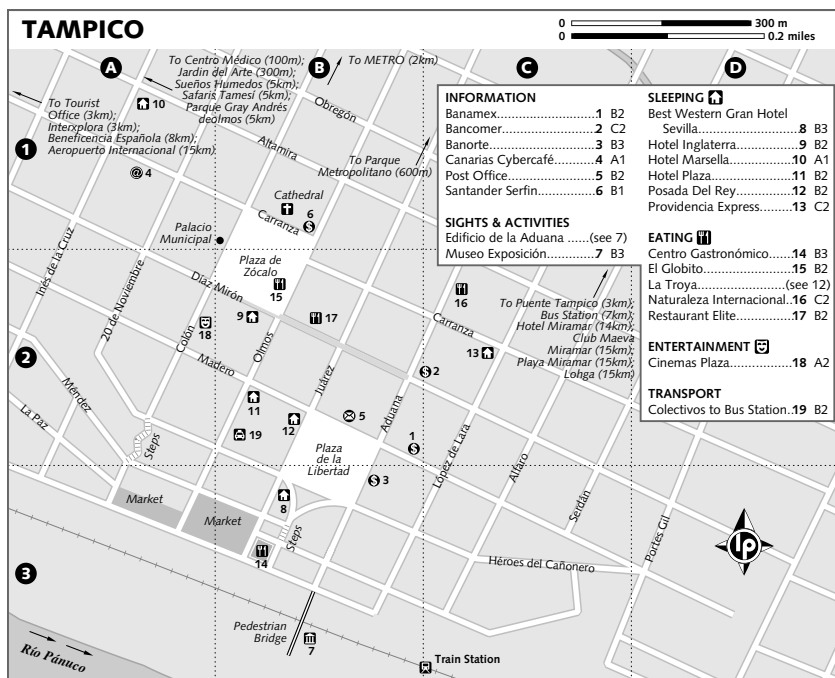
Festivals & Events

Semana Santa (week preceding Easter Sunday) Activities at Playa Miramar include regattas, fishing and windsurfing competitions, sand-sculpture contests, music, dancing and bonfires. Warning: petty crime rises during this period.

Aniversario de la Repoblación de Tampico (April 12) Features a procession from Altamira that passes Tampico's *zócalo*, celebrating the city's refoundation in 1823.

Sleeping

During holidays downtown places fill up quickly and rates skyrocket, increasing from 10 to 30%. Some hotels pay taxi drivers commission when they deliver customers, so beware (there are some funky hotels in this town).

**BUDGET**

Hotel Plaza (☎ 214-17-84; Madero 204 Ote; from M\$275;) Its tidy rooms are good for your purse strings. The location is great and there's a pizza place downstairs. Pay parking is available nearby.

Posada del Rey (☎ 214-10-24; www.hotelposada-delrey.com.mx; Madero 218; r M\$275-470;) Right on the *zócalo*, this hotel is clean, though the un-remodeled rooms are weathered. It offers windowless interior rooms and large rooms with views of the plaza.

MIDRANGE

Best Western Gran Hotel Sevilla (☎ 214-38-33, 800-570-39-11; www.bwgranhotelsevilla.com; Héroes del Cañonero 304 Pte; r M\$550-680;) Staying at a chain can kill the romance, but this hotel has undeniable charm with a curved modern facade and café overlooking the Plaza de la Libertad. Many of its cozy, clean rooms enjoy plaza views and are fairly priced with breakfast included.

Hotel Miramar (☎ 269-00-87; www.hotelmiramarinn.com; Av Álvaro Obregón 202 Nte; r M\$500;) A couple of blocks away from Playa Miramar,

this is a doable alternative to the lavish hotels on the beach strip. The establishment is a well-executed affair, though its rooms are unremarkable.

Providencia Express (Emilio Carranza 320-A; s/d M\$550/590;) In a town full of dog-eared hotels, the sterile, upright feeling of this very new hotel with modern trimmings is welcome. The rooms on the upper floors have views of the city. It's a good value.

Hotel Marsella (☎ 229-38-14; www.hotelmarsella.com.mx; Altamira 220 Pte; r from M\$680;) It pulls off European-Renaissance-meets-Mexican-kitsch, surprisingly. The newly remodeled rooms are ample and spotless. Go for a corner room that sports two balconies if you can.

TOP END

Hotel Inglaterra (☎ 230-44-44, 800-715-71-23; www.hotelinglaterra.com.mx; Díaz Mirón 116 Ote; r M\$850-1300;) The newly revamped rooms are upscale and have sleek Asian décor. For a significantly lower price, you can get an un-remodeled room that still has a terrific location on the corner of the *zócalo*, spa-

cious quarters and huge windows. Breakfast is included.

Club Maeva Miramar (☎ 230-02-02, 800-849-19-87; www.maevamiramar.com.mx; Blvd Costero s/n, Playa Miramar; all-inclusive r M\$1300-2200; P X ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹ ☹) The fanciest option on the beach, this all-inclusive tourist confine creates a separate world of hedonism with its pools, enormous decked-out rooms, live entertainment, private beach access and an armory of activities to entertain any of its bored charges.

Eating

A lot of the higher-end restaurants dot Av Hidalgo, a fume-ridden and traffic-saturated thoroughfare. However, in the center there are some good options. The local specialty is *carne asada a la tampiqueña*, steak marinated in garlic, oil and oregano and usually served with guacamole, strips of chili and corn chips.

El Globito (☎ 212-86-27; Plaza de Armas; mains M\$10-30; ☺ 24hrs) In the middle of the plaza; you can drink fresh juices or munch sandwiches all night.

Naturaleza Internacional (☎ 212-49-79; Aduana 107 Nte; mains M\$25-55; ☺ 8am-8pm; V ☹) At the rear nook of a 'health food' store, breakfasts and set meals (M\$45) are served with whole-wheat rolls. In general, this region hasn't figured out delicious vegetarian, but veggies might want to check it out.

La Troya (☎ 214-10-24; Madero 218; mains M\$40-100) This bar-restaurant has breezy balcony seating overlooking the plaza that makes a great place for a cold margarita and savory Mexican food.

Restaurant Elite (☎ 212-03-64; Díaz Mirón 211; mains M\$50-110; ☺ 7:30am-11pm) A spacious, popular restaurant with bustling waitresses and a long line-up of Mexican food served in generous portions, including excellent *carne asada a la tampiqueña*.

Centro Gastronomía (between Calles Juárez & Aduana) Join *tampiqueños* as they indulge in fantastic regional seafood such as *cocteles de camarón* (shrimp cocktails) adorned with avocado or a *torta de barda* (named after the protective wall, the *barda*, in the port) which is a sandwich loaded with different meats, cheeses, beans and the (hygenic) kitchen sink. Expect insistent waitstaff to vie for your business, and bring some extra pesos if it's your inclination to give to those who ask. One block south of Plaza de la Libertad in a chaotic arcade of food stands.

Drinking & Entertainment

Coffee shops and bars are scattered throughout the center, and there are some other fun options.

Lohga (☎ 216-86-70; Playa Miramar s/n) A small but fully equipped beachside bar with an ambience more laid-back than hotel bars, but with a debauched, youthful vibe.

Sueños Húmedos (Parque Gray Andrés de Olmos; ☺ 2pm-dose) Bar-on-a-barge on Lago Chairel. For M\$50 take a spin around the lake while you drink your *cerveza*. They set sail at 6pm for an hour and a half.

Cinemas Plaza (☎ 214-24-39; Colón 100 Sur) Shows recent American films subtitled in Spanish.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aeropuerto Internacional Francisco Javier Mina is 15km north of downtown. **Mexicana** and **Click Mexicana** (☎ 228-36-62) are among a handful of national airlines that offers daily flights to major Mexican cities. **Continental** (☎ 800-900-50-00) operates regular flights between Tampico and Houston, Texas.

BUS

Tampico's modern bus station (☎ 213-00-47) is 7km north of the center on Rosalío Bustamante. There are stores selling snacks, taco stands, a call center and luggage storage.

First-class buses run to most major towns north of Mexico City and down the Gulf coast.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Ciudad Valles	M\$10	3hr	6 daily
Matamoros	M\$305	7hr	9 daily
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	M\$394	10hr	every 1½ hrs
Monterrey	M\$358	7½hr	hourly
Poza Rica	M\$106	5hr	½ hourly
San Luis Potosí	M\$337	8hr	5 daily
Tuxpan	M\$168	4hr	hourly
Veracruz	M\$378	9hr	hourly
Xalapa	M\$376	10hr	2 daily

Deluxe and 2nd-class services also run to many of these destinations. For Xilitla, the quickest way is to travel to Ciudad Valles and get a connection there.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Hwy 180 north of Tampico is a good highway for about 80km, then narrows to a two-lane

northeast to Aldama or northwest on Hwy 81 to Ciudad Victoria. Heading south from Tampico, Hwy 180 crosses Puente Tampico and continues down to Tuxpan, which is an adequate road.

Avis (☎ 228-05-85) and **Budget** (☎ 227-18-80) are some car rental agencies are located at the airport.

Getting Around

Tampico's *colectivo* taxis are large old cars with destinations painted on the doors. They're inexpensive but slower than regular taxis and make frequent stops.

Transporte Terrestre (☎ 228-45-88) runs *colectivo* combis from the airport to anywhere in Tampico–Ciudad Madero for around M\$65.

Taxis from the bus station to the city center cost M\$30. From the city center to the bus station or Metro take a 'Perimetral' *colectivo* (M\$4.50) from Olmos, a block south of the *zócalo*.

CIUDAD VALLES & AROUND

☎ 481 / pop (Ciudad Valles) 110,000 / elevation 71m

Ciudad Valles slumbers on the banks of the huge Río Valles and serves as a good base for trips into the luscious Huasteca. It's also close to the midpoint between Monterrey and Mexico City, at the intersection of Hwy 85 (the Pan-American) and Hwy 70 (running east–west from Tampico to San Luis Potosí). Hence, it's a handy stop for motorists. It also serves as a good base for rafting and trips to caves and waterfalls in the luscious Huasteca.

Orientation & Information

Hwy 85, called Blvd México-Laredo in town, curves north–south through the city. To reach the main plaza, head five blocks west down Av Juárez or Av Hidalgo. Hwy 70 bypasses town on the south side.

The main bus station is located 3km south of the center, off Hwy 85 (Carr Nacional México-Laredo). Just off the Plaza, the staff at the **tourist office** (☎ 381-57-35; www.sanluispotosi.gob.mx; Av Hidalgo 111-113, 2nd fl; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat) knows their stuff and will give you lots of helpful information and maps.

Between the plaza and Hwy 85 on Juárez are banks (including a Banamex ATM) and **TOPCOM** (☎ 381-17-81; Juárez 115) with internet access.

Sights & Activities

Valles wouldn't usually be considered a destination point, but at the end of October the town goes all out to celebrate **Xantolo** – the traditional Huasteca variation of Día de Los Muertos – with music, dances and customary food. The modest **Parque Urbano** right off the plaza is perfect for an ice cream–equipped riverside stroll.

Mostly this little town is a great base for adventures (see boxed text, p657) to the Huasteca's azure rivers, lush forests and plunging waterfalls. If you have a car, you can venture out, but make sure you go with the help of the detailed maps you can get from the tourist office.

Alternatively, there are a number of adventure tour companies that run from here. They all tend to offer similar services like rafting, rappelling and zip lines, as well as trips to waterfalls, caves, Tamtoc (below) and Xilitla (p665). A rafting excursion will coast around M\$700 per person. Trips are more regular during the busy seasons – other times, you might have the guide to yourself. Often the rule of thumb is the more clients, the cheaper the cost.

Adventure tour companies:

Aventours (☎ 381-04-85; www.aventours.org; Galeana 46) They have a trip to El Cielo Biosphere Reserve (p423).

MS Xpediciones (☎ 381-18-88; www.msxpediciones.com.mx; Blvd México-Laredo 15 Nte) Offers sit-on-top kayaks trips, car rentals with driver/guide included (M\$1250 per day) and myriad caving excursions.

Adventura Huasteca (☎ 381-75-16; www.adventura.huasteca.net; Blvd México-Laredo 19 Nte) Rafting Río Tampoán and the Río Micos is the specialty of this well-established company.

TAMTOC

The important Huastec ceremonial center of **Tamtoc** (admission M\$43; ☎ 9am-5pm, Sun closed) flourished from AD 700 to 1500. Today it's one of the few maintained Huastec sites. The cleared part of the expansive site is a plaza with platforms made of river stones. Look for a low bench with two conical altars decorated with faded 1000-year-old frescoes believed to represent Quetzalcóatl, the feathered-serpent god.

Southwest of the main site are two unreturned pyramids, and further southwest is Puente de Dios (Bridge of God). At the winter solstice, you can stand on the main platform and watch the sun set into the Puente de Dios,

with the pair of pyramids and Río Tumpaón perfectly aligned.

On the way to Tamtoc, you'll pass **Tamohi** (also known as El Consuelo), which is another smaller archeological site that also has some other interesting Huastec structures.

To get to the ruins, go to the town of Tamuín, 30km east of Ciudad Valles on Hwy 70. Continue a kilometer east and turn south on the Tamuín–San Vicente road. Around Km 5, you'll see a sign for Tamohi where you turn right. Tamohi is about a kilometer down that road. For Tamtoc, continue straight on the Tamuín–San Vicente road and you'll see a sign for Tamtoc around Km 8 where you take a right and follow a rough road for 10 more kilometers.

There's no public transportation to these sights. A taxi will cost you M\$200 from Valles for a round trip. Frequent buses to Tampico go through Tamuín. The Vencedor window in Tamuín sells tickets to San Vicente that will drop you at the turnoffs if you want to walk the rest of the way.

WATERFALLS & SWIMMING SPOTS

Cascadas de Micos is a lovely place to take a dip or rent a canoe near Valles north of Hwy 70. Take the bus to Naranjo from 5 de Mayo near the plaza, and tell the driver to drop you off. The waterfalls are only 200m from the highway.

Southeast of Valles the fantastic **Cascada de Tamul** plunges 105m into the pristine Río Santa María. Take Hwy 70 for 24km, then turn left following signs to the waterfall for another 18km. There's no bus service here, and a round-trip taxi will cost about M\$250. You can also arrive from Aquismón. The *lan-cha* to actually reach the waterfall is M\$60 to M\$80 per person.

TAMASOPO

Many rivers flow eastward from the slopes of the Sierra Madre Oriental, forming waterfalls and swimming holes. Tamasopo, 5km north of Hwy 70 and 55km west of Ciudad Valles, is set in this luscious area.

Two kilometers from Tamasopo, **Cascadas de Tamasopo** (admission M\$20, campsites per person M\$50) has gorgeous waterfalls and a beautiful natural arch. **Cosmos Hotel** (☎ 482-387-00-40; Allende 309; s/d M\$385/490, with air M\$450/575; ♿ (P)) is the nicest of the smattering of little hotels in small Tamasopo. **Balneario Tamisaqua** (☎ 482-387-03-31; r M\$550; ♿ ♿ ♿ ♿) is a hotel burrowed in the

forest less than a kilometer past the Casadas de Tamasopo (follow signs) and 2.5km northeast from Tamasopo. It's equipped with a private set of cascades, a pool and a café.

HOTEL TANINUL

On Hwy 70 between Ciudad Valles and Tamuín is the turnoff for Hotel Taninul, a minor hot-springs resort. **Hotel Taninul** (☎ 388-01-43; taninul@avantel.net; Hwy Valles-Tampico, Km 15; from M\$660; ♿ ♿ ♿) is a converted hacienda on extensive grounds in a 700-acre reserve. It has good accommodations, a blissful (slightly sulfurous) hot mineral pool and a fleet of beater bikes on-hand for guests. It offers an array of spa services, including outdoor massage.

Next to the hotel, the small **Museo Lariab** (☎ 382-00-00; admission M\$10; ☎ 9am-3pm Tue-Sun) has well-presented exhibits on the Huastec, ancient and contemporary. A taxi from Valles costs around M\$120.

Sleeping

Most of the midrange and upmarket places are on Hwy 85.

Hotel Condesa (☎ 382-00-15; Juárez 109; r M\$150) Right near the plaza, these low-priced rooms are very simple yet clean, with friendly management. Ask for a room with windows.

ourpick Hotel Piña (☎ /fax 382-01-83; www.hotel-pina.com; Av Juárez 210; s/d M\$320/420; ♿ ♿) Unlike the hotels on Hwy 85, the Piña doesn't pretend to be upscale, nor does it charge you as such. With its warm-hued decor, pleasant sitting areas and high standards of cleanliness, this well-run hotel is a great deal.

Hotel Aventura Huasteca (☎ 382-01-28; Blvd México-Laredo 19 Nte; s/d M\$360/400, with air M\$400/450; ♿ ♿ ♿) This hotel keeps it plain, simple and pretty clean. Adventure Huasteca, a well-established adventure company, conveniently makes its base here.

Hotel San Fernando (☎ 382-22-80; Blvd México-Laredo 17 Nte; s/d M\$530/620; ♿ ♿ ♿) Not unlike a disappointing first date, this hotel presents well upon entrance, but the rooms inside are slightly dilapidated. It's held together by an efficient staff who keep it clean and guests appeased. It's four blocks from the plaza.

Hotel Valles (☎ 382-00-50; www.hotelvalles.com; Blvd México-Laredo 36 Nte; s/d M\$910/1130; ♿ ♿ ♿) Successfully creates a peaceful, verdant getaway right off Hwy 85. The expansive, landscaped grounds have a large pool, and some of

the spacious, well-kept rooms have stone tubs. There's a casual restaurant and a fancier steak and seafood place on the premises.

Eating

El Cafetto (Central plaza; ☎ 8am-9pm; dishes M\$10-45; ☼) Smack in the middle of the plaza, this café is as trendy as Valles gets. It serves paninis, refreshing smoothies and coffee drinks.

Todo Light (☎ 381-14-93; Morelos cnr Juárez; mains M\$25-50; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun; ☼ ☐) This eatery on the plaza has whole-wheat goodies, salads, sandwiches and fresh juices. The VIGOR smoothie mixes spinach, orange and pineapple juice.

Torta 'Don Max' (Juarez 227; mains from M\$30; ☎ 9:30am-11:30pm) A to-the-point sandwich joint and a locals' choice.

La Troje (☎ 381-68-44; Av Juárez 210; mains M\$30-70; ☼) This popular café connected to Hotel La Píña has friendly service and plentiful, delicious Mexican food.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Just off Hwy 85, 3km south of Juárez, the **bus terminal** (☎ 382-39-12) has a left-luggage room and a taxi ticket booth (M\$30 to the center). Many buses are *de paso* (therefore often late). First-class buses depart from Ciudad Valles to several destinations:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Matamoros	M\$360	8hr	11 daily
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	M\$471	10hr	9 daily
Monterrey	M\$338	7hr	19 daily
San Luis Potosí	M\$238	5hr	frequent
Tampico	M\$125	2½hr	hourly

Second-class buses run more frequently and cost about 10% less; local routes go to Pachuca, Ciudad Victoria, Tampico, Tamazunchale, Aquismón and Xilitla.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Hwy 70 west of Valles is spectacular. It climbs the Sierra Madre toward San Luis Potosí (262km) on the Altiplano Central (slow trucks will hold you up periodically on this twisting road). East to Tampico, Hwy 70 is straight and fast. Hwy 85 heads south to Tamazunchale and then southwest toward Mexico City. You can also continue east from Tamazunchale to Huejutla, circling the

Huasteca back to Tampico, which is a slower route over rough roads.

AQUISMÓN & AROUND

☎ 482 / pop 1900 / elevation 137m

The molasses-paced Huastec village of Aquismón – 45km south of Ciudad Valles and 4km west from Hwy 85 – nestles into dense forest beneath a precipitous limestone ridge. Most people come for the Sotano de las Golondrinas, but few realize that this area is rich in caves, not to mention waterfalls, rivers and forests (see opposite). If you're around on a Saturday, you might want to catch the colorful market. During Semana Santa the city and surrounding areas crawl with Mexican tourists.

On the plaza, the **tourist office** (☎ 368-00-22; dirturismo_aquismon@hotmail.com) gives out information enthusiastically. Conveniently, the very eager, for-hire *camionetas* are right outside the office. They quote you a lump price that is split among up to 8 passengers. There is an ATM in the Palacio Municipal on the plaza.

Various tour companies from surrounding cities bring people mostly to the main Sotano. Yet the in-town tourist resources are undeveloped, beyond the *camionetas* for hire, in an area glugged with natural beauty.

A *camioneta* (M\$600) will take you to Mexico's second-deepest pit, the astonishing **Sótano de las Golondrinas** (Pit of the Swallows; admission M\$10; ☎ dawn-dusk), a 376m-deep cave 13km southwest of Aquismón. It's home to thousands of swifts that emerge en masse just after sunrise and return at dusk. Their beating wings sound like river rapids. It takes an hour in each direction on a rough access road suitable for 4WD vehicles only.

A mere 15-minute ride north from Aquismón is **Balneario de Tambaque** where you'll find Río Tanutés crystalline waters cascading and pooling for your dipping pleasure. A *camioneta* there should cost about M\$20 per person. Also close to Aquismón are the **Cuevas de Mantezulel** (Mantezulel Caves), which includes a cave with an expansive entrance allowing you to explore a ways without equipment; a *camioneta* costs M\$300. There's a back way going north from Aquismón to Cascada de Tamul (p663). A *camioneta* costs M\$400.

Aquismón is the center for the lively festivals of **San Miguel Arcángel** (September 28 and 29) and the **Virgen de Guadalupe** (December 12). The Huastec dances performed imitate the

DO IT YOURSELF: AQUISMÓN

There's a dog-eared map in the Aquismón tourist office that stores the collective knowledge of foreign spelunkers come and gone, marking the abundant, little-known caves. If you're into spelunking, this might be your hog heaven. Possible contact Ateno Genes Pérez lives in the community by the Sótano de las Golondrinas and takes people rappelling into the vast caverns. Go through the tourist office to get in touch with him. **Inegi** (www.inegi.gob.mx) is a good source for detailed topos.

The little-trafficked system of back roads could make for a gorgeous bike tour, especially with all the rural communities, rivers, waterfalls and caves as destination points where camping is usually permitted, with varying fees (free to M\$50) and degrees of services. The tourist office offers guided bike trips (M\$500 half day) with shoddy rentals. Bringing your own bike and arranging a guide or an SAG vehicle might be the way to go. Or, if you want to roll solo, get info from the friendly tourist office. October, November and March would be prime times to tour because it's uncrowded, cooler and less rainy.

movements of wild creatures. Much drinking of *aguardiente* (sugar cane alcohol) accompanies the performances at the festivals.

One of two hotels in town is the very basic **Hotel San Cosme** (☎ 368-00-72; cnr Zaragoza & Av Juárez; s/d M\$150; (P)) just off the plaza. Endure it if you want to save a couple of pesos. Otherwise a short stroll from the plaza, **Hotel La Mansión** (☎ 368-00-04; Carmona 16; s/d M\$200/300, air-con M\$100 extra; (P) (S)) is pleasant and contains a restaurant. Its sparse rooms are well attended.

There's a smattering of standard Mexican, eateries near the Plaza. In the center of the plaza, **El Kiosko** has sandwiches and fresh fruit drinks made with cinnamon.

Second-class buses from Ciudad Valles or Xilitla drop you at the crossroads of Hwy 85; *colectivo* taxis (M\$6-8) take you the last 4km to Aquismón. To get to Xilitla, catch the 'Jalpan' bus (M\$22) from the Hwy 85 crossroads.

XILITLA

☎ 489 / pop 5900 / elevation 1151m

Perched on a hilltop, surrounded on all sides by the verdant, sweeping slopes of the Sierra Madre Oriental, Xilitla (*he-leet-la*) is a striking mountain town. Las Pozas is the main tourist draw here, but staying a night or two in Xilitla with its temperate climate and beautiful setting is a laid-back, pleasant experience.

Orientation & Information

The central plaza occupies the highest part of the town, with streets falling away steeply on all sides. Most things are close to this square, including the bus stop (there's no terminal), which is 200m to the southwest. There's a Banorte (with ATM) on the plaza and several

internet cafés including **La Nave** (☎ 9am-10pm; per hr M\$10), just west of the plaza.

A big festival is the Xilitla coffee fair on August 27, but a few days before and after there are Huapango dances and musical performances – characterized by intricate steps and falsetto singing.

Sights

LAS POZAS

Xilitla's famous attraction is **Las Pozas** (The Pools; admission M\$30; ☎ 9am-dusk), a bizarre but beautiful concatenation of concrete temples, pagodas, bridges, pavilions, sculptures and spiral stairways built adjacent to an idyllic series of waterfalls. This surreal creation stands as a monument to the imagination and excessive wealth of Edward James (see boxed text, p666) as well as to the expertise of site manager Plutarco Gastelum and the skill of local workers who cast the elaborate constructions in the 1960s and 1970s. Though the project was never completed – the jungle encroaches on the half-finished structures – this is an amazing place.

The extravagant labyrinth of surreal sculptures and edifices with stairs leading nowhere and random architecture could invigorate anyone's creative inclination. If you're in fairly good shape you could spend the whole day dipping in the lovely swimming holes and climbing around the precarious structures and maze trails within the 36 hectares.

In most places guardrails are nonexistent, which adds to the unreal experience, but could be hazardous. It's a popular picnic spot, but mid-week it can be deserted. The café here is open daily from 10am to 6pm.

EDWARD JAMES

Born into immense wealth in Sussex, England, James (1907–84) rejected aristocratic conventions and sought the company of artists, poets and existentialists. As a generous patron, James became absorbed in surrealist art and amassed the largest private collection in the world.

In 1945 his adventures took him to Xilitla where he met close friend Plutarco Gastelum who helped build Las Pozas. It began with 40 local workers crafting giant, colored, concrete flowers beside an idyllic jungle stream. Then, for 17 years, James and Gastelum created ever larger and stranger structures, many of which were never finished, at an estimated cost of US\$5 million.

James died in 1984, making no provision to maintain his creation, which is already decomposing into another Mexican ruin. Currently, there are rumors of its restoration.

Even though Las Pozas is the main sthick here, it's relatively inconvenient to arrive without a car. You can walk there the pleasant back way in about 45 minutes east of Xilitla, or take a *combi* (M\$6) to the entrance off the highway and walk the remaining 1km. A taxi is M\$60.

MUSEO DE EDWARD JAMES

A tiny **museum** (Ocampo 105; admission M\$30; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun) was set up by the Gastelum family who fondly remembers Edward James. It displays the intricate wood molds made by hand that were used to make the incredible structures at Las Pozas. You'll also find some photographs chronicling the construction of Las Pozas and James' life.

CONVENTO DE SAN AGUSTÍN

Brooding over the plaza, the austere former monastery **Convento de San Agustín** was built in 1557. An intriguing feature is the row of tiny windows that line its upper north side, which mark the *celdas* (cells) of the resident monks. The only part of the complex open to the public is the single-naved chapel and small rear patio.

Sleeping

The little town of Xilitla has surprisingly adorable, well-priced places to stay.

Hotel Dolores (☎ 365-01-78; www.hoteldoloresxilitla.com; Matamoros 211; s/d M\$180/350 with fan, double M\$450 with air; ☎) A short walk away from the plaza you'll find this cheery, well-decorated hotel. Most rooms have large windows that provide fantastic views of the mountains. The single room with a fan is a deal.

Hotel Guzmán (☎ 365-03-38; Corregidora 208; s/d M\$200/350, with air-con M\$300/350, suite M\$500; ☎) Just off the plaza, this attractive stone hotel run by an eccentric family has three floors of well-kept, clean, comfortable rooms, many

with rich wooden details, rock-embedded floors and mountain views. The top-floor suites are expansive with fantastic views and bathtubs.

Las Pozas (☎ 365-03-67; www.laspozas.ya.st; 2/4 people M\$300/500; ☎) You can't beat the location of these *cabañas* scattered throughout the lower part of the estate. However, they are bit dated and musty.

Hostel del Café (☎ 365-00-18; hostaldelcafe@hotmail.com; Niños Héroes 116; r M\$400-600; ☎) This seven-room, bed-and-breakfast-style hotel is a kilometer or so from town. You'll find the rooms tucked into a luscious hillside with gorgeous details like hand-carved headboards, painted sinks, and showers tiled with river stones. Breakfast is served in the *Cueva*, a colorfully decorated minicave looking out onto the communal patio dripping with foliage.

Posada El Castillo (☎ 365-00-38; Ocampo 105; www.junglegossip.com; r M\$700-1200; ☎) The former Gastelum home where Edward James stayed in Xilitla is now a verdant, Pozas-esque guesthouse run by the family and is the highest end option in town. Its tasteful rooms are decorated with antiques and art, and some claim fantastic views.

Eating

Look out for tasty local *acamaya* (freshwater crayfish) and *enchiladas huastecas*, which are served with *cecina* (thin strips of beef) on the side. Taco and *esquite* (corn-on-the-cob) stands are all around the plaza and seem to win the people's choice award. Also, you're bound to find interesting eats in the Mercado behind the church.

Las Tortugas de Xilitla (☎ 365-06-48; Escobedo 218; ☎ 12pm–10pm Sun–Fri; sandwiches M\$18–28) Plop onto a cushy, red barstool at this popular, cheap sandwich spot and watch the cook whip you

up a sandwich with fresh ingredients. The *torta huasteca* (M\$22) comes decked with *cecina*, *chorizo* and shredded cheese.

La Flor de Café (☎ 365-03-76; Hidalgo 215; M\$25-40; ☎ 6:30am-9pm) Run by a co-op of Nahua women, this simple place offers local specialties including *zacahuiles* (huge *tamales*) as well as delicious *aguas frescas* (sweetened fruit water).

Restaurant Cayo's (☎ 365-00-44; Alvarado 117; dishes M\$40-90; ☎ 9am-10pm) The patio looking onto the Sierra is a gorgeous place to grab a bite. The *sopa de mariscos* is a delightful and impolite adventure with whole, unpeeled crawfish and shrimp.

Getting There & Away

Xilitla has regular connections on comfortable 2nd-class buses to Ciudad Valles (M\$54, frequently) that pass Aquismón en route. Buses to Tampico (M\$200) also run frequently. There are also buses to San Luis Potosí (M\$350). The southeast journey across northern Veracruz state toward Tuxpan is actually quickest traveled via Valles and Tampico.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The drive through the Sierras to the market town of Huejutla on Hwy 85 is fantastic. If you pass through Huejutla on a Sunday there's a big market, which many Nahua people in the region attend.

South of Huejutla, Hwy 105 climbs into the lovely Sierra Madre Oriental. It's a tortuous, foggy road to Pachuca. On the way you'll pass old monasteries at Molango and Zacualtipán.

Hwy 120, heading west to Jalpan then southwest toward Querétaro, is an exciting route through the Sierra Gorda. Southeast of Xilitla, Hwy 85 is the most direct route from the Huasteca to Mexico City. It's a steep but scenic route over the Sierra Madre. Start early to avoid fog.

NORTHERN VERACRUZ STATE

The northern half of Veracruz state, between the coast and southern fringes of the Sierra Madre Oriental, mainly consists of lush rolling pastureland. Laguna de Tamiahua claims

the region's largest wetland, while the Gulf has some fine isolated (sometimes polluted) sandy beaches. The major archaeological attraction is El Tajín.

At the regular army checkpoints along this coast the soldiers are usually very respectful toward tourists.

TUXPAN

☎ 783 / pop 75,000

Tuxpan (sometimes spelled Túpam), 300km north of Veracruz and 190km south of Tampico, is a steamy fishing town and minor oil port. If you have some time here, cross the broad Río Tuxpan to visit a little museum devoted to Cuban-Mexican friendship or join vacationing Mexicans on Playa Norte, the beach 12km to the east.

Orientation & Information

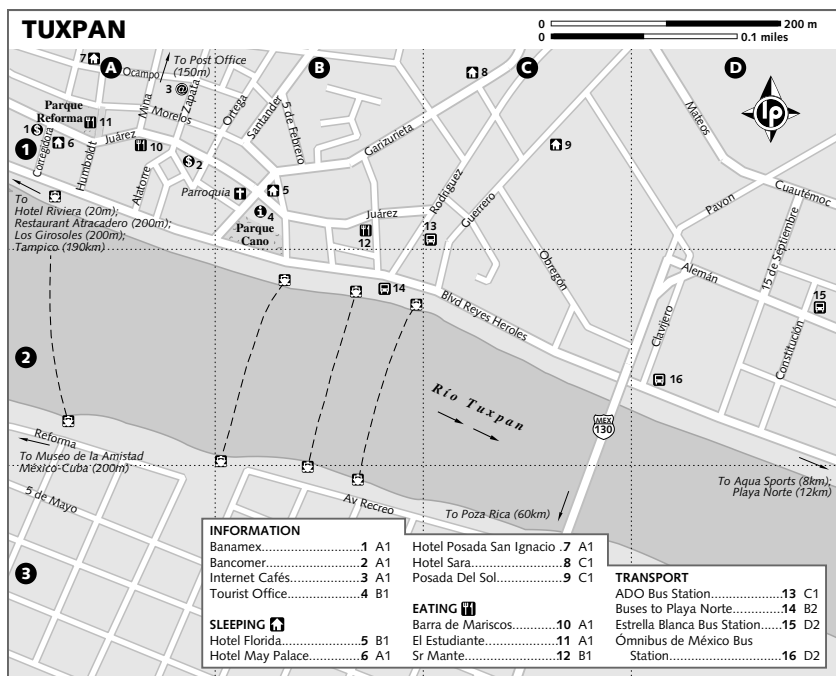
The downtown area is on the north bank of the Río Tuxpan, six blocks upstream from the bridge that spans the river. The riverfront road, Blvd Reyes Heróles, passes under the bridge and runs east to Playa Norte. Across the river is the suburb of Santiago de la Peña where the museum is located.

Tuxpan's simple **tourist office** (☎ 834-64-07; turismotuxpan@yahoo.com.mx; Palacio Municipal; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) has a smattering of maps and tourist brochures. Card phones are in Parque Reforma and banks with ATMs on Juárez. The post office is several blocks away, on Mina, while you'll find internet cafés around the center.

Sights & Activities

On the south side of the river, the **Museo de la Amistad México-Cuba** (Mexican-Cuban Friendship Museum; Obregón s/n; admission free; ☎ 9am-7pm) has a room filled with displays on José Martí and pictures of Che Guevara and Castro as well as other memorabilia. Fidel Castro stayed in this suburban house in 1956 while planning the infiltration of Cuba. On November 26, a private yacht overloaded with 82 revolutionaries set sail from here to Cuba to start the uprising. To get to the museum, take a boat (M\$3) across the river, walk several blocks south to Obregón, then turn right – the museum is at the western end of Obregón on the river.

Tuxpan's beach **Playa Norte**, 12km east of town, is a wide strip stretching 20km north from the Río Tuxpan's mouth. At the time of publication, its *palapa* restaurants were



still recovering from Hurricane Dean and the beach was undergoing a cleaning process, but it's still a chilled-out place to eat cheap seafood and take a break from the city. The hydro-electric plant in the backdrop takes away from the ambience, but the water and sand are fairly clean and – holidays and Sundays apart – it's usually empty. Local buses (M\$8, 25 minutes) marked 'Playa' leave regularly from the south side of Blvd Reyes Heróles and drop you at the south end of the beach.

Aqua Sports (☎ 837-02-59; aquasportuxpan@yahoo.com.mx; Hwy Tuxpan–La Bara Km 8.5; 2 dives M\$800-1300), around 8km from downtown going toward the beach, is an established scuba-diving operation with quality boats that offers dives on nearby reefs or Isla de Lobos, as well as **fishing trips** (M\$1000 per hour). Visibility is best between May and August, and from January to March you can fish for giant tarpon. Camping on the island (with all provisions provided) can be arranged with advanced notice.

Festivals & Events

A big **fishing tournament** brings hundreds of visitors to Tuxpan in late June or early July.

Festivities for the **Assumption** (15 August) continue for a week with folk-dancing contests, bullfights and fireworks.

Sleeping

Hotels fill up quickly during holiday periods, but discounts may be available at other times. Not much of a hot spot on the tourist track, Tuxpan lacks top-end lodgings.

Hotel Posada San Ignacio (☎ 834-29-05; Ocampo 29 s/d M\$200/300) This vibrantly decorated, quiet place is a fantastic deal. It's well done up, and the clean rooms surround a courtyard bursting with plants and color.

Posada del Sol (☎ 834-18-59; Guerrero s/n; s/d M\$320/420; ☺) Attempts a peaceful hacienda feel but doesn't quite succeed. However, the rooms are clean enough and large with some pleasant details.

Hotel Riviera (☎ 834-53-49; Blvd Reyes Heróles 17; s/d M\$420/460; P ☺) This renovated hotel has a good location on the river. Some of the generously sized, well-presented rooms enjoy partial river views. Accommodation in the front of the hotel is more attractive. Street noise can be an issue in some rooms.

Hotel Florida (☎ 834-02-22; www.hotel-florida.com.mx; Juárez 23; s/d M\$470/570; (P) ☒ ☑) It's a cheaper, better choice than its neighbor Hotel Reforma. The Florida has friendly staff, spacious rooms with big windows and communal decks that look over bustling Calle Juárez.

Hotel Sara (☎ /fax 834-00-10; www.hotelsaratuxpan.ver.com.mx; Garizurieta 44; s/d M\$450/650; (P) ☒ ☑) This hotel is newer and an excellent deal, especially considering it offers discounts for cash. The tidy rooms are large and slick with marble tiling. The awesome rooftop pool with city and river views is a plus.

Hotel May Palace (☎ 834-88-81; Av Juárez 44; s/d M\$615/725; (P) ☒ ☑) Locals say this is the best place in town. Some of its immaculate, pleasant rooms have good river as well as *zócalo* views.

Eating

The *zócalo* is flanked by good restaurants. Furthermore, the *palapas* at Playa Norte are ideal for fresh *mariscos* and cold beers. Additional restaurants include:

El Estudiante (middle of *zócalo*; juices M\$16) You can't get any more central than this. It serves fresh juices and huge fruit salads with granola and honey (M\$25), which you can munch under shade umbrellas.

Sr Mante (☎ 834-57-36; Juárez 8; buffet M\$80, mains M\$45-100; ☎ 6am-12am) Located on a busy street corner where you can people-watch, this locals' darling has tasty regional food and a buffet that scores for value.

Barra de Mariscos (☎ 834-46-01; Av Juárez 44; seafood M\$50-110) An enjoyable, atmospheric place where freshness is valued; try the *pulpo con salsa de ajo* (octopus in garlic sauce) or *camarones a la plancha* (grilled shrimp).

Los Girasoles (☎ 834-03-92; cnr Blvd Heróles & Hernández y Hernández; mains M\$60-120; ☎ 12pm-12am) This place has a varied menu including Caesar salads, BBQ and pasta, and its wacky decorations include a cello, water skis and an antique gas pump. Live rock music at weekends.

our pick Restaurant Atracadero (☎ 834-10-70; Blvd Heróles 35; mains M\$60-200) This barge-turned-restaurant docked on the river is a fabulous splurge with its open-air, upscale ambience. Drink red wine while enjoying the house specialty: paella (M\$250), which can feed three to four people and is made with all sorts of meat, *mariscos* and veggies.

Getting There & Around

Most 1st-class buses leaving Tuxpan are *de paso* (passing through). Booking a seat in advance might be a good idea. There are several bus terminals, but the ADO station (1st-class and deluxe) on Rodríguez is the most convenient from the center. Omnibus de México (ODM; 1st class) is under the bridge on the north side of the river. The modern Estrella Blanca terminal, two blocks east of the bridge on Alemán, runs mainly 2nd-class services, but also has a few 1st-class buses. First-class departures:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Matamoros	M\$522	11hr	2 daily
Mexico City	M\$380	4hr	1 daily
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	M\$230	6hr	hourly
Papantla	M\$50	2hr	1
Poza Rica	M\$20	1	hourly
Tampico	M\$168	4hr	hourly
Veracruz	M\$210	6 hr	hourly
Villahermosa	M\$534	14hr	5
Xalapa	M\$208	6hr	5

There are also half-hourly 2nd-class services to Poza Rica and Tampico, and several deluxe UNO services to Matamoros. Covered launches (M\$3) ferry passengers across the river.

TAMIAHUA

Tamiahua, 43km north of Tuxpan by paved road, is at the southern end of Laguna de Tamiahua. During the local Carnaval the second week in May, *Semana Santa* and summer vacations, there can be a fair amount of Mexican tourists here. If you visit any other time, you'll be immersed in the warm culture of a small Mexican fishing town. You can rent boats from the docks for **fishing trips** (3 hours; M\$400), excursions out to the lagoon's barrier island, or to get to the ocean and pretty **Playa Tamiahua**. Mexican tourists are known to camp on the beach. One of Tamiahua's handful of hotels is **Hotel Barrera** (☎ 768-857-01-64; Hidalgo 7; s/d M\$300/400; ☒ (P)), which is well kept. The town has a few no-frills seafood restaurants, a delightful one being **Restaurant El Veracruzano** (Ruiz Cortines s/n; mains M\$20-80; ☎ breakfast, lunch, dinner) where Ruiz Cortines hits the river. Try the delectable corn empanadas (M\$8) stuffed with seafood.

From Tuxpan, take a taxi (M\$20) to the *Crucero de Tamiahua* (Tamiahua crossroads)

where frequent 2nd-class buses (M\$17) to Tamiahua pass.

POZA RICA

☎ 782 / pop 175,000

The modern industrial oil city of Poza Rica is at the junction of Hwy 180 and Hwy 130, and is a big transportation hub.

If you're stranded overnight, the **Best Western Hotel Poza Rica** (☎ 822-01-12; fax 823-20-32; www.bwpozarica.com; cnr Calles 2 Nte & 10 Ote; s/d M\$830/900; ♿) is a good choice with helpful staff, modern amenities and a café-restaurant.

The main Poza Rica bus station, on Puebla east off Blvd Lázaro Cárdenas, has 2nd-class and some 1st-class buses. Second-class Transporte Papatlta will take you to coastal towns. Most 1st-class buses leave from the adjoining ADO building, including the following departures:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	M\$192	5hr	hourly
Pachuca	M\$128	5hr	at least 2 daily
Papatlta	M\$16	30min	20 daily
Tampico	M\$200	4½hr	25 daily
Tuxpan	M\$20	45min	30 daily
Veracruz	M\$180	5hr	hourly

For El Tajín take any one of the frequent 2nd-class buses to Coyutla, El Chote, Agua Dulce or San Andrés (M\$15) from the main bus station. These pass the turnoff marked 'Desviación El Tajín' and will drop you off. The ruins are 300m from the highway.

The scenic 200km Poza Rica-Pachuca road, Hwy 130, is the direct approach to Mexico City from northern Veracruz. This winding, misty route climbs up to the Sierra Madre, across the semitropical north of Puebla state and into Hidalgo on the way to Pachuca, passing through many Nahua and Totonac towns.

PAPANTLA

☎ 784 / pop 48,000 / elevation 196m

Spread over a hillside, Papatlta is a friendly, commerce-oriented town that has a couple of intriguing things for a visitor beyond its traditional role of housing El Tajín-bound tourists. As the center of a vanilla-growing region, markets and shops offer vanilla-based artisan products, and the city also has beautiful murals. Don't be surprised to see Totonacs wearing traditional clothing here – the men

in loose white shirts and trousers, women in embroidered blouses and *quechquémitls* (traditional capes).

Orientation & Information

Papatlta lies just off Hwy 180, which runs southeast from Poza Rica. The center of town is uphill from the main road. From the *zócalo* downhill is north.

The plaza is 1.5km south of the ADO bus station; turn left out of the terminal, then take the first right into Av Carranza, then left up 20 de Noviembre, past the Transportes Papatlta bus terminal and market to the *zócalo*. The ramshackle **tourist office** (☎ 842-38-37; 1st fl, Azueta 101) is just off the northwest corner of the *zócalo*. You'll find two banks with ATMs on Enríquez just east of the *zócalo*, and **Internet** (☎ 842-62-05; 20 de Noviembre 1; ☎ 9am-10pm; per hr M\$8) has – big surprise – internet services. The post office is four blocks northwest of the plaza.

Sights

Officially called Parque Téllez, the *zócalo* is terraced into the hillside below the **Iglesia de la Asunción**. Beneath this Franciscan cathedral a 50m-long **mural** (see boxed text, opposite) facing the square depicts Totonac and Veracruz history. A serpent stretches along the mural, bizarrely linking a pre-Hispanic stone carver, El Tajín's Pirámide de los Nichos and an oil rig.

At the top of the hill towers Papatlta's **volador monument** (see p673 for information on *voladores* rites). This 1988 statue portrays a musician playing his pipe, preparing for the four fliers to launch. To reach the monument, take the street heading uphill from the southwest corner of the cathedral yard; at the end of the road hang a left.

The **Casa de la Cultura** (16 de Septiembre s/n; ☎ 10am-2pm Mon-Sat) houses art classes and a display of local art work on the top floor. If you're lucky, you'll run into Maestro Teodoro Cano painting. In the workings is the **Museo de la Ciudad Teodoro Cano**, which will have art, Totonac artifacts and an exhibit on Papatlta's history. It will replace the recently closed Museo de La Ciudad.

Guide **Gaudencio Simbrón** (☎ 842-01-21; puxko_hermano_mayor@yahoo.com.mx; M\$300-400/day) is more commonly known as *el de la ropa típica* (the guy who wears traditional clothes) because he sports Totonac costume. He works through

TEODORO CANO: PAPANTLA'S VOICE OF ART

In the late 1940s imagine how enthralled the tiny *pueblo* of Papantla was to have Diego Rivera waltz into the town square. Rivera was in the region visiting El Tajín, the subject of his next mural for the National Palace. A village boy no more than eight years old caught Rivera's attention. Little Teodoro Cano frankly told the famous man that he painted himself. Taken with Cano, Rivera promised the boy that he would help him become a painter. And that he did. When Cano was a teenager he lived in Diego's house in Mexico City for several months cleaning his studio, after which he was sent to Mexico City's famous Academia de San Carlos, where he studied fine arts for five years and was selected 'Best Art Student.'

Subsequently, Cano's life took many paths: he lived as a struggling yet successful artist, painted cars and eventually took the position of Director of Art at the University of Veracruz in Xalapa. Now retired in his hometown of Papantla, he hardly seems retired. Cano gives his time, energy and resources to the Casa de la Cultura where there are exhibitions and art classes. His murals, some of which you can see displayed at El Tajín and near Papantla's plaza, characteristically address Totonac culture and its clash with contemporary society as well as the disconnection between the natural world and modern industry.

Having a modest, contented demeanor, he educates through his art and endears himself to Papantla. It was first a vivacious hotel clerk and then later a young taxi driver who reverently pointed me toward Maestro Cano. He's known to drop what he's doing to explain the history of the region and discuss the dying Totonac culture. Right now he's working on the city's new museum, Museo de la Ciudad Teodoro Cano.

Hotel Tajín and will guide you through El Tajín – where he grew up. He can also show you some of the area's overlooked attractions like the small **nature reserve** at Talpan, a **vanilla plantation** and little-visited **archeological sites**.

Festivals & Events

The fantastic **Feria de Corpus Christi**, in late May and early June, is the big annual event. As well as the bullfights, parades and *charreadas* that are usual in Mexico, Papantla celebrates its Totonac cultural heritage with spectacular indigenous dances. The main procession is on the first Sunday when *voladores* fly two or three times a day.

Papantla's other major celebration is the **Festival de Vanilla** (Vanilla Festival) on June 18, featuring indigenous dancers, gastronomic delights sold in street stalls and vanilla products galore.

Sleeping

Papantla has a fairly limited selection of hotels.

Hotel Pulido (☎ 842-10-79; Enríquez 205; s/d M\$180/280, plus M\$50 w/air; (P) (☺)) A basic but acceptable place 250m east of the *zócalo*. The fan-only rooms are a fair budget deal.

Hotel Familiar La Pasadita (☎ 842-56-73; Obispo de las Casas 102; s/d M\$300/400; (P) (☺)) Even though the newish Pasadita has updated furnishings,

fresh tiling and spacious accommodations near the city center, it remains in the shadow of the old-guard, *zócalo* hotel strongholds. Opt for the window rooms and check for smoke factor.

Hotel Totonacapán (☎ 842-12-20; cnr 20 de Noviembre & Olivo; s/d M\$350/400; (☺) (☺)) About 400m downhill from the *zócalo*, this hotel is pleasant enough and clean enough. Some rooms have balconies, and there's a convenient restaurant downstairs.

Hotel Provincia Express (☎ 842-16-45; hotprovi@prodigy.net.mx; Enríquez 103; s/d M\$370/480; (☺) (☺)) Shares a prime location with Hotel Tajín and an interior knocking on dilapidation's door, though it can boast fantastic staff and internet access.

Hotel Tajín (☎ 842-01-21; fax 842-10-74; Núñez 104; s/d M\$530/620; (P) (☺)) It has a prime location on the *zócalo* and a nice communal balcony looking over the city, but the interior is dated.

Eating

You'll find no shortage of the usual delicious Mexican food in Papantla.

Restaurant Totonaca (Hotel Tajín, Núñez 104; (☎) 8am-10pm; mains M\$40-140) This hotel bar-restaurant aims for semi-formal and has an extensive menu. There's also a short wine list (M\$80 to M\$100), and it serves cocktails made with locally produced vanilla extract.

La Hacienda (☎ 842-06-33; Reforma 100 Altos; mains M\$30-100) Offers a slightly cheaper menu and a different perspective of the *zócalo* from its rival, the Pardo. There are the usual Mexican suspects, and good *mariscos*.

Plaza Pardo (☎ 842-00-59; 1st fl, Enríquez 105; M\$35-130) Eating enchiladas with a cold beer at a balcony table over the *zócalo* is the best way to enjoy a dying afternoon in Papantla. It has steaks (M\$130) for the carnivorously inclined.

Mercado Juárez, at the southwest corner of the plaza opposite the cathedral, has stalls that sell regional food cheap and fresh.

Shopping

As Mexico's leading vanilla-growing center, you'll find quality vanilla extract, vanilla pods and *figuras* (pods woven into the shapes of flowers, insects or crucifixes) in Papantla's Mercado Hidalgo, at the northwest corner of the *zócalo*. Try the regional vanilla liquor or vanilla-infused cigarettes. You'll also encounter traditional Totonac clothing and handmade baskets.

Getting There & Away

Few long-distance buses stop at Papantla's quaint station. Most are *de paso*, but you can make reservations at Ticket Bus just east of the plaza. Or go to Poza Rica to get one of the more frequent buses from there. ADO is the only 1st-class line serving Papantla; 2nd-class Transportes Papantla (TP), which serves the coastal towns to the south, leaves from a separate terminal near the plaza. The following are 1st-class services:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency (daily)
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	M\$280	6hr	6
Poza Rica	M\$16	½hr	26
Tampico	M\$220	5½hr	6
Tuxpan	M\$50	2hr	7
Veracruz	M\$150	3½hr	7
Xalapa	M\$162	4hr	11

There are also 2nd-class TP services to Poza Rica (every 15 minutes) and Tuxpan (four daily).

EL TAJÍN

Situated on a plain surrounded by low verdant hills 6km west of Papantla, the extensive ruins

of El Tajín are the most impressive reminder of Classic Veracruz civilization. The name Tajín is Totonac for 'thunder,' 'lightning' or 'hurricane.'

The years AD 600 to 900 saw its zenith as a town and ceremonial center. Around AD 1200 the site was abandoned, possibly after attacks by Chichimecs, and lay unknown to the Spaniards until about 1785.

Among El Tajín's special features are rows of square niches on the sides of buildings, numerous ball courts, and sculptures depicting human sacrifice connected with the ball game. Archaeologist José García Payón believed that El Tajín's niches and stone mosaics symbolized day and night, light and dark, and life and death in a universe composed of dualities, though many are skeptical of this interpretation.

Orientation & Information

The **El Tajín site** (admission M\$45; ☎ 9am-5pm) covers an area of about 10 sq km. To see everything, you'll walk a few kilometers over a couple of hours. There's little shade and it can get blazingly hot, so an early start is recommended. Most buildings and carvings here are labeled in English and Spanish, and some have information panels in German and French as well.

Bordering the parking lot are stalls selling food and handicrafts. The visitor center has a restaurant, left-luggage room, information desk, museum and souvenir shops. Those seeking more information should look for the book *Tajín: Mystery and Beauty*, by Leonardo Zaleta, sometimes available in several languages in the souvenir shops. Guide service is available for M\$200 per hour with one to six people.

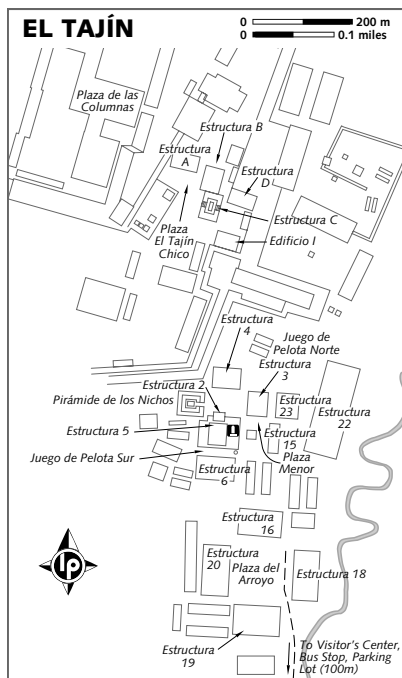
Sights

PLAZA MENOR

Beyond the Plaza del Arroyo, flanked by pyramids on four sides, is the **Plaza Menor** (Lesser Plaza), part of El Tajín's main ceremonial center and possible marketplace, with a low platform in the middle. All of the structures around this plaza were probably topped by small temples, some decorated with red or blue paint – traces of which remain.

JUEGO DE PELOTA SUR

Some 17 ball courts have been found at El Tajín. The **Juego de Pelota Sur** (Southern Ball



Court), dates from about 1150 and is the most famous of the courts, owing to the six relief carvings on its walls depicting various aspects of the ball-game ritual.

The panel on the northeast corner is the easiest to make out: in the center, three ball-players perform a ritual post-game sacrifice with one player ready to plunge a knife into the chest of another, whose arms are held by the third. Death gods and a presiding figure look on. The other panels depict various ceremonial, pulque drinking (p684) scenes.

PIRÁMIDE DE LOS NICHOS

El Tajín's most emblematic structure, the beautifully proportioned Pyramid of the Niches, is just off the Plaza Menor. The six lower levels, each surrounded by rows of small square niches, climb to 18m. Archaeologists believe that there were originally 365 niches, suggesting that the building may have been used as a kind of calendar.

EL TAJÍN CHICO

The path north toward Plaza El Tajín Chico passes the **Juego de Pelota Norte** (Northern Ball

Court), which is smaller and older than the southern court and bears fainter carvings on its sides.

Many of the buildings here have geometric stone mosaic patterns known as 'Greco' (Greek). **Edificio I**, probably once a palace, has some terrific carvings. **Estructura C**, on the east side, with three levels and a staircase facing the plaza, was initially painted blue. **Estructura A**, on the plaza's north side, has an arch construction known as a corbeled arch, with two sides jutting closer to each other until they are joined at the top by a single slab, which is typical of Maya architecture. Its presence here is yet another oddity in the jigsaw puzzle of pre-Hispanic cultures.

Northwest of Plaza El Tajín Chico is the unreconstructed **Plaza de las Columnas** (Plaza of the Columns), one of the site's most important structures. It originally housed a large open patio and adjoining buildings stretching over the hillside. Some wonderful carved reassembled columns are displayed in the museum.

VOLADORES PERFORMANCES

The Totonac *voladores* rite (traditionally carried out only once a year, but now performed almost daily for visitors) looks something like a slow-motion bungee jump from the top of a vertiginously tall pole. The rite begins with five men in elaborate ceremonial clothing climbing to the top of the pole. Four of them sit on the edges of a small frame at the top and rotate the frame to twist the ropes around the pole. The fifth man dances on the platform above them while playing a *chirimía*, a small drum with a flute attached. When he stops playing, the others fall backward. Arms outstretched, they revolve gracefully around the pole and descend to the ground, upside down, as their ropes unwind.

One interpretation of the ceremony is that it's a fertility rite and the fliers make invocations to the four corners of the universe. It's also noted that each flier circles the pole 13 times, giving a total of 52 revolutions. The number 52 is not only the number of weeks in the modern year but also was an important number in pre-Hispanic Mexico, which had two calendars, one corresponding to the 365-day solar year, the other to a ritual year of 260 days. The calendars coincided every 52 solar years.

Totonacs carry out the *voladores* rite three times per day beside the visitor center. Before

they start, a costumed performer requests donations (M\$20) from the audience.

Getting There & Away

Frequent buses come from Poza Rica. From Papantla, buses (M\$8) marked 'Pirámides Tajín' leave from opposite the Pemex station at the lower end of 20 de Noviembre. The site is 300m from the highway – buses drop you off near the market, before the entrance to Tajín.

SOUTH OF PAPANTLA

Hwy 180 runs near the coast for most of the 230km from Papantla to Veracruz. Though currents can be strong on this stretch of coast, visiting gives you the chance to check out an awesome turtle conservation project, the sparkling Emerald Coast and Quiahuitlán, a stunning, out-of-the-way Totonac site. The area is bereft of tourists during the low seasons.

Tecolutla

☎ 766 / pop 3900

This seaside town with pleasant beaches is a popular destination for middle-class Mexican families. The place is dead midweek when it's not a holiday. However, during holiday seasons and Semana Santa, the place is teeming with people and prices can quadruple. There are banks and ATMs on the plaza.

Probably the coolest thing happening here is the **Grupo Ecologista Vida Milenaria** (☎ 846-04-67; www.vidamilenaria.org.mx; donation required; ☎ 9am-dusk). This small turtle conservation center is run by Fernando Manzano Cervantes who is a sweetie-pie of a man, known locally as 'Papá Tortuga.' In addition to educating the public, he has been effectively protecting and releasing green and Kemp's ridley turtles here for over 33 years. Visitors are welcome to look at the hatchlings. If you stop by, think about buying a trinket souvenir because this is a privately funded show. **Volunteers** are especially needed here in April and May, when patrolling the beaches and collecting the turtle eggs is imperative. Camping and the use of kitchen and bathroom facilities are free to volunteers. In late October, you can join hundreds of locals in celebrating the releasing of the baby turtles in the **Festival de Las Tortugas**. A source of information on Tecolutla-based turtle-preservation efforts is the **Tecolutla Turtle Preservation Project** (www

.tecolutla-turtle-preservation-project.org), with a good (and English-speaker-friendly) website.

Walk toward Río Tecolutla on Emilio Carranza and you'll hit the *embarcadero* where **boats** (M\$300-400/group) will take you fishing or through dense mangrove forests rich with wildlife.

Hotels abound in this town relying on tourism. **Hotel Vanilla** (☎ 846-02-75; Carranza s/n; r M\$200-300 plus M\$50 with air; ☎ ☎) is a deal. It's clean, in the thick of plaza action and has a communal balcony looking onto the *zócalo*. **Real del Mar** (☎ /fax 846-03-80/846-01-00; www.hotelrealdelmar.com; cnr Aldama & Galeana; from M\$580-680; ☎ ☎ ☎) is a well-done, higher-end option with light colorful rooms, some with ocean view balconies. Rooms surround an indoor pool and a three-story, sea-themed mural.

Unless you hate fresh, inexpensive seafood, you'll be happy as the clam that got away in Tecolutla. On the beach, all the *palapa* places sell cold beer, while vendors hawk seafood cocktails. There are tons of eateries along the walk from the plaza to the beach on Obregón. **El Cotarro** (☎ 845-16-71; Obregón s/n; M\$25-80) may not keep up with its neighbors' hokey sea-themed décor, but the food is delicious, fresh and inexpensive. The *mojarra al ajo* is a fish drenched in date-dooming garlic. At **Palapa 'El Girosal'** on the beach near the turtle preservation project, you can drink cocktails (M\$40) and eat yummy seafood plates (M\$80) under *palapas*.

Tecolutla is 41km east of Papantla. There are regular 2nd-class Transportes Papantla buses between Tecolutla and Papantla (M\$33). Most 1st-class buses run from Gutiérrez Zamora, but there's an ADO office in Tecolutla a block from the beach, where you can book your ticket in advance. From Tecolutla, ADO offers service to Mexico City's Terminal Norte (M\$224), Puebla (M\$214) and Pachuca (M\$158), as well as frequent service to Poza Rica (M\$42) and Papantla (M\$35).

Costa Esmeralda

The Emerald Coast's waters – more accurately described as semi-precious – are various shades of azure, though not crystalline, and its waves crash on 20km of grayish-blond beaches. It's a raging summer and holiday spot. The rest of the year, especially midweek, it's tranquilly yours and is a lovely match for the beach-lovers and crowd-haters. You can throw down cash for upscale digs or do it

on the cheap. Advertised and unadvertised campgrounds proliferate.

Approaching Casitas from the north, you'll hit Cabo Alto Hotel and Spa, which houses **Spa Xochicalli** (☎ 321-02-59; Hwy 180; massages from M\$480). Its good facilities have an extensive list of services if you want some beach hiatus TLC. A bit further south, you'll hit **Hotel Misión del Mar** (☎ 321-08-00; Hwy 180 Km 87, Costa Esmeralda; hotelmisiondelmar@yahoo.com.mx; campsites/s/d M\$100/850/1110; 📞 🚽 🛏). Just off the beach, its rooms are well equipped and many look onto a courtyard thick with plants. But the *palapa*-ed campgrounds are the deal here, with access to showers, bathrooms, three pools and cafeteria.

At the north end of Casitas is **Hotel Miramar** (☎ 321-03-70; miramarcasitas@yahoo.com.mx; Hwy 180 Km 90 Casitas; s/d M\$200/250, plus M\$50 w/air), which is good for a budget beach hurrah. The rooms, though unexceptional, are clean and a block from a pleasant beach. Also, the cheap, tasty eats that abound in grubby little Casitas make a better alternative to being stuck at an expensive hotel restaurant away from town.

At the mouth of the Río Filobobos (known as Río Bobos and famous for its rapids), head southwest of Nautla on Hwy 131 and you'll hit **Tlapacoyan** where a handful of rafting companies are based and where the waterfall Cascada de Encanto provides a gorgeous swimming spot. **Aventura Extrema** (☎ 229-178-38-12; www.aventuraextrema.com.mx; rafting packages from M\$670) has facilities near Tlapacoyan and offers one- to three-day packages including food, accommodation or camping, and various other adventure activities. A highlight of Bobos rafting is the two riverside archaeological sites, Caujilote and Vega de la Peña, which most companies stop to visit. **Hotel Oliver** (☎ 225-315-07-04; www.hospedajetlapacoyan.tk.com.mx; Cuauhtémoc 400; s/d M\$250/380; 📞 🚽) is an adorable place to stay right off the plaza in Tlapacoyan. Buses (M\$42) from Nautla go to Tlapacoyan.

Five kilometers south of Nautla is **Hotel Istirinchá** (☎ 317-42-01; www.hotelistirincha.com; Hwy 180 Km 102; s/d M\$800/900; 📞 🚽 🛏). For a fair price, you can stay in this new hotel's spacious, freshly decorated rooms with ocean-view decks. It arranges kayaking in its lagoon, interpretive walks and horseback riding. The owner is working to restore this once deforested chunk of land to its natural habitat. An on-hand biologist cares for the grounds and its creatures in captivity, such as crocodiles

and toucans. You'll see signs at the entrance on the highway. It's about a 20-minute walk to the hotel from where the bus leaves you.

To get to any coastal location, take a non-direct bus on Hwy 180 and tell the driver where you want to stop.

South of Laguna Verde

Mexico's sole nuclear power station, operating since 1989, is on **Laguna Verde**, about 80km north of Veracruz port on Hwy 180. Government plans for more reactors have been scrapped in the face of public protest. Current reports by Greenpeace (for updates see www.greenpeace.org) and a highly critical 2005 investigation by WANO (the World Association of Nuclear Operators) have highlighted numerous safety concerns, i.e. there's no solid evacuation plan for the local communities.

EcoGuías La Mancha (☎ 296-100-11-63; www.ecoturismolamancha.com; La Mancha-Acotpan; campsites/cabañas M\$50/120) is a progressive association of locals who have developed a homespun, grass-roots environment education center. With their facilities a kilometer from the beach, they offer interpretive walks, birding excursions, apary tours, horseback riding and kayak tours where you can see mangroves and wildlife. Accommodations are rustic, but it's a great off-the-beaten-path choice that supports the local community. From the La Mancha east-bound turnoff on Hwy 180, it's a kilometer down the road. Bring repellent.

Villa Rica, a small fishing village 69km north of Veracruz, is the probable site of the first Spanish settlement in Mexico. You can explore traces of a fort and a church on the Cerro de la Cantera or bask on a lovely beach.

Nearby are the Totonac tombs of **Quiahuiztlán** (☎ 8:30am-5pm; admission M\$27). You'd want to be buried here too. This pre-Hispanic cemetery is situated on verdant foothill with a sweeping vista of the coast and is guarded by a towering rocky outcrop, locally known as Cerro los Metates. The site has two pyramids, more than 70 tombs (each resembling a small temple) and some carved monuments. It's a gorgeous, 25-minute walk to the part that overlooks the ocean. Plus, you can experience this sacred Totonac site in solitude and nature, as opposed to other touristed ruins. If you want to arrive by a Hwy 180 bus, have the driver drop you at Quiahuiztlán. From there it's a pretty three-kilometer walk uphill.

TOP OFF-THE-BEATEN-TRACK ADVENTURES

- Caving in **Aquismón** (p664)
- Biking the route of Hernán Cortés from Veracruz, where Cortés landed, to Mexico City with **Veracruz en Bicicleta** (p680) – you can just ride sections if you don't want to attempt the whole thing
- Climbing **Volcán San Martín** (p704)
- Hiking, drinking fabulous coffee and doing yoga at **Ashram Coatepec** (p683) near Coatepec
- Rafting and kayaking in **Jalcomulco** (p684)
- Contemplating ruins and sweeping views of **Quiahuiztlán** (p675)

CENTRAL VERACRUZ STATE

Curvy Hwy 180 follows the coast past dark-sand beaches (toward Veracruz) to Cardel where Hwy 140 branches west to Xalapa, the state capital. Charming mountain towns sprinkle the inland volcanic ranges laced with dramatic river gorges. From Veracruz, Hwy 150D heads southwest to Córdoba, Fortín de las Flores and Orizaba, on the edge of the Sierra Madre.

CENTRAL COAST

North of the city of Veracruz, the beaches are a popular Mexican vacation spot, and the area also boasts the impressive Zempoala ruins.

Zempoala

☎ 296 / pop 9500

The pre-Hispanic Totonac town of Zempoala (or 'Cempoala') stands 42km north of Veracruz and 4km west of Hwy 180 in modern Zempoala. The turn-off is by a Pemex station 7km north of Cardel. *Voladores* performances are enacted several times daily. Zempoala is most easily reached through Cardel – take a bus marked 'Zempoala' (M\$12) from the Cardel bus station, or a taxi (M\$70).

HISTORY

Zempoala became a major Totonac center after about AD 1200 and fell to the Aztecs

in the mid-15th century. The 30,000-person town boasted defensive walls, underground water and drainage pipes. As Hernán Cortés approached the town, one of his scouts reported that the buildings were made of silver – but it was only white paint shining in the sun.

Zempoala's chief struck an alliance with Cortés for protection against the Aztecs. But his hospitality didn't stop the Spanish from smashing his gods' statues and lecturing his people on the virtues of Christianity. It was at Zempoala in 1520 that Cortés defeated the expedition sent by Cuba's Spanish governor to arrest him.

By the 17th century Zempoala, devastated by disease, was reduced to just eight families. The town was eventually abandoned. The present town dates from 1832.

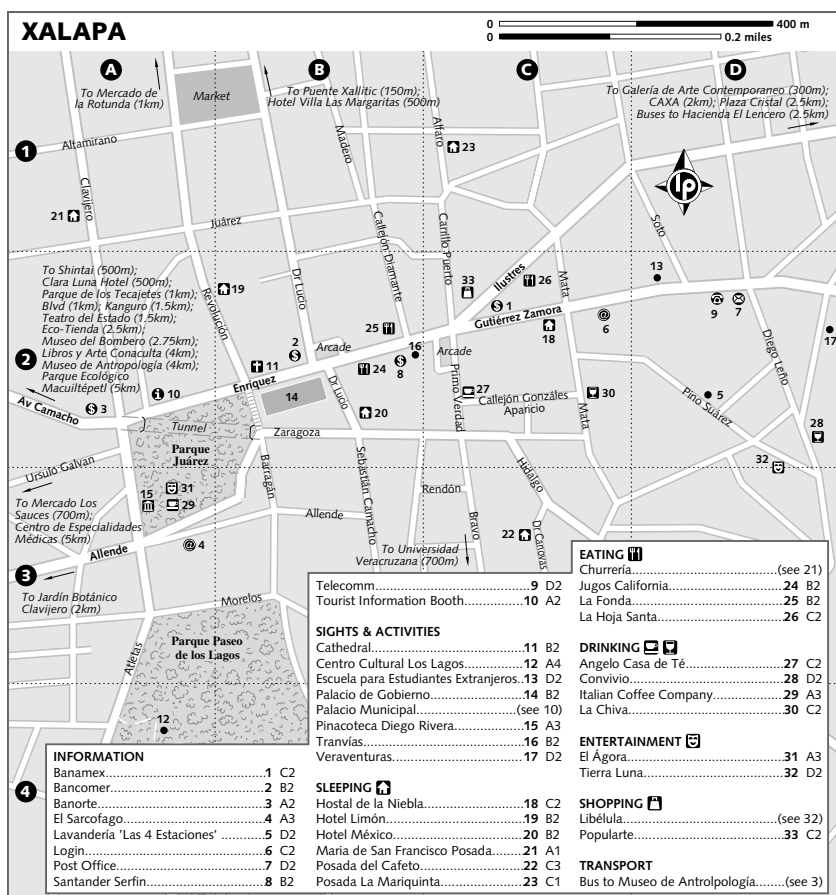
SIGHTS

The **archaeological site** (admission M\$35; ☎ 9am–5:30pm) is lush with a lovely mountain backdrop. Though not as monumental as El Tajín, it's still astounding. Most of the buildings are faced with smooth, rounded, riverbed stones, but many were originally plastered and painted. A typical feature is battlement-like 'teeth' called *almenas*.

The **Templo Mayor** (Main Temple) is an 11m-high pyramid with a wide staircase ascending to the remains of a shrine. When they first encountered Zempoala, the Cortés and his men lodged in **Las Chimeneas** whose hollow columns were thought to be chimneys – hence the name. There are two main structures on the west side. One is known as the **Templo del Sol** with two stairways climbing its front side in typical Toltec–Aztec style. To its north is the **Templo de la Luna** whose structure is similar to Aztec temples to the wind god Ehecatl.

East of Las Chimeneas is **Las Caritas** (Little Heads), named for niches that once held several small pottery heads. Another large wind-god temple, known as the **Templo Dios del Aire**, is in the town itself – go back south on the site entrance road, cross the main road in town and then go around the corner to the right. The ancient temple, with its characteristic circular shape, is beside an intersection.

The small site **museum** has some interesting clay figurines, polychrome plates and obsidian flints.



the center. CAXA, the bus station, is 2km east of the city center.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Libros y Arte Conaculta (☎ 840-87-43; Museo de Antropología, Av Xalapa s/n; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) Inside the Museo de Antropología, this library offers a wide selection of books about art, architecture and history, including English-language titles

INTERNET ACCESS

El Sarcófago (Allende 35; per hr M\$12) Open late.
Login (Zamora 48; per hr M\$10)

INTERNET RESOURCES

Turisteando (www.turisteandoxalapa.com)

Xalapa Tourist Network (www.xalapa.net)

LAUNDRY

Lavandería 'Las 4 Estaciones' (☎ 841-05-99; Pino Suárez 59; M\$17 per kg)

MEDIA

Performance Free magazine devoted to the cultural scene.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Centro de Especialidades Médicas (☎ 814-46-24; Ruiz Cortines s/n; ☎ 8am-6pm) Excellent medical care.

MONEY

There are banks with 24-hour ATMs along Enriquez-Gutiérrez Zamora.

POST

Post office (cnr Gutiérrez Zamora & Diego León)

TELEPHONE & FAX

Telecomm (cnr Gutiérrez Zamora & Diego León) Next to the post office; it has Western Union services.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Information Booth (☎ 842-12-00, ext 3025; Palacio Municipal; ☎ 9am-3pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri) Next to the Palacio Municipal, this booth has some helpful information and maps.

Sights**MUSEO DE ANTROPOLOGÍA**

Veracruz University's remarkable **anthropology museum** (☎ 815-09-20; Av Xalapa s/n; M\$45, audio-guide M\$20; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is devoted to the archaeology of the state and is one of Mexico's best museums. Its large collection includes seven huge Olmec heads and 29,000 other superb artifacts.

All exhibits are labeled in Spanish, but laminated English information sheets are in many rooms. As there's so much to see, allow yourself a good chunk of time to visit. There's a small café on the upper floor, and an excellent bookstore.

Several spaces concentrate on the Olmec culture from southern Veracruz including the most celebrated piece, **El Señor de Las Limas**. There's also an array of fine work associated with the pre-Hispanic ball game.

The museum is set in spacious gardens on the west side of Av Xalapa, 4km northwest of the city center. To get there take a 'Camcho-Tesorería' (M\$5) from Enríquez. To return, take a bus marked 'Centro.' A taxi costs M\$20.

CITY CENTER

The centrally located **Parque Juárez** feels like a terrace, with its south side overlooking the valley below and the snowcapped mountains in the distance. Tucked beneath the west side of the plaza, the **Pinacoteca Diego Rivera** (☎ 818-18-19; Herrera 5; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat) houses a modest collection of Rivera's works, as well as pieces from other Mexican artists.

On the plaza's north side is the **Palacio Municipal** and on the east side is the **Palacio de Gobierno**, the seat of Veracruz' state government. The Palacio de Gobierno has a fine mural depicting the history of justice

above the stairway near the eastern entrance on Enríquez.

Facing the Palacio de Gobierno across Enríquez is the unfinished **cathedral** (started in 1772), from where Dr Lucio leads up to the busy market zone and crosses a deep valley via the **Puente Xallitic**, a high, arched bridge with a pretty public space below.

GALERÍA DE ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEO

The town's contemporary art **gallery** (☎ 818-04-12; Xalapeños Ilustres 135; admission free; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun) is in a renovated colonial building 1km east of the city center showing worthwhile, sometimes edgy, temporary exhibitions. There's a small movie theatre here that shows artsy films, mostly for free.

MUSEO DEL BOMBERO

Devoted to firefighters and firefighting, this **museum** (☎ 890-22-85; Ortiz 5; admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-8pm) exhibits an 1885 English horse-drawn firemen's carriage and plenty of information on the history of firefighting from its origins in ancient Egypt. It's 3km from Parque Juárez.

PARKS

Just south of Parque Juárez is **Parque Paseo de los Lagos** with 3km of delightful lakeside paths (most commonly used for jogging and making out). At its northern end is the **Centro Cultural Los Lagos** (☎ 812-12-99; Paseo los Lagos s/n), a lovely cultural center where you check out the bulletin board to find out about drop-in dance or yoga classes among other cultural event announcements.

Atop a hill north of the city, **Parque Ecológico Macuiltepetl** is actually the heavily wooded cap of an extinct volcano. Spiraling to the top, the park's paths are a treasure for joggers, and provide expansive views of Xalapa and the surrounding area. Waiting at the summit, the small **Museo de la Fauna** (admission M\$10; ☎ 10am-5:30pm Tue-Fri) has some shamefully tethered eagles, snakes and other reptiles. **Parque de los Tecajetes** (Avila Camacho s/n; ☎ 6am-6pm) is another awesome nature park where you'll forget you're in the city. It's a kilometer from the center on Camacho.

Southwest of the town center the attractive **Jardín Botánico Clavijero** (☎ 842-18-27; Antigua Carr a Coatepec Km 2.5; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm) has a nice collection of subtropical and cloud forest plants.

Activities

Veraventuras (☎ 818-95-79, 800-712-65-72; www.veraventuras.com.mx; Santos Degollado 81; trips from M\$480) offers rafting excursions and trips to El Carzizal's hot springs (p682).

Local birding guide **Robert Straub** (☎ 818-18-94; tours M\$300-750) and member of **COAX** (www.coaxxalapa.org), a conservation-minded birding club. He offers tours in the area. Straub authored a birding guide to Veracruz, *Guía de Sitios*, whose proceeds go to Pronatura, a conservation non-profit.

If you come with your own bike and equipment, **Veracruz en Bicicleta** (☎ 126-10-90; www.veracruzencbicicleta.com) can set you up and guide you on a cyclo-tour (day or half-day, M\$500 per day), which is a remarkable way to have a true experience of the countryside and culture.

Courses

The Universidad Veracruzana's **Escuela para Estudiantes Extranjeros** (School for Foreign Students; ☎ 817-86-87; www.uv.mx/eee; Gutiérrez Zamora 25; courses per hr from US\$20, for two weeks US\$215 plus registration fee) offers short-term, accredited programs in Spanish, Náhuatl languages and Mexican culture – including cooking, dancing, guitar classes and homestays (US\$170 per week).

Tours

Green Traveler Online (☎ 818-97-79; www.greentraveleronline.com) Offers organized tours of major sites, interesting towns and big cities in Veracruz state.

Tranvías (☎ 817-34-25; Calle de Enriquez Zona Centro; 45-60 minute tour M\$40) Historical city tours in an open-air bus that looks like an old-fashioned wooden trolley.

Roy Dudley (☎ 812-05-55; www.xalaparoy.com; M\$1800/day) With over 30 years living in Xalapa, this jovial ex-American known as the 'Gringo Xalapeño' has an excellent way of revealing the subtleties of the culture and has extensive knowledge of the area.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Hotel Limón (☎ 817-22-04; fax 817-93-16; Revolución 8; s/d M\$140/220) Details like tiling, mosaics and plants make this hotel. It's clean and a good value, though staff is indifferent and the courtyard echoes.

Hostal de la Niebla (☎ 817-21-74; www.delaniebla.com; Gutiérrez Zamora 24; dm/s M\$145/220; ☎ ☑) A modern Scandinavian-style hostel that's extremely well done: it's spotless, organized,

community-oriented and airy with decks and terraces. There's access to lockers and a kitchen.

MIDRANGE

Hotel México (☎ 818-80-00; Lucio 4; s/d M\$310/390; ☎ ☑ ☑) The bright orange-and-blue color scheme works for this fresh, simple, well-priced hotel. Some rooms have balconies with plaza views.

our pick **María de San Francisco Posada** (☎ 817-33-90; Clavijero 17; s/d M\$345/420; ☎) With its old-world feel and calla-lilied courtyard, this well-kept hotel is a great choice. The café below is adorable with women making tortillas in the open.

Posada del Cafeto (☎ /fax 817-00-23; Dr Canovas 8; s/d M\$390/460, ste M\$850; ☑) There's a homely atmosphere at this lovely, quiet, secure guesthouse. All the accommodations have real Mexican character, with high ceilings, wooden furniture and decorative local textiles. There's a delightful rear garden and a charming café where your complimentary breakfast is served.

Posada La Mariquinta (☎ 818-11-58; www.lamariquinta.xalapa.net; Alfaro 12; s/d from M\$390/490; ☎) This homey, plant-filled guesthouse is set in an 18th-century colonial residence with rooms arranged around a lovely garden. It rocks to get the M\$100 mini-suite upgrade with a balcony.

Hotel Villa Las Margaritas (☎ 840-08-86, 800-719-43-67; www.villamargaritas.com; Dr Lucio 186; s/d M\$640/720; ☎ ☑ ☑) This most central Margarita hotel has beautiful tile work, wood floors and a skylit central area. Décor is slightly reminiscent of your grandmother's lacy pin cushion.

TOP END

There are surprisingly few top-end options near the center, though there are some in outlying areas. The best high-end option nearby is the Posada Coatepec (p683).

Clara Luna Hotel (☎ 167-80-00; Avila Camacho 42; r M\$760; ☎ ☑ ☑) A short walk from the center, this new upscale hotel welcomes you with a huge mural in lobby of a romanticized Veracruz in the age of Agustín Lara. The comfortable rooms have simple yet elegant and furnishings.

Eating

Stylish cafés and restaurants abound in Xalapa, many offering healthy and vegetarian choices. One local specialty is *chiles rellenos*

(stuffed peppers). Of course, jalapeño chilies are from the region too.

ourpick Jugos California (☎ 817-22-71; Enriquez 26; juices M\$18-30; ☎ 7am-9:30pm; V) Besides *antojitos* it serves fantastic volcano-like fruit salads, delicious juice combos, smoothies and even chocolate soy shakes.

Churrería (☎ 817-33-90; Clavijero 17; dishes M\$30-70; ☎ 8am-12am) Real Mexican hot chocolate, homemade cinnamon tea and traditional dishes are served with handmade tortillas (you can watch them being made) in this pleasant, airy café.

La Fonda (☎ 818-72-82; Callejón Diamante 1; dishes M\$45-100; ☎ 8am-5:30pm Mon-Sat) You can eat in the vibrant, mural festooned interior or grab a cozy two-person, plant-adorned balcony overlooking the street. Try the *mole* here or the *chileatole de pollo* (chicken soup with little floating corns on the cob). The four-course set meal is M\$45.

La Hoja Santa (☎ 818-75-08; Xalapeños Illustres 22; dishes M\$30-50; V) This open vegetarian place has a vividly hand-painted wall and serves breakfasts and a daily set meal (M\$33) that is a deal.

Shintai (☎ 820-40-40; Camacho 54; dishes M\$45-110; ☎ 1-11pm Mon-Thu, 1pm-1am Fri & Sat, 1-7pm Sun) This newly opened Mexican chain is popular because it delivers satisfying Asian-style food, like sushi rolls and teriyaki, even if it lacks authenticity.

Callejón González Aparicio (btwn Primo Verdad & Mata) This alley is loaded with hip, international eateries and even hipper crows. Try Cubanias, where you can sip mojitos; La Condesa for salad and sushi; or Shalom to grab falafels.

Mercado de la Rotonda (Revolución s/n; ☎ 7am-6pm) At the north end of Revolución, this untouristed market with numerous eateries has delicious regional food on the cheap. Ask for *Zarzaparrilla*, a drink made with its namesake root that's used in genuine root beer and known for its medicinal and aphrodisiac qualities.

Drinking

Italian Coffee Company (☎ 812-12-44; Parque Juárez; coffee drinks M\$13-25; ☎ 8:30am-10pm) Boasts a wonderful location on the edge of the plaza. The outdoor terrace, with volcano views, is where coffee is meant to be enjoyed.

Angelo Casa de Té (☎ 841-08-39; Primo Verdad 21-A; ☎ 8am-9pm) Linger over a pot of rose tea,

SOUND RECOMMENDATIONS: MUSIC OF THE CENTRAL GULF COAST

The region has a passion for a wide variety of music, from local genres to the best Latin America has to offer.

- Mexican rock – Everyone loves **Maná**, a band originally from Mexico
- Trova – Acoustical, romantic **Fernando Delgado**
- Reggaetón – Booty-grinding goodness of **Daddy Yankee** for young folk
- Son Jorocho – Harp-filled Afro-indigenous sounds from **Graciana Silva**
- Salsa – **Dark Latin Groove** will inspire your dance skills.

one of many tea choices, while savoring homemade cookies.

Convivio (☎ 818-05-24; Diego Leño 57; ☎ 10am-10:30pm) University professors come here to enjoy wine (M\$150 to M\$250 per bottle) or foofy espresso drinks (M\$12).

La Chiva (Mata 13; ☎ 2pm-2am Tue-Thu, noon-2am Fri & Sat) A tiny boho stronghold very popular for its alternative (electronica, hip-hop and rock) tunes.

Entertainment

El Ágora (☎ 818-57-30; Parque Juárez; ☎ 10am-10pm Tue-Sun, 9am-6pm Mon) is a busy arts center with a cinema, theater, gallery, bookstore and café.

Tierra Luna (☎ 812-13-01; Rayón 18; cafeteatrotierra.luna@yahoo.com; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Thu, 9am-2am Fri & Sat) Provides poetry readings, music and sanctuary for the artsy fartsy. It serves tasty café fare to boot.

Teatro del Estado Ignacio de la Llave (☎ 818-08-34; cr. Ignacio de la Llave & Avila Camacho; ☎ from 8pm) is the impressive state theatre that hosts performances by both the Orquesta Sinfónica de Xalapa and the Ballet Folklórico of the Universidad Veracruzana.

Bldv (Avila Camacho 97; drinks M\$20-30; ☎ 9pm-4am Thu-Sat) One of several discos at the Camacho-Victoria intersection. This video bar specializes in house, electric and pop.

Shopping

An epicenter of Xalapa's alternative culture is **Callejón Diamante**, an alley lined with boutiques and street vendors selling cheap jewelry, incense and paraphernalia.

Popularte (☎ 841-12-02; Xalapeños Ilustres 3) More spendy, high-quality local handicrafts made by, and supporting, Veracruz' indigenous communities.

Libélula (☎ 106-54-41; Rayón cnr Diego Leño; www.artelibelula.com; ☎ 11am-10pm Mon-Sat) Artsy trinkets and trendy souvenirs.

Eco-Tienda (☎ 815-41-55; Paseo de las Palmas 23; ☎ Mon-Sat) Bona fide health-food store, organically yours, with yuppie prices. It boasts awesome sustainable food and body products.

Getting There & Away

Xalapa is a transportation hub with excellent connections throughout the state and beyond.

BUS

Xalapa's modern, well-organized bus station, the **Central de Autobuses de Xalapa** (CAXA; 20 de Noviembre), is 2km east of city center and has an ATM, cafés and telephones. Second-class buses for Xico and Coatepec regularly leave from Los Sauces Mercado, which is a couple of kilometers south of city center on Circuito Presidentes. Deluxe service is offered by UNO, 1st-class service by ADO and good 2nd-class services by AU. Daily services are as follows:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Cardel	M\$42	1½hr	18 daily
Mexico City (TAPO)	deluxe M\$222 1st-class M\$206	5¼hr	6 daily 28 daily
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	M\$206	5¼hr	5 daily
Papantla	M\$162	4hr	10 daily
Puebla	M\$120	3¼hr	12 daily
Tampico	M\$358	10hr	2
Veracruz	M\$74	2hr	frequent 5am-11pm
Veracruz airport	M\$205	1¼hr	5 daily
Villahermosa	M\$380	8½hr	5 daily

Other places served by ADO include Acayucan, Campeche, Cancún, Catemaco, Córdoba, Fortín de las Flores, Mérida, Orizaba, Poza Rica, San Andrés Tuxtla and Santiago Tuxtla.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

For car rentals, try **Kanguro** (☎ 817-78-78; Avila Camacho 135; from M\$545). Hwy 140 to Puebla is narrow and winding until Perote; the

Xalapa-Veracruz highway is very fast and smooth. Going to the northern Gulf coast, it's quickest to go to Cardel, then north on Hwy 180; the inland road via Tlapacoyan is scenic but slow.

Getting Around

For buses from CAXA to the city center, follow signs to the taxi stand, then continue downhill to the big road, Av 20 de Noviembre. The bus stop is to the right. Any bus marked 'Centro' will pass within a block or two of Parque Juárez (M\$5). For a taxi to the city center, you have to buy a ticket in the bus station (M\$30). To return to the bus station, take the 'Camacho-CAXA-SEC' bus from Camacho or Hidalgo. Buses (M\$5) that head up Av Camacho, 'Camcho-Tesorería' (M\$5), leave from Enriquez.

AROUND XALAPA

The dramatic landscapes around Xalapa, with rivers, gorges and waterfalls, cradle some charming mountain towns and worthwhile places.

Hacienda El Lencero

About 12km southeast from Xalapa on the Veracruz highway, a signposted road branches off to the right for a few kilometers to the impressive **Museo Ex-Hacienda El Lencero** (☎ 228-820-02-70; Hwy Xalapa-Veracruz Km 10; admission M\$45; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun). Well worth a visit, this grand former estate was one of the first inns between Mexico City and Veracruz. The superbly restored house is furnished with antiques, and the gardens and lake are delightful. Check out the 500-year-old fig tree.

From Xalapa, catch one of the regular 'Miradores' buses (M\$10) from the Plaza Cristal shopping center.

El Carrizal

South of the Veracruz road, 44km from Xalapa, the balmy El Carrizal hot springs feed several sulfurous pools. Laze away the day soaking then spend the night in **Hotel el Carrizal** (☎ 228-818-97-79; Hwy Xalapa-Veracruz Km 36; from M\$470; ☎ P ♻), which has a good restaurant with fresh seafood.

Coatepec

☎ 228 / pop 48,500 / elevation 1200m
Some 15km south of Xalapa, Coatepec mixes Xalapa urbane sensibilities with small moun-

tain town charm. If you're a coffee lover, you can't miss this café-filled city that literally emits a rich coffee smell. In late September Coatepec vivaciously celebrates its patron saint San Jerónimo. There's a helpful **tourist office** in the Palacio Municipal on the plaza.

Take a walk up **Cerro de Culebra** (Snake Hill) where you'll find cobbled walking paths and magnificent city and mountain views. To get there, walk three blocks west from the plaza on Lerdo then north all the way up Independencia. Also, the impressive **María Cristina orchid garden**, on the main square, is open daily.

For a spiritual retreat, visit **Ashram Coatepec** (☎ 816-10-55; www.ashramcoatepec.org; Javier Mina 100; dm or campsites M\$50; (P) (V)), on the outskirts of town, for yoga, meditation and walking trails on the lush grounds. The immaculate treatment of the gorgeous meditation and yoga spaces isn't simulated in the dormitories, but it's a manageable place to hang your hat. Only vegetarian food is served here.

Staying at tastefully done-up **San Jeronimo** (☎ 816-54-86; www.posadasanjeronimo.com; 16 de Septiembre 26; s/d M\$570/695; (P) (♿) (A)) is a peaceful experience, and it has a lovely courtyard restaurant. More upscale is the hallmark hotel **Posada de Coatepec** (☎ 816-05-44; www.posadaacoatepec.com.mx; Hidalgo 9; r from M\$965; (P) (♿) (A)), a gorgeous place to stay with a fantastic pool and exhibits from local artists.

Coffino (☎ 816-42-36; www.coffino.com.mx; Jiménez del Campillo 17) is a bustling café with rich coffee and superb Mexican food. A short walk from the center is **Café R Opoch** (☎ 816-07-07; 5 de Mayo 66; coffee M\$10-20; ☎ 9am-12pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat, 10-2 Sun) where you can grab a cup of organic joe.

In **La Misión** (☎ 816-41-32; Aldama 6; ☎ 9am-7pm) store you'll find local peace-loving items: organic coffee, essential oils, maguey honey and soy milk.

Regular buses (M\$8) arrive from Xalapa's CAXA and Los Sauces terminals, or a taxi is M\$85. Near the plaza, buses leave for Xico (M\$6). **ADO** (5 de Mayo s/n) serves Puebla and Mexico City.

Xico

☎ 228 / pop 15,000 / elevation 1300m
Eight kilometers south of Coatepec, Xico is a stunning mountain town with cobbled roads and colonial architecture. The same old mansion that houses the small **tourist office** on Hidalgo hosts the **Mercado Ecológica Xicote**,

which sells organic food and regional hand-crafts on Sundays.

The famous **Fiesta de Santa Magdalena** takes place here on July 15 to 24. Gigantic floral arches are raised, and streets are artistically decorated with carpets of colored sawdust in preparation for the saint's procession. The Magdalena statue, in the la Parroquia de Santa María Magdalena, located at the end of Av Hidalgo, is clothed in a different elaborate dress each day for 30 days around the fiesta. The **dress museum** (in the Parroquia, Hidalgo & Juárez) displays a rich collection of the saint's past dresses dating from 1910.

Café Gourmet Pepe (☎ 846-74-71; cafepepe@hotmail.com; Xico-Coatepec Km 1; tour M\$55) This almost-organic, shade-grown coffee plantation will give you a tour and sell you delicious coffee and liquors. Get off on at the first bus stop in Xico and walk back 150m where you'll see signs on the right.

It's a pleasant, signed 3km walk from Xico past an ex-hacienda to the plunging 80m **Texolo waterfall** and the **Cascada de la Monja** (Waterfall of the Nun) which provides a luxurious place to take a dip.

Just outside Xico, **Coyopolan** (☎ 813-12-66; www.coyopolan.com; Venustiano Carranza Sur s/n; r M\$300; (P) (♿)) enjoys an exquisite location right on the river. The economical rooms here are delightful and vibrant, and the restaurant serves superb regional food. Plus **Xico Aventuras**, an outdoor adventure outfit, makes its home here and offers hiking, biking, four-wheeling and rappelling in the fabulous surrounding mountains and canyons.

From Xalapa, take a 'Xico' bus (M\$15) from Los Sauces Terminal. From Coatepec, Xico buses (M\$6) frequently leave from near the plaza.

Parque Nacional Cofre de Perote

The misty 4274m-high Cofre de Perote volcano is southwest of Xalapa. From the town of Perote, 50km west of Xalapa on Hwy 140, Allende continues southwest to become a dirt road that climbs 1900m in 24km, finishing just below the summit. There's no public transportation here, and it's not recreationist-friendly, having no visitor services. However, the park can be explored via car, mountain bike, or foot. At the entrance to Perote, **Hosteria Covadonga** (☎ 282-825-26-42; www.hosteriacovadonga.com; s/d M\$265/350) is recommended as a lovely base from which to explore the park.

PULQUE

This alcoholic beverage (depicted being drunk on panels at El Tajin) is made from the fermented *aguamiel* of the maguey plant. The drink was sacred to Mesoamerican civilizations and served to the cultures' honored people (warriors headed for battle, lactating women, etc). It is said to be nutritious and healing, and even to enhance virility. Plus, it's fizzily refreshing and delicious. When cold beer entered the scene, pulque – in its true form – slid toward extinction. However, a few *pulquerías* still survive. In La Vigas, a mountain town outside Xalapa, Pulque y Antojitos Las Vigas serves the drink fresh.

Jalcomulco

Surrounded by lush ravines, this town, just 30km southeast of Xalapa, hugs the Río Antigua (known as the Río Pescados) and is very picturesque. The area is rich with caves and luscious swimming spots, but it's most famous for its rapids, which accommodate beginning white-water enthusiasts and can also satisfy the more advanced. Trips are more regular during the high seasons, but they may be full so it's best to plan in advance. Trips can be more expensive if there are just a few people.

Though Jalcomulco is still relatively under the radar, rafting outfits, both sketchy and experienced, are beginning to migrate to this sleepy town. The tiny **tourist office** in the Palacio Municipal has some info and a small accommodations list.

The well-recommended **Aventuras Sin Límites** (☎ 279-832-35-80; www.raftingsinlimite.com; Zaragoza 58) is a rafting outfit that has high standards. It's also the only outfit here that's run by locals. The basic but clean accommodations are for guests only. Another quality rafting outfit you could try is **México Verde** (☎ 279-832-37-34; www.mexicoverde.com), which has its own resort right on the road coming into town from the northwest. **Ignacio Romero 'Bobillo'** (☎ 279-832-35-80; bobillomx@hotmail.com; 5 de Mayo 14) is a local kayaker who runs courses, rents out real white-water kayaks and provides transportation.

There are buses (M\$22) to Jalcomulco from Xalapa at the Azteca bus terminal, as well as buses from Cardel.

VERACRUZ

☎ 229 / pop 569,000

Be careful: Veracruz is intoxicating. Scantly clad, she adorns herself in sea shells, permeates car exhaust and casually testifies her sordid colonial past. She'll gladly share her last taco with you and just as gladly take your last peso. Usually you'll find her swiveling to salsa, boozing, or laughing at her own joke. She gives her inhabitants, the ever-proud and doggedly faithful *jarochos*, a place to fall in love on her sweltering shores saturated with mariachis, seaside cafés, *trova*, and explosive sunsets. And for the broken-hearted, she offers miles of coastline boulevard for solitary rambling – save during her raucous Carnaval, which rocks Mexico. Whatever the case may be, Veracruz, both regal and trashy, could make even the most stoic bloke wax poetic.

History

Hernán Cortés arrived in Veracruz on Good Friday (April 21), 1519, and thus began his siege of Mexico. By 1521, he had crushed the Aztec Empire.

Veracruz provided Mexico's main gateway to the outside world for 400 years. Invaders and pirates, incoming and exiled rulers, settlers, silver and slaves – all came and went, making Veracruz a linchpin in Mexico's history. In 1567, English sailor Francis Drake survived a massive Spanish sea attack. He continued career as a pirate and never ceased to harass the Spanish. In 1683, vicious Frenchman Laurent de Gaff, with 600 men, held the 5000 inhabitants of Veracruz captive, killing escapees, looting, drinking, and raping. Soon after, they left much richer.

In 1838, General Antonio López fled Veracruz in his underwear under bombardment from a French fleet in the Pastry War. But the general managed to respond heroically, expelling the invaders. When Winfield Scott's army attacked Veracruz during the Mexican-American War, more than 1000 Mexicans died before the city surrendered.

In 1861 Benito Juárez announced that Mexico couldn't pay its debts to Spain, France and Britain. The British and Spanish planned only to take over the customhouse, but retreated seeing that Frenchman Napoleon III sought to conquer Mexico. After Napoleon III's five-year intervention ended, Veracruz experienced revitalization. Mexico's first railway was built between Veracruz and Mexico

City in 1872, and foreign investment poured into the city.

In 1914 US troops occupied Veracruz, halting a delivery of German arms to dictator Victoriano Huerta. Later in the Revolution, Veracruz was briefly the capital of the reformist Constitutionalist faction led by Venustiano Carranza.

Today, Veracruz is an important deep-water port, handling exports, manufacturing, and petrochemical industries. Tourism, particularly from the domestic sector, is another large income earner.

Orientation

The cathedral and Palacio Municipal border the *zócalo* to the east. The harbor is 250m east, with the San Juan de Ulúa fort on its far side. Blvd Camacho follows the coast to the south, past anchorages and beaches. About 700m south of the *zócalo* along Av Independencia is the green space of Parque Zamora, with Mercado Hidalgo just to its west. The bus terminal is 2km south of Parque Zamora along Díaz Mirón. 'Boca del Río' signifies both the municipality directly south of the city center and the small city 11km down the coast serving as its municipal head.

Information

BOOKSTORE

Libros y Arte Fototeca (Map p688; ☎ 932-69-43; Callejón El Portal de Miranda 9; ☎ 10am-7:45pm Mon-Sat, Sun from 1pm) Good regional and international selection.

EMERGENCIES

Ambulance, Fire & Police (☎ 066)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet (Map p688; Lerdo 20A; per hr M\$15; ☎ 9am-12am, Sun 10am-11pm).

LAUNDRY

Lavandería Mar y Sol (Map p688; Av Madero 616; wash & dry M\$27/load; ☎ 8:30am-9pm Mon-Sat)

LEFT LUGGAGE

There's a 24-hour facility in the 2nd-class bus station.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Beneficencia Española (Map p686; ☎ 932-00-21; Av 16 de Septiembre 955) Hospital offering general medical services.

Hospital Regional (Map p686; ☎ 932-36-90; Av 20 de Noviembre 1074)

MONEY

There's a cluster of banks a block north of the *zócalo* with ATMs.

POST

Post office (Map p688; Plaza de la República 213) A five-minute walk north of the *zócalo*.

TELEPHONE

Card phones proliferate around the *zócalo*.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (Map p688; ☎ 922-95-33; www.veracruzturismo.com.mx; Palacio Municipal; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) Has mostly helpful staff and plenty of maps and brochures.

Sights

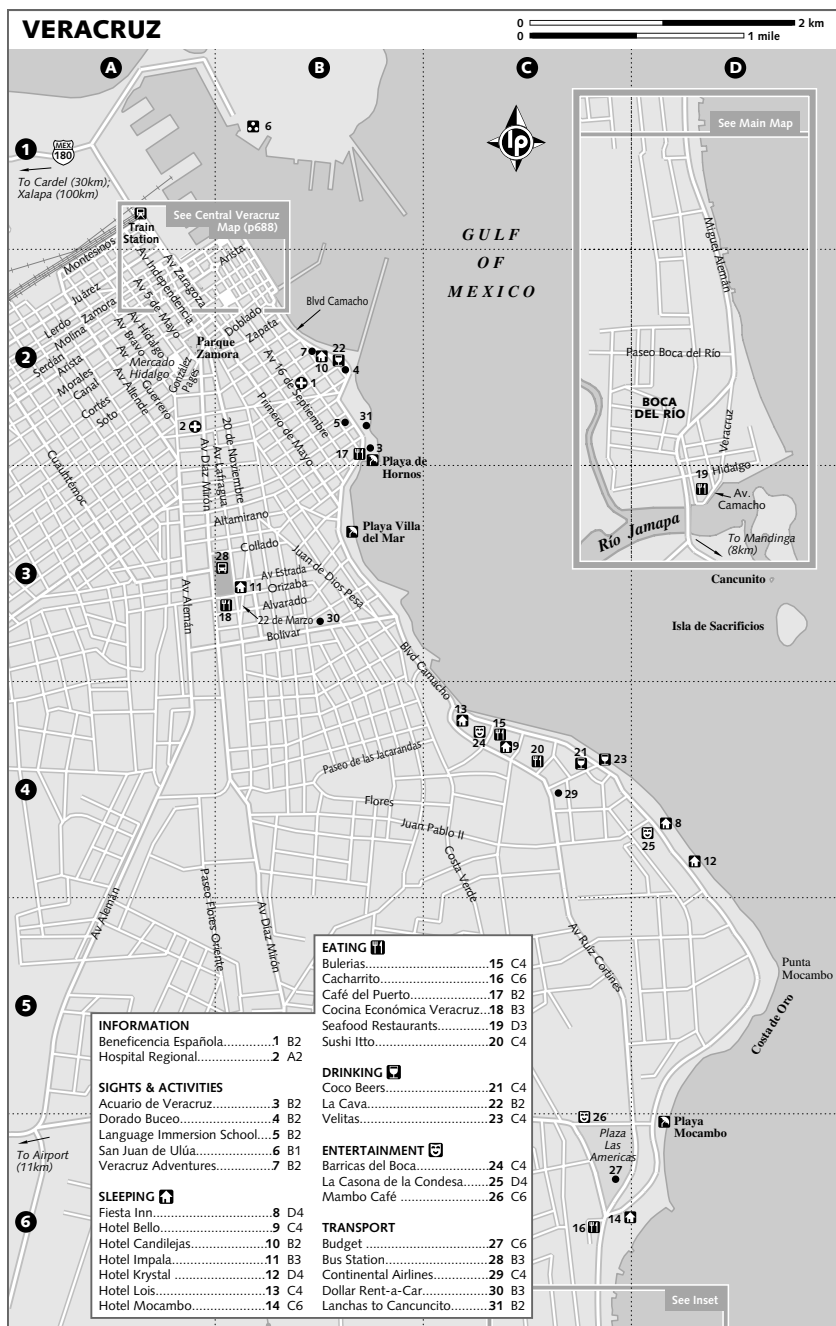
ZÓCALO

Veracruz' *zócalo* (Map p688) – also called the Plaza de Armas and Plaza Lerdo – is a hub for *jarochos* and visitors alike. It's a handsome public space, framed on three sides by *portales* (arcades), the 17th-century **Palacio Municipal** and an 18th-century **cathedral**. The level of activity accelerates throughout the day until the evening when the *zócalo* becomes thick with music, entertainers, merry-makers and bystanders.

MALECÓN & BOULEVARD

Veracruz' harbor is a busy oil port with rigs off the coast, but that somehow adds to the gritty romanticism of the **waterfront walk** on the *malecón* (harbor boardwalk), starting at the rows of vendor stalls of Plaza de las Artesanías that sell a kaleidoscopic of souvenirs. You'll pass the high-rise **Pemex building** (Map p688), an early example of modern Mexican architecture with some interesting murals.

Heading south the *malecón* becomes a wide pedestrian walkway called the boulevard (pronounced *boo-ley-bar*). Lining the coast, it continues down roughly 8km, passing lighthouse piers, statues of famous government figures, and monuments to the city's defenders and sailors who've died at sea. It makes for a fabulous run. Between Rayón and Víctimas, you'll see what looks like a block-long tarp shelter, but inside you'll find a gritty, bustling **artisans' market** (Map p686) with lower prices, hokiness beyond belief and fantastic finds.



Two blocks inland from the *malecón* is the 1998 **Altar a la Patria** (Map p688), an obelisk marking the buried remains of those who defended Veracruz during its numerous conflicts.

FOTOTECA

On the southeast side of the *zócalo* this superb **arts center** (Map p688; ☎ 932-87-67; www.fototecadeveracruz.org; Callejón El Portal de Miranda 9; 🕒 10am-7pm Tue-Sun) has rotating photographic and video exhibitions, from cutting-edge urban images to beautifully composed portraits. It's spread over three floors of a restored colonial building.

FARO CARRANZA

Facing the waterfront on the *malecón*, **Faro Carranza** (Map p688) holds a lighthouse and navy offices guarded by a large statue of Venustiano Carranza. It was here that the 1917 Mexican Constitution was drafted. Every Monday morning the Mexican navy goes through an elaborate parade in front of the building.

SAN JUAN DE ULÚA

This **fortress** (Map p686; ☎ 938-51-51; admission M\$37; 🕒 9am-4:30pm Tue-Sun) protecting Veracruz harbor was originally an island, but it's now connected to the mainland by a causeway. Cortés arrived here in 1519, and the island subsequently became the main entry point for Spanish newcomers to Mexico.

The central part of the fortress was a prison, and a notoriously inhumane one during the Porfirio Díaz regime. Today, San Juan de Ulúa is an empty ruin of passages, battlements, bridges and stairways. Guided tours are available in Spanish and, sometimes, English. To get there you can take a *lancha* (M\$25) from the *malecón* or a taxi (M\$50).

BALUARTE DE SANTIAGO

Until 1880 Veracruz was a walled city surrounded by mighty medieval defenses. **Baluarte de Santiago** (Map p688; ☎ 931-10-59; Canal s/n; admission M\$33; 🕒 10am-4pm Tue-Sun), the only surviving fort of nine, was built in 1526 beside what was then the waterfront. A small exhibit of pre-Hispanic gold jewelry is inside. The price covers admission to the fort's interior, but you can walk around the outside battlements for free.

ACUARIO DE VERACRUZ

Veracruz' well-done **aquarium** (Map p686; ☎ 931-10-20; www.acuariodeveracruz.com; Blvd Camacho s/n; adult/child M\$60/30, Tiburonería M\$300/150; 🕒 10am-7pm) is a worthwhile visit, located about 2km south of the city center. There's a large donut-shaped tank filled with sharks, rays and turtles that glide around visitors. Other tanks house freshwater and saltwater fish, reptiles and amphibians, river otters and even manatees. But for a really dramatic encounter climb into the Tiburonería – a transparent safety cage that is lowered into a pool of feeding sharks.

MUSEUMS

The displays at the **Museo de la Ciudad de Veracruz** (Veracruz City Museum; Map p688; ☎ 931-63-55; Av Zaragoza 39; admission free; 🕒 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, Sun till 3pm) do a good job of informing visitors of the city's history from the pre-Hispanic era, but they also give a feel for the essence of this proud and lively city through explanations of its music, its diverse ethnic roots and its politics.

Occupying a former naval academy, the **Museo Histórico Naval** (Map p688; ☎ 931-40-78; Arista 418; admission free; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) covers Mexico's maritime heritage. Get ready for your testosterone to spike: along with rooms full of weapons and model ships, the museum holds well-presented exhibits on the US attacks on Veracruz in 1847 and 1914, and on revolutionary hero Venustiano Carranza.

BEACHES & LAGOONS

Inseparable from the *Jarocho* identity is the beach. You'll find pleasant stretches of them all the way down through Boca del Río. As a rule of thumb, the further from the oil rigs the better, but locales patronize them all.

Alternatively, you can find *lancheros* (M\$120) by the aquarium who will bring you to **Cancunito** (Map p686), a sand bar off the coast touted as the best beach in Veracruz, with light sand and clear water. Another part of the *lanchero* schtick is the **Isla de Sacrificios** (Map p686). It was once an island used for Totonac human sacrifice and later used as a leprosy colony. Now it's a protected nature reserve working on its karma.

Some 11km from the city center, the gritty, off-shoot town of **Boca del Río** (Map p686) has a smattering of brightly colored seafood restaurants looking over the mouth of the river on Blvd Camacho. Also, *lanchas* offering **boat**



tours to mangrove forests leave from here. Over the bridge, the coastal road continues about 8km further down the coast from Boca del Río to **Mandinga**, known for its seafood (especially *langostinos bicolors*), where you can also hire a boat (from the *zona de restaurantes*) to take you around mangrove lagoons rich with wildlife.

Activities

DIVING & SNORKELING

You wouldn't expect good diving right near such a oil-rigged city, but Veracruz has some cool options (including at least one accessible wreck) on the reefs near the offshore islands. Part of the area has been designated an underwater natural park.

Dorado Buceo (Map p688; ☎ 931-43-05; www.dorado-buceo.com.mx; Blvd Camacho 865; without/with equipment M\$695/945) is a good choice of the various PADI dive schools in the city. It has quality equipment and arranges dive and snorkel excursions from the Veracruz area. Guides speak English.

KAYAKING

The relatively calm waters off the coast invite a day or afternoon of kayaking.

Veracruz Adventures (Map p686; ☎ 931-53-58; www.veracruzadventures.com; Blvd Camacho 681A) will rent you a single or double sit-on-top kayak (prices vary). If you're up for it, you can kayak from here to Cancuncito or Isla de Sacrificios.

ORGANIZED TOURS

Take a city tour, see surrounding sites, or play around in nature while leaving logistics to a tour company.

Amphibian (Map p688; ☎ 931-09-97; www.amphibian.com.mx; Lerdo 117, Hotel Colonial lobby; per person from M\$400) is an outfit offering activity-based tours; in addition to diving and snorkeling trips, it also offers rafting trips to nearby rivers, rappelling and sightseeing trips to places like El Tajín and to Roca Partida – a rocky outcrop jutting straight out of the ocean.

Aventura Extrema (☎ 980-84-57; www.aventuraextrema.com) offers rappelling, rafting and hiking in the area.

Boats from the *malecón* offer 45-minute **harbor tours** (Map p688; ☎ 935-94-17; www.asdic.com.mx; per person M\$75; ☎ 7am-7pm). They leave when they're full, about every 30 minutes, so be prepared for a wait, particularly in the slow season.

The **Tranvías bus** (p688; ☎ 817-34-25; departs cnr Independencia & Zamora; M\$40) is an open air bus with trolley-like wooden trimmings that gives one-hour city tours to the beat of tropical tunes.

Courses

Language Immersion School (p686; ☎ 931-47-16; www.veracruzspanish.com; Alacio Pérez 61; first week US\$575 incl homestay) An American-owned school, it offers Spanish courses centered around learning the city, traveling around the state, doing outdoor activities and taking Mexican cooking classes.

Festivals & Events

Carnaval (February or March) Veracruz erupts into a nine-day party before Ash Wednesday each year with flamboyant parades winding through the city daily, beginning with one devoted to the 'burning of bad humor' and ending with the 'funeral of Juan Carnaval.' Chuck in fireworks, dances, salsa and samba music, handicrafts, folklore shows and children's parades, and it adds up to one of Mexico's greatest fiestas. See the tourist office for a program of events.

Festival Internacional Afrocaribeño (last two weeks of July) This festival of Afro-Caribbean culture features academic and business forums and a trade show, but the main attractions are the dance and music performances (many of them free), film screenings and art expositions, with many nations from the Caribbean and Latin America participating.

Sleeping

Hotel prices vary greatly according to demand in Veracruz and can shift from day to day at busy times of the year (mid-July to mid-September, Carnaval, Easter, Semana Santa, Christmas, New Year), during which you should book in advance and know that prices might increase 10% to 40%. Ask about discounts.

It can be entertaining to stay near the *zócalo*, which is music-filled and near museums and the *malecón*. If nightlife is your thing, think about staying on Blvd Camacho. Many higher-end options are on Ruiz Cortines.

BUDGET

Most budget places are near the bus station or around the fringes of the *zócalo*. Count on

VERACRUZ IN TWO DAYS

Day 1

Start with a morning stroll on the *malecón* (p685), stopping at the **Gran Café de la Parroquia** (p691) for breakfast. Find your way to the **Museo de la Ciudad** (p687) to get a feel for the city. Before heading to the **portales** for ice cream and music, swing by **Baluarto de Santiago** (p687), a colonial fortress of yesteryear. After a siesta, spend the rest of the afternoon at soaking up rays at **Cancuncito** (p687) and grab a late dinner and mojito in the acoustical atmosphere of El Rincón de La Trova.

Day 2

Begin the next day by **kayaking** around the harbor which will merit a hearty lunch at a seafood *palapa* on Playa Hornos (p691), right near your next stop, the **aquarium** (p687). Rest up in the afternoon because the night starts with perusing the **artisans' market** (p685) on the Boulevard, then dropping in on an oceanside restaurant where you will fortalize yourself for **Mambo Café** (p692). Whether you end up salsa dancing or people-watching, hopefully an early morning bus ride isn't in store.

hot water, but check for adequate ventilation and working fans.

Hotel Amparo (Map p688; ☎ 932-27-38; www.hotelamparo.com.mx; Serdán 482; s/d M\$150/300; (P)) Compared to other budget hotels, this secure, well-managed place a few blocks south of the *zócalo* is a good deal. It's a simple and central place to collapse at the end of a busy day out and about.

Hotel Santillana (Map p688; ☎ 932-31-16; Landeró Y Cos 209; s/d M\$200/300) This hotel is weathered with simple, scrubbed accommodations. There's a huge cage of parakeets in the center of the building.

Hotel Villa Rica (Map p688; ☎ 932-48-54; Blvd Camacho 165; s/d M\$200/300) A friendly bunch runs this small seaside hotel with bare-bones rooms that are clean and breezy, some with tiny tiled ocean-view balconies.

Hotel Sevilla (Map p688; Zaragoza y Lerdo; from M\$250) Just off the *zócalo*, this hotel provides acceptable, cheap shelter and a friendly welcome... but not much else.

Hotel El Faro (Map p688; ☎ 931-65-38; www.hotelelfaro.com.mx; Av 16 de Septiembre 223; s/d M\$290/340; ☎ ☎) A solid economical choice. This quiet hotel has planted sitting areas, a little internet café and rooms that are well maintained.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Impala (Map p686; ☎ 937-01-69; fax 935-12-57; Orizaba 650; s/d M\$300/480; (P) ☎) Near the bus station, this well-run hotel is a great place to stay before an early morning bus ride. Some, but not all, rooms have sketchy carpet.

Mar y Tierra (Map p688; ☎ 931-38-66, 800-543-41-68; www.hotelmariyatierra.com; Sainz de Baranda & Malecón; r M\$400/510; (P) ☎ ☎) Some of the rooms are remodeled with bright pop-out windows, and older rooms are cheaper and have balconies. Hang out in the rooftop pool with vistas of the city and sea. The amenities and location are pleasing.

Hotel Concha Dorada (Map p688; ☎ 931-29-96, 800-712-53-42; conchadorada@yahoo.com.mx; Lerdo 77; s/d M\$370-520; ☎) On the fringe of the *zócalo* action, this hotel about equals the quality of its more expensive neighbors who pretend to be fancy. Considering the location, it's a value.

Mesón del Mar (Map p688; ☎ 932-50-43; www.mesondelmar.com.mx; Estaban Morales 543; r M\$450, ste from M\$550; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The airy rooms have tall ceilings, and some have cool lofts and balconies. Though not ridiculously clean, the rooms are

very well cared for. The vibrant, trendy café below serves delicious Mexican food.

Hotel Colonial (Map p688; ☎ 932-01-93; www.hcolonial.com.mx; Lerdo 117; r M\$450-750; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎) The Colonial languidly ages and becomes more and more dated while capitalizing on its fantastic *zócalo* location. The *zócalo*-side accommodations are noisy but a blast. Rooms have a centrally controlled air-conditioning and sound system (so you'd better like 1980s music and love ballads).

our pick Hotel Candilejas (Map p688; ☎ 932-58-72; www.travelbymexico.com/vera/candilejas; Juan Barragán 35; s/d M\$510/580; (P) ☎ ☎) This cute hotel modestly flanks the Novo Mar hotel monolith. Many of the rooms have precious balconies with *malécon* views. If you snag a corner room you'll get two balconies. The bare, rooftop patio was made for yoga.

Hotel Ruiz Milán (Map p688; ☎ 932-37-77, 800-221-42-60; www.ruizmilan.com.mx; cnr Malecón & Gómez Farías; from M\$580; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎) This welcoming hotel has got it together and is located ringside *malecón*. It's worth the price hike to get a view of the harbor.

Hawaii Hotel (Map p688; ☎ 938-00-88; hawaii@infotel.net.mx; Paseo del Malecón 458; s/d M\$650/750; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎) Who knows why it's called the Hawaii Hotel? The building shape is contemporary with gleaming light-colored marble and white décor inside. Some rooms have marvelous views of the *malecón*.

Hotel Bello (Map p686; ☎ 922-48-28; www.hotelbello.com; Av Ruiz Cortines 258; r M\$860; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Both the lobby and the rooms manage to be colorful and cheerful without being cheeseball. Higher-floor double rooms have ample balconies equipped with wooden deck furniture and city or sea views. It's in a bar and restaurant district near the beach, 5km south of the *zócalo*.

Hotel Veracruz (Map p688; ☎ 931-22-33, 800-900-00-00; www.hotelescalinda.com.mx; cnr Av Independencia & Lerdo; r M\$950; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) With a fine location on the *zócalo*, it provides guests with ample, borderline-stylish rooms and nice amenities plus a pool on the second floor with *zócalo* views.

TOP END

Most upscale options are far from the *zócalo* (except Diligencias) but near restaurants, bars and the beach.

Gran Hotel Diligencias (Map p688; ☎ 923-02-80, 800-505-55-95; www.granhoteldiligencias.com; Av Independencia

1115; r M\$1110; (P) (X) (B) (Q) (R) This fantastically renovated, landmark hotel royally presides over the *zócalo*. The fanciest option on the plaza, the huge rooms manage a business-class elegance but lack personality.

Hotel Mocambo (Map p686; ☎ 922-02-00, 800-290-01-00; www.hotelmocambo.com.mx; Av Ruiz Cortines 4000; r M\$910-3000; (P) (B) (Q) (R)) On a hilltop just behind the beach, this aging, Italianate resort retains elegance considering its all-encompassing nautical theme. The rooms are spacious, but simply furnished and with ocean or horizon views. It has three pools and an incredible restaurant.

Hotel Lois (p686; ☎ 937-82-90; www.hotellois.com.mx; Ruiz Cortines 10; M\$1350; (P) (B) (Q) (R)) The slick lobby has a chic, feng shui feel. The rooms, though large and well done, don't capture the hipster jive of the lobby. It's very near clubs and bars.

Hotel Krystal (Map p686; ☎ 923-02-32; www.nh-hotels.com; Blvd Camacho, Lote 5 y 6; r M\$2000; (P) (X) (B) (Q) (R)) Its slick central lobby, accented with red and natural colors, has plants dripping from the upper floors. Although it's on busy Camacho, the immaculate rooms, pool, and beach access give it a ritzy resort feel.

Fiesta Inn (Map p686; ☎ 923-10-00; www.posadas.com; Blvd Camacho s/n; r M\$2450; (P) (X) (B) (Q) (R)) Right on a cute beach, this upscale hotel boasts a great ocean-view pool and all the amenities. Though the rooms won't wow you, the attention to detail is superb.

Eating

If you can tear yourself away from delicious Mexican seafood, international cuisine is available.

ZÓCALO AREA

The cafés under the ever-lively, music-filled *portales* are popular spots for drinks and food. They all offer the same tasty, price-hiked variety. Alternatively, you can join *jarocho*s in the mazes of **Mercado Hidalgo** where you can find eatery nooks that serve cheap delectable local favorites like *cocteles de mariscos*, *mondongo* (prepared cow stomach) and delicious moles.

Gran Café del Portal (Map p688; ☎ 931-27-59; cnr Av Independencia & Zamora; mains M\$30-100; ☎ 7am-midnight) Just off the *zócalo*, you still have a view of the jovial ruckus and get the mariachi overflow. The menu has great variety and regional classics including steak *tampiqueño*.

PESCADO A LA VERACRUZANA

Pescado a la veracruzana is a hallmark dish of Veracruz, though each region does it a little bit differently. This specific recipe is from a señora in San Andrés Tuxtla. Sea bass and *huachinanango* are commonly used for this dish, but any fish will do. The señora says the recipe, which mixes indigenous cooking and Spanish spices, represents *mestizo* culture. She also mentioned that the secret to its flavor lies within the fact it's cooked in the rural kitchen where there are no recipes, just *deditos* (pinches), sprinkles and tasting till you get it how you want it. Not only is this dish scrumptious, but it's also beautiful upon presentation, with the spiced tomato, onion and chili compote layered on tender fish.

El Portón (Map p688; Av Independencia s/n; M\$45-100; ☎ 7am-midnight, open late on weekends) A half a block north of the *zócalo*, El Portón provides refuge from *zócalo* excitement with traditional food and agreeable prices.

Sanborns (Map p688; ☎ 931-00-91; Av Independencia 1069; mains M\$50-100) This huge, ever-busy café with a terrace facing the *zócalo* and an extensive international and Mexican menu is a local and tourist staple. Waitresses sport campy indigenous costumes.

HARBOR

our pick **Nieves de Malecón** (Map p688; ☎ 931-70-99; Av Zaragoza 286; dishes M\$2.50-8; ☎ 11am-7pm) On the way to the *malecón* from the *zócalo*, equip yourself for the stroll by treating yourself to a scrumptious Mexican-style sorbet laden with fruit chunks.

Gran Café de la Parroquia (Map p688; ☎ 932-25-84; Farías 34; mains M\$40-120; ☎ 6am-midnight) As a Veracruz icon, this busy restaurant-coffeehouse faces the harbor and buzzes from daylight until midnight. The trademark custom is for customers to request refills by clinking spoons on glasses.

DOWN THE COAST

Just south of the aquarium you'll find a smattering of *palapa* seafood restaurants bordering Playa Hornos. You pay for the view and atmosphere via the food's tourist prices (M\$150 for a seafood plate) – worth it to some and ridiculous to others.

Café del Puerto (Map p686; ☎ 932-74-47; Blvd Camacho s/n Plaza Acuario; M\$40-80 mains; ☎ 8am-10pm) This air-conditioned café of windows is a terrific waterfront spot for a cappuccino and pastry.

Cocina Económica Veracruz (Map p686; cnr Mirón & Orizaba; mains M\$30-90) Right next to the bus station, its enormous fresh fruit juices and delicious *mole* will strengthen your constitution for a long journey.

Bulerias (Map p686; ☎ 202-01-46; www.bulerias.com.mx; Blvd Camacho 9; ☎ 11am-close; M\$50-150) A more upscale tapas bar with seaside ambience, outdoor seating and lovely food. Its huge TV tends to show soccer games, and the patio is good for boulevard watching.

Cacharrito (Map p686; ☎ 921-60-01; Gaviota 1; M\$75-250; ☎ 1:30pm-11pm, Sun 1:30-6pm) This classy, formal Argentine restaurant near Hotel Mocambo is renowned for its *parrilladas* (barbequed meat) but you'll also find pastas, seafood and salads.

Sushi Itto (Map p686; ☎ 921-76-41; www.sushi-itto.com; Ruiz Cortines 3501; rolls M\$60-100) Wasabi and salsa *chipotle* are equal condiments here. It has some eyebrow-raising Mexican-inspired rolls and 'burgiesitas' (M\$68) that are hamburger-like creations made with sushi ingredients.

Drinking

The *portales* cafés are drinking strongholds. But head south and you'll find plenty of other choices.

Velitas (Map p686; Blvd Camacho & Militar; drinks M\$15-50) This popular little seaside *palapa* could be romantic with its tiki-torch ambience or just a laid-back place to grab a cocktail while checking out the ocean and people strolling past on the boulevard. On weekends there's live music. **Coco Beers** (Map p686; Militar s/n; ☎ 6pm-close, Wed-Sun) How can one go wrong in a place that serves super-sized beers out of *yardas*: iced, bong-shaped, glass containers? It's loud and popular here, dude.

La Cava (Map p686; Blvd Camacho, btwn Uribe & Barragán; drinks M\$15-30; ☎ 5pm-close) Definitely a neighborhood favorite, this tiny bar illuminated with black lights seems to host lots of laughter and cocktail-induced intimacy.

Entertainment

Of course, there are always marimbas and mariachis on the *zócalo*. And the coastline boulevard is known as *la barra más grande del mundo*, the biggest bar in the world, *barra*

referring to both the sandbar and drinks bar. During holiday times, it's an outdoor party with live music and dancing in the streets. Many venues line Blvd Camacho.

El Rincón de la Trova (Map p688; Callejón de la Lagunilla 59; cover M\$30; ☎ 11am-7pm Mon-Wed, 9pm-3am Thu-Sat) Set on a pedestrian side road, this venue has live *trova* as well as *son jarocho* music. You can sip a mojito and eat empanadas while enjoying the show.

La Casona de la Condesa (Map p686; ☎ 130-12-82; www.casonadelacondesa.com; Blvd Camacho 2015; cover M\$50 weekends; ☎ 10pm-5am Tue-Sun) The weird Jesus art is meant to be edgy but feels whacked out. La Casona attracts an older (ie not teenage) crowd and offers solid live music every night it's open.

our pick Mambo Café (Map p686; ☎ 927-19-55; www.mambocafe.com.mx; Av Americas 551; ☎ 10pm-4:30am Wed-Sat; cover women/men M\$70/130) The cover is steep in Veracruz terms, but this expansive salsa club with slick fountains and bursting colors is where Latin dancing goes down in this town. Sometimes there are lessons early on weekend nights. Check for ladies' nights specials, too.

Barricas del Boca (Map p686; ☎ 100-37-76; cnr Blvd Camacho & Militar; ☎ 9pm-3am Wed-Sat) This *Jarocho*-recommended club has *trova*, salsa, pop and rock music. You can hang out at the bar or dance to the DJ.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Frequent flights to Tampico, Villahermosa, Mérida and Mexico City are offered by Aeroméxico and **Mexicana** and **Click Mexicana** (☎ 932-22-42, 800-502-20-00) in addition to a handful of other national airlines. Direct flights from Houston are offered by **Continental Airlines** (☎ 922-60-08; www.continental.com).

BUS

Veracruz is a major hub, with good services up and down the coast and inland along the Córdoba-Puebla-Mexico City corridor. Buses to and from Mexico City can be heavily booked at holiday times.

The bus station is about 3km south of the *zócalo* between Calles Collado and Orizaba on Av Díaz Mirón, and has ATMs. The 1st-class/deluxe area is in the part of the station closest to Orizaba. For more frequent and slightly cheaper and slower 2nd-class services, enter the other side from Av Lafragua. There's

a 24-hour luggage room here. Daily 1st-class departures include the following:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Acayucan	M\$196	3½hr	14 daily
Catemaco	M\$100	3½hr	9 daily
Córdoba	M\$82	1¾hr	hourly
Mexico City (TAPO)	M\$348	5½hr	20 daily
Oaxaca	M\$396	7hr	3 daily
Orizaba	M\$96	2½hr	28 daily
Papantla	M\$150	4½hr	7 daily
Puebla	M\$244	3½hr	8 daily
San Andrés	M\$94	3hr	10 daily
Santiago	M\$94	2½hr	14 daily
Tampico	M\$448	9½hr	20 daily
Tuxpan	M\$210	6hr	15 daily
Villahermosa	\$370	7½hr	13 daily
Xalapa	M\$74	2hr	frequent till 11:30pm

Buses leaving Veracruz also go to Campeche, Cancún, Chetumal, Matamoros, Mérida, Nuevo Laredo and Salina Cruz.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Many car rental agencies have desks at the Veracruz airport. There are also some larger agencies scattered around town. Rates start at M\$600/day.

Budget (Map p686; ☎ 989-05-31; Ruíz Cortínes 3495)

Dollar (Map p686; ☎ 935-88-08; fax 935-88-07; Bolívar 501B)

Getting Around

Veracruz airport (☎ 934-70-00) is 11km southwest of town near Hwy 140. It's small, modern and well organized with a café and several shops. There's no bus service to or from town; taxis cost M\$120.

To get into the city center from the 1st-class bus station, take a bus marked 'Díaz Mirón y Madero' (M\$5). It will head to Parque Zamora then up Madero. For the *zócalo*, get off on the corner of Madero and Lerdo and turn right. Returning to the bus stations, pick up the same bus going south on Av 5 de Mayo. Booths in the 1st- and 2nd-class stations sell taxi tickets (*zócalo* area, M\$30). In the tourist office, you can get a summary sheet of official taxi ride costs that's helpful to guard against tourist price inflation.

Buses marked 'Mocambo-Boca del Río' (M\$7 to Boca del Río) leave regularly from the corner of Zaragoza and Serdán, near

the *zócalo*; they go via Parque Zamora then down Blvd Camacho to Playa Mocambo (20 minutes) and on to Boca del Río (30 minutes). AU buses also go there from the 2nd-class station.

CÓRDOBA

☎ 271 / pop 135,000 / elevation 924m

Cordobenses are spirited urbanites who are proud of their colonial town where the contract sealing Mexico's independence was signed in 1821. Its historical appeal and agreeably temperate climate might entice you to visit, especially if you're a city-goer. The museum is small but interesting, the cathedral grandiose and the *zócalo* teeming with kids chasing pigeons, grandmothers on benches and shoe shiners hard at work.

Córdoba lies in the foothills of Mexico's central mountains, surrounded by fertile countryside. In 1618 30 Spanish families founded Córdoba in order to inhibit escaped African slaves from attacking travelers between Mexico City and the coast. Today it's a commercial and processing center for sugar cane, tobacco, coffee and fruit.

Orientation

Córdoba's central Plaza de Armas has regal 18th-century *portales* on three sides. Like many towns, streets have numbers rather than names, and avenidas are perpendicular to calles. Even-numbered avenidas are north-east from the plaza and even-numbered calles are northwest, leaving odd numbers southeast and southwest of the plaza, respectively.

Information

Banks around the Plaza de Armas have 24-hour ATMs.

Centro de Lavado (☎ 706-99-44; Calle 2 no 501;

☎ Mon-Fri 8am-9pm, Sat 9am-8pm) Laundry at M\$9 per kilo.

Cibermania (☎ 712-88-20; Av 2 no 306; per hr M\$10) Internet access.

Libros y Regalos (Av 3 no 104 in Plaza Jardín;

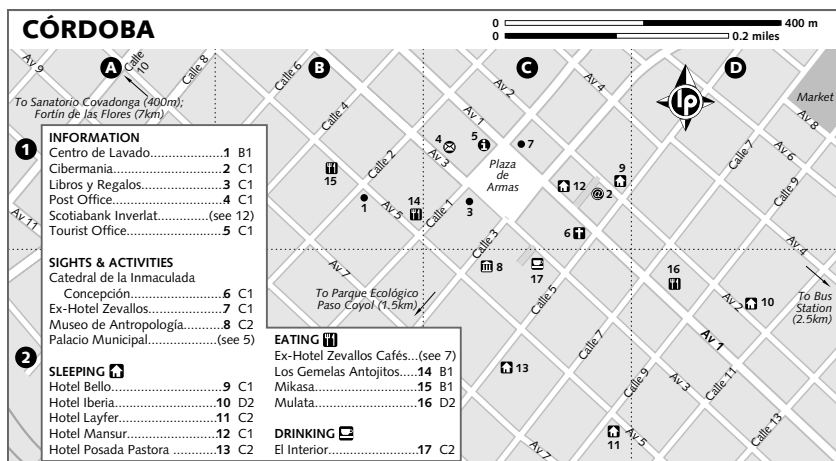
☎ 10:30am-8:30pm) Just off the *zócalo*.

Post office (Av 3 s/n) Northwest of the plaza.

Sanatorio Covadonga (☎ 714-55-20; www.sana.toriocovadonga.com.mx; Av 7 no 1610; ☎ 24hr) Urgent medical care at all hours.

Tourist office (☎ 717-17-00 ext 1778; turismo@mpiocordoba.gob.mx; Palacio Municipal; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) Helpful staff offers maps and information.

Volunteers sometimes give tours of the city.



Sights

The **Ex-Hotel Zevallos**, built in 1687, is former home of the *condes* (counts) of Zevallos. It's on the northeast side of the plaza, behind the *portales*. Plaques in the courtyard record that Juan O'Donjú and Agustín de Iturbide met here on August 24, 1821 and agreed on terms for Mexico's independence. They also concurred that a Mexican, not a European, should be head of state. Iturbide went on to briefly reign as Emperor Agustín I. The building is now notable for its café-restaurants.

At the southeast end of Plaza de Armas is the imposing baroque **Catedral de la Inmaculada Concepción**, which dates from 1688. It has an elaborate facade flanked by twin bell towers. The showy interior is ornate with gold leaf detailing and marble floors. The chapel is flanked with candle-lit statues with altars, such as a gruesome Jesus on the cross and an eerily despairing Virgen de la Soledad. The mixture of glitz and gore is a visual metaphor of a disturbing historical dichotomy: the richness of the conquistadores and the misery that the indigenous people subsequently endured.

Half a block southwest of the plaza, the **Museo de Antropología** (Calle 3 s/n; admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-8pm) has a modest but interesting collection of artifacts. There's a fine Aztec ball-court marker, some Olmec figurines and a replica of the magnificent statue of El Señor de Las Limas that resides in Xalapa's Museo de Antropología. On the 2nd floor there's a lovely overlook to the mountains.

Parque Ecológico Paso Coyol (☎ 714-20-84; cnr Calle 6 & Av 19 Bella Vista; admission M\$2) is a jewel in the urban rough. The neighborhood joined with the government to turn what was once a 4-hectare abandoned lot overrun by 'delinquents' into a park. Now this eco-conscious park is patronized by *cordobenses* who run and walk its trails snaking around gardens corralled by old tires and plastic bottles. Your meager entrance fee pays for both *campesinos* and biologists alike to maintain the place. Follow Calle 3 south from the plaza for 1.5km. The street changes names, weaves through a suburb and bottoms out at the park.

Festivals & Events

On the evening of **Good Friday**, Córdoba marks Jesus' crucifixion with a procession of silence, in which thousands of residents walk through the streets behind an altar of the Virgin. Everyone holds a lit candle, no one utters a word and the church bells are strangely quiet.

Sleeping

Córdoba's accommodation options are not extensive, but they are well done.

Hotel Iberia (☎ 712-13-01; ibericordoba@prodigy.net.mx; Av 2 no 919; s/d M\$165/265, with air-cn M\$180/280; 🚽) A great budget deal, the clean rooms have arched brick windows and there's a courtyard in the center. You can rent a room here for four hours. Wink.

Hotel Posada Pastora (☎ 712-88-82; Calle 5 no 517; s/d M\$280/300, plus M\$50 with air-cn; 🚽) ☎

There is nothing spectacular about this place, but it's clean and comfortable and solid value for the price. Two rooms have outside-facing windows.

Hotel Mansur (☎ 712-60-00; fax 712-69-89; Av 1 no 301; from M\$410; (P) ♻️) This is the most friendly and appealing hotel on the *zócalo*. Its vast balconies with thick wooden chairs are fantastic perches to enjoy cathedral views and people-watching on the lively plaza below. The rooms are simple yet sparkling and have solid wood furnishings.

Hotel Bello (☎ 712-81-22; www.hotelbello.com/cordoba; cnr Av 2 & Calle 5; s/d M\$440/520; (P) ♻️) This modern hotel is spotless and smartly decorated. The rooms are fresh and the staff affable. Go for the top-floor balcony rooms.

Hotel Layfer (☎ 714-05-05; Av 5 no 908; s/d M\$550/720, ste add M\$200; (P) ♻️) It's meant to be fancy, but the odd-colored, blockish rooms are more trippy than anything else. The wide array of complimentary body care condiments is strangely pleasing.

Eating & Drinking

our pick **Las Gemelas Antojitos** (Av 5 no 7; mains M\$15-45; ☎ 24hr) At any hour, this colorful eatery serves Mexican food made right in front of you. You can also get the local scoop from chatty ladies behind the counter.

Ex-Hotel Zevallos (☎ 712-18-53; Av 1 No 101; mains M\$70-120; ☎ 8am-1am) Multiple fashionable cafés share this colonial building on the plaza, with the more formal choices upstairs. Good food, excellent ambience, higher prices.

Mikasa (☎ 712-76-13; Av 5 no 212; mains M\$70-120; ☎ 1-10pm Tue-Sun) Cordoba does sushi. And loves it. You might have to wait for a table at this hole in the wall hotspot.

Mulata (☎ 717-66-63; Av 1 no 721; dishes M\$80-140) Named for a legend of a beautiful African slave who escaped from prison through the picture she drew in her cell. Appropriately, there's a gorgeous mural here as well as delectable, internationally influenced food and bakery items.

El Interior (☎ 727-17-17; Av 3 no 318; coffee M\$12-25; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-8pm Sun) This café and gift shop has a new-age feel. It sells espresso drinks, unique souvenirs and useful maps.

Getting There & Around

BUS

Córdoba's bus station, which has deluxe, 1st-class and 2nd-class services, is at Av Privada

4, 2.5km southeast of the plaza. To get to the town center from the station, take a local bus marked 'Centro' or buy a taxi ticket (M\$20). To Fortín de las Flores and Orizaba, it's more convenient to take a local bus from Av 11 than to go out to the Córdoba bus station.

As always, 2nd-class buses run more often than 1st-class services to closer destinations, take longer and cost 10% less than the corresponding 1st-class service. Deluxe and 1st-class buses from Córdoba include:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Mexico City (TAPO)	M\$224	5½hr	26 daily
Oaxaca	M\$258	6hr	4 daily
Puebla	M\$136	3hr	17 daily
Veracruz	M\$82	1¾hr	at least 1 hourly
Xalapa	M\$120	3hr	11 daily

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Córdoba, Fortín de las Flores and Orizaba are linked by toll Hwy 150D, the route that most buses take, and by the much slower Hwy 150. A scenic back road goes through the hills from Fortín, via Huatusco, to Xalapa.

ATOYAC

Stop at the town of Atoyac, some 25km from Cordoba, and get messy tearing into the renowned *langostinos* (king prawns) caught in the river. Prepared *al ajillo* (à la garlic), it's scrumptiously served with half a head of fried garlic. Afterwards, cool off at **Playa Bella**, a sandbar where the town's gorgeous river widens and makes for a fantastic swimming spot.

If you have a car or like to walk you can visit the **Cascada de Atoyac**. Continue east through town and turn right onto a dirt road at the deserted railroad station for a couple of kilometers. You'll pass under two hand-hewn tunnels before you see the plunging waterfall next to the picturesque abandoned railroad. Trails of questionable quality drop down to the river.

From Córdoba, buses (M\$12) for Atoyac leave from the main bus station.

FORTÍN DE LAS FLORES

☎ 271 / pop 21,000 / elevation 970m

Just west of Córdoba, Fortín de las Flores is a tranquil cut-flower cultivation center, with nurseries and private gardens. It's a peaceful weekend retreat for Mexico City's middle class,

though travelers may find this a nice jumping-board town for mountain adventures. It could be preferable to stay in tranquil Fortín – with its cute *zócalo* and lush surroundings – over its industrial neighbors, Córdoba and Orizaba. Fortín's annual **flower festival** runs for a week in late April or early May.

Orientation

Fortín is 7km from central Córdoba, but the towns are starting to grow into each other along Hwy 150. Its attractive, open plaza, the Parque Principal, shelters the Palacio Municipal in the middle and a cathedral on the south side. Streets are arranged like Córdoba's with perpendicular *avenidas* and *calles*.

Information

'El Chat' (☎ 713-31-81; cnr Calle 3 & Av 12; per hr M\$10; ☎ 9am-9:30pm)

Post office (Calle 1 btwn Avs 1 & 3) Between El Interior and El Centro de Mariscos through the arcade to the left.

Tourist office (☎ 713-01-02; cnr Calle 5 & Av 1; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Activities

Take a scenic **walk** from the center west down Av 1, which turns into the Fortín Viejo road. After about 20 minutes you'll come to a point overlooking the old railroad and towering verdant mountains. Continuing down the road for a kilometer or so, you'll pass over the river and turn right for 2km onto a forest dirt road going to **El Corazón** (admission M\$10), a basic facility with weathered swimming pools. Behind the pools, behind the electric plant, you can climb a huge staircase to get great views. The roads are safest walked during the day.

Xochitl travel agency (☎ 713-29-26; www.groups.msn.com/faraventuras; faraver@hotmail.com; Av 3 Pte no 113; ☎ 10am-12pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat), just a couple of blocks from the plaza, arranges myriad outdoor trips (hiking to waterfalls, rappelling, caving, paragliding) in the phenomenal surrounding areas.

Also, **Cecilia Rábago** (☎ 271-120-20-30; cecirabago@hotmail.com; M\$900-1000/day, 1-4 people) is a well-established, bilingual tour guide in the area and a firecracker of a lady. She's an expert on history and sites in the Fortín-Córdoba-Orizaba area.

Sleeping

Hotel Suites 'Magnolias' (☎ 713-22-98; Av 3 no 105; s/d M\$300/500, with Jacuzzi M\$700; ☎ (P)) Skittles box

meets bad cubism at this quirky little hotel right off the *zócalo*. The bright colors, weird tile schemes and somewhat wacky designs will make for an interesting stay. The sanitary standard isn't rigid.

Hotel Fortín Las Flores (☎ 713-01-08; www.hotelfortindelasflores.com.mx; Av 2 no 210 btwn Calles 5 & 7; s/d M\$415/570, ste from M\$760) This open-air, plant-filled hotel a short walk from the center is a great value. Rooms over the pool have adorable bay window sitting nooks, and some patios have excellent views of Pico de Orizaba.

Hotel Posada Loma (☎ 713-06-58; www.posadaloma.com; Carretera Córdoba-Fortín Km 333; s/d M\$550/650, bungalows per month M\$10,000-12,000; (P) ☎ ☎) If you're a garden lover, this is your oasis. Its grounds are a marvel of greenhouses, famous orchid collections, gardens with exotic and local flowers, terraces and a pool. The airy accommodations come with fireplaces for winter nights. The renowned breakfast in its restaurant, with spectacular views of Pico de Orizaba, is unbeatable. Loma is off Hwy 150, about 1km from central Fortín.

Eating and Drinking

Lots of eateries surround the *zócalo*.

El Interior (Calle 1 No 105; snacks M\$15-50; ☎ 9am-10:30pm, Sun 10am-10pm) Small-town Mexico goes for trendy...and does alright. This branch café-bookstore is welcoming, bright and known for its *mostachón* (walnut crusted torte filled with cream cheese and fresh strawberries).

our pick Kiosko Café (*Zócalo*; mains M\$30-70; ☎ 7am-11pm) Smack dab in the middle of the *zócalo*, this café enjoys unmatched real estate. Formerly the library, it now serves coffee, fresh juices and meals. The enchiladas have high acclaim.

El Parián (☎ 713-11-67; Av 1 no 110; mains M\$35-80; ☎ 7am-11pm, closed Wed) Just off the center, you'll find hearty plates with good service and pleasant atmosphere. Try *sopa Azteca*, a soup of shredded, fried tortillas and avocado chunks.

Getting There & Away

In Fortín, local bus services arrive and depart from Calle 1 Sur, on the west side of the plaza. The ADO depot on the corner of Av 2 and Calle 6 mainly has long-distance services to Mexico City, Veracruz, Puebla, Orizaba and Xalapa.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency (daily)
Córdoba	M\$6	20min	9
Mexico City (TAPO)	M\$216	5hr	3
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	M\$216	5hr	1
Orizaba	M\$12	25min	12
Veracruz	M\$88	2hr	6
Xalapa	M\$130	4hr	13

The 2nd-class bus to Orizaba goes through the gorgeous countryside but is more crowded and slower.

COSCOMATEPEC

☎ 272 / pop 13,700 / elevation 1,588

Coscomatepec (referred to as Cosco) is a picturesque mountain town 24km north of Fortín. It is renowned for its intricate hand-made saddles and leather goods, quality cigars and delicious bread.

You can take tours through the famous bakery, cigar factory and saddle shops arranged through the **tourist office** (☎ 737-04-80; turismo cosco@yahoo.com.mx; Amez y Argüelles s/n; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) in the Plaza Municipal. Ask for Nacho, who also arranges **outdoor adventure** activities, such as hiking, rappelling, horseback riding, zip-lines and possibly rock climbing in this area rich with caves, rivers, old bridges and waterfalls. There's an ATM in the plaza.

Having one of the only fleets of quality rental mountain bikes in the state is **Aventuras del Nuevo Mundo** (☎ 273-737-07-33; www.coscomatepec.info; nwasoco@hotmail.com) founded and run by a pleasant gringo and his Coscomatepecan wife. It specializes in a bike tour that drives people to the top of a 20km descent and lets them rip. Cross-country bike trips can also be arranged. Note that the DIY biking opportunities here are rich indeed if you have your own bike.

The **Hotel San Antonio** (☎ 737-03-20; Bravo 35; s/d M\$180/250) on the plaza has a lovely communal patio and cleanish rooms. Alternatively, the infamous **Posada del Emperador** (☎ 737-15-20; cnr Av Juárez & Domínguez; r M\$400-800) is a more upscale option touted as having hosted Maximilian. It's a charming place boasting antique furniture, wood floors, exquisite views and a plant-filled interior.

In between Fortín and Cosco in Monte Salas is **Chula Vista Camping** (☎ 271-732-00-74; Calle 3 no 309; per person M\$50). Turn left on Calle 3 off the main road and continue for 3km. Follow signs to the campground. It's by a beautiful

turquoise river, with nature trails and caves nearby. Rustic *cabañas* are available.

From Fortín it's an hour bus ride (M\$12) or a taxi costs M\$60.

ORIZABA

☎ 272 / pop 122,000 / elevation 1219m

More industrial than urbane, Orizaba does a heck of a job making you forget that you're in the middle of gorgeous mountain country. Another strike is that the *zócalo*, Palacio Municipal, and cathedral are scattered about rather than bordering a unifying plaza. Thus, hotels and activity are unfortunately migrating to Av 6 Ote, a thru-way for traffic. But the city does have some worthwhile highlights: the fantastic art museum, interesting architecture, and strolls through Alameda Park and along the river.

The city was founded by the Spanish to guard the Veracruz–Mexico City road. An industrial center in the late 19th century, its factories were early centers of the unrest that led to the unseating of dictator Porfirio Díaz. Today it has a big brewery and is home to cement, textile and chemical industries.

Orientation

The central plaza is Parque Castillo, with the irregularly shaped Parroquia de San Miguel on its north side. The Palacio Municipal is west toward Alameda Park on Av Colón Pte, which is the boundary between the Norte and Sur *calle*s. Madero, a busy street bordering the plaza's west side, divides *avenidas* into Ote and Pte. Three blocks south of the plaza is Av Ote 6, the main east–west artery through town.

Information

Banks with ATMs are on Av Ote 2, a block south of the plaza.

Cruz Roja (☎ 725-05-50; Av Colón Ote 253; ☎ 24hr)

Provides medical care.

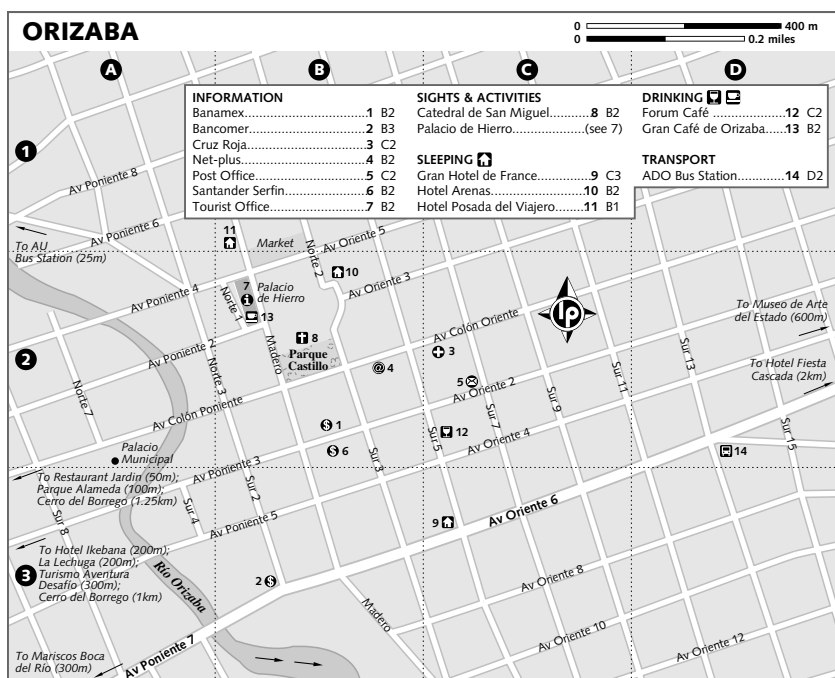
Net-plus (Av Colón Ote s/n, 2nd fl; per hr M\$10) Internet access.

Post office (Av Ote 2)

Tourist office (☎ 728-91-36; www.orizaba.gob.mx/turismo.htm; Palacio de Hierro; ☎ 8am-3pm & 4-8pm Mon-Fri, noon-8pm Sat, noon-4pm Sun) Has enthusiastic staff and plenty of brochures, though not much practical information.

Sights

The Parque Castillo has an imposing 17th-century-style, towered parish church, the



Catedral de San Miguel. Opposite the church is the **Palacio de Hierro** (Iron Palace), Orizaba's Art Nouveau landmark built entirely from iron and steel. Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, a master of metallurgy who gave his name to the Eiffel Tower and engineered the Statue of Liberty's framework, designed this pavilion, which was built in Paris. Orizaba's mayor, eager to acquire an impressive European-style Palacio Municipal, bought it in 1892. Piece by piece it was shipped, then reassembled in Orizaba.

Orizaba's wonderful **Museo de Arte del Estado** (State Art Museum; ☎ 724-32-00; cnr Av Ote 4 & Calle Sur 25; admission M\$10; ⌚ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is housed in a gorgeously restored colonial building dating from 1776. The museum is divided into rooms that include one of Mexico's most important permanent Diego Rivera collections; there are also contemporary works by regional artists.

Activities

West of the center, **Parque Alameda** is an expansive, lush city park dotted with statues. It hosts pick-up soccer games, runners and loafers.

The **Cerro del Borrego** looms lusciously over the park and offers brilliant views if you get to the top very early before the mist rolls in. However, avoid it in the evening. The entrance is easy to miss. Walk westbound on Av Pte 3 until it bottoms out, and take a left. Look for a very narrow alleyway entrance on the right, which will lead you past the quirky Ermita de la Virgen de Guadalupe and finally to the trail's stairs.

Also, there's a neat pedestrian **river walk** that weaves nonsensically down the river and tours you under some of city's 13 bridges. You can access it from most of the bridges near the center.

A number of adventure tour operators are based in Orizaba (see boxed text, p657). **Mountain Sports Mexico** (☎ 726-00-18; www.mountainmexico.com; elkletus@hotmail.com) arranges various outdoor activities in nearby hills, mountains and canyons, including climbs part way up Pico de Orizaba. **Turismo Aventura Desafío** (☎ 725-06-96; Av Pte 3 No 586) offers similar services. Servimont (p700) in Tlachichuca provides bona fide hiking and biking guides for around the Pico. Highlights of the area

include the gorgeous Cañon de la Carbonera near Nogales and the Cascada de Popócatl near Tequila. But, really, exquisite natural places saturate this region. DIY adventures are waiting to be had.

Sleeping

Higher-end options are on the Av Ote 6 traffic strip. Low-end choices are near the center.

Hotel Arenas (☎ /fax 725-23-61; Av Nte 2 no 169; s/d M\$120/170) Tucked into a bustling side street, this hotel is a great value. The rooms are well-cared for and look into a central patio sitting area lush with plants and trees.

Hotel Posada del Viajero (☎ 726-33-20; Madero Nte 242; s/d M\$100-200; (P)) The Viajero might look unappealing from the outside, but staying here is a solid value with clean rooms and pleasant staff.

Hotel Ikebana (☎ 725-71-43; Av Pte 3 no 512; hotel_ikebana_ste@hotmail.com; s/d M\$240/280; (P) ♻) This small, funky Japanese-themed hotel has a restaurant below that strives to offer Asian dishes. The rooms with pop-out windows looking out over the park are fantastic while the windowless internal rooms leave something to be desired.

Gran Hotel de France (☎ 725-23-11; Av Ote 6 no 186; s/d M\$350/380; (P) ♻) This historic late 19th-century building has a splendid high-ceiling lobby. The rooms are pleasantly simple and the price is right.

Hotel Fiesta Cascada (☎ 724-15-96; fax 724-55-99; www.hotelcascada.com.mx; Hwy Puebla-Córdoba Km 275; s/d M\$660/790; (P) ♻) The Cascada sits above a gorgeous canyon and has a pool, gardens and forest trails, and is near a fantastic waterfall. The spacious rooms come at a terrific price. It's about 2km east of the center.

Eating & Drinking

In sedate Orizaba many restaurants close early. Head to the plaza for tacos and snacks.

La Lechuga (☎ 726-39-81; Av Pte 3 No 542; mains M\$25-80 ☎ 8:30am-6pm; (V)) Properly located in front of Alameda Park where the health-conscious population comes to run and walk, this pleasant vegetarian restaurant offers a breakfast buffet and a daily set lunch menu (M\$45).

Restaurant Jardín (Av Colón Pte 379; mains M\$25-50; ☎ 8am-7pm) You'll almost pass it if you're not careful, but look for an entrance that leads into a plant-filled courtyard. A tranquil spot to lunch on delicious Mexican favorites.

Mariscos Boca del Río (☎ 726-52-99; Av Pte 7 s/n; seafood M\$50-100; ☎ noon-8pm Tue-Sun) Known as the best seafood restaurant in town, its big portions should not leave you hungry.

Gran Café de Orizaba (☎ 724-44-75; cnr Av Pte 2 & Madero) Sitting pretty inside the Palacio de Hierro with its polished wood floors and pictures of old Orizaba, this café has a regal feeling. The patio is a fabulous spot to drink the high-quality tea or coffee.

Forum Café (☎ 725-47-35; Calle Sur 5 No 225; drinks M\$10-30; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Sat, 5-10pm Sun) It's a fantastic place to enjoy the acoustical delights of *trova* (playing most nights) over a beer or coffee. There's courtyard seating, and the place is adorned with local art.

Getting There & Around

Local buses from Fortín and Córdoba stop four blocks north and six blocks east of the town center, around Ote 9 and Nte 14. The AU 2nd-class bus station is at Zaragoza Pte 425, northwest of the center.

The modern 1st-class bus station is on the corner of Av Ote 6 and Sur 13, and handles all ADO, ADO GL and deluxe UNO services. Daily 1st-class buses are as follows:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Córdoba	M\$16	40min	every 30 min
Fortín del las Flores	M\$12	3½hr	6 daily
Mexico City (TAPO)	M\$210	5hr	17 daily
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	M\$210	5hr	7 daily
Oaxaca	M\$244	6hr	3 daily
Puebla	M\$122	2½hr	16 daily
Veracruz	M\$96	2½hr	25 daily
Xalapa	M\$130	4hr	10 daily

There are also 1st-class services to Tampico and Villahermosa, as well as slower and slightly cheaper 2nd-class services to Mexico City, Puebla and Veracruz.

Toll Hwy 150D, which bypasses central Orizaba, goes east to Córdoba and west, via a spectacular ascent, to Puebla (160km). Toll-free Hwy 150 runs east to Córdoba and Veracruz (150km) and southwest to Tehuacán, 65km away over the hair-raising Cumbres de Acultzingo.

PICO DE ORIZABA

Mexico's tallest mountain (5611m), called 'Citlaltépetl' (Star Mountain) in the Náhuatl language, is 25km northwest of Orizaba. From

the summit of this dormant volcano, one can see the mountains Popocatepetl, Iztaccíhuatl and La Malinche to the west and the Gulf of Mexico to the east. The only higher peaks in North America are Mt McKinley in Alaska and Mt Logan in Canada.

The only recommended local company that guides people to the summit is **Servimont** (☎ 245-451-50-82; www.servimont.com.mx; Ortega 1A, Tlachichuca; packages from US\$370), a climber-owned outfit passed down through the Reyes family. As the longest-running operation in the area, it also acts as a Red Cross rescue facility. It's based in the small town of Tlachichuca (2600m), which is a common starting point for expeditions.

Unless you're an experienced climber with mountaineering equipment, you'll need a guide and a good level of fitness. Book your expedition with Servimont two to four months in advance and allow four to seven days to acclimatize, summit and return. Staff will tell you all you need to know about acclimatization, gear, etc.

If you're going to climb unguided, talk to Servimont about the routes; some spots are becoming dangerous due to global warming. Topographical maps can be mail-ordered way ahead of time or bought in person from Inegi offices in Veracruz or Xalapa (see boxed text, p657). Also, *Mexico's Volcanoes*, by RJ Secor, offers some good info. The best climbing period is October to March, with the most popular time being December and January.

Summiting Veracruz' iconic bad boy will prove to be an exhilarating, challenging endeavor as well as a fantastic way to experience the region's spectacular mountainscape. Initially, you hike to a base camp (4200m) where you sleep a touch and begin the final ascent around 2am, reaching the summit around sunrise. The climb is moderately steep and not technically difficult, but you'll still use crampons, ropes and ice axes.

Hostal accommodations at Servimont's base camp (which is a former soap factory adorned with interesting mountaineering antiques) is included in your package. If you want a private room, **Hotel Coyote** (☎ 245-451-54-25; 5 de Mayo s/n; s/d M\$150/250; (P)) is right on the plaza, as is **La Casa Blanca** (mains M\$30-80), a restaurant with delightful heating.

From Orizaba, catch a bus from the AU terminal to Ciudad Serdán (M\$38, 2 hours), then another to Tlachichuca (M\$12, one hour).

SOUTHEAST VERACRUZ STATE

Southeast of Veracruz port you'll find flat, fecund coastal plains crossed by rivers as well as volcano-dappled rainforest with myriad lakes, waterfalls and beaches. As the former heartland of ancient Olmec culture, the area is laden with archaeological sites, both preserved and seldom visited. The far south of the state claims oil metropolises such as Minatitlán and Coatzacoalcos.

TLACOTALPAN

☎ 288 / pop 9000 / elevation 10m

In the 19th century, Tlacotalpan was a major port because of its location on the expansive Río Papaloapan's north bank. Now this is a tranquil little town that's done well to preserve its broad plazas, colorful houses, colonial architecture and cobbled streets, thus receiving Unesco World Heritage status in 1998. Walking around, you're bound to run into an interesting niche museum. Buildings around town have plaques, in both Spanish and English, explaining their respective histories.

Information

There's an ATM on Carranza near the plaza.

Internet Café (Alegre s/n) A block south from the zócalo.

Post office (☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Around the corner from the tourist office.

Tourist office (Palacio Municipal; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Under the green and red *portales* facing Plaza Hidalgo. The office has helpful maps.

Sights & Activities

This little town is rich with interesting mini-museums. The **Museo Salvador Ferrando** (Alegre 6; admission M\$20; ☎ 10:30am-5pm Tue-Sun) displays assorted artifacts from the town's colonial history. Move on to the **Casa Museo Agustín Lara** (Beltrán 6; admission M\$20; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), featuring memorabilia of *tlacotalpeño* Agustín Lara (1900-70), a legendary musician, composer and Casanova. The pink **Casa de la Cultura Agustín Lara** (☎ 884-22-02; Carranza 43; ☎ 9am-5pm) houses art exhibits, folkloric dance rehearsals and *jarocho* music lessons, which are free for visitors to observe; the gallery upstairs may exact an admission fee.

Down the road is the **Mini-Zoológico Museo** (Carranza 25; donation M\$10; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat),

AGREEABLE TABLE MANNERS

- Whenever you catch the eye of someone who's eating, stranger or not, you say 'Provecho' (Enjoy). Don't avoid this custom. It's good manners and feels nice.
- After finishing a delicious yet messy fish meal, it's not rude to clean your fingers with the rind of the squeezed lime. It's quite practical really.
- When eating outdoors, you may see people stuffing paper napkins in their soda bottle-necks. It keeps the flies away.

the home of Don Pío Barrán, who keeps several crocodiles and a range of artifacts, including a locally excavated mastodon tooth and a sword that supposedly belonged to Porfirio Díaz.

If you walk the *malecón* near the restaurants, you're bound to run into a *lanchero* offering to whisk you down the scenic river for a hour-long **boat ride** (M\$250 split btwn passengers) to see a nearby lagoon. It's not the Amazon, but it's a lovely way to spend a late afternoon. Or take a stroll by the riverside and down Cházaro, which starts from the Palacio Municipal and has wall-to-wall, whacky colored, colonial-style houses and buildings with high arches and columns and tiles.

Festivals & Events

In late January and early February, Tlacotalpan's lively **Candelaria** festival features bull-running in the streets; and an image of the Virgin is floated down the river followed by a flotilla of small boats.

Sleeping & Eating

Prices triple or quadruple during the Candelaria holiday.

Hotel Reforma (☎ 884-20-22; Av Carranza 2; s/d M\$200/250, with air-con M\$300/350; **P** 🚽) It's not squeaky clean, but the rooms are spacious and a good value, especially if you get one with a balcony right over the *zócalo*.

Hotel Blanca (☎ 884-31-20; Beltrán 50; s/d M\$260/320; **P** 🚽) The spick-and-span rooms don't have lots of natural light, but are spacious, comfortable and welcoming with bright linens and colonial-themed decor.

Hotel Tlacotalpan (☎ 884-20-63; hoteltlacotalpan@tlaco.com.mx; Beltrán 35; s/d M\$450/500; **P** 🚽 🍷) This bright blue-and-yellow building off the main road has fresh rooms that surround a beautifully tiled courtyard. The lobby has an airy, colonial feel with rocking chairs and high ceilings.

Hotel Posada Doña Lala (☎ 884-25-80; Av Carranza 11; s/d M\$390/440, with air-con M\$440/550; **P** 🚽 🍷) The huffy staff bank on this hotel's famous reputation, but it has a great location near the river and the *zócalo*.

For good eats, try **Restaurante Tlacotalpan** (☎ 884-34-75; Malecón s/n; M\$80-120), one of the numerous terrific open-air eateries on the riverfront that whip up fresh, traditional seafood. They're more expensive than eateries in town, but the ambience is worth it. Also, there are a couple of lovely cafés in the center that face Plaza Hidalgo and the *zócalo*. Alternatively, head to the **market** by ADO for cheap fresh juices and regional favorites.

Getting There & Around

Hwy 175 runs from Tlacotalpan up the Papaloapan valley to Tuxtepec, then twists and turns over the mountains to Oaxaca (320km). ADO offers service to Mexico City, Puebla, Xalapa and Veracruz, while Transportes Los Tuxtlas (TLT) buses cover local routes.

SANTIAGO TUXTLA

☎ 294 / pop 16,000 / elevation 180m

More laid-back and a touch more charming than its rowdy neighbor San Andrés, Santiago (1525) is centered on a lovely, verdant *zócalo* and is surrounded by rolling green foothills of the volcanic Sierra de los Tuxtlas. The plaza is strewn with ladies arm-in-arm, couples lip-to-lip and shoes getting vigorously shined. It's not on the tourist track, per se, but the intriguing little museum, the close proximity (23km) to Tres Zapotes and the possibility of tranquil stay at Mesón de Santiago merit a visit.

All buses arrive and depart near the junction of Morelos and the highway. To get to the center, continue down Morelos, then turn right into Ayuntamiento, which leads to the *zócalo*, a few blocks away. The post office is on the *zócalo*, as are two banks (with sometimes dry ATMs), while a handful of internet places are scattered in close proximity.

The **Olmec head** in the *zócalo* is known as the 'Cobata head,' after the estate where it

TEMASCAL

The temascal steam bath ritual of Mesoamerican cultures was considered barbaric and strange by conquering Spaniards, who were notably nonbathing types. These days tourists are eager to hop into the small dome temascal structure (similar idea to the Native American sweat lodge) and to participate in a tradition known to be healing and cleansing both internally and externally. More and more places offer temascal because of its fiscal promise, but the tradition still exists in its truer form in indigenous villages.

TRES ZAPOTES

☎ 294 / pop 3600

The important late-Olmec center of Tres Zapotes is now just a series of mounds in cornfields. However, interesting artifacts are displayed at the museum in the town of Tres Zapotes, 23km west of Santiago Tuxtla. The trip to this tiny town is not convenient, but might be worth it if archaeology floats your boat.

Tres Zapotes was occupied for over 2000 years, from around 1200 BC to AD 1000. It was probably first inhabited while the great Olmec center of La Venta (Tabasco) still flourished. After the destruction of La Venta (about 400 BC), the city carried on in what archaeologists call an 'epi-Olmec' phase – the period during which the Olmec culture dwindled as other civilizations, notably Izapa and the Maya, came to the fore. Most finds are from this later period.

The small **Museo de Tres Zapotes** (admission M\$27; ☎ 9am-5pm) notably has the 1.5m Tres Zapotes head, an Olmec head dating from about 100 BC. The biggest piece, Stela A, depicts three human figures in the mouth of a jaguar. Other pieces include a sculpture of what may have been a captive with hands tied behind his back and the upturned face of a woman carved into a throne or altar. The museum attendant is happy to answer questions in Spanish or give a tour (tipping is appreciated).

The road to Tres Zapotes goes southwest from Santiago Tuxtla; a 'Zona Arqueológica' sign points the way from Hwy 180. Eight kilometers down this road, you fork right onto a paved stretch for the last 15km to Tres Zapotes. It comes out at a T-junction, from

where you go left then left again to reach the museum. From Santiago Tuxtla there are 2nd-class buses (M\$20) and taxis (M\$20/80 *colectivo*/private). Taxis leave from the Sitio Puente Real, on the far side of the pedestrian bridge at the foot of Zaragoza (the street going downhill beside the Santiago Tuxtla museum).

SAN ANDRÉS TUXTLA

☎ 294 / pop 56,000 / elevation 300m

Surrounded by rolling evergreen landscape and farmland, the bustling town of San Andrés is in the center of Los Tuxtlas and is Mexico's cigar capital. It has a few exciting things going on: cigar factory tours, Yambigapan's cooking classes, or the looming Volcán San Martín (1748m) in the distance begging to be climbed.

Orientation & Information

The main bus station is on Juárez, 1km northwest of the plaza. The cathedral is on the plaza's north side, the Palacio Municipal on the west side with a tiny tourist office, and a Banamex (with ATM) on the south side. The market is three blocks west.

The post office is on Lafragua; head down 20 de Noviembre directly across the plaza from the Palacio Municipal and follow it around to the left. A couple of blocks away from the *zócalo* on Juárez there is a tiny plant-covered shopping center called Plaza Jardín that houses two internet places, **@ctual's** (Av Juárez 106; per hr M\$10; ☎ 8am-11pm) and **Double Click** (Av Juárez 106; per hr M\$10; ☎ 8am-11pm).

Sights & Activities

Watch and inhale as the *puros* are speedily rolled by hand at the **Santa Clara cigar factory** (☎ 947-99-00; ventas@tabasa.com; Blvd 5 de Febrero 10; admission free; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat), on the highway a block or so from the bus station. Cigars of assorted shapes and sizes, including the monstrous Magnum, are available at factory prices, and the 50 *torcedores* employed here (together rolling 10,000 *puros* a day) are happy to demonstrate their technique.

Twelve kilometers southeast of San Andrés, a 242-step staircase leads down to the impressive **Salto de Eyipantla** (admission M\$8), a 50m-high, 40m-wide waterfall. Follow Hwy 180 east for 4km to Sihuapan, then turn right to Eyipantla. Frequent TLT buses (M\$10) make the trip, leaving from the corner of Cabada and 5 de Mayo, near the market.

The **Laguna Encantada** (Enchanted Lagoon) occupies a small volcanic crater 3km north-east of San Andrés. A dirt road goes there but no buses do. It's not advisable to walk by the lake alone, as there have been isolated incidences of assault, but guides will take you there from nearby **Yambigapan** (☎ 104-46-39; www.yambigapan.com.mx; campsites/s/d M\$50/280/350; (P)). Three kilometers or so from San Andrés, this family-run campground in the countryside is equipped with two simple *cabañas* with spectacular views. Not to be missed are the **cooking classes** from the doña of the house who will teach you traditional Mexican cooking (in Spanish) and its history in her fantastic kitchen for about M\$100 to M\$200. There's also swimming in the nearby river and guided hikes to the supposedly magical **Cueva de Diablo** (Devil's Cave) where the *brujos* (see boxed text, p707) do their thing. Taxi (M\$35 to M\$40) is the easiest way to arrive. Or ask a *pirata* (pickup truck) going to Ruíz Cortines to leave you at the turnoff and follow signs for Yambigapan that eventually lead you up a long dirt driveway. It should cost about M\$10.

our pick Ruíz Cortines (☎ 100-50-35; Ejido Ruíz Cortinez; campsites/cabañas M\$50/400) Way up in the forest tucked in the base of the volcano, an hour north from Andrés, this little town has installed very rustic *cabañas* and offers horseback riding (M\$100 per person) and hikes to caves. Its highlight service is the all-day, breathtaking hike up **Volcán San Martín** (1748m). The little restaurant Comedor

Ecoturístico has delicious, pick-out-your-fish fresh food. A taxi from Andrés costs M\$90 or a *pirata* is M\$25.

Sleeping

San Andrés doesn't have a lot of choices, but you'll be comfortable.

Hotel Colonial (cnr Belisario Domínguez & Pino Suárez; r from M\$75) If you feel the need to pinch a penny or two, head north of the *zócalo* and brave the stale, bare-bone rooms here. There's an open, plant-filled sitting area looking over the city.

Hotel Isabel (☎ /fax 942-16-17; Madero 13; s/d M\$230/300, with air-con M\$310/350; (P) (☎)) With its cheerful, light rooms, this well-kept hotel right off the *zócalo* trumps its more expensive neighboring competition.

Hotel de los Pérez (☎ 942-07-77; Rascón 2; r from M\$360; (P) (☎) (☎)) Strives for a business-class feel but ends up being plain.

Hotel Posada San Martín (☎ 942-10-36; Juárez 304; r from M\$370; (P) (☎) (☎)) Midway between the bus station and the *zócalo*, this hacienda-style posada is a fabulous deal, with a pool set in a peaceful garden and unique touches, like yellow-and-blue sinks and carved headboards, in the spacious rooms.

Eating

Restaurant Winni's (☎ 942-01-10; Madero 10; dishes M\$40) Join the rest of San Andrés here on the corner of the *zócalo* and sip an espresso drink while munching a pastry or a well-priced meal.

ECOTURISMO: WHAT DOES 'ECO' REALLY MEAN?

'Ecotourism' is commonly perceived as tourism based on the ethics of sustainability, with goals of environmental awareness and protection. In the central Gulf coast region, *ecoturismo* signifies any tourist service that doesn't happen to be in the city. A hotel will tag this plug word onto its promotions if it's located outside city bounds, as will a tour company if it offers a 1km hike on a non-paved road.

However, there are small pockets of bona fide, ethics-based ecotourism organizations, many in their infancy. For example, in Los Tuxtlas, some rural communities (see Ruíz Cortines, above; Miguel Hidalgo, p708; and Las Margaritas, p708) have made a collective effort to create economic opportunities for themselves, while protecting their natural environment through the development of ecotourism. Their efforts are somewhat disorganized, and don't offer the reliability of well-established tourist services (eg getting in touch to arrange visits can prove quite difficult). But if you're up for an adventure, hop on a *lancha* or *pirata* to their corners of the rainforest and embark upon a visceral, ideologically sound way to experience the luscious Reserva de la Biosfera Los Tuxtlas.

For further information on budding ecotourism projects in Veracruz, check out Pronatura (www.pronaturaveracruz.org), a conservation organization that is gaining momentum.

Refugio La Casona (☎ 942-07-35; Madero 18; dishes M\$40-70; ☎ 7am-2am) Along restaurant-laden Madero, this bar-restaurant serves traditional Mexican fare in its peaceful, leafy rear garden. There's also live bohemian music (from 9pm) most nights.

Caperucita (Av Juárez 108; dishes M\$50-80; ☎ 7am-midnight) On the top floor of Plaza Jardín near the *zócalo*, this open-air restaurant adorned with plants is a great place to hang out on a hot afternoon drinking fresh-squeezed juice and munching *antojitos*.

Getting There & Around

San Andrés is the transportation center for Los Tuxtlas, with fairly good bus services in every direction, 1st-class with ADO and 2nd-class (meaning no bathroom) with AU. Rickety but regular 2nd-class TLT buses are often the quickest way of getting to local destinations. They leave from a block north of the market and skirt the north side of town on 5 de Febrero (Hwy 180). Regula TLT destinations include Acayucan, Santiago Tuxtla and Veracruz. Frequent *colectivo* taxis to Catemaco and Santiago also leave from the market – they're speedier than the bus but cost a fraction more. Local taxis abound, and catching one to Catemaco or Santiago Tuxtla will run you M\$60.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Acayucan	M\$50	2hr	9 daily
Catemaco	M\$10	25min	10 daily
Cordoba	2nd-class M\$155	4hr	1 daily
Mexico City	M\$342	8hr	8
Orizaba	2nd-class M\$170	5hr	1 daily
Puebla	M\$300	6hr	2 daily
Santiago Tuxtla	2nd-class M\$12	25min	regular
Veracruz	M\$95	3hr	12 daily
Villahermosa	M\$300	5hr	5 daily
Xalapa	M\$165	5hr	7 daily

CATEMACO

☎ 294 / pop 25,000 / elevation 340m

Nestled among lusciously green hills on the western shore of serene Laguna Catemaco, this small town famous for witchcraft (see boxed text, p707) makes its living from fishing and Mexican tourism. During vacations and holidays, prepare for crowds and fiestas. During the low seasons, when hotels

are a third cheaper, Catemaco turns into a charming lakeside town, its precious *zócalo* trimmed with intricate white wrought iron and scenic *malecón* festooned with colorful, weather-worn boats. By the water, the *lancheros* insistently vie for your business, which can be annoying. This is a great place to use a base for visiting beaches, waterfalls and lagoons in the Los Tuxtlas Biosphere Reserve and beyond.

Orientation & Information

Catemaco slopes gently down toward the lake. A **tourist office** (☎ 943-00-16; Municipalidad; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) on the north side of the *zócalo* will impart information, updated or not, about the town and the surrounding region. The **post office** (Cuauhtémoc s/n) is four blocks west of the central plaza. For a very informative website in English, check out www.tuxtlas.com.

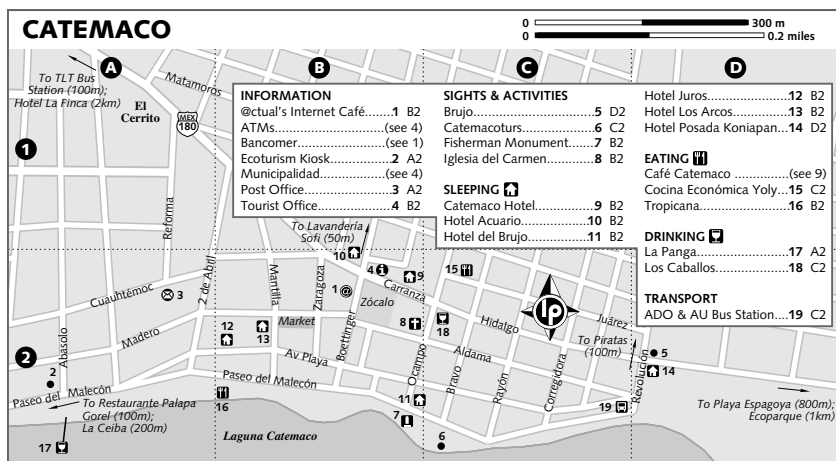
Bancomer (Av Boettinger s/n) on the *zócalo* has an ATM, and there's a Scotiabank ATM a block down. On the west side of the *zócalo*, **@ctual's Internet** (Av Boettinger s/n; per hr M\$10; ☎ 8am-10pm) is one of numerous central internet places.

Lavandería Sofi (Av Boettinger; 8am-8pm; M\$14/kilo) three blocks off the *zócalo* provides excellent laundry services.

Sights & Activities

Ringed by volcanic hills, **Laguna Catemaco**, which is actually a lake and not a lagoon, is 16km long. East of town are a few modest gray-sand beaches where you can take a dip in cloudy water. Following Av Hidalgo a kilometer east of town, the road tees and you'll hit the less-crowded **Playa Espagoya**. If you take a left on this waterfront road you'll find a sign for **Ecoparque** (☎ 94-304-56; www.ecoparque-lapunta.com; 8 treatments for M\$450), a small, jungle-themed rustic spa, offering mud massage and temascal, among other things. The spa also sells arnica soap and other crunchy items.

You can take **boat tours** to several islands within the lake. On the largest, Isla Tenaspi, Olmec sculptures have been discovered. **Isla de los Changos** (Monkey Island; Map p702) shelters red-cheeked monkeys, originally from Thailand. They belong to the University of Veracruz, which acquired them for research. *Lancheros*, disturbingly, feed the monkeys for the sake of close-up photography. A boat ride costs M\$50



if there is a group of people or M\$350 for a private *lancha*.

The town also has a helpful **ecotourism kiosk** (Malecón & Abasolo s/n) that will point you in the direction of rural ecotourism projects in the area (see boxed text, opposite). To support positive use of the rainforest, the kiosk sells goods from local artisans, such as regional botanical remedies and wine holders made from bamboo.

On the *malecón*, **Catemacoturs** (Malecón s/n; www.catemacoturs.com) is a *palapa* hut that rents beat-down adventure gear: low-end mountain bikes, sit-on-top kayaks and pedalboats. It also offers tours to waterfalls and the coast.

If you want to visit a local *brujo*, there's 'El Poder del Tigre' **Botánicos y Ciencias Ocultas** ('Power of the Tiger' Botanicals & Occult Sciences; ☎ 943-07-46; www.brujoguexpal.com; Av Hidalgo 2). The *brujo* might pull up in his Ford Explorer and tell you to check out his website, or he might be available to see you.

Sleeping

Flexible prices fluctuate dramatically (10 to 35%) according to demand with steep price hikes at high-season weekends, holidays, and the March witch-doctor convention.

BUDGET

La Ceiba Restaurant y Trailer Park (Malecón s/n; campsites or trailer per person M\$50) This open-air, tropically decorated, lakeside restaurant has a patch of green grass where you can camp or

hoo up a trailer (water and electricity). There are bathrooms with showers.

Hotel Acuario (☎ 943-04-18; crn Boettinger & Carranza; s/d M\$200/300; (P)) One of several budget places on the *zócalo*, it's well kept though plain and fan-cooled. Some rooms have views.

Catemaco Hotel (☎ 943-02-03; www.hotelcatemaco.net; Carranza 8; r from M\$375; (P) (♿) (♿)) On prime *zócalo* real estate, the café below is a popular hub. Its rooms are spotless, though sometimes the showers are cold.

MIDRANGE & TOP-END

Hotel del Brujo (☎ 943-12-05; Malecón s/n; s/d M\$350/450; (P) (♿)) A clean yet simple, secure yet tattered, hotel right on the lakeshore with mostly air-conditioned rooms. Some have magnificent, lake-facing balconies.

Hotel Los Arcos (☎ 943-00-03; www.arcoshotel.com.mx; Madero 7; r from M\$500; (P) (♿) (♿)) The well-managed Los Arcos has helpful staff and a small swimming pool. The light, airy rooms are situated in a way that entices guests to kick back in the breezy, plant-filled sitting areas.

Hotel Juros (☎ 943-00-84; Av Playa 14; s/d M\$300/550; (P) (♿) (♿)) This hotel runs a tight ship and provides quality rooms. Balcony rooms are fantastic. The roof-top pool has a lounging area with stellar views of the lake.

Hotel Posada Koniapan (☎ 943-00-63; www.hotelposadakoniapan.com.mx; crn Revolución & Malecón; r incl breakfast from M\$550; (P) (♿) (♿) (♿)) On the easternmost tip of the *malecón*, the peaceful Posada Koniapan is located a touch outside

the hustle and bustle of town. A landscaped swimming pool lies within the gated, ultra-secure grounds. Top floor rooms have fantastic views.

Hotel La Finca (☎ 943-03-22, 800-523-46-22; www.lafinca.com.mx; Hwy 180 Km 47; r from M\$750; ♿ ♿ ♿ ♿ ♿) Set lakeside in leafy gardens 2km west of town, this resort-like hotel has rooms with large, lakeview balconies and a pool with slides and a hot tub. It's a deal outside peak seasons, if seclusion from town is okay with you. They provide *lancha* and spa services.

Eating

The lake provides the specialties here: *te-gogolo* (a snail, reputed to be an aphrodisiac, eaten with chili, tomato, onion and lime) sold by street vendors and *chipalchole* (shrimp or crab-claw soup). Many tourist-aimed restaurants line the *malecón*. Explore the city's viscera, and you'll find interesting local eateries.

Cocina Económica Yoly (Juárez s/n; dishes M\$15-50) Watch Yoly hand-make your fat *memela* (gigantic corn tortilla filled with goodies). Just off the *zócalo*, this local dive has fresh, inexpensive food.

Café Catemaco (☎ 943-02-03; Carranza 8; ☞ 6am-11pm; dishes M\$50-100) This common meeting hub and wireless hotspot is patronized by trendy and business-oriented local crowds as well as a tiny international contingent. The food is traditional and tasty.

Restaurante Palapa Gorel (Malecón s/n; dishes M\$60-110) On the *malecón* you'll run into this popular, lakeside *palapa*. The hawker trying to entice you inside is annoying, but the seafood is lovely. It has live music on weekends.

Tropicana (☎ 943-12-97; Malecón s/n; dishes M\$50-120; ☞ 8am-9pm) Vast waterfront restaurant serving fish, *marsicos* and meat. It does up the iconic colorful Mexican decorations, but still is a cool place to grab a bite.

Drinking

Our pick **La Panga** (Paseo de Malecón s/n; ☞ 8am-midnight) This bar-restaurant literally floating on the lake with its own boardwalk is an unbeatable place to lean back, sip *cerveza* and grab a bite to eat while the sun disappears beyond the lake and rolling hills.

Los Caballos (Av Caranza s/n; ☞ 9pm-3am) A block east of the *zócalo*, candle-lit tables, *trova*, and Christmas lights create an ambience soaked with Latin romance. There's live music at weekends.

Getting There & Away

ADO and AU buses operate from a delightful lakeside terminal east of town. Local 2nd-class TLT buses run from a bus stop 700m west of the plaza by the hwy junction. *Colectivo* taxis arrive and depart from El Cerrito, a small hill about 400m to the west of the plaza on Carranza. A taxi to San Andres is M\$60.

First-class bus services include the following:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency (daily)
Acayucan	M\$48	1½hr	4
Córdoba	M\$180	5¼hr	2
Mexico City	M\$390	9hr	5
Puebla	M\$304	6hr	4
Santiago Tuxtla	M\$18	1hr	10
Veracruz	M\$100	3½hr	10
Xalapa	M\$176	5hr	4

THE WITCHING HOUR

On the first Friday in March each year, hundreds of *brujos* (shamans), witches and healers from all over Mexico descend on Catemaco to perform a mass cleansing ceremony. The event is designed to rid them of the previous year's negative energies, though the whole occasion has become more commercial than supernatural in recent years. Floods of Mexicans also head into town at this time to grab a shamanic consultation or *limpia* (cleansing) and eat, drink and be merry in a bizarre mix of otherworldly fervor and hedonistic indulgence.

Witchcraft traditions in this part of Veracruz go back centuries – mixing ancient indigenous beliefs, Spanish medieval traditions and voodoo practices from West Africa. Many of these *brujos* multitask as medicine men or women (using both traditional herbs and modern pharmaceuticals), shrinks and black magicians (casting evil spells on enemies of their clients). If you're lucky, you could run into a *brujito* on your visit because, really, who couldn't use a little more *abracadabra* in their life?

To arrive at communities surrounding the lake and toward the coast, take inexpensive *piratas*. They leave from a corner five blocks north of the bus station.

AROUND CATEMACO

In 1998 various nature reserves around Catemaco were conglomerated to make the **Reserva de la Biosfera Los Tuxtlas**, an area containing a splendor of natural beauty. This region, being economically depressed, has little tourism infrastructure. Nevertheless, what it does have is worthwhile. In fact, that which it doesn't have is worthwhile as well.

Laguna Catemaco

On the lake, one-way *lancha* (boat taxi) prices are M\$50 *colectivo* or M\$350 private.

On the northeast shore of the lake, the well-established **Reserva Ecológica de Nanciyaga** (Map p702; ☎ 294-943-01-99; www.nanciyaga.com; Hwy Catemaco-Coyame; ☒ 9am-2pm & 4-6pm; 📍) preserves a small tract of rainforest. The grounds are replete with a temascal (see boxed text, p703) (\$250 per person), ancient planetarium and Olmec-themed decorations and replicas. Even though it plays up the contrived indigenous theme, this place stands out for its organization and cleanliness. One night's lodging (M\$800) in solar-powered cabins includes a mineral mud bath, massage, guided walk and the use of kayaks. Camping is available too. Arrive by *pirata* (M\$7), taxi (M\$80) or by boat (M\$50 per person).

On the east side of the lake, a couple of kilometers past Tebanca, **Prashanti** (Map p702; ☎ 294-107-79-98; www.prashanti.com.mx; Tebanca-Coyame road; r from M\$800) is very agreeable (yet overpriced and not immaculate). Rooms are blessed with names like 'Mantra' and 'Genesh,' and you can sacredly rent four-wheelers here as well. It also offers kayak rentals and boat tours. The views of the lake and hills are spectacular from here.

Las Margaritas (Map p702; ☎ 294-945-52-51; www.ecoturismo-lostuxtlas.tx; santos_132j@hotmail.com; campsites M\$50, cabaña per person incl meals & two guided trips M\$550) No *colectivo* boats go to this little village, spitting distance from the official demarcation of the beginning of the biosphere reserve, so arrive by private *lancha* (M\$350) or bumpy *pirata* (M\$12). The rural setting by the lake is stunning, but try to give enough notice of your visit for the rustic cabins to be cleaned. Trips are offered to uncharted archaeological sites

and to waterfalls where guides point out birds and medicinal plants. It also rents canoes and kayaks (M\$30 per hour).

In the Rainforest

Ecobiosfera (Map p702; ☎ 294-949-73-08; felixaguilar_ecobiosfera@hotmail.com; Carr Catemaco-Dos Amates; campsites M\$50, cabañas from M\$400) If hidden waterfalls, kayaking, hiking, bird-watching, or beautiful beaches interest you, Ecobiosfera will organize your excursion. Prices vary (about M\$400 to M\$1000), but the owner, Felix, is a biologist and knows the area very well. He can take you to the deep-green **Poza Reina** (Map p702) swimming hole laden with cascades east of Laguna Catemaco, which is a local favorite and is not signed. For a DIY bike tour, Felix will arrange support vehicles or whatever you need. The *cabañas* at the base camp are charming in a Robinson Crusoe kind of way with a shared bathroom.

Miguel Hidalgo (Map p702; ☎ 294-949-56-03; rcruz90@hotmail.com; campsites/cabañas M\$50/450) This little community in the rainforest east of Laguna Catemaco's northeastern shore has rustic lodging. The *cabaña* price includes meals and a short hike. The area's flora, fauna and waterfalls are spectacular. Try to give advance warning of your arrival if you can.

López Mateos (Map p702; ☎ 294-943-11-01; www.ecoturismo-lostuxtlas.tk; elmarinero@tuxtlas.org) East of Laguna Catemaco snuggled up in the rainforest near a beautiful river, this place has a similar thing going but with even less infrastructure. Nothing is guaranteed but an adventure.

Laguna de Sontecomapan

In the town of Sontecomapan, 15km north of Catemaco, there are some lagoon-side restaurants and the idyllic **Pozo de los Enanos** (Well of the Dwarves) swimming hole. You can catch a *lancha* (M\$15 to M\$25 *colectivo*) from here to any of the following places on the lake.

Family-run **Paraiso Real** (Map p702; ☎ 294-949-59-84; cabañas M\$350 & M\$600; 📍), in the tiny town of El Real, has two *cabañas* and a peaceful camping space right on Lake Sontecomapan.

our pick Los Amigos (Map p702; ☎ 294-943-01-01; www.losamigos.com.mx; campsites/dm/cabañas M\$50/150/350; 📍) is near where the laguna enters the ocean is the well-run, peaceful retreat. The fantastic *cabañas* tucked into the verdant hillside have lovely hammocked balconies with spectacular views of the bay. There are

nature trails to a beautiful lookout, kayak rentals and a restaurant.

The Coast

The small fishing town **La Barra**, with its pleasant beaches and seafood restaurants, can be reached by a *lancha* from Sontecomapan or a side road going east from La Palma, 8km north of Sontecomapan.

North of La Barra is the tiny beach town of **Jicacal**. You can access Jicacal from a rough road that forks east from the main road. Family-run **Hotel Icacos** (r M\$300-400) is the only place to stay, with basic rooms, and owns the only restaurant with delectable, fresh-from-the-line seafood. The dirt road to the left right before you hit Jicacal will lead you 10 minutes down a gorgeous wreck of a road to a moldering relic of a hotel. From there, you'll find a path leading to a long set of crumbling stairs going to **Playa Escondida** (Hidden Beach), which earns its name. During the work week in the low season, you'll probably have this gorgeous blond sand beach and its turquoise waters to yourself.

North of the junction to Jicacal, you'll soon hit the **Biological Research Station** (☎ 200-125-54-08; www.ibiologia.unam.mx; museum ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) where you'll see a handful of camping opportunities, including at Laguna Escondida and Finca Villa Carino. The ornery biologists have a tiny biology museum and limited patience for tourists. They cobbled the roads through their section of the reserve to limit people, speed and traffic.

Farther north is **Montepío**, where there's a picturesque beach at the mouth of the Río Máquina where you can eat seafood on the beach, and **Posada San José** (☎ 294-942-10-10; s/d M\$240/270, with air-con M\$340/370; ☎ ☎), a reasonably comfortable place to sleep.

ACAYUCAN

☎ 924 / pop 47,000

Acayucan is an important commercial center and bustles accordingly. It's at the junction of Hwy 180 (between Veracruz and Villahermosa) and Hwy 185. If you're here in transit, you'll find services are good.

The bus station is on the east side of town. To reach the central plaza, walk uphill to Av Hidalgo, turn left and walk six blocks. Several banks alongside the plaza have ATMs. There are internet cafés off the pedestrian alley behind the plaza.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Ritz (☎ 245-00-24; Hidalgo 7; s/d M\$150/180, M\$290/350 with air; ☎ ☎) Staying at the Ritz is a bargain. This is a colorful, well-kept hotel that is clean and feels separated from the city even though it's on the road connecting the bus station to the *zócalo*.

Hotel Kinaku (☎ /fax 245-04-10; Ocampo Sur 7; s/d M\$510/600; ☎ ☎ ☎) Acayucan's most expensive hotel, equipped with a formal restaurant, is not a brilliant value for money, but upper-floor rooms have sweeping views.

Cortijo (☎ 245-65-87; Pasaje Bravo btwn Hidalgo & Colonia Centro; mains M\$25-60; ☎ 7am-8pm) This locals' choice is off the pedestrian alley behind the plaza (the north side). It has fresh, Mexican fare.

Mercado (snacks M\$10-50) If you're just passing through town or waiting for a bus, you're in luck, *compadre*. Located between the bus stations is a massive labyrinth of little eateries and merchants selling a myriad of things, including food of all colors, textures and shapes.

Getting There & Away

Local buses (M\$5) and taxis (M\$15 to M\$20) run between the terminal and city center. UNO and ADO GL run a few deluxe services, while ADO is a 1st-class line. You can reserve these ahead of time. Alternatively, AU provides good 2nd-class service. These companies, and more, operate from the same location flanking the market. Direct 1st-class buses are listed below. (There are frequent 2nd-class services to Catemaco and Santiago Tuxtla.)

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency (daily)
Catemaco	M\$48	1½hr	1
Mexico City (TAPO)	M\$469	9hr	3
Santiago Tuxtla	M\$54	2¼hr	1
Tuxtla Gutiérrez	M\$264	5hr	3
Veracruz	M\$140	3½hr	14
Villahermosa	M\$144	3hr	12

The toll highway, 145D, passes south of town. Heading east, it's signposted to Minatitlán; heading west, toward Córdoba or Veracruz, it's marked for the town of 'Isla.' The tolls are expensive, costing more than M\$300 to get to Córdoba.

SAN LORENZO

Near the small town of Tenochtitlán, 35km southeast of Acayucan, San Lorenzo was

the first of the two great Olmec ceremonial centers. It had its heyday from about 1200 to 900 BC.

Ten Olmec heads, stone thrones and numerous smaller artifacts that were found here are now in museums elsewhere. The main structure was gigantic platform, but now it's nothing more than a low hill. The 'museum' (admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm) is two tiny rooms of stone artifacts and a large head.

This trip is really worth it only if you geek out on archaeology.

While you're there, **El Azazul**, about 7km past the museum, has some well-carved, kneeling stone figures said to be over 1000 years old.

Arriving by public transportation is a pain in the *nalgas*. A taxi from Acayucan is M\$200 and a 90-minute ride. There's no public transportation to the Azazul site, but a taxi driver might be coerced into taking you.