

# Northern Mariana Islands

The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) is currently undergoing massive change as its fiscally challenged capital Saipan painfully comes to terms with the loss of its lucrative Japanese tour market. But travel trends come and go; the charm of the islands endures. It's therefore your mission, should you accept it, to seek out the best of the CNMI.

At first glance, Saipan can seem like a package-tour nightmare, a place where Chamorro culture has devolved, tour buses constantly patrol the sights, and solitude seems hard to come by. But catch the island at the right time and at the right angle (in the right place) and you'll be rewarded with some poignant experiences: flame trees in bloom; melancholy historical sights; turquoise waters and white sands; and fine diving and snorkelling.

At some stage, you will need respite, though, and that's waiting just south of Saipan in the form of Tinian. This is a somniferous island, tiny in size but claiming a mighty chapter in world history: American B-29s flew from here to drop the atomic bomb on Japan. Tinian, for the most part, has escaped major development (although it does have an ostentatious casino) and its natural charms remain intact, like lovely beaches and rewarding hikes.

But the real jewel in the CNMI chain is beautiful Rota. Actually, Rota is the Diamond Tiara of the Marianas, the crowning glory, an island punctuated by a hilly interior, small farms, good spring water, enough deer to maintain a hunting season and fiery orange sunsets that light the evening skies. And a more friendly place you'd be hard-pressed to find; by the time you've finished with Rota, your arm will be sore from waving and your heart will be sore from having to leave.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Breathe in the lush serenity of **Pona Point** (p388) in Rota
- Enjoy the tranquillity of peaceful **Tinian** (p382)
- Reflect on one of WWII's most tragic tales at **Banzai Cliff** (p378) in Saipan
- Commune with nature at the teeming **bird sanctuary** (p389) in Rota
- Get deep and wet (if you're an experienced diver) at the famous **Grotto** (p378) in Saipan



## NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FACTS

- **Capital city (and Island):** Garapan (Saipan)
- **Population:** 80,362
- **Land area:** 477 sq km
- **International telephone code:** 1-670
- **Currency:** US dollar (US\$)
- **Languages:** English, Chamorro
- **Greeting:** *Hafa adai*
- **Website:** www.mymarianas.com

Like Guam, the CNMI lies directly along the typhoon track, with typhoons most commonly occurring from August to December. In 2004 the CNMI suffered three major typhoons: Typhoon Chaba and Typhoon Songda in August, and Typhoon Sarika in September. Chaba hit Saipan, Rota and Tinian, forcing over 1000 residents from their homes to evacuation centres. Damage was estimated at US\$18 million and the Northern Marianas were declared an official disaster zone. Songda and Sarika were less widespread: both hit the small islands of Pagan, Alamagan and Agrihan, north of Saipan. See p61 for more on typhoons.

## HISTORY Reduction

The ancient Chamorro inhabited the Mariana islands (Guam, Saipan, Rota and Tinian) at least as early as 1500 BC, probably migrating from Indonesia (they shared Southeast Asian language and customs).

When Ferdinand Magellan came upon the Marianas in 1521, he called them *Islas de los Ladrones* (Islands of Thieves); they were renamed *Las Marianas* in 1668.

In the 1690s the Spanish, initiating their 'reduction' policy, swept down through the Marianas, rounded up the Chamorros and brought them to Guam to forcibly convert them to Christianity. On Rota several hundred Rotanese managed to hide in the hills and avoid capture, which is why some of the people of Rota today represent the purest Chamorro blood in the Marianas.

Around 1820 the Spanish allowed islanders from the western Carolines to move to

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The rainy season is from July to October, when rainfall averages about 300mm a month; from December to May the monthly rainfall average is only around 100mm.

According to *The Guinness Book of Records*, Saipan has the world's most equable temperature, averaging 27°C year-round.

the larger Mariana islands. The Carolinians managed Spanish cattle herds and maintained a presence on the Marianas at a time when Spain was skittish over German intentions in the area.

Germany bought the Northern Marianas from Spain in 1899 as part of its Micronesia package deal, their primary interest here being copra production.

### Destruction

When the Japanese took the Northern Marianas from Germany at the beginning of WWI, there were fewer than 4000 Chamorros and Carolinians on the islands.

The Japanese had little interest in copra but had great expectations for sugar cane. They chopped down groves of coconut trees and cleared tropical forests and jungles to create level farmland. When *latte* stones (p225) from ancient villages got in the way, they were cast aside.

By the mid-1930s sugar operations in the Marianas were providing the Japanese with more than 60% of all revenues generated in Micronesia.

At the outbreak of WWII there were over 45,000 Japanese and immigrant workers in the Northern Marianas – more than 10 times the number of Micronesians.

### Expulsion

On 15 June 1944 the US launched Operation Forager, one of the war's largest military operations: an invasion force of 127,000 soldiers, 600 ships and 2000 planes attacked first Saipan and then Guam, with pre-invasion bombing attacks including the first-ever wartime use of napalm. The Japanese had 31,000 soldiers waiting; resistance was fierce but by evening the US had 20,000 men ashore.

Garapan, the Japanese administrative centre, fell on 3 July. When the battle for Saipan was declared over on 9 July, 3500 Americans, 30,000 Japanese defenders and 400 Saipanese were dead.

After the fall of Saipan, Americans made their first beach landing on Tinian's north-west shore on 24 July 1944, securing the island after nine days of heavy combat and the loss of 400 American and over 5000 Japanese lives. US troops immediately began extending the Japanese airbase on Tinian and used it to stage air raids on Japan, in-

cluding the atomic bomb drops on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

US invasion forces bypassed Rota.

### Reconstruction

The fierce fighting reduced whole towns to rubble; in the years following, the US administered the islands by providing hand-outs rather than encouraging economic development.

In 1948 the CIA closed off half of Saipan to islanders and outsiders alike and used the northern part for covert military manoeuvres; the Northern Marianas were finally opened to visitors in 1962.

In 1961 Saipan and Rota petitioned the US government, asking to become integrated with Guam. The requests were made nearly every year until 1969, when Guam voters were allowed to vote in a referendum on the issue and rejected the idea. One reason cited for the rejection was that many Guamanians still harboured ill feelings towards those Saipanese who had acted as interpreters during Guam's occupation by the Japanese.

In June 1975 the people of the Northern Marianas voted to become a US commonwealth, and in doing so became the first district to withdraw from the Trust Territory.

Since the commonwealth covenant took effect, the US has provided hundreds of millions of dollars for capital development, government operations and other programs in the Northern Marianas. Today, however, there's a growing concern that the Marianas were pushed into becoming a US commonwealth, with standards of education just one of the things that were left by the wayside in favour of rapid tourist development.

In the past several years, a number of garment factories have closed on Saipan, leaving a large group of foreign workers unemployed (perhaps as many as 15,000) and forcing a rise in prostitution, according to government sources.

That's the tip of an economic meltdown that is threatening the CNMI's immediate future. The garment industry, for example, has traditionally been Saipan's strongest, but in 2005 it made US\$5 million less than gambling revenue; poker machines are in every village on Saipan and bring with them the full gamut of social problems, including increased crime.

### JAL TURNS TO JELLY

There's no better indicator of the Northern Mariana Islands' economic woes than Japan Air Lines' termination of its Saipan services. Although JAL has been in the Saipan game for over 30 years, flying 50% of passengers travelling to the island from Japan, it withdrew for good in October 2005. They're not the first major Japanese player to get out: Japanese owners sold various hotels, resorts and golf courses in 2004, with most of these investors citing Saipan's growing prostitution racket as a deterrent (especially as it's centred in Garapan's hotel strip, where most Japanese tourists stay). Others say that the government policy of allowing foreigners to enter for work purposes without doing background checks also contributes to an unsafe environment. Ultimately, Japanese tourists no longer see Saipan as a safe destination and have voted with their wallets, and that goes to the heart of the JAL pullout. CNMI officials are naturally aghast at the decision – they estimate it will cost the government US\$80 million a year in lost revenue.

## THE CULTURE

### The National Psyche

Life on Saipan, for many locals, has revolved around Japanese tourism for so long that it's hard to imagine any other way. The people remain friendly and optimistic, but there's an underlying uncertainty as jobs and hollow markets shake local confidence. Rota, meanwhile, maintains its reputation as the friendliest of the Mariana islands, even after the CNMI Senate recently cut US\$1.2 million from its budget. This prompted Rota's mayor, Benjamin T Manglona, to hint that 'there is always a temptation to join Guam', which in turn caused a Tinian senator to wish for Rota's immediate secession and therefore more money for Tinian.

### Lifestyle

The local Chamorro culture is a hybrid of native and Spanish colonial influences. In Saipan especially, there's a powerful overlay of popular American trends, and perhaps even more so than Guam, there's hardly any indigenous culture left to speak of. As on Guam, most cultural activities centre on the Catholic church, especially among the Chamorro population and Filipino immigrants. There are also followers of the Baptist, Methodist, Mormon, Korean Presbyterian, Evangelical and Seventh-Day Adventist churches.

There is some Carolinian culture going down, although it has been mainly integrated with Chamorro, forming a hybrid known as Chamolinian.

### Population

Saipan is home to approximately 90% of the CNMI's population, while Tinian and Rota have 5% each. Around half of the total

population is resident foreigners, mostly from the Philippines, China and Korea. Of the native population, roughly 75% is Chamorro; the remainder are Carolinian.

### ARTS

The annual Flame Tree Arts Festival (p391) is the region's biggest celebration of local artistic culture.

The Carolinian Stick Dance, a foot-stomping, percussion-driven dance, is said to be a local tradition, although the only time you're likely to see it performed is at the Flame Tree festival or at the Chamolinian Cultural Village (p377).

### Cinema

Given the Marianas' war history, it's no surprise that a few films have attempted to record that period.

Josef von Sternberg's *The Saga of Anatahan* (1954), set on the now-volcanic northern Marianas island of Anatahan, is a peculiar little film that purports to tell a true tale of shipwrecked Japanese soldiers during WWII who don't believe the war is over until years later; meanwhile they terrorise a local woman. The film is narrated in English, yet the actors speak Japanese.

John Woo's *Windtalkers* (2002) is a depiction of the Battle of Saipan with lots of ultraviolence and male bonding – and a stack of clichés.

### LANGUAGE

*Hafa adai* is the traditional greeting, as it is in Guam, although the slang 'howzit' is nearly as common. English is the official language, while Chamorro (also spoken on Guam) and Carolinian are native tongues.

On Saipan, Japanese is spoken in many hotels and shops, at least in Garapan.

### Chamorro Basics

Hello.	<i>Hafa adai.</i>
Goodbye.	<i>Adiós.</i>
How are you?	<i>Hafa tatamanu?</i>
I'm well.	<i>Maolek.</i>
Please.	<i>Pot fa bot.</i>
Thanks.	<i>Si Yu'os ma'ase'.</i>
Yes.	<i>Hunggan.</i>
No.	<i>Ahe'.</i>

### ENVIRONMENT

The CNMI is made up of 14 of the 15 islands in the Marianas archipelago. This archipelago curves 645km northward from Guam, the chain's southernmost island, dividing the Pacific Ocean and the Philippine Sea.

### Geography

All the islands are high types of either volcanic or limestone formation. Except for Aguijan, which is just south of Tinian, the smaller Mariana islands run north of Saipan. The highest point in all of Micronesia is in the Marianas – 964m on the remote island of Agrihan.

In April 1990 all 21 residents of the island of Anatahan were evacuated to Saipan following an earthquake that measured 7.4 on the Richter scale and signs that a volcanic eruption was imminent.

Anatahan has remained uninhabited ever since, just as well considering the

island witnessed its first historical volcanic eruption in 2003. There have been several eruptions since, the most recent being in 2005, when some people on Saipan and Rota were reported to have taken sick as a result of volcanic haze and ash.

### Wildlife

After WWII Saipan was so deforested that *tangan-tangan* plants were aerially seeded to prevent erosion. These plants now predominate the northern end of the island and have choked out native flora and upset the natural prewar ecosystem. Despite the pervasiveness of *tangan-tangan*, hibiscus, banana and coconut trees are also everywhere, as are flame trees that flower in May and June.

## SAIPAN

pop 62,392 / area 122 sq km

On first appearances, Saipan seems to be in a bit of a sorry state. Its character in recent years has been aligned to the yen and the crush of Japanese tourists looking to find a cheap slice of exotica in their own backyard. As a result, a great deal of the island's indigenous charm has been overshadowed by fast-food chains and poker houses; foreign workers currently outnumber indigenous groups, and the capital, Garapan, is a flashy tourist trap, filled with massage parlours and a growing sense of unease.

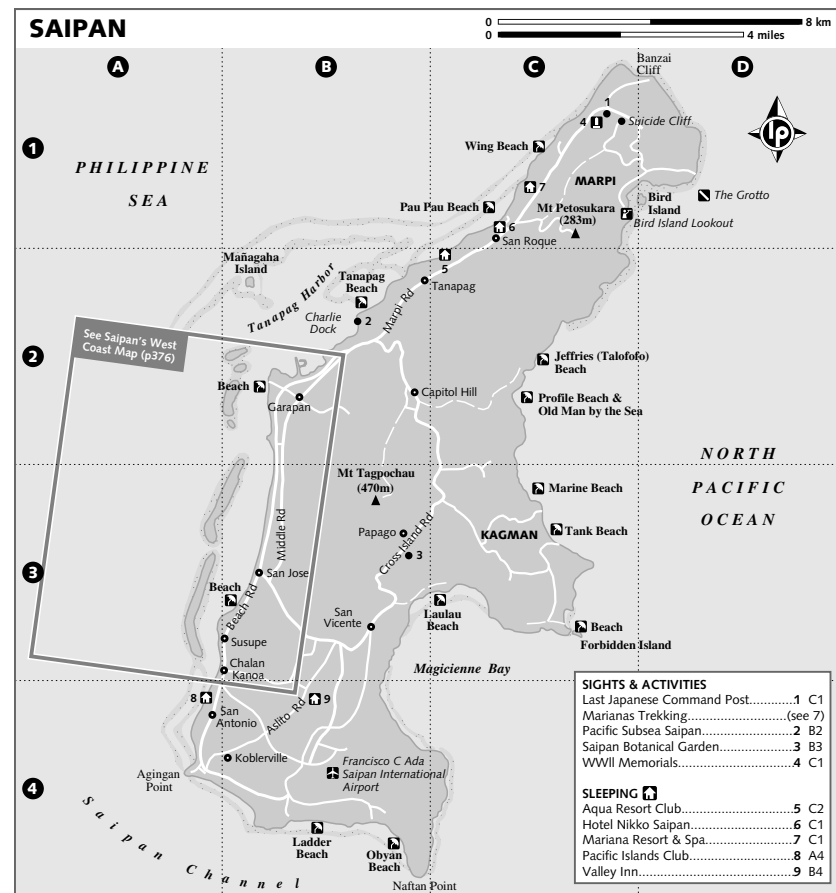
All the same, Saipan has its adherents (apparently, a local joke goes like this: Q: Why do palm trees in Saipan bend to the south? A: Because Guam creates a vacuum).

Outside Garapan, there are gentle beaches on the western and southern coasts, a rugged and rocky eastern coast, a hilly interior and dramatic cliffs to the north.

Finally, despite everything that's been done to their culture (invasion, occupation, appalling economic policies), the people remain welcoming – and tolerant, for the most part.

### ORIENTATION

The airport is at the island's southern end. See p374 for more on getting to/from the airport. Most major hotels and services are on Beach Rd, which runs along the west



coast. Note that Middle Rd is formally known as Chalan Pale Arnold Rd.

### INFORMATION

#### Internet Access

**Computer World** (Map p376; ☎ 233 3321; Garapan; per hr US\$4)

**EZ Rider** (Map p376; ☎ 233 8191; Garapan; per hr US\$4)

**Joeten-Kiyu Public Library** (Map p376; ☎ 235 7322; Garapan) Free access.

### Media

**Saipan Tribune** (www.saipantribune.com) Daily newspaper.

### Medical Services

**Commonwealth Health Center** (Map p376; ☎ 234 8950; Middle Rd, Garapan)

### Money

There are abundant ATMs.

**Bank of Guam** (Map p376; ☎ 233 5000; Garapan)

**Bank of Hawaii** (Map p376; ☎ 236 8450; Garapan)

### Post

**Main post office** (Map p376; Chalan Kanoa)

### Tourist Information

**Marianas visitor information centre** (Map p376;

☎ 664 3200; www.mymarianas.com; Beach Rd;

☎ 8am-5pm)

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Saipan has experienced a rash of burglaries, robberies and purse snatchings in recent times. Take the usual precautions:

## THE NORTHERN MARIANAS IN...

### Two Days

Spend the first two days in Saipan. The northern tip of the island is home to some of Saipan's more rewarding sights, including **Pau Pau** (p377) and **Wing** (p377) beaches, which offer good snorkelling. Also up north, **Banzai Cliff** (p378), **Suicide Cliff** (p378) and the **Last Japanese Command Post** (p378) offer up disturbing war histories, yet also provide some scenic reflection with fine views. If you're a confident diver, you won't want to miss the **Grotto** (p378), one of Micronesia's famous dive sites. In the afternoon wander around Garapan if you dare, taking in **Micro Beach** (opposite), **American Memorial Park** (opposite) and **Sugar King Park** (opposite). Later, dine at a Garapan **restaurant** (p382).

The next day, avoid package tourists by checking out the rugged east coast, including **Profile** (p379) and **Laulau** (p379) beaches. Drive up to scenic **Mt Tagpochau** (p379) in Saipan's interior for scenic views, before finishing off with a stroll or jog down the **Beach Pathway** (p380) on the west coast.

### Four Days

Follow the two-day itinerary, then hop over to Tinian for the next couple of days, exploring the historic **North Field** (p385) and its atomic bomb loading pits, the village of **San Jose** (p383) and its ancient *latte* stones, plus **Kammer Beach** (p383) and **Taga Beach Park** (p384), with their pleasant snorkelling and fine turquoise waters.

### One Week

Follow the four-day itinerary, then spend the rest of the week in Rota, taking it real easy in a very relaxed and peaceful environment. There's great sightseeing if you need it, including lush **Pona Point** (p388); the historic **Taga Taga Stone Quarry** (p388), with its collection of untouched, half-finished *latte* stones; plus a seductive **bird sanctuary** (p389), where you might find yourself tweeting, cocking your beak and shaking your tail feather with the boobies and the terns.

don't openly count money and don't leave valuables in cars.

Western Garapan's numerous massage parlours generate numerous brazen touts who won't take no for an answer, so take special care when walking around the hotel district at night. Recently, surveillance cameras were installed in the area although their effectiveness has been undercut by technical problems (official sources whined that the cameras were 'switching from colour to black and white and sometimes just shining brightly', making identification difficult).

## TRANSPORT

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

See p392 for details of international flights to Saipan.

**Freedom Air** (☎ Saipan 234 8328, 288 5882, Rota 532 3800, Tinian 433 3288; www.freedom-air.net) Daily flights from Saipan to Rota (one way/return adult US\$80/150, child US\$72/135); Saipan to Tinian (one way/return adult

US\$32/64, child US\$27/54); Tinian to Rota (one way/return adult US\$85/161, child US\$74/144).

**Pacific Island Aviation** (☎ Saipan 234 3601, Rota 532 0420, Tinian 433 3600)

#### BOAT

A **ferry** (☎ 328 2233) goes between Charlie Dock and Tinian (US\$15; from Tinian Wednesday to Friday, Sunday and Monday 8am and 1pm, Tuesday and Saturday 1am, 8am and 1pm; from Saipan Wednesday to Friday, Sunday and Monday 9.30am and 5pm, Tuesday and Saturday 3.30am, 9.30am, and 5pm).

### Getting Around

You'll need a car for best results – there's no public transport.

**EZ Rider** (☎ 233 8191) rents bicycles for US\$12/18 (six/24 hours).

#### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Most hotels provide airport transport for their guests, though some charge a fee; check before arrival.

#### CAR

Most car-hire companies will deliver your car anywhere on the island; prices start at around US\$50. Most of the following agencies have booths at the airport:

**Budget** (☎ 234 8232)

**Dollar** (☎ 288 5151)

**Hertz** (☎ 234 8336)

**Islander** (☎ 234 8233)

**Thrifty** (☎ 234 8356)

#### SHUTTLE BUS

All services run approximately from 10am to 10pm; call for exact schedules.

**Gray Line Island Shuttle** (☎ 234 7148) Hotel-to-shopping-centre shuttle offering a half-/full-day pass (US\$5/10).

**Sugar King** (☎ 322 8778) US\$3 a ride.

#### TAXI

It costs around US\$25 to get from the airport to Garapan and Micro Beach, US\$40 from the airport to San Roque and US\$15 from Garapan to Susupe. Taxis are clearly marked and usually easy to find at the airport and around larger hotels.

## GARAPAN

pop 4279

The Japanese developed Garapan, their administrative centre in the Marianas, into one of Micronesia's most bustling towns. Its streets were lined with neat rows of houses and its central area looked like a little Tokyo, with public baths, sake shops, Shinto shrines and Japanese schools and office buildings.

Garapan was completely levelled by US bombers during WWII and it wasn't until the 1960s that the Saipanese began to resettle the area.

These days, you'd be forgiven for wondering if Japan was ever kicked out: the majority of tourist brochures are in Japanese, as is much of the signage, and the language is often heard in shops and hotels. Some see the injection of yen into the economy as a form of 'war reparation', therefore excusing the rampant development that has transformed Saipan over the last few decades.

#### Micro Beach

Saipan's most attractive white-sand beach (Map p376) is travel poster material, with brilliant turquoise waters, a good view of

Mañagaha Island and a fine angle for catching Saipan's lingering sunsets. It's also popular with windsurfers. Water deep enough for swimming is a little way out but the wade is pleasant enough (except for a few squishy sea cucumbers) as the bottom is sandy.

Micro Beach is a culturally significant site to Saipan's Carolinian community – its Carolinians first landed here upon resettling in the 1800s.

#### American Memorial Park

This 53-hectare park (Map p376) stretches north along the coast from the Hyatt hotel, encompassing the north end of Micro Beach and the Smiling Cove harbour area. To the east the park extends all the way to Middle Rd and takes in a swamp forest that serves as an important **bird habitat**.

The park has beachside picnic grounds, restrooms and a popular ironwood-shaded jogging path that runs 2.4km up the coast.

Along Beach Rd there are two **large memorials** honouring Americans who died in the US invasions of Saipan and Tinian.

#### Sugar King Park

This park (Map p376) is a hotchpotch of historical and memorial sights; a **bright red railroad engine** on a roadside grassy knoll makes the park easy to spot. The steam-powered engine was once used to haul

#### SUNKEN TREASURE

In 1638 the Manila galleon *Nuestra Señora de la Concepción* went down in rough gales east of Agingan Point, scattering its rich treasure along the shallow reef that now borders the Coral Ocean Point Resort Club golf course.

In 1987, after searching archives in Seville, Mexico City and Manila to research the location and cargo, an international crew of 30, including historians and archaeologists, began a two-year salvage operation. Some 10,000 dives later they had recovered scores of cannonballs and ballast stones, 1300 pieces of gold jewellery, many inlaid with precious gems, and 156 storage jars, some still filled with fragrant resins. Some of the pieces were recovered in as little as 60cm of water.



sugar cane from fields in the Marpi area to a factory in Chalan Kanoa where Mt Carmel Cathedral now stands. The route follows the present-day Middle Rd, although none of the train tracks remain.

The rear section of the park is called the **Commonwealth Botanical Garden**. While it's not as extensive as the title might imply,

there are some nice old trees and flowering bushes that make for pleasant strolling.

At the far end of the park, a red, riverless bridge leads to a **Japanese shrine** called the Katori Jinja. Originally built in 1911, it was destroyed in 1944 and rebuilt in concrete in 1985. Steps behind the shrine lead to a 15-minute loop trail that climbs around the

back of the hill, stopping along the way at a **hexagonal prayer temple** dedicated to WWII Japanese soldiers.

### CNMI Museum of History & Culture

The ruins of the old Japanese hospital have been converted into this small, though interesting, **museum** (Map p376; ☎ 664 2160; www2.cnmimuseum.org; Middle Rd, Garapan; adult/child US\$3/free; 🕒 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat). The museum has pottery, illustrations and models from Saipan's history. There's also a fascinating collection of trinkets recovered from the 17th-century wreckage of the Spanish galleon *Concepción* (see the boxed text, p375), including gold and pottery.

### Old Japanese Jail

This old jail (Map p376) stands largely intact and makes for an interesting sight – walk down the corridor past the damp concrete cells, some of which still have barred steel doors attached. The main cell-block row was for male civilian prisoners; geishas who stole from their customers' pockets and women who didn't complete their employment contracts were held in a smaller building. There's a rumour that US aviator Amelia Earhart, who disappeared during her round-the-world flight in 1937, was shot down by the Japanese and held here before being executed as a spy.

### Chamolinian Cultural Village

The village is a recent initiative aimed at promoting Chamolinian (Chamorro and Carolinian) arts and traditions. Seven coconut huts feature local products and indigenous performances. Contact the visitor information centre (p373) for further details.

### MAÑAGAHA ISLAND

Just over 2km northwest of Micro Beach, uninhabited Mañagaha (Map p373) is an old patch reef that geological forces lifted above sea level some 10,000 years ago. It's now covered with a fringing white-sand beach and has Saipan's best snorkelling. The clear waters surrounding the island have lots of colourful tropical fish and there's also abundant coral, although much of the near-shore coral shows signs of being trampled on – a consequence of the beach's heavy use.

You can walk around Mañagaha in 20 minutes; there are a few rusting **war relics**, including a pair of coastal cannons along the beach near the boat landing. On the other side of the island is a **colourful statue** and a **small monument** marking the burial site of the Yapese chief Aghurubw, who in 1815 led a group of settlers from the Satawal atoll in the Yap chain to establish a Carolinian settlement on Saipan.

Once the domain of Saipanese picnickers, Mañagaha is now overrun with tourists. There are covered picnic tables and free changing rooms with toilets, showers and coin lockers; you can also hire snorkelling gear and buy drinks.

All regularly scheduled boats to Mañagaha leave from the Outer Cove marina. The crossing takes about 15 minutes. Pacific Subsea Saipan offers a variety of tours (see p380).

### NORTHERN SAIPAN

The northern tip of the island, called Marpi, has most of Saipan's WWII tourist attractions and some of the island's prettiest scenery. It's easy to explore as the roads are well paved; much of the roadside is lined with papaya trees and *tangan-tangan* bushes.

### Pau Pau Beach

The north end of this beach (Map p373) remains pleasantly undeveloped, with soft sand, a picnic shelter, fairly shallow waters, and good snorkelling and swimming during high tide.

Originally named Papau, meaning 'bitter root', Americans inadvertently changed the beach to its present name – everyone except older Saipanese now uses Pau Pau.

A paved road just north of the Hotel Nikko leads down to the beach.

### Wing Beach

This beach (Map p373) was named after the US navy aircraft wing that lay half buried in the sand for decades, *Planet of the Apes*-style, before falling victim to an aluminium recycling programme.

The south end of the beach has a shoreline coral shelf, but the north end is sandy and has good snorkelling. The beach sand is a pleasant mix of white shells and coral bits; vines of white and purple morning glory add a splash of colour.

Wing Beach is 1.6km north of Pau Pau Beach. Turn left off Marpi Rd just beyond the country club swimming pool. This unmarked road changes from packed coral to dirt after 500m. You should be able to make it down in a car, though it might get a bit rough if there has been heavy rain.

### Banzai Cliff

Waves crash onto the jagged rocks below Banzai Cliff (Map p373), one of the places where hundreds of Japanese civilians jumped to their deaths as the Americans were taking over the island in 1944. It's a moving spot, especially when you get into the details of the story.

Whole families lined up in order of age. The next oldest brother or sister pushed each child over the edge, until the mother pushed the oldest child and the father pushed his wife before running backwards over the cliff himself. Although US soldiers dropped leaflets and shouted through loudspeakers that those who surrendered would not be harmed, the mass suicides were deemed preferable to the shame of capture and, it was presumed, torture.

Over the years the Japanese have put up a number of plaques and memorials to commemorate the spot, including a large **statue of Heiwa Kannon**, the Peaceful Goddess of Mercy.

### TERROR IN TANAPAG

The quiet village of Tanapag was the site of one of WWII's most fanatical attacks. On the night of 6 July 1944, about 4000 Japanese soldiers hurled themselves in a banzai attack upon US forces, which were lined up along Tanapag Beach. Some of the Japanese had guns, but most were armed just with clubs, bayonet sticks, bamboo spears and grenades. The Japanese, honour-bound to die one way or another in the face of defeat, were intent on taking as many Americans with them as possible. As wave after wave of Japanese soldiers rushed down in the surprise attack, the Americans were pushed out into the water, across Tanapag Harbor and all the way back onto the reef, firing all the while at the unrelenting enemy. By the next morning it was all over and 5000 men were dead.

The turn-off to Banzai Cliff is off Marpi Rd opposite the Okinawa Peace Memorial.

### Last Japanese Command Post

It was at the spot now known as the Last Command Post (Map p373) that troops of the Japanese Imperial Army readied themselves for their final desperate battle against American invasion forces.

Lieutenant General Yoshitsugo Saito, acknowledging defeat, asked his remaining soldiers to each take seven American lives for the emperor, triggering the banzai suicide attack at Tanapag Harbor (see left). Saito then faced northwest towards Japan and committed hara-kiri, thrusting his sword into his stomach while his aide shot him in the head.

Guns, torpedoes and tanks have been placed on the lawn below the concrete bunker, which served as the command post. The bunker, which was built into the rock face, is cleverly concealed. Climb up inside and scramble around.

### Suicide Cliff

Eight hundred metres beyond the command post, you'll come to a fork – bear right. At a second fork, 1.6km further on, continue straight ahead to get to the Grotto and Bird Island (below), or bear right to get to Suicide Cliff (Map p373).

From this turn-off, it's 3.2km up to Suicide Cliff. Follow the paved road all the way. Some of the signs read 'Laderan Bandero', the Chamorro name for this area.

There is also a paved roadside path leading from the Japanese command post to the top of Suicide Cliff. In the early evenings, it becomes a popular (if challenging) spot for runners.

Suicide Cliff's 249m sheer rock face was another site for Japanese suicides, similar to those that took place on Banzai Cliff. The cliff provides an excellent view of the northern tip of the island. White-tailed tropicbirds and fairy terns swoop and soar in the wind drafts along the cliffs.

### The Grotto

Among dive heads, Saipan is famous for this unique diving spot (Map p373), a collapsed limestone cavern with a pool of cobalt-blue seawater filled by three underwater passageways. Sometimes the Grotto is

calm and at other times powerful surges of water come whooshing in and out.

Once, locals who wanted to swim in the Grotto had to shimmy down a rope, but there are now steep concrete stairs down to the water. Tiny stalactites drip from above and massive spider webs hanging overhead make interesting photographs if caught in the right light. The glowing blue light at the bottom of the rock wall comes from the tunnels that lead to the open sea. There's a viewpoint looking down into the Grotto at the top of the stairs to the left.

To get to the Grotto, turn left 400m past the Suicide Cliff turn-off and follow the road to the end. Even if you don't dive, it's worth visiting for sheer aesthetic value alone.

### Bird Island Lookout

The windy lookout affords a scenic view of **Bird Island** (Map p373), a rocky limestone islet close to shore and a wildlife sanctuary that provides a habitat for brown noddies and other sea birds. Bird Islands' east side is battered by open ocean while a calm reef protects the inland side. The purple beach morning glory that grows around the lookout cliff is known as *alalag-tasi* in Chamorro.

### Bird Island Trail

You can hike down to Bird Island but not from the lookout. Instead, head back the same way you came and look for the start of the trail 1.2km on the right, shortly before the turn-off to the Grotto.

The beginning of the dirt footpath, which looks like an eroded driveway, leads down the hill through tall grass and a canopy of *tangan-tangan*.

At the bottom there's a coral-sand beach. The water is clear and coral formations provide good snorkelling between Bird Island and the beach. Currents are rough beyond the reef.

### CROSS-ISLAND ROAD

The Cross Island Rd heads north from Garapan, turns inland to Capitol Hill, circles Mt Tagpochau, goes south through San Vicente and then heads back to the west coast, ending up on Beach Rd in San Jose.

Drive to the top of 470m **Mt Tagpochau** (Map p373), Saipan's highest point, for

the requisite excellent views. To get there, take the crossroad opposite Capitol Hill's convention centre, drive through the housing project and turn right. Continue a few hundred metres beyond the civil defence buildings and take the dirt road heading down to the right. Each Easter, hundreds of Saipanese hike up Mt Tagpochau carrying a heavy wooden cross to plant at the top. There are excellent views of most of the island from the summit.

On the way to San Vicente, just past Pagago, is the **Saipan Botanical Garden** (Map p373; ☎ 256 7780; botanicalgarden@cnmi-guide.com), featuring around 2000 types of tropical plants over 3 hectares. You're allowed to taste tropical fruits and there are BBQ facilities. The views over the ocean are good.

### EAST-COAST BEACHES

Much of Saipan's east coast is rugged shoreline battered by heavy seas, although there are some protected areas. Most of these beaches can be difficult to reach, as they're at the end of dirt roads that are subject to washouts after heavy rains.

**Profile Beach** (Map p373) is an isolated little beach with a limestone islet called Old Man by the Sea (it does look remarkably like the laughing head of an old man). To get there turn off Cross Island Rd at the south end of Capitol Hill. Take a left at the fork and park about 30m down. The trailhead is on the right side of the road and it's about a 20-minute hike to the beach.

Tank, Marine and Laulau are other east-coast beaches that can all be reached by dirt roads. **Laulau Beach** (Map p373), on the north side of Magicienne Bay, is one of the more popular and protected beaches on the east coast and is good for beach dives.

Another popular remote beach is **Forbidden Island** (Map p373), which has a long stretch of beach, a grotto and a swimming hole. It's on an islandlike peninsula south-east of the Laolao Bay Golf Resort and requires a 20-minute hike to reach.

### SOUTHERN SAIPAN

San Jose, Susupe, Chalan Kanoa and San Antonio were once distinct villages on Saipan's southwest coast until a decade of development turned Beach Rd into a nearly continuous strip of nightclubs, restaurants and shopping centres. Beach Rd has a few

interesting war relics, including a **Japanese tank** (Map p376).

Ladder and Obyan are two south-coast beaches that get a few local picnickers, but are well off the tourist track. To reach them, go around the southwest tip of the airport runway. The road to Ladder Beach is on the right 400m after passing the turn-off to Koblerville.

**Ladder Beach** (Map p373) is a rounded cove backed with 9m limestone cliffs. Most of it is covered with chunky coral pebbles and the water is generally too rough for swimming. There are large caves in the cliffs that are used as picnic shelters, complete with picnic tables.

More appealing for swimmers is **Obyan Beach** (Map p373), a pretty, expansive white-sand beach with calm waters protected by Naftan Point; it's good for shelling and snorkelling. At the head of the parking area is a large WWII concrete bunker, and just inland from a grove of coconut trees are the remains of eight **latte stones** that have been carbon dated to around 1500 BC. They're in two parallel rows and are thought to have once supported a beachside structure.

The turn-off down to Obyan Beach is 2.4km beyond Ladder Beach.

## ACTIVITIES

### Dividing & Snorkelling

Saipan's most unusual and exciting dive is the **Grotto** (p378). It's for experienced and fit divers only, who will keep company with turtles, sharks and sometimes a manta ray; the currents can be quite tricky, so get a thorough briefing beforehand. Other popular dives include **war wrecks** in Tanapag Harbor (see the boxed text, p378), **caves and garden eels** at Obyan Beach (above) and a **huge coral head** offshore from Susupe (p379).

Saipan's best snorkelling is at Mañagaha Island (p377). Pau Pau (p377), Wing (p377) and Laulau (p379) beaches are reasonably good bets and you can also try snorkelling the US Army tanks (Map p376) off Susupe's Killili Beach.

### DIVE SHOPS

Most cater to the Japanese market. Among the few English-speaking operations:

**Speedy Tertle** (☎ 234 6284; ejavier@speedytertle.com)

**Stingray Divers** (Map p376; ☎ 233 6100; stingraydivers@saipan.com; Gualo Rai)

### Hiking & Jogging

Saipan has a number of options for good walking, including the jogging trail that begins at the north side of Micro Beach (p375) and the trek to Forbidden Island (p379). The northern part of the island holds some overgrown forest trails. Joggers, rollerbladers and strollers can also enjoy the **Beach Pathway**, a paved path running 4.35km along the coast north to Garapan from Kilili Beach Park (Map p376).

### Windsurfing

Saipan is on the world windsurfing circuit. Being the only Marianas island with a large lagoon, the sport is popular, especially on Micro Beach (p375).

### SAIPAN FOR CHILDREN

Saipan has some good options for the little fellas and the wee lassies. In Garapan, American Memorial Park (p375) and Sugar King Park (p375) provide many chances to throw the Frisbee, enjoy a picnic, and hide behind trees and war monuments. At the Old Japanese Jail (p377), you can pretend to lock recalcitrant imps away in the intact concrete cells, or lock yourself away for some peace and quiet after persistent cries of 'ice cream'. Take a submarine trip (below) to Mañagaha Island (p377) for guaranteed marine-type thrills, with tropical fish and colourful coral to feast the eyes upon; on Mañagaha itself, kids will love the chance to picnic and run amok on the beach. For watery thrills of a decidedly artificial kind, try the Pacific Islands Club (p382), with its boom-bastic aqua park: water slides, fake lakes and canals, all set to pumping goodtime music. Nonguests can play here for US\$25.

### TOURS

**Americopters** (☎ 234 1304; www.americopters.com; Coral Ocean Point Resort Club, Koblerville) Half-island helicopter tours (adult/child US\$99/89) and the full-island version (adult/child US\$139/125).

**Freedom Air** (☎ 234 8328) Light aircraft available for charter.

**Marianas Trekking** (Map p373; ☎ 322 0770; Mariana Resort & Spa, Marpi) Biking (US\$75), kayaking (US\$60) and snorkelling (adult/child US\$40/25) tours, as well as the Eco-Adventure Tour (adult/child US\$65/45) and the Forbidden Island Tour (adult/child US\$95/55).

**Pacific Subsea Saipan** (Map p373; ☎ 322 7746; managahatour@cnmi-guide.com) Operates the *Deepstar 48*

submarine, which goes out six times daily in the lagoon between Saipan and Mañagaha Island; underwater sights include the ruins of a Japanese freighter and an American B-29 (adult/child US\$75/40). They also do a non-sub Mañagaha Island Tour (adult/child US\$34/25) – parasailing is an extra US\$56/45, banana boating an extra US\$24/31, snorkelling an extra US\$36/40, and lunch an extra US\$14/10. Or you can take the submarine tour combined with the Mañagaha Island tour (adult/child US\$95/60). Finally, there's the Tropical Dream Cruise aboard a two-deck cruiser, with dinner and island dancing (adult/child US\$55/35); combine this with the sub tour (adult/child US\$118/65).

**Saipan Sunset Cruise** (☎ 234 8230) Operates the *Jade Lady III*, an 18m sailing catamaran for sunset cruises (adult/child US\$65/40) and the Mañagaha Island Picnic (adult/child US\$45/30).

### SLEEPING

Most accommodation options are along Beach Rd, many in Garapan.

### Budget

**Century Hotel** (Map p376; ☎ 233 1420; www.century-hotel-saipan.com; Middle Rd, Garapan; s/d US\$60/66; ☺) This one's a good, clean, no-fuss option, with pleasant, spacious rooms and wireless Internet. It has a nice array of staff and the location is away from boisterous Beach Rd, but still central.

**Valley Inn** (Map p373; ☎ 234 7018; valleyin@itecnmi.com; r US\$40; ☺) An excellent choice if you don't mind being inland: the location (a

five-minute drive from the airport) is really only practical if you plan to rent a car. The staff are cheery and helpful and the pleasant rooms surround a central courtyard.

**Saipan Ocean View Hotel** (Map p376; ☎ 234 8900; sov@itecnmi.com; Beach Rd, Garapan; r/ste US\$61/71; ☺ ☺) Modern rooms, a good location, and an agreeable room-and-car package (US\$99).

### Midrange

**Hafadai Beach Hotel** (Map p376; ☎ 234 6495; Garapan; r from US\$130) The foyer has a Roman-aqueduct, stone-courtyard kind of feel. The exterior and the hallways are a bit musty and rundown but the rooms are clean enough, if nothing flash. There's a nice garden area and a beach out back.

### Top End

**Hotel Nikko Saipan** (Map p373; ☎ 322 3311; www.hotel-nikkosaipan.com; San Roque; s/d US\$120/130; ☺ ☺) Relax: no-one's being tortured and everyone's having a great time – that piercing shriek you hear is just the three ultranoisy, caged parrots in the lobby. The Nikko's rooms are plush and comfortable (deluxe is basically the same as standard, but with a few extra amenities like bathrobes), the grounds are enormous and the architecture is pulse popping (think retro '70s sci fi; *Logan's Run*, perhaps?).

**Fiesta Resort & Spa** (Map p373; ☎ 234 6412; www.daiichi-saipan.com; Garapan; r from US\$240; ☺ ☺) This place (formerly the Dai-ichi Saipan) has elegant rooms and it's worth paying a bit extra for the ones with ocean views; come sunset time, you'll be thankful you did. The grounds are spacious and the staff are charming.

**Hyatt Regency Saipan** (Map p376; ☎ 234 1234; www.saipan.regency.hyatt.com; Garapan; r from US\$310; ☺ ☺) The rooms are a bit small and a bit cheesy, with peach-and-marble décor, but the views are lovely: peer over the superb grounds with the big lake in the middle and out to the ocean. The open-air, open-plan bar is good for a drink any time.

Also recommended:

**Aqua Resort Club** (Map p373; ☎ 322 1234; www.aqua-resortsaipan.com; Tanapag; r from US\$270; ☺ ☺) Casual yet classy, with a fabulous beachfront setting.

All rooms have verandas (most with ocean views). **Mariana Resort & Spa** (Map p373; ☎ 322 0770; Garapan; www.marianaresort.com; r from US\$200; ☺ ☺)

### THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Pacific Gardenia Hotel** (Map p376; ☎ 234 3455; www.pacificgardenia.com; Beach Rd, Chalan Kanoa; s/d US\$63/72; ☺) Away from Garapan madness, the Pacific Gardenia features a gorgeous white-sand beach at the back of the hotel with an open-air bistro and bar. The 14 immaculate rooms, all on the 2nd floor along an atriumlike hallway, are large, well furnished and very comfortable; all have kitchenettes. The helpful staff can provide cribs, ironing boards and the like, as well as value-packed car-and-room deals for US\$97.

Sit on the beach with a margarita in hand, watching a perfect Saipan sunset, and just see if you can tear yourself away. The food at the hotel's Sunset Bar & Grill (p382) is recommended, and along with a second margarita, would cap off a perfect night.

You need never leave here, with its go-kart circuit, golf course and beach-view setting. Sleep in cottages or villas. **Pacific Islands Club** (Map p373; ☎ 234 7976; [www.picresorts.com](http://www.picresorts.com); San Antonio; r from US\$325; 🍷 🍷 ) Clean, airy rooms arranged around a full-on water park.

## EATING

**Tori Hide American Sushi** (Map p376; ☎ 234 9367; Garapan; mains US\$7-12; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Serves delectable meals, like (conical) sushi and ramen plus all the greatest hits from the Land of the Rising Sun. Despite the name, this is authentic Japanese right down to the décor and the chef's funny little hat.

**Cusina** (Map p376; ☎ 233 3250; Beach Rd, Garapan; mains US\$9-13; 🍷 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) This breezy, outdoor bamboo 'hut' serves zesty Chamorro food that's best enjoyed with a beer; the beef *kelaguen* (mixed with lemon, onions, pepper and shredded coconut) is a clear fave, as is the sashimi and braised fish.

**Thai House Restaurant** (Map p376; ☎ 235 8424; Beach Rd, Garapan; mains US\$8-15; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Good Thai food and a good beer list to go with it. If you're not used to hot food, order mild, as even moderate can be quite fiery and the 'Thai-hot' is strictly for the initiated.

**E'sY Kitchen** (Map p376; ☎ 233 3550; Garapan; mains US\$9-30; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This breezy Hawaiian-style restaurant and bar features indoor palms, bamboo chairs and rock-encrusted walls. The food passes muster, and it's mainly of a seafood bent: the paella is good, as is the blue-crab spaghetti.

To take advantage of Saipan's glorious sunsets, eat your tucker on the beach at the very appealing **Oleai Beach Bar & Grill** (Map p376; ☎ 235 1757; Beach Rd, San Jose; mains US\$7-20; 🍷 lunch & dinner) or the **Sunset Bar & Grill** (Map p376; ☎ 234 3455; Pacific Gardenia Hotel, Beach Rd, Chalan Kanoa; mains US\$7-24; 🍷 dinner), both serving fancies such as warm-beef salads, burgers and seafood.

Café recommendations:

**Café at the Park/Java Beach** (Map p376; ☎ 233 1012; Garapan; meals US\$6-20; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A fusion of global styles, a glorious rainbow of fish dishes, and the best espresso in the land – every flavour from Irish crème to Honey Thai. Has wi-fi.

**Tan Marikita's Café/Herman's Modern Bakery** (Map p376; ☎ 233 1727; Beach Rd, Garapan; meals US\$5-10; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Chamorro and American brekkies; burgers 'n' sangas for lunch. Also Saipan's best bakery. Has wi-fi.

## DRINKING

The **Oleai Beach Bar & Grill** (Map p376; ☎ 235 1757; Beach Rd, San Jose) and the **Sunset Bar & Grill** (Map p376; ☎ 234 3455; Pacific Gardenia Hotel, Beach Rd, Chalan Kanoa) are the best places to be when the sun goes down and your mood is 'up'. Both feature live music most nights.

**Jonny's** (☎ 287 9019; Beach Rd, Garapan) A small, buzzing, open-air bar right on the street and in the mouth of madness (ie the heart of Garapan). It's hip and they serve good bar snacks.

## ENTERTAINMENT

### Cinemas

**Saipan Megaplex** (☎ 234 9000; Susupe)

### Dinner Theatre

**Sandcastle** (Map p376; ☎ 233 8585; Hyatt Regency, Garapan) Lovers of high hair, inflatable pecs, dazzling teeth, California consciousness and diamante-clad women need only apply – if David Hasselhof was a building, he'd be this joint. And you'd be Hoffed.

## SHOPPING

Garapan holds a bustling street market on Thursday nights, with food and art vendors, and dancers. There's also a farmers market (Map p376) on Saturday mornings by the beach in Susupe.

# TINIAN

pop 3540 / area 101 sq km

Tinian is a peaceful one-village island just 5km south of Saipan. It's an attractive place with ancient *latte* stones, ranch land with grazing cattle, secluded sandy beaches, scenic vistas and some lovely crumbling architecture, like the Old San Jose Bell Tower, in front of which are two stone tablets etched with the Ten Commandments.

Further down the road is the US\$200 million Tinian Dynasty Hotel & Casino (see the boxed text, p384), a garish, neon-lit temple of vice that would do Vegas proud; in front is a brass tablet etched with the command, 'No thongs or singlets'.

It won't be the first time Tinian has been changed beyond recognition; during WWII the island was transformed into the world's largest military air base, earning a notorious place in history as the take-off site for

the aircraft that dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (see the boxed text, p384).

## ORIENTATION

Homesick Americans who captured the island in 1944 decided that Tinian's shape was not too different from New York's Manhattan Island, so they named the main roads appropriately. The two-lane Broadway, on the island's east side, runs in a straight line from San Jose to North Field, while 8th Ave, on the west side, runs from the airport to Chulu Beach.

## INFORMATION

There's an ATM outside the Bank of Guam, one inside J.C. Café and also at the casino.

**Bank of Guam** (Map p385; ☎ 433 3261; San Jose)

**Marianas visitor information centre** (Map p385; ☎ 433 9365; Broadway, San Jose; 🕒 8.30-11.30am & 12.30pm-4.30pm Mon-Sat)

**Post office** (Map p385; San Jose)

**Tinian Health Center** (Map p385; San Jose; ☎ 433 9233)

## TRANSPORT

### Getting There & Away

See p374 for information on flights and ferry services to and from Saipan.

### Getting Around

The hotels provide free airport transfers.

To get to the northern sights, you really need a vehicle.

**Budget** (☎ 433 3104), **Hertz** (☎ 328 2233), **Avis** (☎ 433 2847) and **Islander** (☎ 433 3025) have booths at the airport; Budget also hides out in the Tinian Dynasty Hotel & Casino.

## SIGHTS

### San Jose

Small, quiet San Jose, where most of Tinian's residents live, was once the site of an ancient village of 13,000 Chamorros. The current population is partly comprised of a group of Chamorros who had been living on Yap since the German era and were resettled in San Jose after WWII.

The town is fronted by a big deep-water harbour that was constructed by US Seabees (naval construction battalions) for unloading the scores of bombs that were dropped on Japan in the final months of the war.

**Taga House** (Map p385) is an impressive collection of *latte* stones. They are said to



be the foundations of the home of Taga the Great, legendary king of the ancient Chamorros.

The grassy park contains a dozen or so pitted limestone shafts with capstones, some as large as 1.5m in diameter and 4.5m in height. One *latte* stone still stands upright in its original position, while the others now lie horizontally. The site is on the US National Register of Historic Places.

A few minutes' walk east is the Taga Well, which in ancient times supplied spring water to the island.

**Kammer Beach** (Map p385), also called Jones Beach, is an easy walk from the town centre. It's a nice white-sand beach with coconut palms, pavilions, picnic facilities, restrooms,



### CASINO CAPERS

Why does this tiny island have a massive casino? In the mid-1990s Tinian voters, eager to get some of the overseas money pouring into Saipan, approved the development of casinos. Thankfully, this tower of glitter is happily isolated from the rest of island life, which continues at its same tranquil pace. But for how long? Apparently ignoring Saipan's economic meltdown, the local government is in talks to build an additional US\$300 million resort.

showers and a good view of Aguijan Island to the south.

During WWII, Americans staged a fake diversionary landing at Kammer Beach just hours before the actual invasion on the northwest shore.

To the northwest, next to the church, is the crumbling **Old San Jose Bell Tower** (Map p385), a beautiful old structure, very photogenic; it might put you in mind of a Sergio Leone film.

### South of San Jose

There's good swimming at **Taga Beach Park** (Map p383), 800m south of town on Broadway. From the cliff above the beach there's a striking view of San Jose and some of the most brilliant turquoise waters you can ever expect to see; it's a great sunset spot. Stairs lead down the cliff to a small sandy beach. The water gets deep fairly quickly, which makes it a great swimming spot.

**Tachogna Beach Park** (Map p383), immediately beyond, is also good for swimming (and snorkelling), with its broad white-sand

beach. Both beaches can be reached by foot from San Jose; follow the coastal walkway that starts by Kammer Beach.

The best-preserved **Japanese shrine** (Map p383) on the island is in the hills above Taga Beach. Directions are convoluted; ask at the visitor information centre p383.

To get to **Suicide Cliff** (Map p383), follow the road inland from Taga Beach another 6.5km, bearing right first at the crossroads and then at the fork. In the hills above the cliffs are the natural and soldier-dug caves that were the last defence position and hide-out for the Japanese military. Most of the 4000 Japanese defenders listed as missing are assumed to have committed suicide inside the caves.

A peace memorial at the site remembers the Japanese civilians who leapt from the cliffs in a smaller version of Saipan's suicidal jumps.

Cow patties (step lightly) attest to the grazing done in the area, Polynesian rats hop across the road, and on a clear day you can see Rota.

### North of San Jose

You can make an interesting tour of the island by heading north from San Jose along Broadway and then returning via 8th Ave. The route begins through green pastureland and makes for a pleasant country drive.

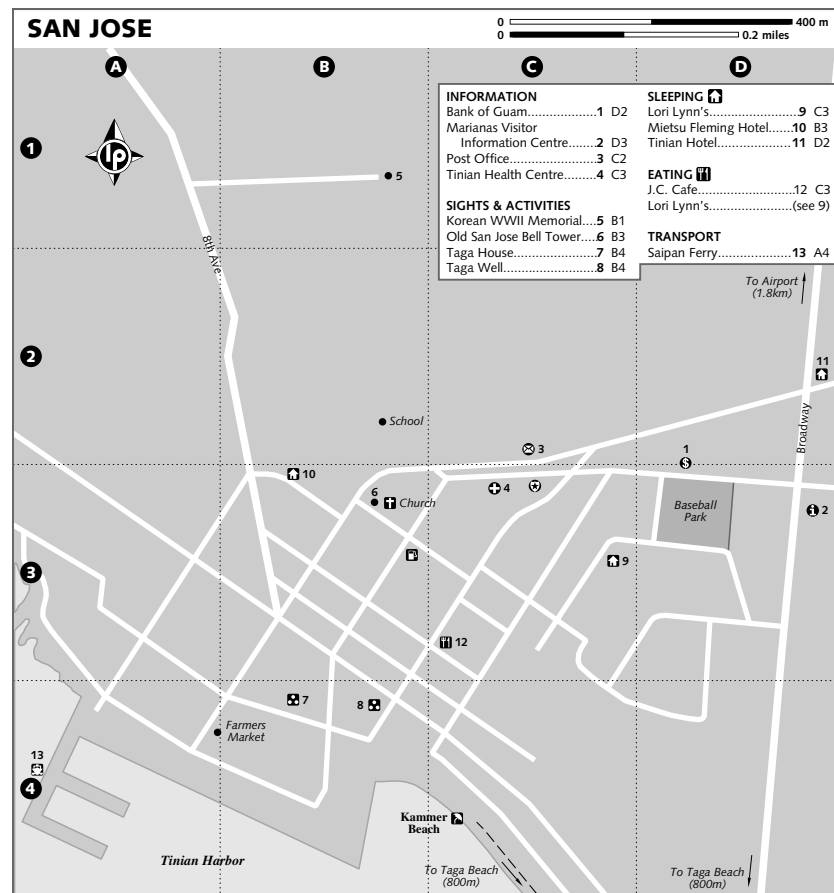
About 6.5km from the airport turn-off, a large **Shinto torii** (gate; Map p383) on the left is visible, the entrance to the site of a former Japanese shrine. Just ahead, the road circles a roundabout that has another **old Japanese shrine** (Map p383) in its centre. A little past this, Saipan comes into view. Along the rocky northeast coast, waves

### LITTLE BOY & FAT MAN

In the early evening of 5 August 1945, a uranium bomb with the code-name of 'Little Boy' was loaded aboard the *Enola Gay*, an American B-29 aircraft. The four-ton bomb had been brought to Tinian from San Francisco aboard the heavy cruiser *Indianapolis*.

The *Enola Gay* and its 12-man crew took off from Tinian at 2.45am on 6 August and headed for Hiroshima, 2735km away. The bomb was dropped at 9.15am Tinian time; it exploded in the air above the city, forming a fireball that quickly mushroomed into a dark-grey cloud 5km wide and 10,668m high. More than 75,000 people perished from the explosion, beginning the age of atomic warfare; the final death toll reached an estimated 200,000.

The second atomic bomb loaded on Tinian was a 4.5-ton plutonium bomb named 'Fat Man'. It was dropped on Nagasaki on 9 August 1945, immediately killing 75,000 of the city's 240,000 residents; another estimated 75,000 people have since died from the effects of radiation.



crash against the cliffs, in places bursting up through spectacular blowholes.

Turn right just after the roundabout and you'll come to the **blow hole** (Map p383), with towering water sprays as waves crash against the wave-weathered holes. Heed the fences, which warn of unexploded ordnance. It's a good place to bring a beer and relax (as long as you don't explode the ordnance).

The main road loops around **North Field** (Map p383), a massive network of landing fields and crisscrossing roads that once comprised the world's largest military airbase. Once inside the field, there's a confusing, huge maze of roads, airstrips and overgrown crossroads. Only lazy monitor

lizards bask in the sun on the abandoned runways that once held rows of warplanes.

Recently, a man was charged with stealing bits of North Field and selling them on the Internet, a scam that has prompted the US government into looking at preserving the area as a protected historical site.

A road to the east, about 13km past the airport turn-off, goes to **Ushi Point** (Map p383), Tinian's northern tip. Follow the cliff road east for a good view of Saipan.

From the main road circling North Field, a road to the **atomic-bomb loading pits** (Map p383) is on the left, about 1.2km beyond the turn-off to Ushi Point. The pit sites are neat and sterile, marked with signs, plaques and plumeria trees.

Go south a few hundred metres from the loading pits until the road splits, then turn left, taking the first right and the first right again onto a runway. Continue on the runway until you notice a small overgrown road to the right going into the complex. Hidden straight ahead are a larger two-storey **former communications building** (Map p383) and low concrete **pillboxes** (Map p383) with gun holes.

From the Japanese buildings turn right, back onto the runway, and at the end of the road turn left, then take the next right to get to **Chulu Beach** (Map p383); a little to the north is **Marine Beach** (Map p383). These attractive white-sand beaches are where more than 15,000 US troops landed in July 1944. Archaeological excavations at Chulu Beach have uncovered three layers of Chamorro civilisation, ranging from 1500 BC to the Latte Period of AD 1000 to AD 1500.

About 2.4km south on 8th Avenue, a side road leads east to the 165m **Mt Lasso** (Map p383), northern Tinian's highest point. At the top of the mountain there's a Japanese shrine and a very scenic view of the island.

Eleven kilometres south of Chulu Beach, on 8th Avenue, turn inland onto a grassy path lined with palm trees. Not far from the road is a **Korean WWII memorial** (Map p385), built on the back of a carved stone turtle. Honeycombed into the nearby hills are caves where the Japanese hid from US forces.

## ACTIVITIES

### Diving & Snorkelling

Tinian has clear waters, an ocean bottom that slopes rapidly from the shore and a number of good dive sites. A popular dive is **Dump Coke**, which was a huge dumping ground for WWII junk; small Japanese tanks, jeeps, trucks, shell casings and other munitions can be easily spotted there. The Saipan-based dive operators on p380 do Tinian.

The best snorkelling from shore is at Tachogna Beach.

## SLEEPING

Tinian is one of the better islands in Micronesia for camping and no permission is needed to camp on public beaches. Try Kammer Beach and Taga and Tachogna Beach Parks, with their picnic tables, barbecue

pits and showers. The white sands of Chulu Beach could do the trick, too.

**Tinian Dynasty Hotel & Casino** (Map p383; ☎ 328 2233; [www.tinian-dynasty.com.cn](http://www.tinian-dynasty.com.cn) in Japanese; r from US\$125) The rambling seven stories here contain 412 exquisite soft-pink rooms complete with minibar and safety box. The marble lobby is a wonder of...well, of something. Fake Greek statues adorn it.

San Jose's three smaller hotels are low-key and unpretentious.

**Tinian Hotel** (Map p385; ☎ 433 7000; San Jose) The pick, with nice rooms, laundry facilities and a restaurant. It accepts major credit cards (unlike the other two) and has in-room phones (likewise). It does tours, as does the Mietsu.

**Lori Lynn's** (Map p385; ☎ 433 3256; San Jose; r US\$40) Owned by a friendly couple, Lori Lynn's has 14 rooms over two storeys; the on-site restaurant is a favourite with locals.

**Mietsu Fleming Hotel** (Map p385; ☎ 433 3232; San Jose; r US\$44) Has 13 good-sized but tired rooms each with balconies, two double beds, a refrigerator and bathtubs.

## EATING & ENTERTAINMENT

Try the local speciality, Tinian chilli pepper sauce, available from any store. Warning: it will blow your stack.

**J.C. Café** (Map p385; ☎ 433 3413; San Jose; dishes US\$8-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Bedecked like a Midwest US café, this place has a tasty menu that includes chicken, beef, fish, squid and mussel dishes, as well as sandwiches and filling breakfasts. At night, it becomes a bar with dancing and karaoke (subject to demand, of course).

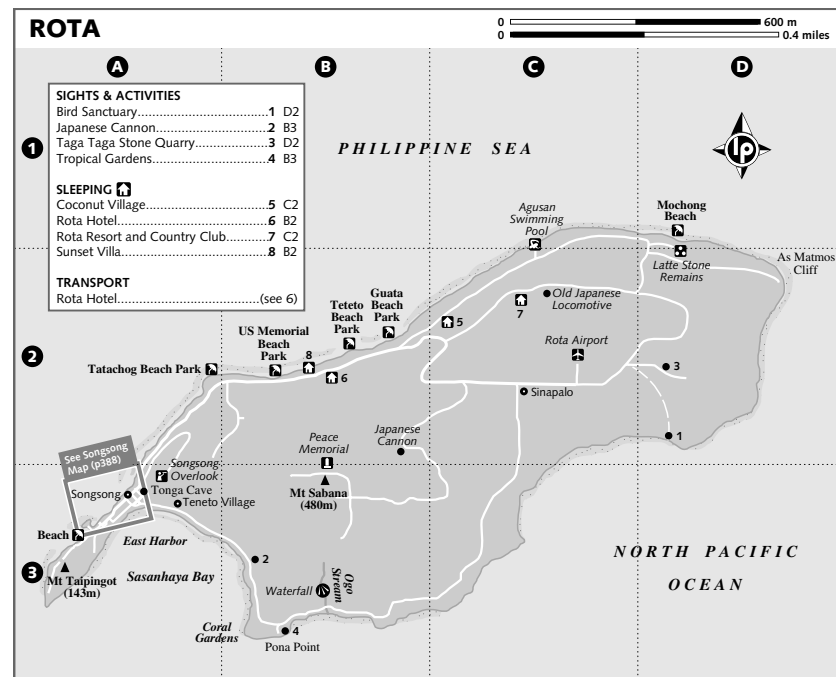
**Lori Lynn's** (Map p385; ☎ 433 3256; San Jose; mains US\$6-13; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Serves Western and Japanese dishes and good Chamorro food.

The casino has the standard resort-style restaurant and a disco.

## ROTA

pop 3283 / area 83 sq km

Between Guam and Saipan, Rota has managed to resist the influx of tourists from those larger islands, retaining a distinctively slow pace. In fact it's a bit like Groundhog Day here – nothing really changes from day to day and everyone's all the more thankful for it.



Indeed, the island's laid-back character and pristine beaches remain its chief attraction. Where else can you swim right in town and still have the beach all to yourself?

Rota is known as 'The Friendly Island'. Without fail, Rotanese drivers wave to each other as they pass (even as they, admittedly rarely, cut you up). You'll be playing the game too, so it's a good job the hire cars are automatic. How can anyone be expected to change gears with one hand on the wheel and the other permanently cocked?

## ORIENTATION

Rota's main road runs between Songsong and the airport.

## INFORMATION

**Bank of Guam** (Map p388; ☎ 532 3600; Songsong) Has an ATM outside.

**Marianas visitor information centre** (Map p388; ☎ 532 0327; Songsong; ☎ 8.30-11.30am & 12.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

**Post office** (Map p388) Central Songsong.

**X-Press** (Map p388; ☎ 532 1466; Songsong; per hr US\$3) Internet access.

## TRANSPORT

### Getting There & Around

See p374 for information on flights and ferry services to and from Saipan. The hotels provide free airport transfers. **Budget** (☎ 532 0801) and **Islander** (☎ 532 0901) have booths at the airport. Renting a bicycle is a great way to see Rota. Try the following: **Dive Rota** (Map p388; ☎ 532 3377; Songsong; 8/24hr US\$8/15)

**Rota Hotel** (Map p387; ☎ 532 2000; 3/6/10hr US\$4/7/11)

## SIGHTS

### Songsong & Around

Quiet Songsong, extending along a narrow neck of land on Tora's southwest peninsula, has a scenic backdrop in the form of 143m **Mt Taipingot** (Map p387), nicknamed Wedding Cake Mountain for its layered appearance. Songsong has an abundance of *latte* stones, with some used to landscape front yards.

A must-see is **Tonga Cave** (Map p387), on the northeastern outskirts, for a preternatural, eerie experience: this enormous natural



cavern is festooned with numerous stalactites and stalagmites, and tunnels and holes that disappear into the eternity of blackness. Tonga Cave was used as a Japanese military hospital during WWII, and serves as a typhoon shelter nowadays.

Take the bayside road east of Songsong for scenic views across the bay's brilliant turquoise water to Mt Taipingot. The narrow road alternately cuts along the coastal cliffs and dives through tropical jungle canopies. Beware of very steep drops along the edge of this road, which are not always obvious as sections tend to get camouflaged with foliage. Going over the edge could be fatal.

About 4km east is a **Japanese cannon** (Map p387), still painted in camouflage and pointing straight out to the harbour and to Mt Taipingot from a concrete shelter. The gun barrel can be moved from side to side but don't leave it sticking straight out or the next car going by could get whacked. And don't park your hire car too close to the barrel, as once the gun starts moving it's hard to stop.

Just over a kilometre past the cannon, there's an open grassy field on the right side of the road, which slopes down to **Pona Point** (Map p387), a wind-whipped rocky outcrop with a good view and excellent cliff fishing. A bit further east are various **tropical gardens**; for a small fee, workers will lead you through the innumerable groves of breadfruit, coconut, papaya, banana, star apple, and other trees. This general area is particularly scenic and well worth your time.

Eight hundred metres further down, the main road passes above **Ogo Stream** (Map p387; also spelled Okgok), which features some small **waterfalls** (Map p387). If you want to visit them you must first get permission from the landowner; inquire in advance at **Joe & Sons Food Market** (Map p388; ☎ 532 0392) in Songsong.

### Central & Northern Rota

A turn-off near the airport leads to the Taga Taga Stone Quarry and the Bird Sanctuary. The **quarry** (Map p387) has nine *latte* shafts and seven capstones still sitting in

the trenches where they were being quarried before being inexplicably abandoned. Mosses, grasses and tiny ferns have grown up around them.

The early Chamorros quarried the *latte* stones without metal tools, possibly by building fires in trenches around the stones and then using basalt stone adzes to cut into the softened limestone. According to legend, the ancient Chamorro king Taga the Great jumped from Guam to Rota to establish a kingdom here, before putting the island's inhabitants to work quarrying these *latte* stones, which he used as foundation pillars for royal buildings. For anyone interested in Chamorro culture, this is an impressive sight. The road into the quarry is signposted and easily negotiable in a car. The quarry itself, 800m from the turn-off, is in a grassy park alongside the road.

The **bird sanctuary** (Map p387) lies on the eastern side of the island, down a rough dirt road 2.4km from the airport. Watch carefully for the turn-off sign to the right. A cliff-top wooden walkway is a sublime spot to watch or photograph all manner of sea birds and shore birds; a bird poster at the sanctuary entrance aids in identification. The best time to go is at sunrise or sunset.

### ACTIVITIES

Rota's diving stands out for its excellent visibility: on normal days you can see 30m down. Interesting cave and tunnel dives, and sunken wrecks, complete the scene. The small island at Pinatang Park (Map p388), at the north end of Songsong, has rather sparse marine life, but swimming and snorkelling between the rock formations can be interesting and the water is clear and calm.

### CORAL DETONATION

The zenith of Rota's diving used to be Coral Gardens in Sasanhaya Bay. Besides its huge platter corals, the area was home to the wreck of the *Shoun Maru*, a Japanese freighter sunk by an aerial torpedo during WWII, which lay offshore with three WWII Japanese auxiliary submarine chasers about 27m under water. The wrecks contained coral-encrusted trucks and assorted paraphernalia such as bathtubs, bicycles and motorcycles.

But the US navy decided that the wrecks were a hazard because they contained unexploded ordnance; in 1996, to the chagrin of divers, they blew up the three submarine chasers.

The story doesn't end there. In 1998 the US Marshall's office sold two illegal Chinese smuggling boats to Rota for US\$2 (US\$1 each boat). In June of that year the navy sank the two boats offshore in Sasanhaya Bay – no doubt to appease the Legion of the Chagrined.

**Dive Rota** (Map p388; ☎ 532 3377; www.diverota.com; Songsong) is a small, personalised dive operation offering one-/two-/three-tank dives (US\$50/80/110), night dives (US\$60), fishing/trolling trips (two hours/half a day US\$225/350), and snorkelling trips (US\$25).

### SLEEPING

Many of Rota's public beach parks allow camping; take all the usual precautions.

Most places will do airport transfers, usually for a small fee.

**Coconut Village** (Map p387; ☎ 532 3448; coconut@gtepacific.net; r from US\$60; 🏠 🚽 🚿) These charming duplex cottages have got an island thing going on: peaked roofs and rattan furnishings, along with small Japanese-style soaking tubs. From the airport, go past the turn-off to the Rota Resort and Country Club and watch for a small, unmarked dirt road leading sharply right along the coast at the bottom of the hill.

**Coral Gardens Hotel** (Map p388; ☎ 532 3201; kinrit@gtepacific.net; Songsong; s/d US\$44/50; 🏠 🚽 🚿) This place is a winner. The compact, neat rooms, although not the height of luxury, are comfortable with all mod cons, and each has a balcony that commands a sublime ocean-view vista.

**Rota Resort & Country Club** (Map p387; ☎ 532 1155; www.rr-cc.net; ste from US\$230; 🏠 🚽 🚿) Perched regally atop an 18-hole golf course with sea views, this is the clear choice for luxury seekers; travellers who call beforehand may be able to negotiate a lower rate with the management. Rooms are big, clean and comfy, with bouncy beds (and, regrettably, cheesy floral quilts). Facilities include a nature spa, a children's activity station, restaurants and a pool with a swim-up bar.

**Rota Hotel** (Map p387; ☎ 532 2000; www.rotahotel.com; d/stc from US\$105/210; 🍷 🍴) Big and spacious, clean and comfortable, friendly and serviceable. Yes, all the key words apply here, just as you would expect at a hotel of this kind on an island like Rota. Bird-watching and sightseeing tours are available.

**Sunset Villa** (Map p387; ☎ 532 8445; sunsetvilla@vzpacifica.net; s/d from US\$55/65; 🍷 🍴) Right on the water and offering sparkling bungalow-style accommodation, some with ocean-view balconies. Double rooms have Jacuzzis, all rooms have king-size beds, and children under 12 stay for free. There's a café on site and they run tours on request.

**Hotel Valentino** (Map p388; ☎ 532 8466; diego@gtepacifica.net; Songsong; s/d from US\$49/54; 🍷 🍴) Clean, spacious rooms in an eerily quiet and impersonal hotel.

## EATING

**Pizzeria Bar & Grill** (Map p388; ☎ 532 7402; Songsong; mains US\$7-19; 🍷 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This popular, Tex-Mex-styled joint serves Mexican food and Budweiser; the black-sashimi pizza deserves marks for attitude and effort and is not half bad. Eat it on the veranda on a warm night for best results.

**Tokyo-En** (Map p388; ☎ 532 1266; Songsong; mains US\$7-18; 🍷 🍴 lunch & dinner) This Filipino-staffed Japanese restaurant does a pretty good job of not only preparing reasonable facsimiles of its chosen culinary repertoire, but of also reproducing the atmosphere of your typical Tokyo house of chopsticks. Favourites include those grill-your-own meat extravaganzas with the grill embedded in the table.

**Tonga Tonga Café** (Map p388; ☎ 532 1010; Songsong) This is really just a nook in the backyard of the owner's house, all the better to charm you with. You can have coffee and sandwiches here, as well as steamed lobster and chicken *kelaguen*. It's not always open so call to confirm, or just pop your head around the back next time you pass.

**Bay Breeze Snack Bar** (Map p388; ☎ 532 7575; Songsong; mains US\$5-11; 🍷 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This cheery waterside restaurant features an open-air eating area and reasonable food, including burritos, seafood and some unusual appetisers like...gulp...chicken gizzards. All served with a big Rotanese smile.

**As Pari's** (Map p388; ☎ 532 3356; Songsong; mains US\$8-29; 🍷 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A bar/

restaurant with adequate dishes including steak and milkfish.

## SHOPPING

**Luta Gallery** (Map p388; ☎ 532 9653; Songsong) They've a good range of souvenirs and local handicrafts: sea-urchin and hemp jewellery, ceramics, woodcarvings and more.

# NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS DIRECTORY

## ACCOMMODATION

Add a 10% hotel tax to all room rates. Many resort hotels have periodic discounts; call to inquire and always check the websites of the major hotels. Rates can be discounted as much as 50%.

During the Japanese holiday season, particularly Christmas through January and mid-July through August, it can be very difficult to find accommodation; advance reservations are recommended.

## ACTIVITIES

All islands have good diving. A junkyard of WWII equipment lies just off Tinian; Rota has some wrecks; and Saipan has the challenging Grotto.

## BUSINESS HOURS

Banking hours are typically Monday to Thursday from 10am to 3pm and Friday from 10am to 6pm. Most Saipan and Tinian businesses are open weekdays from 8am to 5pm. On Rota, hours are earlier: 7.30am to 11.30am and 12.30pm to 4.30pm is typical.

## PRACTICALITIES

- The *Marianas Variety* is published six days a week and the *Saipan Tribune* five days a week; all islands have access to cable TV.
- The video format is NTSC.
- The Marianas' electricity is single-phase 60Hz, 115/230V AC, with two-prong US-style plugs.
- The CNMI, like the US, uses the imperial system. See the Quick Reference page for a conversion table.

## CHILDREN

You won't have too much trouble travelling around the Marianas with kids, but bear in mind that Tinian and Rota have only a few basic stores. Stock up on essentials at Saipan's department stores before visiting these islands.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

The CNMI uses US embassies.

### Embassies & Consulates in Northern Mariana Islands

**Japan** (☎ 323 7201; PO Box 500407, Saipan) Embassy.  
**Philippines** (☎ 234 1848; 5th fl, Nauru bldg, Susupe) Consulate.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

For a full list of events and festivals in the Mariana islands, see www.mymarianas.com.

### February

**Micronesian Open Boardsailing Regatta** Held at Micro Beach.

**Saipan Laguna Regatta** Also at Micro Beach.

### April

**Flame Tree Arts Festival** A very popular weekend-long event attracting participants from all over the Pacific. Art exhibits, musicians and dancers on several stages at Micro Beach Park.

**Tagaman Triathlon** (www.tagaman.com) Consists of a 2km swim, a 60km bike ride and a 15km run. Attracts international competitors.

### May

**Taste of the Marianas** The Marianas visitor information centre in Saipan (see p373) organises this food festival held on each Saturday night in May at the American Memorial Park. Bands play in thatched-roof huts constructed for the event as competitions are held between Saipan's top restaurants.

### July

**Liberation Day Festival** Week-long festival celebrating the American liberation of the Mariana islands; ends 4 July, US Independence Day. Includes a beauty pageant, nightly entertainment, games and food.

**Tour De Tinian** (mvtinian@vzpacifica.net) Nineteen kilometres of on-road and off-road biking competition through historic sites and jungle.

### November

**Rota Blue Triathlon** (kfc-onishi@gem.hi-ho.ne.jp) Two types: Olympic and Iron Man.

## MARIANAFEST

Like Guam, most villages have an annual fiesta honouring their patron saint. Everyone is welcome to join the feasting, dances and cultural events, although, in Rota and Tinian, finding accommodation at that time can be a challenge.

### Saipan

**San Vicente** Early April  
**San Antonio** Mid-June  
**Chalan Kanoa** Mid-July  
**San Roque** Mid-August  
**Tanapag** Early October  
**Koblerville** Late October

### Rota

**Sinapalo** Second Saturday in March.  
**San Francisco de Borja** On the second Sunday of October, this is the Northern Mariana's largest and most popular fiesta, honouring Songsong's patron saint and attracting people from throughout the Marianas. Events include a luau-like feast of Chamorro food, religious processions, music and dancing.

### Tinian

**San Jose Fiesta** Last weekend in April or the first weekend in May.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

Check out the **Marianas Visitors Authority** (www.mymarianas.com).

## MONEY

Credit cards are widely used. A tip of at least 10% is expected at most restaurants. See the Quick Reference page for exchange rates.

## TELEPHONE

The CNMI's international telephone code is ☎ 670 and there are no area codes.

## TIME

The time in the CNMI is GMT + 10 hours.

## VISAS

US citizens need no visa and can stay as long as they like; non-US citizens can stay visa-free for up to 30 days. Tourists can apply for an extension of up to two months.

#### HOW MUCH?

- **Newspaper:** US\$0.50
- **Coffee:** US\$3
- **Taxi from the airport to Garapan:** US\$25
- **Car hire:** from US\$45 per day
- **Snorkelling tour:** US\$40

#### LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **Litre of petrol** US\$1
- **Litre of bottled water** US\$1.20
- **Can of Budweiser beer** US\$0.80
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$15
- **Spicy beef snack** US\$2

## TRANSPORT IN THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

#### Air

Saipan's **Francisco C Ada Saipan International Airport** (Map p373; ☎ 664 3500) is the CNMI's main airport.

#### AIRLINES FLYING TO & FROM THE NORTHERN MARIANAS

**Asiana Airlines** (☎ 288 2625; www.asiana.co.jp; Saipan) Daily direct service from Seoul, Korea.

**Continental Airlines** (☎ 234 6492; www.continental.com; Saipan) Daily direct service from Guam and twice-weekly flights from the Philippines.

**Northwest Airlines** (☎ 1800 447 4747; www.nwa.com) Daily direct service from Tokyo and Osaka, Japan.

#### Sea

At Tanapag Harbor (Map p373) in Saipan, visiting boats can anchor in the commercial harbour or alongside the pier by the Mobil Tanks. Quarantine, customs and immigration officials handle clearance requirements, and you can get directions from the port captain on VHF Channel 16. You can go straight to Rota (rather than going through Saipan), though its harbour facilities are worse than those of Saipan or Tinian.

### GETTING AROUND

#### Air

See p374 for details of inter-island flights.

#### Car & Motorcycle

Your home driving licence will do for up to 30 days; bring an International Driver's License if your home version isn't in English. Drive on the right-hand side.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'