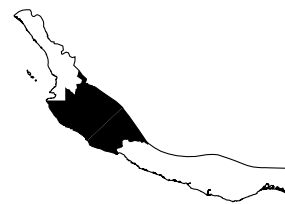


Jalisco, Colima & Michoacán Coasts



South of Puerto Vallarta, Hwy 200 continues into Jalisco state, skirting the Cabo Corrientes promontory and heading south to hug the coast again. Here begins the stretch of Mexico's Pacific shore known as the Costa Alegre (Happy Coast), a singularly beautiful territory of fine, isolated beaches and some of the most luxurious resorts in Mexico. It's prime territory for travelers seeking the quiet pleasures of unassuming towns, simple fishing villages and magnificent maritime landscapes. It extends all the way to the Melaque and Barra de Navidad region, and is a popular destination for Americans and Canadian 'snowbirds,' full-time retirees and short-term vacationers.

Continuing south, Hwy 200 hews to the coast of Colima, passing through the lovely city of Manzanillo before heading into Michoacán, one of Mexico's most beautiful states. The route passes dozens of untouched beaches – some with wide expanses of golden sand, some tucked into tiny rocky coves, some at river mouths where quiet estuaries harbor multitudes of birds. Several have gentle lapping waves that are good for swimming, while others have big breakers suitable for surfing. Many of the beaches are uninhabited, but some are home to small communities. Mango, coconut, papaya and banana plantations line the highway, while the green peaks of the Sierra Madre del Sur form a lush backdrop inland.

HIGHLIGHTS

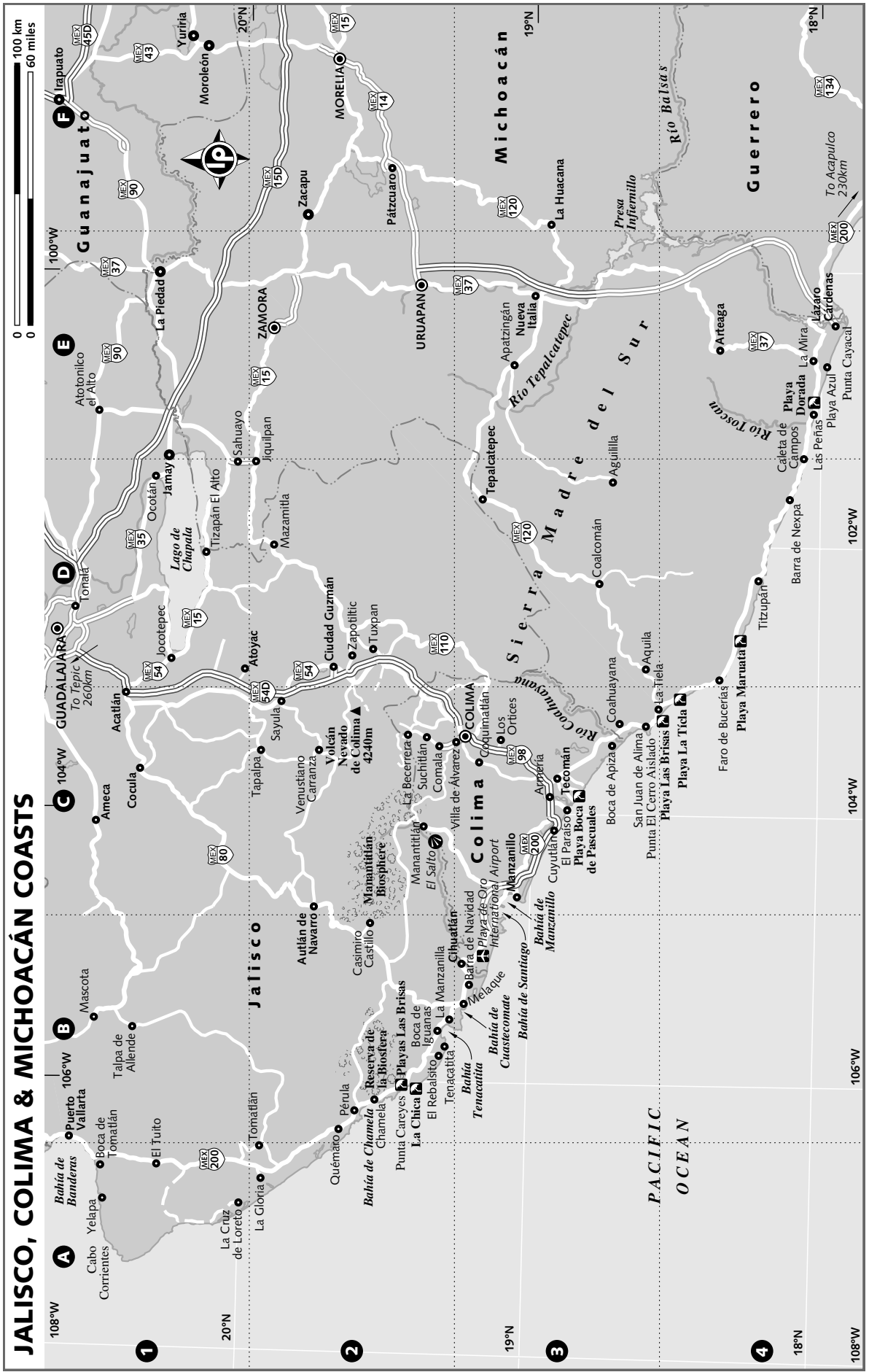
- Slurping oyster cocktails by the lagoon in the understated beach-resort town of **Barra de Navidad** (p158)
- Scuba diving, sportfishing or just enjoying the sand around the bays of **Manzanillo** (p163)
- Easing into the local tempo while brushing up your Spanish skills in **La Manzanilla** (p153)
- Surfing awesome waves at the laid-back community of **Barra de Nexpa** (p174)
- Watching sea turtles come ashore in summer and fall to lay precious eggs at **Playa Maruata** (p174)



■ MANZANILLO JANUARY DAILY HIGH: 27°C | 80°F

■ MANZANILLO JULY DAILY HIGH: 30°C | 86°F

JALISCO, COLIMA & MICHOACÁN COASTS



JALISCO

Along the untrammelled coastline between Puerto Vallarta and Barra de Navidad are a rewarding series of lightly developed beach-side communities.

COSTA ALEGRE

Many remarkable beaches stretch along the coast south of Puerto Vallarta. The Km distances mentioned for destinations are measured on Hwy 200, heading northwest from the junction of Hwys 200 and 80 (the road to Guadalajara) at Melaque.

La Cruz de Loreto

☎ 322

The village of La Cruz de Loreto, west of Hwy 200 and 90km south of Puerto Vallarta, is next to a wetland estuary and nature reserve. It's also the closest village to one of Mexico's most attractive, ecofriendly and expensive all-inclusive hotels. Love for nature and luxury are in the air at **Hotelito Desconocido** (☎ 281-40-10, in the US 800-851-4130; www.hotelito.com; La Cruz de Loreto; r US\$370, ste US\$450-670; 📶), an unforgettable solar-powered resort. As the sun sets, the candles are lit and the evening orchestra of frogs, birds and cicadas begins, you'll find yourself drunk with relaxation.

COSTA ALEGRE BEACHES

South of Puerto Vallarta, somewhere on the Costa Alegre, is your beach, the one you've dreamed about. It may be an isolated, tricky-to-get-to stretch of creamy sand with no facilities, or perhaps it's dotted with beach-happy souls like yourself, quaffing beers and feasting on fresh seafood from a *palapa* (thatched-roof) restaurant. The following beaches, listed from north to south, are sure to satisfy even the pickiest beach connoisseur:

- **Playa Pérula** (Km 76; p150) This scenic stretch of honeyed sand, located at the northern end of 11km Bahía de Chamela, is known for its tranquil waters, which are ideal for swimming and fishing. There are a good selection of palapa restaurants, economical accommodations and *panga* (motorized skiff) captains looking for passengers intent on snorkeling and fishing excursions.
- **Playa Chamela** and **Playa La Negrita** (Km 64; p150) Barely touched by tourism, these two locally favored beaches at the south end of Bahía de Chamela have a smattering of seafood shacks, no accommodations, and a priceless quality called solitude.
- **Playa Careyes** (Km 52; p151) With verdant headlands rising from the sea and excellent bird- and wildlife-watching, this quiet beach provides the perfect setting for beach camping. Local fishermen are on hand, eager to take you fishing.
- **Playa Tecuán** (Km 33; p151) Located 10km off the highway near an abandoned resort, this deserted white-sand beach has no facilities but tremendous opportunities for camping, beach hiking and advanced surfing. A nearby lagoon is rife with birds, crocodiles and the occasional ocelot.
- **Playa Tenacatita** (Km 28; p152) Crystal-clear waters, terrific palapa restaurants, a fair selection of accommodations and a merry community of return visitors make this 3km white-sand beach on Bahía Tenacatita enduringly popular.
- **Playa Boca de Iguanas** (Km 19; p153) Also on Bahía Tenacatita, this 10km beach has mild surf and shallow waters ideal for swimming. The broad beach is a prime spot for hiking and beachcombing. A few good accommodation choices and a gorgeous palm-fringed bay make for a relaxing stay.
- **Playa La Manzanilla** (Km 13; p153) At the southern end of Bahía Tenacatita, this drowsy town is known for its long, gently sloping beach, friendly palapa restaurants, exceptional fishing and sizable population of crocodiles lazing away in the lagoon.
- **Playa Cuastecomate** (Km 3; p155) Located 3km west of San Patricio-Melaque, this tiny cove within Bahía de Cuastecomate is one of the most scenic beaches on the entire Pacific coast. Calm waters make for safe swimming and good snorkeling.

Take a dip in the saltwater pool before slipping into the ever-so-smooth sheets in your lagoon-side bungalow on stilts. In the morning simply raise a flag and the staff will bring you coffee in bed. There's 65km of beach, the bird-watching is excellent, and a sea-turtle protection project operates from June to February; guests can set baby turtles free from September to December. Rates include all meals and activities such as horseback riding, kayaking, windsurfing, yoga, and wildlife-watching excursions. Spa services will cost you extra.

Quémaro

☎ 322

At Km 83 is the sign for Quémaro, a small, dusty village of dirt roads and shabby housing. But just past this village, on a short gravel road toward the coast, is one of the fanciest and priciest resorts in all of Mexico. At **Las Alamandas** (☎ 285-55-00, in the US 888-882-96-16; www.alamandas.com; Hwy 200, Km 83.5; r US\$460-910, ste US\$910-1900; 📍), luxurious and colorful suites nestle in six separate adobe buildings, all simply beautiful with private terraces or patios. Most have stunning sea views and are surrounded by spacious, well-manicured and palm-studded grounds. There's a nice pool, and the compact, golden-sand beach is deliciously private. Naturally the service is top-notch, as is the gourmet food – if you can afford to stay here, you may as well get the all-inclusive plan, as there aren't many restaurants in the area. Reservations are a must; without them you won't get past the security gate.

Playa Pérula

☎ 315

Down a side road from Km 76, toward the north end of tranquil 11km-long Bahía de Chamela, lies the rather bleak town of Pérula. Its beach, however, is long, flat and sheltered – great for swimming, boogie boarding and extended walks. There are only a few *palapa* restaurants, the sands aren't overrun with tourists, and islands offshore break the ocean's horizon. In winter, whales bask in the warm bay waters, and you can always hire a boat from the beach for fishing trips. For those who can deal with few luxuries and services in an unassuming Mexican beach town, this could end up being quite a pleasant stop.

Red Snapper RV Park & Restaurant (☎ 333-97-84; redsnapperrv@hotmail.com; tent/trailer US\$6/12) occupies a prime stretch of beach. This well-run RV haven has 15 spaces, five of which front the beach. The casual restaurant is a good hangout. Monthly and weekly discounts are available. Get here by heading into town 3km from the highway; after the first *tope* (speed bump) turn left.

Although **Hotel y Bungalows Playa Dorada** (☎ 333-97-10; www.playa-dorada.com.mx; Tiburón 40; d/tr US\$50/60, bungalow US\$80-100; 📍 📍) won't win any architecture prizes, it's right on the beach overlooking a particularly glorious stretch of yellow sand. The rooms are basic, clean and freshly painted, and come with up-to-date fixtures. Bungalows up the ante with air-con, a full kitchen and a small living room. Also on offer are a dozen trailer spots with full hookups (US\$12).

A stone's throw from the beach, the budget **Hotel Las Palmas** (☎ 333-98-77; Independencia 30; s US\$15, d US\$18-25, tr US\$38) offers nine dark and cool rooms arranged around a shady courtyard. Meet like-minded souls in the communal kitchen.

Long-distance buses don't head straight into Pérula; they stop at the highway crossroads known as 'El Super'. From there, call a taxi – if you're lucky there will be cheaper *taxis colectivos* (shared taxis). It's about a 10-minute drive to Pérula.

Playas La Negrita & Chamela

☎ 315

Near the Km 64 highway marker, a dirt road leads to a couple of isolated and relaxing beaches nestled in at the south end of Bahía de Chamela and great for day trips. Chamela beach has a calm shore with small waves and is home to a handful of *palapa* restaurants and some fishing boats. The feel is small and local, so if you don't want to see any gringos this is a good shot. A five-minute walk from here and just past a rocky point is La Negrita, 50m of tiny cove beach with one small restaurant. Neither of these places is built up, so no accommodation is available (other than possibly camping – ask first).

To find these little havens, take the dirt road just 30m south of yellow 'Chamela principal' bridge. Go about 1km along this road – you'll pass a small village and then a lagoon. Don't follow the fork up to the left, unless you want to see some abandoned

condominiums. Where it forks right is Chabela beach; at the stony end just past this fork is La Negrita.

Playa Careyes

☎ 315

Another small and beautiful beach is Careyes, sheltered in a dune cove and sloping steeply to the water. Here you'll find only friendly locals, a snack and beer shack and some fishing cooperative boats. A big pink *palapa* building sits as a landmark on the hillside above.

Careyes is 200m down a dirt road just south of the white Careyes bridge (*not* the nearby Careyitos bridge) at Km 52. Look for a bus-stop shed and an '*acceso publico*' (public access) sign signifying the turnoff.

At Km 53.5, taking full advantage of the amazing scenery, is the terrifically romantic **El Careyes Beach Resort & Spa** (☎ 800-508-79-23, in the US 800-728-9098; www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com/thecareyes; Hwy 200, Km 53.5; r US\$365, ste US\$455-1099; ♿ ♿). A bottle of champagne and an overflowing fruit basket welcomes honeymooners and lovebirds to flower-filled suites with private, ocean-view plunge pools. You can relax to the sounds of the tranquil bay on sheltered, pillow-piled outdoor beds, or enjoy a massage before indulging in a sunset dinner at La Lantana, the on-site restaurant with a menu of 'food

of the sea gods' as interpreted by renowned Mexican chef Patricia Quintana.

Playas Las Brisas & La Chica

☎ 315

These two beaches head off in opposite directions from the village of **Arroyo Seco**, about 4km down a dirt road from the highway at Km 36.

When you find the school yard with a mural of Snow White, turn right and go 1.5km past farmland and a red gate. A nice beach with latte-colored sand, no services and few people awaits between two headlands.

To get to Las Brisas, turn left at the schoolyard and right at the fork. Go past farmland about 1.5km and you'll reach the sea. Here too there are no services, though camping and RV parking are possible under the palm-tree-shaded area (someone may turn up to collect a small property-use fee). The long, flat beach has very surfable waves and little competition for them.

Playa Tecuán

About 10km off the highway at Km 33 lie the pristine shores of Playa Tecuán. High above the beach is the abandoned resort of Hotel Tucuán, a spooky skeleton of doorless rooms, broken windows and caved-in beamed hallways just waiting to be turned

COCOS FRIOS: 10 PESOS!

What says 'tropical' more than lying on a hammock at the beach, sipping through a straw the transparent and mildly sweet milk from a freshly opened coconut? *Cocos* are available at many beachside restaurants or road stalls; the dead giveaway is a shady pile of them near a chopping block (often a section of palm tree) cleaved by a large machete.

If you're very lucky, the *cocos* will be stored in big freezer-like compartments and come out cold, but sipping coconut milk straight out of a coconut is wonderfully refreshing even at air temperature. And, unlike some of Mexico's tap water, it's safe to drink. Some huge specimens can store up to 1L of liquid, though most probably hold about half that.

First the coconuteer selects a (hopefully) big green coconut, tender at the stalk end. This signifies the coconut is immature, has soft flesh and harbors plenty of milk. The coconuteer then chops off one end (enough to make it stand upright) and proceeds to chip away at the other end: once the outer shell is off, the tender white flesh begins to show. The trick is to avoid piercing this layer with a severe chop that would have liquid spraying everywhere, and instead to just expose and peel it back slowly without losing any milk. Most coconuteers have this down to an art, and we haven't seen any with missing fingers yet.

Prices vary from US\$0.50 to US\$1.50, but most cost around US\$1. In tourist areas and fancier restaurants, expect to pay at least this. The price may include a final few whacks to split the fruit's hulk in half after you've finished the milk. Have the coconuteer add chili, lime juice and salt, grab a spoon, and enjoy scooping out the tender, meaty flesh...a great quick snack anytime!

into the snazziest youth hostel in existence. Horror film buffs might know this was the location for the slasher flick *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer*. You can still see steel kitchen freezers and bats in the pantries. It's a cool experience and worth getting to if you've got wheels – but remember to be respectful, as it's still considered private property.

The 2km road going south along Playa Tecuán is part of an old landing strip. It passes a private housing complex on the mountain and eventually peters out at the edge of a pretty lagoon.

Bahía Tenacatita

☎ 315 / pop 165

On the western promontory of **Bahía Tenacatita**, and a longtime favorite destination of snowbirds and escape artists, the town of Tenacatita is a sometimes crowded but always beguiling beach destination with a long, curving white-sand beach and safe conditions for extended camping. Take your pick from three separate beaches: as you drive the 8.5km into town from the highway, you pass **Playa Mar Abierto** on the right, which extends for kilometers back to the north toward **Playa Tecuán**. You then hit **Playa Tenacatita** itself, which is lined with *palapa* seafood restaurants but remains beautiful, wide and calm. And over to the right a bit, just over a small hill and tucked into some headlands in between these two larger beaches, are the tiny twin shores of **Playa Mora**. The snorkeling is great in the crystal-clear waters around the protected rocks here.

A mangrove lagoon backing onto Playa Tenacatita is home to scores of birds and sunning reptiles. Boat tours of **El Manglar** (the Mangrove) are available; ask at the Restaurant Fiesta Mexicana, which is on the main road in the center of town. Trips take one hour and cost US\$30 per boatload for up to six; each extra person pays US\$3 (boats can take a total of up to 10 people). Bring insect repellent.

For groceries or phone service, head to the village of El Rebalsito, 3km from the beach on the Hwy 200–Tenacatita road.

Sleeping & Eating

Stretching north from Punta Tenacatita along a particularly fine stretch of sand is a 3km-long sand dune where RVs set up camp for the winter. RV campers can try the unofficial

free sites at Playa Mora – space is limited here, so be considerate. Camping is good on the main beach, though you may need to ask permission (check with the proprietors of the nearest beachfront restaurant).

Las Villetas Suites (☎ 355-53-54 in Barra de Navidad; d US\$60; 🏠) Overlooking the beach, Las Villetas has 10 very pleasant suites with kitchens, sofa areas, TVs with DVD players and beach views. It also has a pool and Jacuzzi, but the electricity and water supply don't always function properly here. Kayaks are available to borrow. You'll find Las Villetas 200m further south from Hotel Paraíso de Tenacatita.

Hotel Los Amigos (☎ 872-31-65; s US\$45-50, d US\$65-70; 🏠) You can't miss this brand-new, bright-yellow small hotel 100m from the beach opposite the Restaurant Fiesta Mexicana. On offer are 18 modest and clean rooms, all with air-con and hot water. Prices drop precipitously during the low season, and discounts are offered for longer stays.

Hotel Paraíso de Tenacatita (☎ 355-59-15; dobie@prodigy.net.mx; d US\$30; 🏠 🏠) This hotel offers 23 adequate rooms on the beach, though there's no hot water. It's the orange building just beyond the last *palapa* restaurant toward the south. The restaurant here, open until 10pm, is the only place in town to get a meal after the sun goes down.

Hotel Costa Alegre (☎ 351-51-21; d US\$28; 🏠) If you can't find a room at any of the other places, try this one. It's on the main road in El Rebalsito, the service town between the highway and Tenacatita. It has air-con, hot water and large, modern rooms.

Seafood *palapas* provide most of the nourishment here. They cater to day-trippers and thus tend to close at 6pm or 7pm.

Restaurant Fiesta Mexicana (☎ 338-63-16; mains US\$4-12; 🍽 breakfast, lunch & dinner) is Tenacatita's most visible – and best – restaurant, serving delectable seafood dishes with a twist. Try their signature dish, *rollo del mar* (a fish fillet stuffed with shrimp, wrapped in bacon and smothered in an almond cream sauce; US\$9). Also, if you've been curious to try *raicilla*, a fiery local distillate elicited from the maguay cactus, here they'll set you up.

Getting There & Away

Tenacatita is 8.5km from Hwy 200 (Km 28) via a good paved road. Bus service provided by Transportes Cihuatlán travels between El

Rebalsito and Manzanillo once a day; it departs at dawn (inquire for the hour, which varies) and returns from Manzanillo at around 3pm to arrive back in El Rebalsito at around 6pm. Taxis and *combis* (minibuses) operate between El Rebalsito and Tenacatita.

BOCA DE IGUANAS

Smack in the middle of Bahía Tenacatita lies the wide, long and very pleasant **Playa Boca de Iguanas** (Km 19). The surf is mild, the sand is hot and wonderful, and the beach is quite shallow for a long way out, making it good for a swim (just don't go past the rocky point, as a dangerous riptide kicks in). The palm-fringed bay curves uninterrupted all the way around to La Manzanilla, providing a tranquil one-hour walk along a firm waterline. An abandoned hotel nearby adds visual interest and curiosity (clue: propane explosion).

There's a couple of beachside RV parks, two 'hotels,' a restaurant and a small lagoon that's home to a very large crocodile.

To get there, take the paved road about 2.5km from the highway at Km 19. *Taxis colectivos* regularly pick up and drop off passengers at the highway turnoff; a ride into town will set you back US\$1.

Sleeping & Eating

Coconuts by the Sea (☎ 351-52-32; www.coconutsbythesea.com; apt US\$95; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Perched high

DON'T FEED THE CROCODILES!

At the northern end of the main road in La Manzanilla is a lagoon filled with...large crocodiles! They haul themselves up on the sandy beach to bask in the sun and lurk in the water like sinister logs. A recently built viewing platform over the lagoon, intended to prevent folks from getting too close to the crocs, has had the reverse effect. Now the crocs and the people gaze at each other through a chain-link fence at a *different* edge of the lagoon. An understated sign – '*Cuidado con los cocodrilos*' ('Take care with the crocodiles') – goes unheeded by some irresponsible souls who see fit to toss chicken bones over the fence to incite a water-churning ruckus. If you witness such a thing, use your burgeoning Spanish-language skills to chastise them roundly.

on the bluff above the beach, Coconuts has grand views to the other side of the bay. The four extremely comfortable and charming apartments are very welcoming: all have full kitchens (bring food), wireless Internet, cable TV, air-con, king-size beds and patios. Plans are afoot for a third apartment. There's a small pool on a grassy cliff. Getting there is tricky: phone or email beforehand.

Boca de Iguana Camping & Trailer Park (camping per person US\$5.50, trailer sites US\$15) This campground sits on the beach, with pleasant sites under peaceful palms.

Boca Beach Campground (☎ 317-381-03-93; bocabeach@hotmail.com; trailer sites US\$15, camping per person US\$7) The biggest of all, Boca Beach has more than 60 palmy sites.

Entre Palmeras (☎ 33-36-13-67-35 in Guadalajara; camp sites per person US\$3.50, r/bungalows US\$25/45) With eight bungalows and 12 rooms with fans, Entre Palmeras offers unremarkable accommodation. Camp sites are cheap and OK but not right on the beach. The best thing here is the restaurant, which has views of the small lagoon and sometimes of Señor Cocodrilo. You'll find it just off the beach on the north side of the road.

LA MANZANILLA & AROUND

At the sheltered, southern end of Bahía Tenacatita basks the peaceful, dusty little town of La Manzanilla (Km 13). It's home to some decent restaurants, an agreeable beach, a few expat residents and many locals. Tourism still hasn't quite caught on here (there's no Internet café yet), but the town has grown mightily during the past few years.

Activities

Get out on the water or into the bush with **Immersion Adventures** (☎ 351-53-41; www.immersionadventures.com), an ecologically minded provider offering sea kayaking, snorkeling, birding and cultural tours to many corners of the Costa Alegre. Half-day tours cost US\$60 to US\$75 per person, while full-day tours cost US\$110 to US\$125. Prices include kayaks, snorkeling gear and a snack or lunch, all experience levels are accommodated. Custom tours are also possible. You can also just rent kayaks (US\$10 to US\$15 per hour). Dave, the manager, has his office at his home, on the road into town (look for the A-frame sign).

Courses

La Catalina Natural Language School (☎ 351-53-62; www.lacatalinaschool.com; Montana del Mar; per week US\$135) offers one- to four-week courses for beginning to advanced-level students, and a Spanish camp for kids ages five to 12 (US\$150 per week). In addition to daily classes, the school provides many opportunities to learn Spanish outside the classroom through volunteer work and cultural events, and they also arrange guided excursions to local areas of interest. Homestays with local families are available for US\$95 to US\$210 per week, depending on the number of meals. Courses start on Mondays year-round, except the week of Christmas.

Sleeping

With a slowly growing contingent of expats who've put down seasonal roots, La Manzanilla has a good selection of stylish, well-priced accommodation choices, in addition to one time-honored cheapie and ample space for camping.

Palapa Joe's Restaurant & Bungalows (☎ 351-52-67, 351-51-27; www.jjsantanavacationrentals.com; Asunción 163; bungalows d/tr US\$65/70; 🚽) For choice digs in the somnambulant heart of downtown La Manzanilla, commandeer one of these two big bungalows with kitchenettes in a peaceful backyard garden. The decor is refined, there's cable TV and you can hang out in the cool covered rooftop terrace with an unheated Jacuzzi.

La Casa de María (☎ 351-50-44; www.lacasamaria.com; cnr Los Angeles Locos & Conca Molida; apt US\$70-90) This place has five peaceful, artistically decorated and very spacious apartments, all with private patios. María is the gracious host and opens her rooftop *palapa* terrace to community teaching projects such as art, yoga, meditation, cooking or dance (teachers with project ideas can contact her). Her house is one street south of the main road into town.

La Casa en la Playa (☎ 351-52-67; www.jjsantana.com; Asunción s/n; d/q US\$50/65; 🚽) Between the ocean and the main street, this little beach house offers three units with warm and unassuming decor, a kitchen and a spacious dining area well suited to dinner parties. A fully enclosed garden area has plenty of chairs and tables for seating and its own outdoor shower. Advance reservations are recommended.

Hotel Posada Tonalá (☎ 351-54-74; posadatonala@hotmail.com; Asunción 75; d US\$30, q US\$50-65) Tonalá comes modern and shiny-tile clean, with nice wood details and pleasing architecture. Spacious rooms include TV, fans and whimsically carved wooden furniture. Most face into a modern *palapa* patio area.

Casa Maguey (☎ 351-50-12; www.casamaguey.com; bungalows US\$50-80) Perched above the southern end of the beach and surrounded by a lush, hilly garden, Casa Maguey's three bungalows are all charmingly different. Each is like a home and is wonderfully decorated with Mexican tiles. Book early if you want to stay during high season (November through April).

Hotel Posada del Cazador (☎ 351-50-00; Asunción 183; s/d US\$15/25) This posada may be bare-bones, budget and bleak, but it's basically bearable and won't break the bank.

El Tamarindo Golf Resort & Spa (☎ 800-508-79-23, in the US 800-728-9098; www.eltamarindoresort.com; Hwy 200, Km 7.5; villas US\$479-835; 📞 🚽 🛏 🚿) Bringing considerable luxury and panache to the southern tip of Bahía Tenacatita, this resort is the ultimate in romantic getaways, with three secluded beaches on 8 sq km of breathtaking wilderness. Visitors disappear into 28 warmly appointed, private bungalows with plunge pools and poolside beds. Oceanside massage *palapas* and double spa-treatment rooms make relaxing with your companion effortless. El Tamarindo also has a stunning golf course – think skinny dipping between birdies. El Tamarindo is 7km north of Melaque.

At the northern end of town, just past the crocodiles' lagoon, is **RV parking** (sites US\$3); there are no hookups or services. Find a pleasant shady site that appeals, and pay the man snoozing under a palm. **Campamento Ecológico** (camp sites per person US\$3.50) is a 10-minute walk further down the beach; rates include basic showers and toilets.

Eating

Activity in La Manzanilla winds down to the speed of molasses in the summer, and some of the restaurants close down altogether.

Martin's Restaurant (☎ 351-51-06; Playa Blanca; mains US\$6-15; 🕒 8am-11pm) This rustic-chic restaurant, affording a pleasing view of the sea through swaying palms, prepares wonderful gourmet seafood, meats, soups, salads and fajitas. At breakfast, it's omelets,

crepes and nicely arranged fruit platters. The 2nd-floor open *palapa* is romantically lit at night, and service is first-rate. Enjoy a Cuban cigar, if you must, but by all means save room for the flambéed bananas. The restaurant is on the main road at the south end of town.

Restaurant Rincón (☎ 351-71-97; Playa Blanca; mains US\$4.50-11; 🕒 8am-6pm) This casual seafood *palapa* on the beach serves superlative shrimp seviche (US\$6) and a delectable fish fillet *al mojo de ajo* (in a garlic sauce; US\$5). Round it all out with coconut milk slurped straight from the shell (US\$1).

Restaurant El Quetzal (☎ 351-52-76; Asunción 13; mains US\$4-12; 🕒 noon-11pm Mon-Sat) Though it sits underneath a rather gloomy indoor *palapa*, El Quetzal's Mexican and quasi-French menu is interesting – it ranges from *pozole* (a hearty soup of hominy, meat or seafood, vegetables and chilies) to duck in Dijon sauce.

Palapa Joe's Restaurant & Bungalows (Asunción 163; mains US\$4-8; 🕒 noon-10pm Tue-Sun) Joe's offers tasty food, such as roasted herb chicken or beer-battered shrimp, plus CNN on TV.

Chava's Café (Asunción s/n; 🕒 7am-4pm) This tiny but popular place near Hotel Posada Tonalá caters primarily to breakfasting gringos.

Getting There & Away

To get to La Manzanilla by bus, travel first to San Patricio-Melaque and then catch a local bus (US\$1) at the depot. Local buses headed to San Patricio-Melaque (US\$1) leave from the *zócalo* (main plaza). Local bus service between the two towns operates hourly from 8am to 5pm. A taxi costs about US\$10. A taxi to/from Playa de Oro International

Airport (64km from Manzanillo) costs US\$30 to US\$40, depending on your bargaining skills.

Playa Cuastecomate

You'll find this singular beach with mocha-colored sands and a full line-up of *palapa* restaurants about 3km west of Melaque. The little cove it inhabits is knockdown gorgeous: Bahía de Cuastecomate is nearly enclosed by the embrace of craggy mountains, and at its opening in the far distance strange rock formations rise from the sea in silhouette. Calm waters make for safe swimming and good snorkeling, and you can explore the village and surrounding hills. (A word to the wise: beware the mother of all speed bumps on the road as it descends into town.)

The only place to stay is at the resort wannabe **Royale Costa Azul** (☎ 315-355-5730; d US\$45; 📍 🚗 🚻), a homely concrete hotel with rooms that are clean but clinical, with kitchens and rewarding views of the bay. The large pool overlooks the beach.

BAHÍA DE NAVIDAD

☎ 315

The tight arc of Bahía de Navidad is ringed by deep, honey-colored sand with two resort towns at either end, waving amiably at each other. Situated 5km apart, Barra de Navidad and San Patricio-Melaque are siblings with distinct personalities. Barra is beloved for its attractive cobbled streets and aura of good living, while Melaque, the scrappier of the two, draws budget-minded travelers seeking to get back to basics in a place that shuns pretension.

PALM FRONDS, ANYONE?

One visit to any laid-back Mexican beach town and you will notice a peculiar commonality: almost all the open-air restaurants (called *enramadas* or *palapas*) on the sands are topped with layers and layers of dried palm-tree fronds. This ubiquitous, practical and extremely handy material literally grows on trees.

Each palm-tree frond produces its own sprig of coconuts and grows to about 4m in length. Fronds are 'harvested' and often dried on the ground before being layered onto rooftop support beams, where they'll last four to five years before needing to be replaced. Sit under one during a thunderstorm, and you will realize that they're a pretty efficient, inexpensive and protective covering – and they also provide vital shade under which to sip a refreshing margarita.

And if you ever drive your car onto the beach and get mired in sand, try this little trick: grab yourself a few fronds and stick them under the stuck tire, for traction. Often they're the only material on hand, and can save your ass surprisingly well.

Getting there & Away

Barra de Navidad and Melaque are served by Playa de Oro International Airport (ZLO), 26km southeast of Barra de Navidad on Hwy 200, which also serves Manzanillo. To get to each town from the airport, take a taxi (US\$25, 30 minutes), or take a bus 15km to Cihuatlán and a cheaper taxi from there.

Both towns maintain separate bus terminals. See Getting There & Away in Melaque (p158) and Getting There & Around in Barra de Navidad (p162) for information on routes and pricing.

San Patricio-Melaque

pop 8000

Known by most as Melaque (meh-lah-keh), this kick-back beach resort on Bahía de Navidad hasn't lost its old-Mexico charm. Besides being a popular vacation destination for Mexican families and a low-key winter hangout for snowbirds (principally Canadians), the town is famous for its weeklong Fiesta de San Patricio in March.

The crumbling ruins of the Casa Grande Hotel are an imposing reminder of the destructive 1995 earthquake and subsequent *maremotos* (tidal waves) that severely damaged the region.

ORIENTATION

Melaque is compact and walkable. Most hotels, restaurants and public services are concentrated on or near east-west Farías, which runs parallel to the beach, and north-south López Mateos, the main Hwy 200 exit. Barra de Navidad is 5km southeast of Melaque via Hwy 200 or 2.5km by walking 30 to 45 minutes along the beach.

INFORMATION

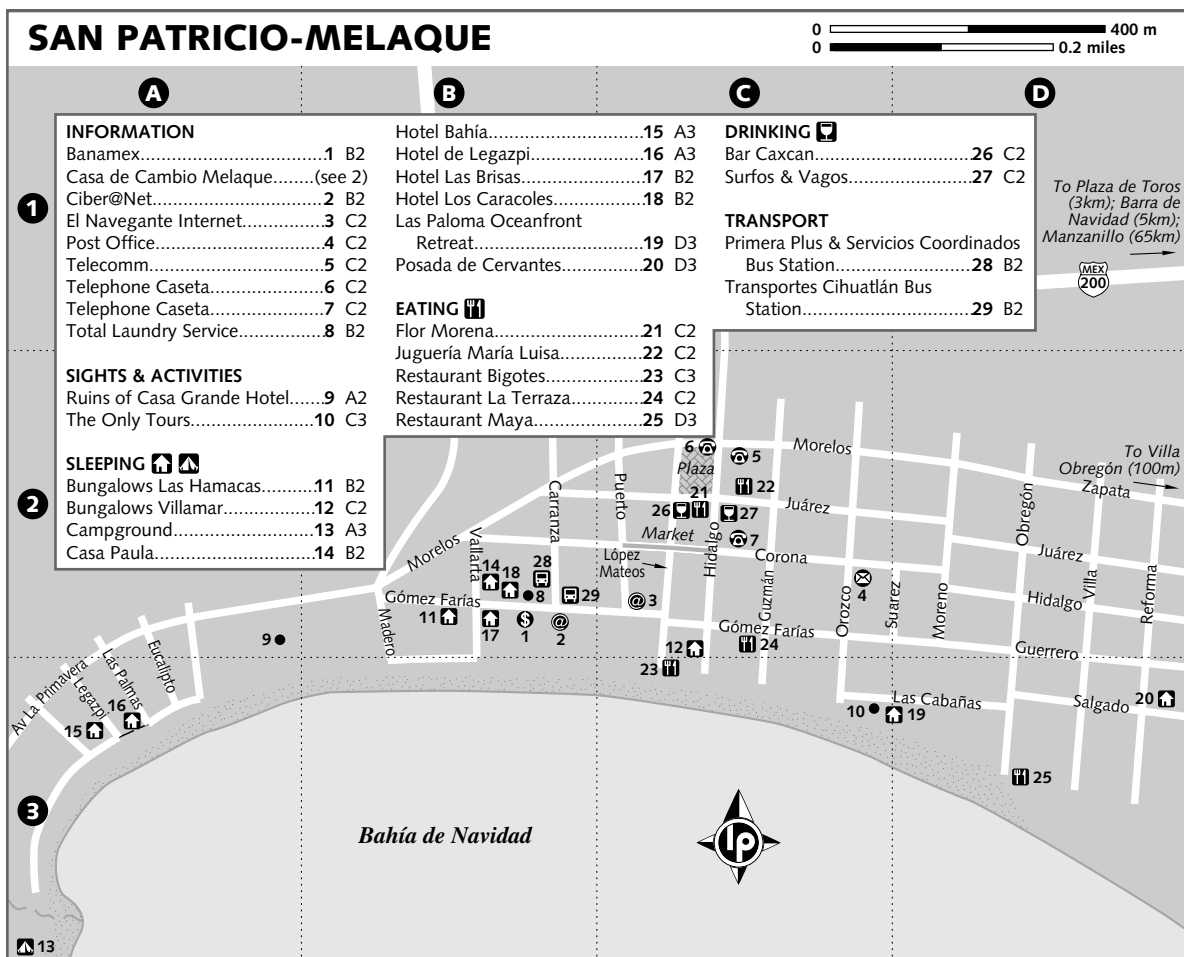
The tourist office (p159) in Barra de Navidad has some basic information on Melaque.

Banamex (Farías s/n) Has an ATM but will not change US and Canadian dollars (unless you have an account there!); traveler's checks are changed from 9am to noon only.

Casa de Cambio Melaque (Pasaje Comercial 11, Farías s/n) Changes cash and traveler's checks at so-so rates.

Ciber@Net (Farías 27A; Internet per hr US\$2; ☎ 9:30am-2:30pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat) Air conditioned.

JALISCO, COLIMA & MICHOACÁN COASTS



El Navegante (Farías 48; Internet per hr US\$2; ☎ 9am-2:30pm & 5-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2:30pm Sun) Air conditioned.

Post office (Orozco) Near Corona.

Telecomm (Morelos 53; ☎ 9am-2:30pm Mon-Fri) Offers the usual fax and phone services. See Map p156 for other *casetas telefónicas* (public telephone stations).

Total Laundry Service (Farías 26; per kg US\$1)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Simply relax and take it easy. The main activities are swimming, lazing on the beach, watching pelicans fish at sunrise and sunset, climbing to the *mirador* (lookout) at the bay's west end, prowling the plaza and public market, or walking the beach to Barra de Navidad. A *tianguis* (indigenous people's market) is held every Wednesday starting around 8am; it's on Orozco two blocks east of the plaza.

The Only Tours (☎ 355-67-77; raystoursmelaque@yahoo.com; Las Cabañas 26) This small operation runs popular snorkeling tours (US\$25) and tours to Colima (US\$50). They also rent mountain bikes (half-/full-day US\$6/10), snorkeling gear and body boards (each US\$10 per day).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Melaque's biggest annual celebration is the **Fiesta de San Patricio** (St Patrick's Day Festival; March 17), honoring the town's patron saint. A week of festivities – including all-day parties, rodeos, a carnival, music, dances and nightly fireworks – leads up to the big day, which is marked with a Mass and the blessing of the fishing fleet. Take care when the *borrachos* (drunks) take over after dark.

SLEEPING

Rates vary greatly depending on the season; the following prices are for November through April. Discounts are common for longer stays.

Budget

Casa Paula (☎ 355-50-93; Vallarta 6; s/d US\$15/30) Staying here is like staying with the sweetest grandma ever. In this simple home there are four basic rooms, with TVs and a fridge, set around a courtyard. It's very quiet and a family atmosphere pervades the place.

Hotel Los Caracoles (☎ 355-73-08; www.loscaracoles.com.mx; Farías 26; s/d/bungalow US\$20/30/70) This fresh new hotel with 10 rooms and two

bungalows is not on the beach but makes amends with clean, modern rooms with hand-painted headboards and tiled desks.

Bungalows Villamar (☎ 355-50-05; Hidalgo 1; s/d US\$20/28; 📶) The Villamar has five spacious but worn garden bungalows, a pool and a beachfront terrace. It's owner Roberto speaks English.

The Ejidal beachfront **campground** (sites US\$2), at the west end of town, has no facilities but inhabits an undeniably beautiful setting. Many of the nearby *enramadas* charge a nominal fee for showers and bathroom usage.

Midrange

Hotel Bahía (☎ 355-68-94; Legazpi 5; r US\$30-35, bungalow US\$30-50; 📶) Just half a block from the beach, this family-run place is one of Melaque's best deals. It's clean, very well maintained and has a communal open-air kitchen. Four of the 23 units have private kitchens.

Posada de Cervantes (☎ 355-65-74; posadadecervantes@hotmail.com; Salgado 132; bungalows US\$66-72; 📶 📶) This well-decorated, gay-friendly inn has friendly management and charming sitting areas. The bungalows are a bit cramped, but some might call them cozy.

Hotel Las Brisas (☎ 355-51-08; Farías 9; s/d US\$33/45, bungalows US\$70-145; 📶 📶) The beachfront Las Brisas has one of the nicest pools in the neighborhood, outdoor communal cooking facilities, friendly staff and a small library. All rooms have fridge, air-con and TV.

Hotel de Legazpi (☎ 355-83-97; hotel@delegazpi.com; Las Palmas 3; d/tr US\$30/40, with kitchen US\$50; 📶 📶) Right on the beach, the Legazpi has bright, if slightly worn, rooms. It's very popular for the rooms with ocean views; they cost the same but are hard to get.

Bungalows Las Hámacas (☎ 355-51-13; Farías 13; d/q US\$33/60; 📶 📶) Ideal for larger groups, the beachfront Las Hámacas has chipping paint, and worn but big rooms with full kitchens.

Top End

Las Paloma Oceanfront Retreat (☎ 355-53-45; www.lapalomamexico.com; Las Cabañas 13; studios US\$72-89; 📶 📶 📶 📶) Original art abounds at this unique boutique resort, which doubles as an art center. The singular, comfortable studios have kitchens and terraces with rewarding ocean views. Lush gardens, a 25m

beachside swimming pool, complimentary breakfasts, a well-stocked library, and Internet access make an extended stay here extremely tempting. Reservations are a must, particularly if you are interested in the drawing, painting or mask-making classes held yearly from November to April.

EATING & DRINKING

From 6pm to midnight, food stands serve inexpensive Mexican fare a block east of the plaza along Juárez. A row of pleasant *palapa* restaurants (mains US\$4 to US\$11) stretches along the beach at the west end of town.

Flor Morena (Juárez s/n; mains \$1.50-4; ☎ 6-11pm Tue-Sun) You may have to wait to get a seat in this tiny place run by women, but it's worth it. Everything is made fresh, there are plenty of vegetarian options and even the house specialty, shrimp *pozole*, costs less than US\$4.

Restaurant Maya (Obregón 1; www.restaurantmaya.com; mains US\$7-14; ☎ 6-11pm Wed-Sun & 10:30am-2pm Sun) The menu changes regularly but the quality at this Asian-fusion beachside hotspot is consistently excellent. Dinners include a range of gourmet salads, grilled meats and fish with exotic sauces, and there are appetizers like tequila lime prawns. Western favorites like eggs benedict and rich omelets with Brie rule the brunch menu.

Restaurant La Terraza (☎ 355-53-13; Guzmán 4; mains US\$2.50-5; ☎ 7am-10pm) This warm, family-run spot serves organic coffee and a full breakfast menu in the morning and homemade bread, salads, salsa and traditional Mexican food for lunch and dinner. There's Internet access and a breezy 2nd-floor terrace, where on Friday nights there's a buffet (US\$12 to US\$15) and traditional dance performed by students from the local secondary school.

Restaurant Bigotes (☎ 355-69-34; López Mateos 2; mains US\$5-10; ☎ 8am-9pm) Seafood is the specialty at this pleasant beachfront *palapa*; try the *guachinango a la naranja* (red snapper à l'orange) or *camarones al cilantro* (cilantro shrimp). The two-for-one happy hour (2pm to 8pm) is popular.

Juguería María Luisa (cnr López Mateos & Corona; snacks US\$1-3) This place whips up fresh fruit and vegetable juices, *tortas* (Mexican-style sandwiches made with rolls) and good burgers.

Surfos & Vagos (☎ 355-64-13; cnr Juárez & Hidalgo; ☎ 8pm-2am) Rocking to an agreeable beat,

this 2nd-floor open *palapa* has a pool table and board games.

Bar Caxcan (cnr López Mateos & Juárez) The new kid in town thumps out techno beats, has a pool table and an extended happy hour and attracts mostly young men.

ENTERTAINMENT

During the winter and spring, *corridos de toros* (bullfights) occasionally liven up the Plaza de Toros, 3km southeast of town off Hwy 200, near the Barra turnoff. Watch for flyers promoting *charreadas* (Mexican rodeos), and keep an ear out for cruising, megaphone-equipped cars scratchily announcing *béisbol* games and *fútbol* (soccer) matches.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus

Melaque has three bus stations. Transportes Cihuatlán and Primera Plus/Servicios Coordinados are on opposite sides of Carranza at the corner of Farías. Both have 1st- and 2nd-class buses and ply similar routes for similar fares. The 1st-class Primera Plus bus station is a block east on Farías. Buses trundling daily out of these stations serve the following destinations:

Barra de Navidad (US\$0.30, 10min, every 15min 6am-9pm) Or take any southbound long-distance bus.

Guadalajara (US\$23, 5-7½hr, 6 1st-class; US\$19, 5-7½hr, 10 2nd-class)

Manzanillo (US\$5, 1-1½hr, 10 1st-class; US\$4, 1-1½hr, 2nd-class at least hourly 3am-11:30pm)

Puerto Vallarta (US\$17, 3½-5hr, 2 1st-class; US\$14, 3½-5hr, 17 2nd-class)

Local buses for Villa Obregón (US\$0.50, 1km) and Barra de Navidad (US\$0.50, 15 to 20 minutes, 5km) stop near the plaza by the Paletería Michoacán every 15 minutes.

Taxi

A taxi between Melaque and Barra should cost no more than US\$5, or as little as US\$3, depending on how well *tu hablas español*.

Barra de Navidad

☎ 315 / pop 4000

The charming town of Barra de Navidad (usually simply called 'Barra') is squeezed onto a sandbar between Bahía de Navidad and the Laguna de Navidad. Barra de Navidad first came to prominence in 1564 when

its shipyards produced the galleons used by conquistador Miguel López de Legazpi and Father André de Urdaneta to deliver the Philippines to King Philip of Spain. By 1600, however, most of the conquests were being conducted from Acapulco, and Barra slipped into sleepy obscurity (a state from which it has yet to fully emerge).

ORIENTATION

Legazpi, the main drag, runs parallel to the beach. Veracruz, the town's other major artery and the highway feeder, runs parallel to Legazpi before merging with it at the southern end of town, which terminates in a finger-like sandbar. Buses drop passengers at offices on Legazpi.

INFORMATION

The regional **tourist office** (☎ 355-83-83; www.costaalegre.com; Jalisco 67; ☒ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) has free maps and information about more than just Barra; it also runs an information kiosk on the jetty during the high season.

Barra has an air-conditioned **Banamex ATM** (Veracruz s/n). You can change money at **Vinos y Licores Barra de Navidad** (Legazpi s/n; ☒ 8:30am-11pm), on the plaza, or at the more official **casa de cambio** (Veracruz 212).

Telecomm (Veracruz 212-B; ☒ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) and **Mini-Market Hawaii** (Legazpi at Sonora; ☒ noon-10pm) both have telephone and fax services. See Map p159 for *caseta* locations. There's also a **post office** (cnr Sinaloa & Mazatlán).

BARRA DE NAVIDAD

0 200 m
0 0.1 miles

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JALISCO, COLIMA & MICHOACÁN COASTS

Ciber@Money (Veracruz 212-C; per hr US\$2.50; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6:30pm Sat) has a decent Internet connection, as does **Centro Virtu@l** (Veracruz s/n; per hr US\$2; ☎ noon-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat).

You can exchange, but not buy, books at **Beer Bob's Book Exchange** (Tampico 8; ☎ noon-3pm Mon-Fri).

ACTIVITIES

Barra's steep and narrow beach is lovely to behold, but with its steep slope waves crash close to shore. Conditions can get rough for swimming, with the gentlest waves arriving in the early mornings. Small but surfable right and left breaks are snatched up by determined souls at the southernmost end of the beach near the jetty.

South Swell Surf Shop (☎ 354-54-7; www.southswellmex.com; Sinaloa 16; rentals/lessons per day US\$25/42), in the Hotel La Alondra, rents and sells body boards and surfboards and provides surfing lessons and information about surfing spots further afield.

Boards can also be rented from **Crazy Cactus** (☎ 355-60-99; Veracruz 165; ☎ 9:30am-6pm Mon-Sat), as can snorkeling gear, kayaks and bicycles (not to mention cars and apartments). **Nauti-Mar dive shop** (☎ 355-57-91; Veracruz 204) rents out outfits for all manner of aquatic sports.

Boat Trips

Boat trips into the Laguna de Navidad are a Barra highlight. The boat operators' cooperative, **Sociedad Cooperativa de Servicios Turísticos** (Veracruz 40; ☎ 7am-9pm), offers boat excursions, ranging from half-hour trips around the lagoon (US\$20 per boat) to all-day jungle trips to Tenacatita (US\$200 per boat). Prices (for up to eight people) are posted at the open-air lagoon-side office. The cooperative also offers fishing (from US\$80 for four hours), snorkeling (from US\$25) and diving trips.

For a short jaunt out on the water, you could also catch a **water taxi** from a nearby dock and head over to the Grand Bay Hotel on Isla de Navidad or to Colimilla (US\$2 round-trip). At the latter, you can laze your afternoon away at one of the pleasant restaurants, all with rewarding views of the lagoon and super-fresh *mariscos* (seafood).

Walking

For a pleasant day of intensive beach strolling, you can pad the sands all the way to San

Patricio-Melaque, 2.5km south on the other end of Bahía de Navidad. Start early in the morning with the sun at your back, and carry water and sun protection. At the far end of Melaque you'll find a trail leading beneath the cliff to a wonderfully craggy spot at the tip of the bay with splendid tide pools.

Sportfishing

The waters near Barra are rife with marlin, swordfish, albacore, *dorado* (dolphinfish), snapper and other more unusual catches. Fishing trips can be arranged at the boat operators' cooperative for about US\$25 per hour, including gear. If a serious deep-sea fishing expedition is what you have in mind, pass on the *lanchas* (fast, open, out-board boats) and check out **Z Pesca** (☎ 355-60-99; Veracruz 204), or **Fantasia Pesca Deportiva** (☎ 355-68-24; Legazpi 213), both of which have better boats and equipment. A six-hour all-inclusive (except beer) trip costs US\$180 to US\$250, depending on the size of the boat and the number of fisher folk.

Golf

The Grand Bay Golf Course (☎ 355-50-50; Grand Bay Hotel Wyndham Resort, Isla de Navidad; green fees 18/27 holes US\$216/240) is a celebrated 27-hole course with excellent vistas and greens carved into ocean dunes against a backdrop of mountains. Caddies and rental clubs are available.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Big-money international fishing tournaments are held annually for marlin, sailfish, tuna and *dorado*. The most important, the three-day **Torneo Internacional de Pesca**, is held around the third week in January. The two-day **Torneo Internacional de Marlin**, held during late May or early June, with another two-day tournament in mid-August.

SLEEPING

Barra has fewer beachfront rooms than its neighbor Melaque. The following prices are for the high season (between November and May). A bungalow is a room with a kitchen and sleeps at least three.

Budget

Hotel Caribe (☎ 355-59-52; Sonora 15; s US\$15-20, d US\$20-25) The popular Caribe is one of Barra's best budget deals. It has a rooftop terrace, hot water and 18 clean rooms, some

of which are larger than others. Downstairs there's a pleasant garden offering respite on a hot afternoon. You'll be lucky to get a room here in the winter.

Hotel Posada Pacífico (☎ 355-53-59; Mazatlán 136 at Michoacán; s/d US\$15/25, bungalow US\$40; (P)) This friendly, comfortable posada has 25 large, clean rooms, plus four bungalows, each of which sleeps up to four people. Some English is spoken.

Casa de Huéspedes Mama Laya (☎ 355-50-88; Veracruz 69; r with/without bathroom US\$20/15) On the lagoon side of town, the Mama Laya has stark, worn rooms with TV. Expect to get to know the family that runs the place. Prices appear to be negotiable.

Hotel San Lorenzo (☎ /fax 355-51-39; Sinaloa 7; s/d US\$25/30) Try the less drab upstairs rooms at the bright-orange San Lorenzo (near Mazatlán) if all the other budget hotels in town are full.

Midrange

Hotel Delfín (☎ 355-50-68; www.hoteldelfinmx.com; Morelos 23; d/tr/ste US\$50/60/120; (P) (A) (B)) With large, pleasant rooms that open onto shared balconies, a grassy pool area and exercise room, the Delfín is one of Barra's best hotels. Discounts are available for longer stays but repeat customers fill the place in winter.

Hotel Costa Dorada (☎ 355-64-10; Veracruz 174; bungalow s US\$40-50, bungalow d US\$60; (P)) This welcoming option offers 24 fastidious and whimsically tiled bungalows with diminutive TVs and good, firm mattresses. Grab an upstairs unit to benefit from the cross breeze.

Bungalows Mar Vida (☎ 355-59-11; www.tomzap.com/marvida.html; Mazatlán 168; apt US\$55; (B) (B)) The fine little Mar Vida has five newly remodeled studio apartments, all with satellite TV, cheerful tile work and hand-carved doors. Some English is spoken.

Hotel La Alondra (☎ 355-83-73; www.alondrahotel.com; Sinaloa 16; s US\$78-84, d US\$106-117, ste US\$182-264; (P) (B) (A) (B)) Giving the town something of a skyline, this new five-story hotel tries to come off as a luxury hotel but falls short; the rooms have chintzy murals and balconies but are otherwise generic. The best reason to pay the prices asked is for the commanding views on the upper floors.

Hotel Barra de Navidad (☎ 355-51-22; www.hotelbarradenavidad.com; Legazpi 250; s/d/tr US\$62/72/78, bungalow US\$144; (B) (B)) Providing Barra's best beach access, this modern, glowingly white

beachside hotel harbors a shaded, intimate courtyard and a small but inviting pool. The best rooms have ocean views and air-con.

Also recommended:

Buenos Aires Hotel (☎ 355-69-67; hotelbuenosairesmx@yahoo.com.mx; Veracruz 209; s/d US\$50/60, ste US\$85-90; (X) (B) (B)) Crisp and efficient with no smoking and no children allowed.

Hotel Sarabi (☎ 355-64-10; www.hotelsarabi.com; Veracruz 196; bungalow US\$50-80; (P) (B)) Clean and efficiently run. Ask about the 'third night free' promotion.

Top End

Getting away from it all is a matter of considerable luxury on Isla de Navidad, a short water-taxi ride across the lagoon from Barra de Navidad.

Grand Bay Hotel Wyndham Resort (☎ 355-50-50; www.wyndham.com; Rinconada del Capitán s/n, Isla de Navidad; d US\$350, ste US\$550-680; (B) (A) (B)) This superluxury resort is self-consciously magnificent and very large. The same adjectives apply to the rooms, which have marble floors, hand-carved furniture and bathrooms big enough to herd sheep in. If the weather's not hot enough for you, spend some time in your suite's steam bath or, better yet, at the pool's convenient swim-up bar. Justifying the hefty price tag are three grass tennis courts, golf packages, a 'kid's club' day-care center, and big fluffy bathrobes. Golf, tennis and other packages can be booked online.

Mesón Doña Paz (☎ 355-6441; www.mesondonapaz.com; Rinconada del Capitán s/n; Isla de Navidad; d US\$350, ste US\$460-575; (B) (A) (B)) For something really special, check into this gorgeous colonial-style lodge where every room has a balcony facing the limpid lagoon. The grounds are graced by a tranquil private bay, lookout point and lush landscaping. All-inclusive plans and golf packages are available. Be sure to ask about low-season and promotional rates.

EATING

Several of Barra's many good restaurants are on the beachfront, offering beautiful sunset views, while others overlook the lagoon. Simple, inexpensive little indoor-outdoor places line Veracruz in the center of town. However, most are open only in the high season.

Sea Master Café (☎ 355-51-19; cnr Legazpi & Yucatán; mains US\$6-15; (B) lunch & dinner) With a very pleasant environment perfect for tossing back cocktails, this place scores points by

taking liberties with seafood. For instance, a dish called piña sea master fills a pineapple with shrimp, peppers, mushrooms and a buttery Kahlua sauce. Who needs desert?

Mexico Lindo (Legazpi 138; mains US\$4-14; ☎ noon-10pm) With simple plastic tables under a corrugated tin roof, this place somehow manages to feel romantic and intimate at night. The menu features regional favorites like savory and sour tortilla soup, quesadillas, garlic fish tacos and shrimp seviche; a good selection of drinks and cocktails seals the deal.

El Manglito (☎ 355-85-90; Veracruz s/n; mains \$7-10; ☎ 8am-7pm) An exuberantly decorated *palapa* overlooking the lagoon, El Manglito is a grand place to while away a hot afternoon watching the *lanchas* come and go. The service is slow but the seafood served is so good you'll soon forget about this minor inconvenience.

Los Arcos (cnr Mazatlán & Michoacán; mains US\$3-5; ☎ 9am-11pm) One of the homiest place you'll eat at, Los Arcos has mom-and-pop cooking and serves homemade food in a tiny dining area.

Olivo's (cnr Legazpi & Guanajuato; mains US\$9-14) Olivo's boasts artwork, a pleasant atmosphere and renowned Mediterranean food, including baked lamb and pork fillets.

Restaurant Ramon's (☎ 355-64-35; Legazpi 260; mains US\$5-11; ☎ 7am-11pm) This casual and friendly *palapa* serves excellent fish tacos among other local and gringo favorites.

DRINKING

Sunset Bar (☎ 355-52-17; Jalisco 140; ☎ noon-2am) The waiter at this seaside saloon claims that 'the sunset' was named after the bar, and not the other way around. Humongous drink specials are served daily from 2pm to 10pm. A DJ spins nightly during the high season.

Piper Lovers Bar (☎ 355-67-47; Legazpi 154A; www.piperlover.com; ☎ 10am-2am) With its tough motorcycle-bar look and loud live music Wednesday through Saturday (from 9pm), this is the place to rock.

Show Bar Jarro (Veracruz near Yucatán; ☎ 9pm-4am) This down-to-earth, gay-friendly disco has pool tables and lagoon views.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Bus

The long-distance buses stopping at San Patricio-Melaque (p158) also stop at Barra de Navidad (15 minutes before or after). Transportes Cihuatlán's station is at Veracruz

228; Primera Plus and ETN operate from small terminals nearby, on the opposite side of Veracruz.

In addition to the long-distance buses, colorful local buses connect Barra and Melaque (US\$0.50, every 15 minutes, 6am to 9pm), stopping in Barra at the long-distance bus stations (buses stopping on the southbound side of the road loop round Legazpi and back to Melaque).

Boat

Water taxis operate on demand 24 hours a day from the dock at the southern end of Veracruz, offering service to the hotels on Isla de Navidad (US\$1), the marina, the golf course and Colimilla. Also see p160 for information on boat tours.

Taxi

Catch taxis from the official **taxi stand** (cnr Veracruz & Michoacán) to ensure the best price.

COLIMA

Tiny Colima's coastline is dominated by the city of Manzanillo, home to one of Mexico's most important ports and a thriving tourism scene. South of town are the sleepy towns of Cuyutlán and El Paraíso, and Playa Boca de Pascuales, a legendary surf spot.

MANZANILLO

☎ 314 / pop 130,000

With a port that recently surpassed Veracruz to become the largest in Mexico, these are heady times in Manzanillo. Nowhere is the upbeat attitude more prevalent than downtown, where the waterfront has been enhanced with a 3km boardwalk along the ocean and a capacious seaside *zócalo*. Providing a dramatic setting for a promenade, at dusk swarms of starlings do their best to blot out the sunset, while the giant Swordfish Memorial creates an imposing silhouette. Away from the center, miles of pristine and unpopulated beaches ring nearby Bahía de Santiago and Bahía de Manzanillo, and the lagoons surrounding the town offer good bird-watching. And, befitting the city's deep-sea fishing reputation, fans call Manzanillo the 'World Capital of Sailfish,' and each year fishing tournaments draw hopeful anglers from all around.

Orientation

Manzanillo extends 16km from northwest to southeast. The resort hotels and finest beaches begin at Playa Azul, across the bay from Playa San Pedrito, the closest beach to the center. Further around the bay is the Península de Santiago, a rocky outcrop holding Las Hadas Resort and Playa La Audiencia. Just west of the peninsula, Bahía de Santiago is lined with excellent beaches.

Central Manzanillo is bound by Bahía de Manzanillo to the north, the Pacific Ocean to the west and Laguna de Cuyutlán to the south. Av Morelos, the main drag, runs along the north edge of town center, beside the sea. At its east end it meets Av Niños Héroes, which leads to Hwy 200.

Information

Banks Several banks with ATMs are scattered around the city center.

HSBC (Map p164; Av México s/n) Offers currency exchange.

Caseta Telefónica (Map p164; Av Morelos 144; ☎ 9am-10pm) Long-distance telephone and fax service. Public telephones are plentiful around the center.

Members.com (Map p164; Juárez 116; per hr US\$2)

Offers fast connections in a comfortable atmosphere.

Lavandería Lavimatic (Map p164; cnr Madero & Domínguez; per kg US\$1.25; ☎ closed Sun) Within walking distance of the center.

Post office (Map p164; Galindo 30)

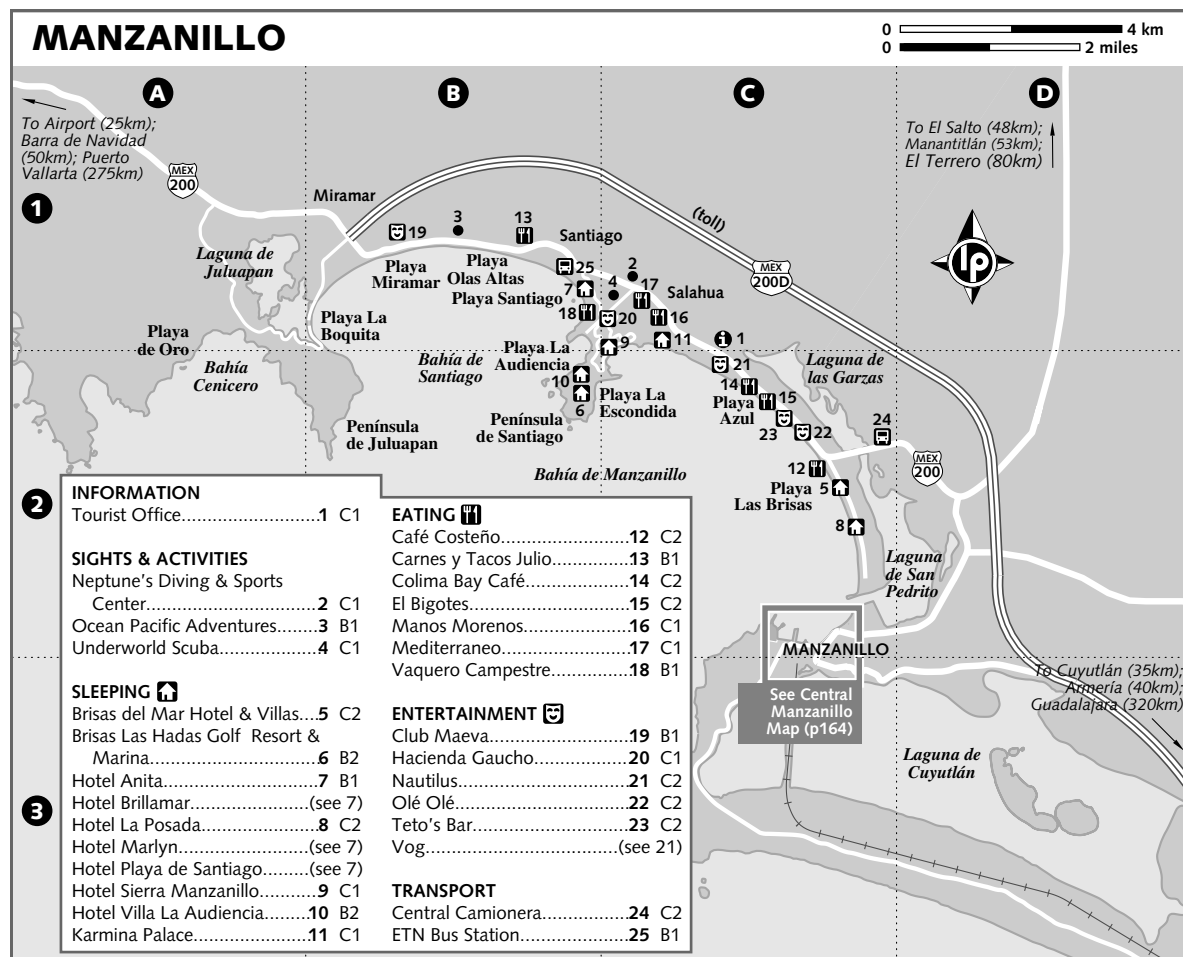
Tourist office (Map p163; ☎ 333-22-64; Blvd Miguel de la Madrid 4960, Km 8.5; www.visitacolima.com.mx; ☎ 9am-3pm & 5-7pm Mon-Thu, 9am-3pm Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Dispenses information about Manzanillo and the state of Colima.

Tourist police (Map p164; ☎ 332-10-04) Stationed behind the Presidencia Municipal.

Sights & Activities

MUSEO UNIVERSITARIO DE ARQUEOLOGÍA

The University of Colima's **archaeological museum** (Map p164; ☎ 332-22-56; cnr Niños Héroes & Glorieta San Pedrito; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) presents interesting objects from ancient Colima state and rotating exhibits of contemporary Mexican art. At the time of research the museum was undergoing renovation; it is scheduled to reopen in January 2007.



JALISCO, COLIMA & MICHOACÁN COASTS

BEACHES

Playa San Pedrito, 1km northeast of the *zócalo*, is the closest beach to town. The next closest stretch of sand, spacious **Playa Las Brisas**, caters to a few hotels. **Playa Azul** stretches northwest from Las Brisas and curves around to Playa La Escondida and the best beaches in the area: **La Audiencia**, **Santiago**, **Olas Altas** and **Miramar**. Miramar and Olas Altas have the best surfing and bodysurfing waves in the area; surfboards can be rented at Miramar. Playa La Audiencia, lining a quiet cove on the west side of Península de Santiago, has more tranquil water and is popular for water-skiing and other noisy motorized water sports.

Getting to these beaches from the town center is easy: local buses marked ‘Santiago,’ ‘Las Brisas’ and ‘Miramar’ head around the bay to San Pedrito, Salahuá, Santiago, Miramar and beaches along the way. ‘Las Hadas’ buses take a more circuitous, scenic route down Península de Santiago. These buses pick-up passengers from local bus stops, along the length of Calle 21 de Marzo, and from the main bus station, every 10 minutes from 6am to 11pm.

WATER SPORTS

Snorkeling, windsurfing, sailing, waterskiing and deep-sea fishing are all popular around the bay. The scuba diving in Manzanillo can be spectacular, and there are many sites to explore – either off one of the beaches or out on the bay.

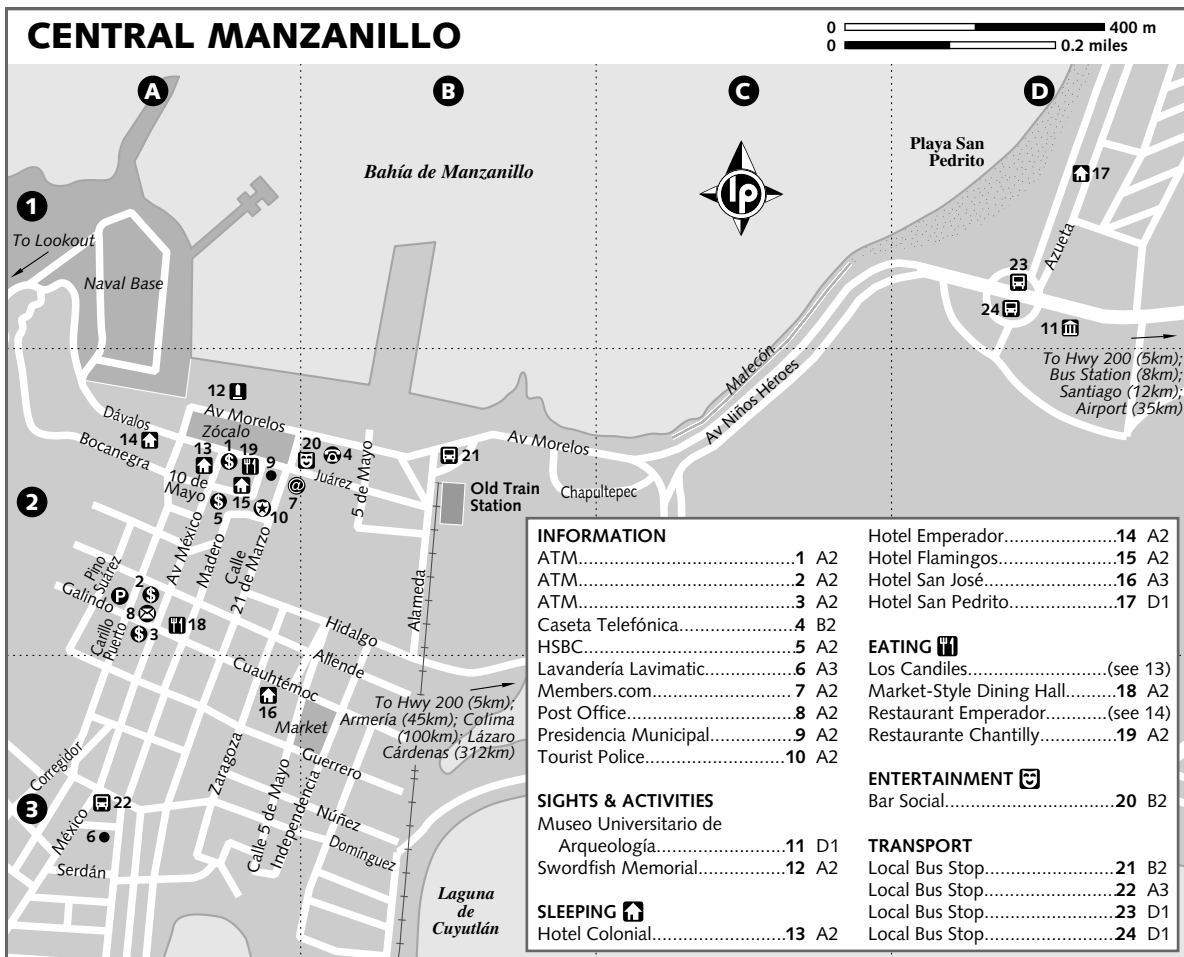
The best diving operator is the well-established **Underworld Scuba** (Map p163; ☎ 333-06-42; www.divemanzanillo.com; Hwy 200, Km 15). This complete PADI dive center charges US\$80 for two-tank dives, including equipment, or US\$300 for PADI certification. Another good choice is **Neptune’s Diving & Sports Center** (Map p163; ☎ 334-30-01; www.neptunesdiving.com; Hwy 200, Km 14.8), which offers similar dives, costs and services. They also do night dives and snorkeling trips.

SPORTFISHING

Sailfish and dorado are found in the waters off Manzanillo during every season of the year, while marlin and tuna are generally in the area from November to March.

Ocean Pacific Adventures (Map p163; ☎ 335-06-05, www.gomanzanillo.com/fishing) Supporting

JALISCO, COLIMA & MICHOACÁN COASTS



DETOUR: EL SALTO FALLS & MANANTITLÁN BIOSPHERE

While it seems incredible, some people actually grow weary of gorgeous sandy beaches and crystalline ocean waters. For them, an excursion to the cool cascades of El Salto waterfall and to the highland cloud forests of Manantitlán Biosphere provides a lovely respite from the insufferable pressures of beach life.

The one-hour drive to El Salto takes you over meandering mountain roads through dense tropical deciduous forest and a few typical small villages. You'll pass by the Peña Colorada strip mine at the top of a mountain and the 27km blue pipeline used to move iron ore all the way back to the outskirts of Manzanillo.

One kilometer past the company town where the miners live is the entrance to **El Salto Park** (admission US\$0.50). Beyond the gate, there's a new-fangled picnic area and water park with three spring-fed pools and an impressive water slide. Just down the road, across an iron bridge, is a nicer spot to lunch overlooking the falls, which cascade over two 10m steps into a series of inviting pools. Descend the stone steps and jump in! From the base of the falls, it's possible to float 100m downstream on your back beneath the canyon walls to where there's a beach of sorts. On weekends hungry masses devour tacos from a simple stand, but the rest of the week you'll likely have the place to yourself (and have to rely on the contents of your picnic basket). Overnight camping is allowed.

Back on the road, continue north 5km to the pleasant town of Manantitlán, which supports a good, traditional restaurant called La Herradura. Another 16km brings you to the entrance of **Manantitlán Biosphere** (☎ 317-381-01-54 in Spanish) an ecological reserve that gives refuge to more than 2900 plant species, half of which are endemic. A very bumpy but navigable road ascends 16km through exceptionally scenic territory to the 2700m summit and the small indigenous *ranchito* of **El Terrero**. Here you can spend the night in a rustic cabin shelter or at a shady campground with picnic tables, potable water and an outhouse. Even if there are no other people around, you may not be camping alone – the biosphere is home to a staggering 588 vertebrate animals including ocelots, pumas, boa constrictors, jaguars and lynxes. If this unnerves you, see if you can't get your hands on some locally brewed *pulque* (an ancient form of fermented agave) to calm your nerves.

If you've developed a taste for adventure, the road that brought you to El Terrero continues down the other side of the mountain into more unspoiled territory uncharted by this or any other guidebook. For more information about biospheres in Mexico visit www2.unesco.org/mab/bios1-2.htm and access the interactive map.

Getting There & Away

Your journey begins in Manzanillo at the traffic circle near Km 4 on the main highway, where the highway to Manantitlán peels off to the north. From here it's 48km to El Salto and another 16km to the entrance of Manantitlán Biosphere (keep an eagle eye out for the sign reading 'Estación Biosfera'). You'll travel another slow 16km on bumpy roads to El Terrero. Departing from Manzanillo's Central Camionera (main bus station), 2nd-class buses bound for Manantitlán will drop you at El Salto, but you'll need a car to make it to El Terrero.

Manzanillo's only catch-and-release program, this well-run operation offers fishing trips on an 8m (26ft) and 12m (40ft) cruiser (US\$200/US\$260); prices are for the whole boat and include gear, drinks and having your fish cooked up for dinner.

Tours

Hectours (☎ 333-17-07; www.hectours.com) offers a half-day tour of Manzanillo (US\$28) and a full-day excursion to Colima and the

colonial town of Comala (US\$70). The price includes transportation from your hotel.

Festivals & Events

The **Fiestas de Mayo** (May 1 to 10) celebrate the founding of Manzanillo in 1873 by holding sporting competitions and other events. The **Fiesta de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe** is held from December 1 to 12 in honor of Mexico's revered manifestation of the Virgin Mary, here as elsewhere in Mexico.

Sailfish season runs November to March, with marlin, red snapper, sea bass and tuna also plentiful. The biggest international tournament is held in November, with a smaller national tournament in February.

Sleeping

Central Manzanillo has the town's best cheap options within a block or two of the *zócalo*. There are more places in the run-down area a few blocks south of the city center. Around the bay, where the better beaches are, hotels are more expensive; Playa Santiago, half an hour away by bus, is the exception.

BUDGET

Hotel San Pedrito (Map p164; ☎ 332-05-35; hotelsanpedrito@hotmail.com; Azueta 3; s/d US\$30/40; 📍 🚽) San Pedrito sits next to Playa San Pedrito, the beach nearest downtown. The old tiled rooms are generous in size, but worn and dank – see a few before deciding. From the *zócalo*, walk 15 leisurely minutes east along the *malecón* (waterfront street), or catch a local bus and get off at the archaeological museum and then walk from there.

Hotel Emperador (Map p164; ☎ 332-23-74; Dávalos 69; s US\$15, d US\$18-20) Half a block from the *zócalo*, this simple but clean refuge has some top-floor rooms that are marginally brighter than the rest. The hotel's restaurant is good and is one of the cheapest in town.

Hotel Flamings (Map p164; ☎ 332-10-37; Madero 72; s US\$14, d US\$17-20) On a quiet side street, this old cheapie offers 30 clean, basic rooms. Some can be musty; ask for one with two beds and an outside window.

Hotel San José (Map p164; ☎ 332-51-05; Cuauhtémoc 138; s/d/tr US\$15/25/35) This well-kept budget option near the market is a tad more pleasant than the cheapies near the waterfront.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel Colonial (Map p164; ☎ 332-10-80, 332-06-68; Bocanegra 100; s US\$25, d US\$28-32; 📍 🚽) This atmospheric, old-fashioned hotel in the heart of downtown retains the character of a bygone hacienda. Big rooms, blue-tiled outdoor hallways and a thick colonial ambience make it the best deal in town. There's limited underground parking and a quality restaurant-bar on the premises.

Hotel Anita (Map p163; ☎ 333-01-61; Balneario de Santiago s/n; r US\$32) This is the cheapest place on Playa Santiago, with endless remodeling efforts and 36 large, faded rooms.

MIDRANGE

Brisas del Mar Hotel & Villas (Map p163; ☎ 334-11-97; www.brisasdelmarmanzanillo.com; Playa las Brisas; d/villa US\$60/100; 📍 🚽 🚿) The beautiful, generous suites and villas at Brisas del Mar are all modern and colorfully decorated. They're beachside and within walking distance of some action. The pool is large enough to do laps in. All-inclusive plans are available.

Hotel Villa La Audiencia (Map p163; ☎ 333-08-61; Península de Santiago; r/villas from US\$76/92 📍 🚽 🚿) Near Playa Audiencia, but a bit far from the beach, this moderately priced hotel is good value, especially for families. All the villas come with a kitchen, air-con and satellite TV.

The following hotels overlooking Playa Santiago are a winding 15-minute walk (or five-minute bus ride) from Santiago town, down the road leading off Hwy 200 past the ETN bus station. The hotels perch on a bluff overlooking the beach, and all have beachfront swimming pools.

Hotel Playa de Santiago (Map p163; ☎ 333-02-70; hoplasan@prodigy.net.mx; Balneario de Santiago s/n; d/tr US\$61/80, ste US\$129-192; 📍) Perched at the end of the road, this hotel offers comfortable, semimodern rooms with balconies, sea views and decent – though ageing – baths.

Hotel Brillamar (Map p163; ☎ 334-11-88; Balneario de Santiago s/n; r/bungalows from US\$32/73-100; 🚽 🚿) Brillamar has air-con and TV, though some toilets may be missing their seats – unforgivable. Rooms are otherwise reasonable, but small. Large bungalows with kitchen are also available.

Hotel Marlyn (Map p163; ☎ 333-01-07; Balneario de Santiago s/n; d/ste from US\$54/73; 🚽 🚿) Marlyn hosts pleasant rooms with TV and fan. The ones you want have sea views and balconies, and consequently cost more. Six-person kitchen suites are available.

TOP END

Most of Manzanillo's upmarket hotels are on or near the beaches outside the city center. Many sprawl along the beach side of the main road near Playa Azul.

Hotel La Posada (Map p163; 333-18-99; www.hotel-la-posada.info; Cárdenas 201; s/d US\$58/78; 📍 🚽)

Right on the beach, this friendly, passionate-pink posada has spacious rooms with Mexican architectural touches. There's a breezy, well-appointed common area ideal for reading a book or chatting with the amiable staff.

Manzanillo also has plenty of all-inclusive resorts that are best booked in advance. The 'rack rate' listed here is easily improved by booking online.

Brisas Las Hadas Golf Resort & Marina (Map p163; ☎ 331-01-01; www.brisas.com.mx; Av Vista Hermosa s/n, Playa Audiencia; r US\$292, ste US\$540-652; 📞 📺 📺 📺 📺) This resort sits like a Moroccan kingdom, so bright and white you'll need sunglasses just walking around. Las Hadas has a choice of 234 spacious rooms and suites with marble floors, all-white furnishings and plentiful amenities; some even have their own private pool. Hard-core film buffs may know this is where the Bo Derek film *10* was made. There's also a golf course.

Hotel Sierra Manzanillo (Map p163; ☎ 333-20-00; Av de la Audiencia 1, Playa Audiencia; all-inclusive d US\$400, ste US\$458-482; 📞 📺 📺 📺 📺) This blindingly white, sterile hotel is beautifully situated above Playa Audiencia. It's not ultraluxurious, but pleasant enough for most vacationers – most of whom are package tourists from Canada.

Karmina Palace (Map p163; ☎ 334-13-00; www.karminapalace.com; Av Vista Hermosa 13; all-inclusive d ste US\$425-449, q ste US\$994-1170; 📞 📺 📺 📺 📺) Conceived to evoke Mayan pyramids, the architecture of this posh 324-unit all-inclusive hotel is unintentionally silly, but after a day or two in your deluxe suite you may come to appreciate it. The amenities are extravagant, from the his and hers black-marble sinks in the swanky bathrooms to the eight connected swimming pools. Youngsters dig the Kid's Club so much that you may not see them for the rest of your vacation.

Eating

Several good, down-to-earth options are on the *zócalo*, while chain and chain-like spots line Hwy 200 around the bay.

Restaurant Emperador (Map p164; ☎ 332-23-74; Dávalos 69; mains US\$2-5) Good, cheap and simple, this intimate ground-floor restaurant in the Hotel Emperador is popular with locals and budget travelers. Highlights here are the set breakfasts and the meat-and-seafood *comida corrida* (set-price lunch or dinner menu).

Restaurante Chantilly (Map p164; ☎ 332-01-94; Juárez 44; mains US\$3-10) This crowded *cafetería* and *nievería* (ice creamery) has reasonably priced meals and snacks, plus a generous *comida corrida*, genuine espresso and good ice cream.

Los Candiles (Map p164; ☎ 332-10-80; Bocanegra 100; mains US\$4-11) The Hotel Colonial's restaurant opens onto a pleasant patio, features surf-and-turf fare and has a full bar; sports dominates the satellite TV.

A **market-style dining hall** (Map p164; cnr Madero & Cuauhtémoc; mains US\$2-5; 📺 7am-6pm) has a number of inexpensive food stalls that you can choose from.

Many more restaurants are spread out around the bay all the way past the plaza in Santiago.

Café Costeño (Map p163; ☎ 333-94-60; Lázaro Cárdenas 1613, Playa Las Brisas; breakfast US\$3-4.50; 📺 9am-10:30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) A good start to your day: French toast, hotcakes and omelets are cheerfully served along with espresso and cappuccino. Sit in the shady garden out back.

El Bigotes (Map p163; ☎ 334-08-31; Hwy 200, Km 8.4; mains US\$9-22; 📺 1-10pm) Popular for seafood like 'octopus drunken crazy' or 'snail garlic.' The beachside location is pretty fine.

Mediterraneo (Map p163; Hwy 200, Km 11; mains US\$6-12; 📺 8am-11pm) Boasts generous salads, good crepes, pasta and several versions of stuffed chicken breast. Have *tzatziki* (Greek yogurt and cucumber dip) for an appetizer while enjoying the view of the golf course.

Vaquero Campestre (Map p163; ☎ 334-14-48; Playa Audiencia; mains US\$8-15; 📺 2-10:30pm Tue-Sat) Near Las Palmas, this place serves pitchers of margaritas and sangria to help lubricate those servings of grilled beef and seafood. *Palapa* roofs and a few animal heads and skins surround diners.

Manos Morenos (Map p163; ☎ 333-03-20; Hwy 200, Km 11; mains US\$6-13) Choose from fish with mango sauce or chicken with *huitlacoche* (corn truffle, a fungus that grows on maize) sauce or keep it simple with crepes or a generous salad at this *palapa* with a golf-course view.

Colima Bay Café (Map p163; ☎ 333-11-50; Hwy 200, Km 6.5, Playa Azul; mains US\$7-16; 📺 2pm-1am) This super-fun Mexican restaurant keeps things lively. Service is professional, DJ music is thump-in' and portions are more than generous.

Carnes y Tacos Julio (Map p163; ☎ 334-00-36; Hwy 200, Km 14.3; Playa Olas Altas; mains US\$4-11; 🕒 8am-midnight) Savory grilled meat is the specialty at this lively place, but breakfast, pasta and other tourist-friendly fare won't disappoint.

Entertainment

If you're in town on a Sunday evening, stop by the *zócalo*, where multiple generations come out to enjoy an ice cream and the warm evening air. On the most atmospheric of nights, a band belts out traditional music from the gazebo, and every night around sunset you can hear the cacophony of the resident *zanates* (blackbirds) – a regular bombing squad: don't stand under any electrical wire for too long. And be sure to check out the *golondrinas* (swallows) perching on the wires later in the evening; it's eerily reminiscent of the Hitchcock classic *The Birds*.

Behind the doors of **Bar Social** (Map p164; cnr Calle 21 de Marzo & Juárez; 🕒 noon-midnight Mon-Sat) is a world frozen in the past; it's not scary, but it is odd.

Tourist nightlife starts in Playa Azul, with theme discos like **Vog** (Map p163; ☎ 333-18-75; Hwy 200, Km 9.2; women/men cover US\$10/15; 🕒 Fri & Sat nights) and **Nautilus** (Map p163; ☎ 334-33-31; Hwy 200, Km 9.5; cover US\$15; 🕒 Fri & Sat nights) and continues northwest around the bay. Near the Hotel Fiesta Mexicana, **Teto's Bar** (Map p163; ☎ 333-19-90; Hwy 200, Km 8.5) offers live music and dancing. **Olé Olé** (Map p163; Hwy 200, Km 7.5) is the place to dance to live salsa music.

Near Vaquero Campestre, **Hacienda Gaucho** (Map p163; ☎ 334-19-69; Playa Santiago) features *carne asada* (grilled beef) and dance music. On Playa Miramar, **Club Maeva** (Map p163; ☎ 335-05-96) houses the Disco Boom Boom and the casual Solarium Bar with a pool table; phone for reservations.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Playa de Oro International Airport lies between a long and secluded white-sand beach and tropical groves of bananas and coconut, 35km northwest of Manzanillo's Zona Hotelera on Hwy 200.

Alaska Airlines (☎ 334-22-11; Airport) Direct service to Los Angeles.

America West (☎ 800-235-9292 in the US) Direct service from Phoenix.

Continental (☎ 800-231-0856 in the US) Direct service to Houston.

The following carriers provide direct service to Mexico City:

Aero California (☎ 800-237-6225)

Aeroméxico (☎ 800-237-6639)

Mexicana (☎ 800-531-7921)

BUS

Manzanillo's new, airport-like, full-service Central Camionera (Map p163) is northwest of the center near Playa Las Brisas, just off Blvd Miguel de la Madrid (Hwy 200). It's an organized place with two tourist offices, phones, eateries and left luggage. There are several daily departures:

Armería (US\$3, 45min, 2nd-class services at least hourly)

Barra de Navidad (US\$6, 1-1½hr, 3 1st-class; US\$5, 1-1½hr, 10 2nd-class)

Colima (US\$6, 1½-2hr, 20 1st-class)

Guadalajara (US\$19-21, 4½-8hr, frequent 1st-class services; US\$14-18, 4½-8hr, 19 2nd-class)

Lázaro Cárdenas (US\$21, 6hr, 1st-class at 2am & 6am; US\$17, 6hr, 4 2nd-class)

Mexico City (US\$59-62, 12hr, 4 1st-class; US\$50, 4 2nd-class) To Terminal Norte.

Puerto Vallarta (US\$21, 5-6½hr, 4 1st-class; US\$18, 5-6½hr, 10 2nd-class)

San Patricio-Melaque (1-1½hr) Same services and fare as to Barra de Navidad.

ETN (☎ 334-10-50) offers deluxe and 1st-class service to Barra de Navidad (US\$6, one to 1½ hours, three daily), Colima (US\$8, 1½ to two hours, seven daily) and Guadalajara (US\$28, seven daily) from its own bus station near Santiago at Hwy 200, Km 13.5. ETN also offers daily service to the international airport in Guadalajara (US\$28).

Getting Around

There is no local or regional bus service to or from Playa de Oro airport. Most resorts have shuttle vans. **Transportes Turísticos Benito Juárez** (☎ 334-15-55) shuttles door-to-door to/from the airport. The fare is US\$28 for private service (one or two people) or US\$8 per person when three or more people share the ride. A taxi from the airport to Manzanillo's center or most resort hotels costs US\$25.

Local buses heading around the bay to San Pedrito, Salahua, Santiago, Miramar and beaches along the way depart every 10 minutes from 6am to 11pm from the corner of Madero and Domínguez, the corner of Juárez and Calle 21 de Marzo near the *zócalo*, and from the Central Camionera. Fares (pay the

DETOUR: COLIMA CITY

If knocking around in the heart of Manzanillo has aroused in you a taste for the urban experience, consider a day trip or an overnigher to the pleasant inland capital city of Colima. Overshadowed by the imposing, actively puffing Volcán Nevado de Colima (4240m) – 30km to the north – this attractive (and growing) city is graced by lively plazas and several noteworthy examples of preserved colonial buildings. Standing proud over the heart of the city and Plaza Principal, the **cathedral** (Santa Iglesia), dates back to 1527 but was rebuilt in the original style after a cataclysmic 1941 earthquake. Next to the cathedral is the **Palacio de Gobierno**, built between 1884 and 1904. Local artist Jorge Chávez Carrillo painted the murals on the stairway to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of independence hero Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (p30), who was once parish priest of Colima. The murals depict Mexican history from the Spanish conquest to independence. There's also a **museum** (admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) with engrossing painting, currency and arms exhibits.

Equally edifying is the **Museo Regional de Historia de Colima** (☎ 312-312-92-28; Portal Morelos 1; admission US\$3.25; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 5-8pm Sun), displaying an excellent collection of ceramic vessels and figurines and an impressive reconstruction of a shaft tomb, and the must-see **University Museum of Popular Arts** (☎ 312-312-68-69; cnr Barreda & Gallardo; admission US\$1, free Sun; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun), about 1km north of Plaza Principal. On display are folk-art exhibits from Colima and other states, with a particularly grand collection of costumes and masks used in traditional Colima dances.

Spend the night in style at **Hotel Ceballos** (☎ 312-312-44-44; www.hotelceballos.com; Portal Medellín 12; r from US\$77; P ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎), a stately five-star hotel on the north side of Plaza Principal, or more economically in one of the good, modern rooms at **Hospedajes del Rey** (☎ 313-36-83; Rey Colimán 125; s/d US\$31, tw US\$37; P ☎ ☎). Many small restaurants around Plaza Principal offer good simple fare – just pick one that appeals. For something special, try the Oaxacan delights served at **Ah Qué Nanishe!** (☎ 314-21-97; Calle 5 de Mayo 267; mains US\$3.75-7.50; ☎ 1pm-midnight Wed-Mon), or perhaps the soy seviche at the all-natural **Centro de Nutrición Lakshmi** (☎ 312-64-33; Madero 265; meals under US\$3; ☎ 8am-9:30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm & 6-9:30pm Sun).

No visit to Colima is complete without visiting the volcano, which has erupted dozens of times in the past four centuries and as recently as June 2005. A visit to the **Parque Nacional Volcán Nevado de Colima**, 87km from Colima on roads of varying quality, will get you up close and personal. Bring your hiking boots to enjoy the well-tended trails. The easiest way to make the trip is with a tour operator such as **Colima Magic** (☎ 312-310-74-83 in Colima; www.colimamagic.com; tours US\$75-120).

Getting There & Away

Colima is 45km from the coast, but quite a bit cooler and less humid. Getting there by car or bus from Manzanillo is a breeze. It's about an hour's drive on the four-lane Hwy 54; 20 1st-class buses make the journey daily from Manzanillo's Central Camionera.

driver as you board) are US\$0.30 to US\$0.60, depending on how far you're going.

Taxis are plentiful in Manzanillo. From the bus station buy a prepaid ticket for a *taxi colectivo* to ensure the best price. From the bus station, a cab fare is around US\$2 to the *zócalo* or Playa Azul, US\$6 to Playa Santiago and US\$9 to Playa Miramar.

CUYUTLÁN & EL PARAÍSO

☎ 313

The laid-back black-sand-beach resort towns of Cuyutlán and El Paraíso are popular with Mexicans but see very few *nor-teamericanos*. Gentle waves and fun-in-the-

sun activities, such as swimming, people-watching and boogie boarding, can be savored on or about the charcoal-colored sands. Cuyutlán has a better selection of hotels, but the beach is less crowded and more tranquil in El Paraíso.

Orientation & Information

Cuyutlán is at the southeastern end of Laguna de Cuyutlán, 40km southeast of Manzanillo and 12km west of Armería. Sleepy El Paraíso is 6km southeast of Cuyutlán along the coast, but 12km by road.

Cuyutlán has a post office (El Paraíso does not), but neither town has a bank; for

this you'll have to visit Armería. Both towns have public telephones and long-distance *casetas* near their *zócalos*.

The beachfront accommodations here are cheaper than they are at other coastal resorts. The high season is Christmas and Semana Santa (Holy Week), when Cuyutlán's hotels are booked solid by Mexican families.

Getting There & Away

Cuyutlán and Paraíso are connected to the rest of the world through Armería, a dusty but friendly little service center on Hwy 200, 46km southeast of Manzanillo and 55km southwest of Colima. From Armería a 12km paved road heads west to Cuyutlán; a similar road runs 8km southwest from Armería to El Paraíso.

To reach either place by bus involves a transfer in Armería. Two bus lines – Sociedad Cooperativa de Autotransportes Colima Manzanillo and Autotransportes Nuevo Horizonte – have offices and stops just off Armería's main street. They both operate 2nd-class buses to Manzanillo every 15 minutes from 6am to midnight (US\$2.50, 45 minutes) and to Colima every half hour from 5:45am to 10:30pm (US\$2.50, 45 minutes). Buses go every 20 minutes to Tecomán (US\$0.70, 15 minutes), where you can connect with buses heading southeast on Hwy 200 to Lázaro Cárdenas and elsewhere.

Buses to Cuyutlán and El Paraíso depart from Armería's market, one block north and one block east of the long-distance bus depots. To Cuyutlán, they depart every half hour from 6am to 7:30pm (US\$0.75, 20 minutes). To El Paraíso, they go every 45 minutes (US\$0.65, 15 minutes).

No buses shuttle directly between Cuyutlán and El Paraíso. To go by bus, you must return to Armería and change buses again. However, you can take a boat from the Centro Tortuguero (right) between the hours of 9am and 4:30pm; the scenic 45-minute trip through the Palo Verde estuary costs US\$3/6.50 per child/adult.

Cuyutlán

pop 1000

The long stretch of fine-grained, black-sand beach here attracts Mexican vacationers like bears to honey. Rickety wooden paths make walking the hot black sands tolerable, there are plenty of seaside restaurants, and

hundreds of colorful, rentable beach chairs and umbrellas keep the scorching sun off.

Cuyutlán is known for its **ola verde** (green wave), appearing just offshore in April and May. It's supposedly caused by little green phosphorescent critters, but it's the subject of much local debate.

Don't miss the **Centro Tortuguero** (☎ 328-86-76; admission US\$2; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm), about 4km toward Paraíso. This ecological center, founded in 1993, has incubated and released 500,000 baby sea turtles into the sea. On display are various small pools containing many of the endearing reptiles as well as some crocodile and iguana enclosures. Guides speak English, and there are educational talks almost hourly. Bring your swimsuit if you want to splash in the pool.

Lagoon trips lasting 45 minutes on the Palo Verde estuary – featuring passage through a mangrove 'tunnel' – leave from the Centro Tortuguero and cost US\$2/US\$4 per child/adult. You can also take a boat from here to El Paraíso (see opposite). Get there by car or taxi, or walk 4km along the beach.

SLEEPING & EATING

You can camp on the empty sands on either side of the hotels. Several of the beachfront *enramadas* rent showers.

Hotel Morelos (☎ 326-40-13; Hidalgo 185 at Veracruz; per person without/with meals US\$13/25; 🚿) Gets points for attractive, well-priced rooms with hot water. There's a whimsical swimming pool and an enthusiastically decorated restaurant (open 7am to 10pm) with a US\$5 *comida corrida*.

Hotel María Victoria (☎ 326-40-04; Veracruz 10; per person US\$21; 🚿 🚿) Has a giant mushroom-shaped structure in the airy lobby – see it for yourself. Cuyutlán's most luxurious hotel also sits next to the beach, and the spacious rooms have sitting areas. Get one with a view. The restaurant serves fresh typical Mexican fare at high-roller prices.

Hotel San Rafael (☎ 326-40-15; Veracruz 46; s US\$20-30, d US\$30-40; 🚿 🚿) Just OK despite a remodel. Rooms are small and raggedy for the price, so unless you get a good sea view go somewhere else. At least there's a pleasant swimming pool and beachfront restaurant-bar.

Hotel El Bucanero (☎ 326-40-05; cnr Hidalgo & Malecón; interior/sea view r per person US\$12) At last visit, major renovation was underway at

this old beach favorite, but the owner swears he won't raise the price. Rooms are basic, some affording splendid views of the waves rolling in.

Hotel Posada del Sol (☎ 326-40-29; López Mateos 10; d US\$20-30) Home to 17 good, plain rooms around a pleasant garden, this place is in a quiet neighborhood away from the center. Go one block past the radio towers at the south end of town (about five blocks from Hidalgo); it's a block from the beach on López Mateos.

Hotel Morelos and Hotel Posada del Sol both have good open-air restaurants. Beachfront restaurants and snack stands supply seafood and cold drinks. Or grab a snack at one of the simpler places near the *zócalo*.

El Paraíso

pop 300

As the crow flies, the small, rustic fishing village of El Paraíso is just 6km southeast of Cuyutlán, but by road it's more like 12km. Like its larger neighbor, it harbors a fine, charcoal-colored beach that attracts Mexican families. Unlike its larger neighbor, there are fewer decent places to stay, which makes for a less crowded and more tranquil beach. An unending line of seafood restaurants sits on the sands.

The nicest hotel in town, **Hotel Paraíso** (☎ 322-10-32; r US\$29-35; P 🚰) has 60 decent rooms and is to the left of the T-junction at the entrance to town. Otherwise, you can camp on the beach or string up a hammock at one of El Paraíso's beachfront *palapas*. All the *palapas* serve basically the same food at similar prices; expect to spend US\$5 to US\$10 per person for a full, fresh meal.

PLAYA BOCA DE PASCUALES

☎ 313 / pop 50

Playa Boca de Pascuales, 3km south of El Paraíso, is a legendary surf spot where aggressive, surfable barrel swells ranging from 2m to 5m in height arrive in the summer season. There's a heavy beach break. If you're a neophyte surfer, don't try your luck. At last visit, three snapped surfboards were arranged to resemble headstones; fortunately there's a high-quality board-repair guy on hand.

Otherwise known as Edgar's Place, **Hotel Real de Pascuales** (☎ 329-42-29; www.pascualessurf.com.mx; r US\$10-20) is the local surfing nexus. Proprietor Edgar Álvarez welcomes surfers

from all over the world and fixes their boards when they get munched. Everyone calls each other 'bro.' The rooms are Spartan to the extreme, but that's the way the 'bros' seem to like it.

To get to Pascuales, travel first to the town of Tecomán, 3km south of Cuyutlán. If driving, follow the sign from downtown about 10km to the beach. Taxis or *combis* provide transport from Tecomán to Pascuales.

MICHOCÁN

Travelers to the unspoiled coast of Michoacán may feel as if they have discovered the place. There are few tourists, only a smattering of accommodations but plenty of choice campsites.

BOCA DE APIZA

☎ 313 / pop 225

Near the Michoacán–Colima border, at the mouth of the Río Coahuayana, basks this dusty little fishing town lined with egret-filled mangrove lagoons. A 300m line of competing seafood *enramadas* crowd the beach, and on Sunday afternoons hordes of local kids bathe and splash in the river. Gentle waves, hot black sands and general fun-in-the-sun activities prevail here. To get there, turn off Hwy 200 at the town of Coahuayana (Km 228) and continue about 4km to the beach.

There's another side to Boca de Apiza, literally. Across the river (and across the Michoacán–Colima border) is where Mexican families have built many *palapa* shelters for Sunday picnics. Here a long beach heads northwards, with a sandy access road going inland 6.5km to meet back with the highway. There are no services here, so bring your own supplies.

Thinking about sticking around? Try **Hotel Sarahi** (☎ 327-05-64; 1/2 beds US\$14/19, bungalows US\$40), the most decent digs in town, with plain rooms that will do in a pinch. Management is hoping to add TV and air-con, so prices may rise.

SAN JUAN DE ALIMA

☎ 313

About 20km south of Boca de Apiza, near where the highway meets the coast, lie the concrete bumps of San Juan de Alima (Km 211).

BEACHES OF MICHOACÁN

Adventurers looking for desolate expanses of golden sand, tiny rocky beach coves, quiet estuaries harboring a multitude of birdlife, and mostly undeveloped coastal towns will discover them all here along the scenic 250km coast of Michoacán. Hwy 200 traces the shoreline and passes dozens of different beaches; some have gentle lapping waves and are good for swimming, while others have big breakers suitable for surfing. Many of the beaches are uninhabited; some have small communities. Overdeveloped megaresorts are few and far between, nightlife only comes calm and laid-back, and just a few towns attract large groups of gringos. Mango, coconut, papaya and banana plantations line the highway, while the Sierra Madre del Sur mountains form a verdant backdrop. Cattle pastures peek from between predominantly deciduous tree-covered hillsides, and the odd cactus or weaverbird nest adds visual curiosity.

At the Michoacán–Colima border, **Boca de Apiza**, deposited at the mouth of the Río Coahuayana, is a mangrove-lined beach with many competing seafood *enramadas*; turn off Hwy 200 at the town of Coahuayana. Kilometer markers begin counting down from Km 231 at the state border.

San Juan de Alima (Km 209), 20km south, after the highway meets the coast, is popular with surfers and has many beachfront restaurants and several modern hotels.

A short distance down the coast, **Las Brisas** (Km 207) is another beachside community with places to stay. Still further along, **Playa La Ticla** (Km 183) is a good surfing spot with beachfront cabanas for rent.

The next stop is **Faro de Bucerías** (Km 173), known for its clear, pale-blue waters, yellow sand and rocky islands. It's a good spot for camping, swimming and snorkeling, and the local Nahua community prepares fresh seafood.

Further along, white-sand **Playa Maruata** (Km 150) is one of Michoacán's most beautiful beaches, with clear turquoise waters. This is the principal Mexican beach where black sea turtles lay their eggs; these and other species of sea turtles are set free here each year by conservation programs. Camping and discreet nude bathing are possible, and services include rustic cabanas and some *palapas* serving fresh seafood.

Further south, **Pichilinguillo** (Km 95) is in a small bay, good for swimming. Further still are beautiful, unsigned **Barra de Nexpa** (Km 56), popular with surfers; **Caleta de Campos** (Km 50), on a lovely little bay; **La Soledad** (Solitude), a very beautiful, tranquil little beach; and **Las Peñas**, another good surfing beach. **Playa Azul**, 24km northwest of Lázaro Cárdenas, is another laid-back beach community that is easy to visit and has surfable waves.

Plenty of Michoacán's coves and beaches are not listed in this or any guidebook, and those places will be even more isolated and untouched. They are waiting to be discovered, so see them now.

It's a town still defining itself: half-finished constructions attest to continuing growth. A main road of cobbles and concrete keeps dust levels down and heat levels up. However, there are reasons to come: plenty of hotels, small stores and beachfront restaurants service the tourists and are spread out along the coast where creamy surfing breakers curl and fall. Be careful of swimming out too far, though, where heavier currents lurk.

Sleeping & Eating

The restaurants you want to eat at are on the beach, and they're just like the ones up and down the rest of the coast, so don't expect any surprises. There's a choice of well-priced hotels, ranging from dour to decent. *All* of them are blue.

Hotel Parador (☎ 327-90-38; s US\$25-38, d US\$29-58, tr US\$59-65; 🏠 📶) With the town's best ambience and a good variety of rooms, this is the best choice for groups and families. The smaller, cheaper rooms are fairly good but the more expensive ones with balconies with views are downright pleasant. The friendly atmosphere in the popular restaurant will make you linger over your lunch.

Hotel San Juan (☎ 327-90-11; r US\$25-35, bungalow US\$60; 🏠 📶) It's new and light blue, with San Juan's only Internet café and an eagerness to please. Rooms are basic but immaculate; the more expensive ones have air-con. The *palapa* restaurant with well-made fare is watched over by rowdy parrots.

Hotel El Oceano (☎ 327-90-19; r/bungalow US\$35/60; 🏠 📶) El Oceano is sky blue with clean,

well-kept lavender rooms and a serviceable restaurant. The fan-cooled bungalows have two bedrooms and full kitchen; the seven rooms have air-con and sleep two to four souls.

Hotel Villas de San Juan (☎ 327-90-64; r US\$25, bungalows US\$50) These centrally located villas are painted an indescribable shade of blue. Inside the high wing, sea-view rooms are decent but could use some balconies. The friendly, comfortable bungalows lining the driveway have kitchens and two bedrooms.

Hotel Coral (☎ 328-80-06; d/tr beds US\$15/25) This dark-blue option has worn, comfortable rooms. The otherwise empty ground floor is marked by supporting pillars, giving a somewhat bleak, tidal-wave-ready feel to the whole place. Small pink rooms greet you up the concrete stairs, if that's where you want to go.

LAS BRISAS

The road south from San Juan de Alima affords one tremendous scenic overlook where visitors can survey desolate sandy beaches as far as the eye can see. The tiny community of Las Brisas, 1.5km down a dirt road from the highway (Km 204), is accented by just a few *palapa* restaurants and one big-ass, incongruous midrange hotel – the only solid building on the beach. It's very peaceful, with swaying palms and a long, wide, flat beach with fine, firm dark sand. The wind tends to kick up (as the name implies) and a nice bird-filled lagoon is nearby. Camping and RV parking (no hookups) are exceptionally pleasant here. To get there by bus, travel first to La Placita and then commandeer a taxi.

Unless you camp, you'll be staying at the moderately priced **Hotel Paraíso Las Brisas** (☎ 327-90-55; www.paraisolasbrisasmichoacan.com; r US\$60-80, ste US\$160-250; 🚻 🚿), where 30 large, modern and thoughtfully appointed rooms are on offer with cable TV and air-con.

LA PLACITA

Here's a cute little highway town (Km 199) with a leafy plaza and surrounding *comedores* (inexpensive restaurants) and, if you're going south, the last Pemex gas station until Caleta de Campos, about 150km away. Fill up here, and if you can't find a roof to sleep under in nearby Playa La Ticla (below), try

Hotel Reyna or Hotel de la Costa, two basic cheapies near the highway.

PLAYA LA TICLA

At Km 186 a bumpy dirt road peels off and leads over a hill and down to Playa La Ticla, another prime surfing destination. In the early morning, calm seas near the shore give birth to curving arcs of gorgeous, misty-edged waves, simply beautiful to watch – but even better to ride. The quaint pueblo of La Ticla, hiding behind a small coastal mountain, draws mostly foreign surfers with their own vehicles. They also bring their own boards and camping equipment, since beach services are fairly undeveloped and the quiet little town isn't yet geared toward tourism of any sort. A nearby palm-ringed lagoon provides bird-watching possibilities, salt-free swimming and a variation in landscape.

You can camp (per person US\$1.50) under flimsy *palapa* shelters at the northern edge of town. Your other option is **Parador Turístico la Ticla** (☎ 313-88-665; camp sites per person US\$3.50, r with shared bathroom US\$13, cabanas US\$66), offering well-kept, thatch-roofed cabanas on stilts. If you snag a tiny room, don't expect much privacy or peace: the ceiling is shared and your neighbors will be young surfers, dude, so bring earplugs. Perhaps the interesting burning smells in the air will aid entry into a dreamlike state.

HIGHWAY 200, MICHOACÁN STYLE

Be prepared for some slower driving along the stretch of coast from Km 74 to Km 134, somewhere between Barra de Nexpa and Faro de Bucerías. This area isn't the highest priority for Mexican highway funds, and the road is mostly curvy with some minor rough spots. Give yourself a couple more hours of daylight to cover this stretch, and make sure your vehicle is full of gas: there are no Pemex stations between La Placita (Km 199) and Caleta de Campos (Km 50), though you'll pass dinky little towns where signs may offer a few liters for sale. Also, don't expect much solid accommodation when the sun gets low: unless you're camping, you won't run across many places to stay, though there will be a few eateries along the way.

Restaurant Serrano (mains US\$2.50-8), nearest the lagoon's mouth, is popular for breakfast and seafood. You can camp for free if you eat there often enough.

You have a choice of two dirt roads that lead to Playa La Ticla, at Km 183 or 186. Don't forget sunscreen and insect repellent.

FARO DE BUCERÍAS

About 2km down a beach dirt road, at Km 173, lies a calm cove, which has decent snorkeling and is wonderful for swimming. Known for its clear, pale-blue waters, soft yellow sand and rocky islands, Faro de Bucerías is also good for camping and having a spot of lunch with the Nahua community. A picturesque square red-and-white lighthouse sits high up on the hill, and there's some good tide-pooling behind the lofty restaurant Palapa Miramar – just be careful getting around the rocky point, and never turn your back on those ocean waves.

There are no hotels; either rumble in with your RV or camp (US\$8) under one of the *palapa* shelters. There are a number of open-air seafood restaurants; lobsters are plentiful, well priced and beautifully prepared here.

PLAYA MARUATA

About 1km west of Km 150, past the town's bleak plaza, lies this paradise for beach lovers and rustic campers. Playa Maruata is three beaches in one; two climbable rocky heads, riddled with small caves and tunnels, separate the three sections of white-sand crescents. Each has a different size and character: the one on the right (northernmost) is about 1km long and has the roughest waters (don't try swimming here); the middle arc is more intimate and OK for strong swimmers; the one on the left is 3km long and decorated with fishing boats and is where most camping shelters and their snack sheds lie). There are also shallow, palm-ringed lagoons to explore, often visited by vultures looking for fish scraps (you can get mighty close to the birds on the ground). Two simple *palapa* restaurants and some camping shelters dot the varied landscape, but there are no real concrete structures or hotels. It's a pleasant and tranquil place to hang out with your sweetie or a large stack of paperbacks.

Playa Maruata is also the principal Mexican beach where black sea turtles lay their eggs – from June to December they come

ashore nightly. Hatchlings of these and other species of sea turtles are set free here each year by conservation programs.

Camping shelters are pretty much all the same and most charge US\$1.25 per person. You can also string up a hammock, or rent one at some shelters. Those who need four semisolid walls can try one of the few rustic, two-bed cabanas for US\$11, and RV drivers have several discreet spots in which to park. For simple groceries such as fruit, ramen, cereal or beer, there's a small store at the end of the southernmost beach past all the *palapa* shelters.

BARRA DE NEXPA

☎ 753 / pop 50

At Km 55.5, just north of Puente Nexpa bridge and 1km from the highway down a cobbled road, lies Nexpa. The salt 'n' pepper bar of sand here, and a good number of healthy waves – which build up and curl sharply in the mornings – bring in surfers from around the world. Rustic cabanas, good campsites and some decent restaurants add comfort to the mix, and the very laid-back feel completes the recipe for a peaceful stay.

A long point break wave curls in from the left. The longest are about 150m, and 50m waves are common. As long as there's not an organized surfing tour in town, there are enough waves for everyone. Beginners hone their chops in winter but make way for more advanced surfers when the big swells hit, from March through October. With its rocky shoreline and strong surf, Nexpa is not ideal for swimming.


Twenty minutes by foot along the river and into the mountains, the fluorescent-blue **El Troncon** waterfall makes for a refreshing hike. Engage a local guide to lead the way for a small tip.

Jorge's Tienda (☎ 555-150-92-43; helennex@hotmail.com) rents surfboards (US\$10/US\$50 per day/week) and sells gear. It also has telephone service and Internet access (US\$2 per hour), and sells groceries. Pablo's Palapa, near Restaurant Chichos, repairs and sells boards. There's a larger surf shop in the nearby Caleta de Campos (opposite); a taxi will take you there for about US\$4.

Sleeping & Eating

Rio Nexpa Rooms (☎ 531-52-55 in Caleta de Campos; www.surf-mexico.com/sites/nexpa; r US\$30; 📍) This

beautifully crafted SE Asian-style *palapa* about 200m inland along the river has four comfortable rooms with three full-sized beds and a loft. It has a shared kitchen, lagoon-side garden area and tranquil communal sitting room.

Gilberto's Cabañas (cabanas per person US\$10, tent/RV sites US\$3/9; ) Gilberto's offers cabanas, some more rustic than others, some with kitchen, and most with hammocks. It has a communal kitchen and shower block for tent and RV campers, and Gilberto offers taxi service to Caleta. Look for Gilberto's sign on the right-hand side as you enter town.


Restaurant Chicho (cabanas US\$14-23) Chicho has tables perched just right for watching surfers cut waves nearby. The food (with mains costing US\$3 to US\$10) is good, and there are also grassy camp sites.





La Isla Restaurant (mains \$3-12). This restaurant cooks up the best Western breakfasts around, with good cappuccinos and the largest fruit plate on the coast. A taxi service and a casual book exchange are available. Rooms (US\$10 to US\$35) are also available.




CALETA DE CAMPOS


 753 / pop 2000

A friendly town on a bluff overlooking a lovely azure bay, 'Caleta' (Km 50) is a quiet place, but it has a pair of good, clean hotels and several satisfying places to eat. Caleta's paved main drag has all the essentials, including a telephone *caseta*, late-night *taquerías* (taco stalls) and *torta* shops, a pharmacy and grocery stores. The southern side of the bluff has perfect waves for novice surfers.

Just off the main drag, near Hotel Yuritzi, is **Surf y Espuma** ( 531-52-55; surfboard rental per day \$10), which sells and rents surf gear. It also carries surfwear, does fishing charters and washes your laundry (US\$1.25 per kg)

Modern, well maintained and comfortable, **Hotel Yuritzi** ( 531-53-53; www.hotelyuritzi.com; Corregidora 10; s US\$35-45, d US\$40-55, tr US\$45-60;   ) counts as its customers business travelers, beach bums and families.

Hotel Los Arcos ( 531-50-38; s US\$25, d US\$30-35, with air-con & hot water US\$35;  ) affords dramatic sea views and bright rooms. It's toward the ocean, at the end of the main drag, and is a bit run-down, but the bird's-eye view of Bahía de Bufadero's blowhole is brilliant.

Large, well-appointed **Villa Tropical** ( 531-52-55; www.caletadecampos.com; villa US\$235) can sleep


up to 12 and is thus a sweet deal. The owner, who also operates Surf y Espuma, is happy to negotiate, particularly when the house is empty. The breezy roof deck with views of the lighthouse is the ultimate party nook.

Hourly buses depart Caleta for Lázaro Cárdenas from 5am to 7pm (US\$3.50, 1½ hours). A taxi between Caleta de Campos and Barra de Nexpa costs US\$4.

LAS PEÑAS



A small cove at Km 18 is home to eight *enramadas* and one wide but cozy beach, punctuated by rocky headlands. Around the southern point is a much longer beach called **Playa Dorada**, dotted with a few rustic restaurants of its own and stretching as far as you can see. No accommodations are available, but camping may be possible – ask around at Playa Dorada or just pick an isolated spot.





PLAYA AZUL


 753 / pop 3500

Playa Azul is a sleepy, dusty beach resort backed by lagoons fed by tributaries of the Río Balsas. It's usually quiet, with a trickle of foreign travelers enjoying the long beach and surfable waves. A strong undertow makes swimming touch-and-go; swimming is better (when it's not mosquito season) at Laguna Pichi, a couple of kilometers east along the beach, where boat trips take visitors to view the plants, birds and other animals that inhabit the surrounding mangrove forest.

You can string up a hammock at most of the beachfront *enramadas*; otherwise there are a couple of reasonable hotels, all with private bathrooms, in town.

The 42 large and comfortable balconied rooms at **Hotel María Teresa** ( 536-00-05; Independencia 626; s US\$42-47, d US\$57-68;  ) are fresh and up-to-date. A poolside *palapa* restaurant-bar comes with an attractive patio area. Look for this place two blocks north of the plaza.

On the far (east) side of the plaza and a bit worn around the edges, **Hotel María Isabel** ( 536-00-16; Madero s/n; d US\$25-40;   ) has impeccably clean and very peaceful rooms.

The upmarket, 73-room **Hotel Playa Azul** ( 536-00-24/91; Carranza s/n; r US\$48-57, with air-con & TV US\$72, RV sites US\$18;   ) has a small trailer park and enjoyable rooms around a garden courtyard with an inviting pool. The poolside Las Gaviotas restaurant/bar (mains

US\$7-15), open from 7:30am to 10:30pm, is a good bet for anything from pizza to *pozole*.

The *malecón* is lined by informal restaurants with beachside seating. One of the most laid-back is **Yupanky** (mains US\$4-10; ☎ 8am-6pm), remarkable for its utter idleness. Hammocks are strung up throughout and the sound of the pounding surf often mixes with the melancholy music of Playa Azul's elderly mariachis. The menu features seafood, of course, and there's invariably a pile of coconuts waiting to be cracked open.

Locals recommend Restaurant Galdy and Restaurant Familiar Martita, both on the market street near Madero, around the corner from Hotel Playa Azul. Both serve fresh-squeezed juices and good cheap grub (*comida corrida* US\$3.25).

Combis run every 10 minutes from 5am to 9pm between Playa Azul and Lázaro Cárdenas (US\$1.25, 30 minutes, 24km). Taxis between Playa Azul and Lázaro Cárdenas cost around US\$10.

LÁZARO CÁRDENAS

☎ 753 / pop 78,000

Industrial Lázaro isn't of interest to travelers, but since it's the terminus of several bus routes tourists do pass through. Once here, you can change buses, stock up on provisions and head 24km west to Playa Azul (p175). If you must spend the night, several adequate hotels are near the bus stations.

Hotel Reyna Pio (☎ 532-06-20; Corregidora 78; s/d US\$20/25; ☎) is a good, friendly budget hotel with clean, spacious rooms. It's on the corner of Av 8 de Mayo, a block west of Av Lázaro Cárdenas, near the bus terminals.

Hotel Viña del Mar (☎ 532-04-15; Javier Mina 352; s/d US\$22/25; ☎) has a leafy, inviting courtyard with pool, but most of the darkish rooms are not around it. Still, they're good-sized and come with air-con and TV. It's half a block west of Av Lázaro Cárdenas.

Hotel Casablanca (☎ 537-34-80; Nicolás Bravo 475; s/d US\$36/48; ☎) has air-con, TV, a pool with a Jacuzzi and secure parking. The 56 modern rooms with balconies and wide windows overlook the city or inland mountains. Look for this high-rise a block east of Av Lázaro Cárdenas.

Many cheap restaurants cluster around the bus terminals. Locals recommend **Restaurant El Tejado** (Lázaro Cárdenas s/n; mains \$4.50-10), between Corregidora and Javier Mina,

for meats, seafood, six styles of frog legs and four pages of drinks. If you're tired of Mexican, **Restaurant Kame** (☎ 537-26-60; lunch US\$4.50), one block south of the Estrella Blanca bus terminal, is a Japanese eatery with a variety of delicious meals.

Getting There & Away

Lázaro has four bus terminals, all a few blocks from each other. **Galeana** (☎ 532-02-62) and **Parhikuni** (☎ 532-30-06), with services northwest to Manzanillo and inland to Uruapan and Morelia, share a **terminal** (Lázaro Cárdenas 1810 at Constitución de 1814). Opposite, Autobuses de Jalisco, La Línea, Vía 2000 and Sur de Jalisco share another **terminal** (☎ 537-18-50; Lázaro Cárdenas 1791) and serve the same destinations, plus Colima, Guadalajara and Mexico City.

The terminal for **Estrella Blanca** (EB; ☎ 532-11-71; Francisco Villa 65) is also the home base for Cuauhtémoc and Elite. From here buses head southeast to Zihuatanejo and Acapulco; up the coast to Manzanillo, Mazatlán and Tijuana; and inland to Uruapan, Morelia and Mexico City. The **Estrella de Oro terminal** (☎ 532-02-75; Corregidora 318) serves Acapulco, Cuernavaca, Mexico City and Zihuatanejo.

Daily buses from Lázaro Cárdenas:

Acapulco EB (US\$19, 6-7hr, 12 1st-class; US\$16, 6-7hr, hourly 2nd-class); Estrella de Oro (US\$19, 6-7hr, 3 1st-class; US\$15, 6-7hr, 11 2nd-class)

Caleta de Campos Galeana (US\$4.50, 1½hr, 10 2nd-class); Sur de Jalisco (US\$4.50, 1½hr, 4 2nd-class)

Colima Autobuses de Jalisco (US\$17, 4-6½hr) Same buses as to Guadalajara.

Guadalajara Autobuses de Jalisco (US\$38, 9-11hr, 5 1st-class); Sur de Jalisco (US\$28, 9-11hr, 4 2nd-class)

Manzanillo Elite (US\$23, 7hr, 4 1st-class daily); Galeana (US\$17.50, 6-7hr, 4 2nd-class); Autobuses de Jalisco (US\$26, 6-7hr, 2nd-class at 2:30pm & 5:30pm)

Mexico City Vía Plus (US\$45, 12hr, 5 1st-class); Futura (US\$45, 5 1st-class); Estrella de Oro (US\$44, 2 1st-class) To Terminal Sur.

Morelia Futura (US\$29, 4-8hr, 5 1st-class); Parhikuni 'Plus' (US\$36, 4-8hr, 1 executive; US\$30, 14 2nd-class); Futura (US\$29, 4-8hr, 5 1st-class)

Puerto Vallarta (US\$34, 12hr, 4 1st-class *Elite*)

Uruapan (US\$12-17, 3-6hr) Same buses as to Morelia.

Zihuatanejo (US\$5-7, 2-3hr) Same buses as to Acapulco.

Combis to Playa Azul via La Mira trawl Av Lázaro Cárdenas every 10 minutes from 5am to 9pm (US\$1.25, 30 minutes, 24km), stopping outside the Autobuses de Jalisco terminal, opposite Galeana. A taxi from Lázaro Cárdenas to Playa Azul is US\$10 to US\$12.

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