

Northern Haiti



If you're interested in how Haiti came to be as it is today, head for the north coast. It all happened here, from Columbus' first landfall on Hispaniola to the key events of the Haitian slave revolution, and there are still many monuments left to mark out this path of history.

Everything starts at Cap-Haïtien, Haiti's second city. Now a quiet sort of a place, it was once one of the richest colonial ports in the world. Its central square and wide gridded streets with high-shuttered doors and balconies make it the ideal base from where you can explore the region.

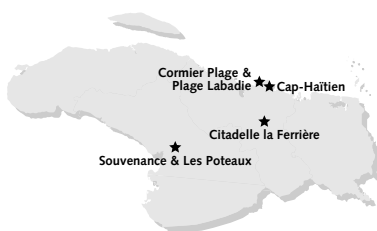
Cap-Haïtien is just an hour away from what has to be Haiti's most stupendous tourist attraction. The magnificent Citadelle la Ferrière is the mother of all Caribbean forts – a true castle perched high on a mountain and the master of all it surveys. Built in the early years of independence, it's a monument to the vision of a short-lived king, whose ruined palace of Sans Souci sits below, looking like something from a tropical Hollywood adventure movie. There are more forts further to the east, including Fort Liberté, part of France's futile attempts to keep hold of its colony – independence was declared in Gonaïves, on the road back to Port-au-Prince. Haiti's history reaches back even further to the west, where Île de la Tortue evokes memories of the golden age of piracy.

History is well and good, but the crashing Atlantic waves give the north some spectacular coastline and great beaches as well. Cormier Plage and Plage Labadie are a stone's throw from Cap-Haïtien and are ideal places to unwind – even in the years of turmoil, Labadie was one place the cruise lines couldn't bear to give up.

NORTHERN HAITI

HIGHLIGHTS

- Take a breathtaking trip through the past at **La Citadelle la Ferrière** (p338), one of the Caribbean's most awesome historic sites
- Explore the wide boulevards of **Cap-Haïtien** (opposite), Haiti's second city
- Chill on the beach with a rum punch at **Cormier Plage** or **Plage Labadie** (p338)
- Explore the Vodou heritage of the festivals of **Souvenance** and **Soukri** (p341), held at Souvenance and Les Poteaux



CAP-HAÏTIEN

pop 130,000

Haiti's second city feels a world away from the throng and hustle of Port-au-Prince. During the French colonial era it was the richest city in the Caribbean, and even if that grandeur has long since faded, the city still maintains a relaxed and parochial atmosphere. Its streets are laid out in a grid system that make it difficult to get lost, and the old port architecture of high shop fronts and balconies makes it a pleasant place to wander. Most people refer to the city simply as 'Cap,' or 'O'Kap' in the high-lilting local Creole accent of its residents.

Despite its rich history, there is still plenty of poverty in Cap-Haïtien, although recent efforts to improve municipal facilities, water supply and rubbish collection are slowly beginning to have their effect.

There isn't too much to do in Cap-Haïtien beyond enjoy the atmosphere, but it's an ideal place to base yourself to enjoy the nearby attractions, including the amazing La Citadelle la Ferrière and the beaches around Plage Labadie.

History

The currently sleepy nature of Cap-Haïtien belies a turbulent past. It has been razed to the ground five times by man and nature alike, and had four changes of name. Its history is inextricably linked to Haiti's colonial past and struggle for independence.

Cap-François was founded in 1670 by Bertrand d'Ogeron, who recognized the superb natural harbor of its location. It was a refuge for Calvinists fleeing religious turmoil in France, but as Saint-Domingue grew as a colony, the port soon became its most important possession. Renamed Cap Français, it sat at the hub of the booming plantation economy of the 18th century. Sugar, coffee, cotton and indigo swelled its coffers, and all fed by the African slave trade. By the middle of the century, Cap Français was displaying its wealth through its grand buildings and the fine dress of the colonists, the 'Paris of the Antilles.'

This Paris was destined to burn in the great slave revolution. Early rebellions had been squashed here, the inhabitants witnessing the executions of Mackandal in 1758, Vincent Ogé, who had agitated for mulatto's rights, in 1790 and Boukman a year later. The city was sacked when the full revolution erupted,

then completely torched in 1803 on the orders of Toussaint Louverture, who preferred to see it burn rather than fall into the hands of Napoleon's invading army. At Vertières on its outskirts Dessalines won the final victory that brought independence, and renamed the city Cap-Haïtien as a symbol of freedom. In a gesture of vanity, when Christophe became king he renamed it Cap Henri, but the name reverted on his death in 1820.

From then Cap-Haïtien ceded its central political and economic role to Port-au-Prince, and never fully recovered from the earthquake that leveled it in 1842. Charlemagne Péralte, the hero of the Caco rebellion against the US military occupation in 1915, is buried here, but even he couldn't stop the Americans forcing one last name change on the city, when they reordered the street plan for their own convenience.

Orientation

Cap-Haïtien is laid out in a grid pattern. Streets parallel to the sea are lettered Rue A through Q, A being the closest to the sea; those running perpendicular are numbered Rue 1 to 24, starting from the southern end of the city. If a building is on the corner of Rues 15 and L, its address is written as Rue 15L, while if the building is along Rue 14 between Rues A and B, the address is written Rue 14A-B (if the building is on Rue A between Rues 13 and 14, its address is Rue 13-14A). The streets were renamed in this utilitarian fashion by the US Marines in 1915, who couldn't pronounce the French originals.

The wide avenue running the length of the seafront is simply called the Boulevard (or Boulevard de Mer). The area to the north of the city, across a water canal, is called Carenage.

Information

CULTURAL CENTERS

Alliance Française (☎ 2262-0132; Rue 15B-C; 📧 8am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) Runs regular cultural events.

EMERGENCY

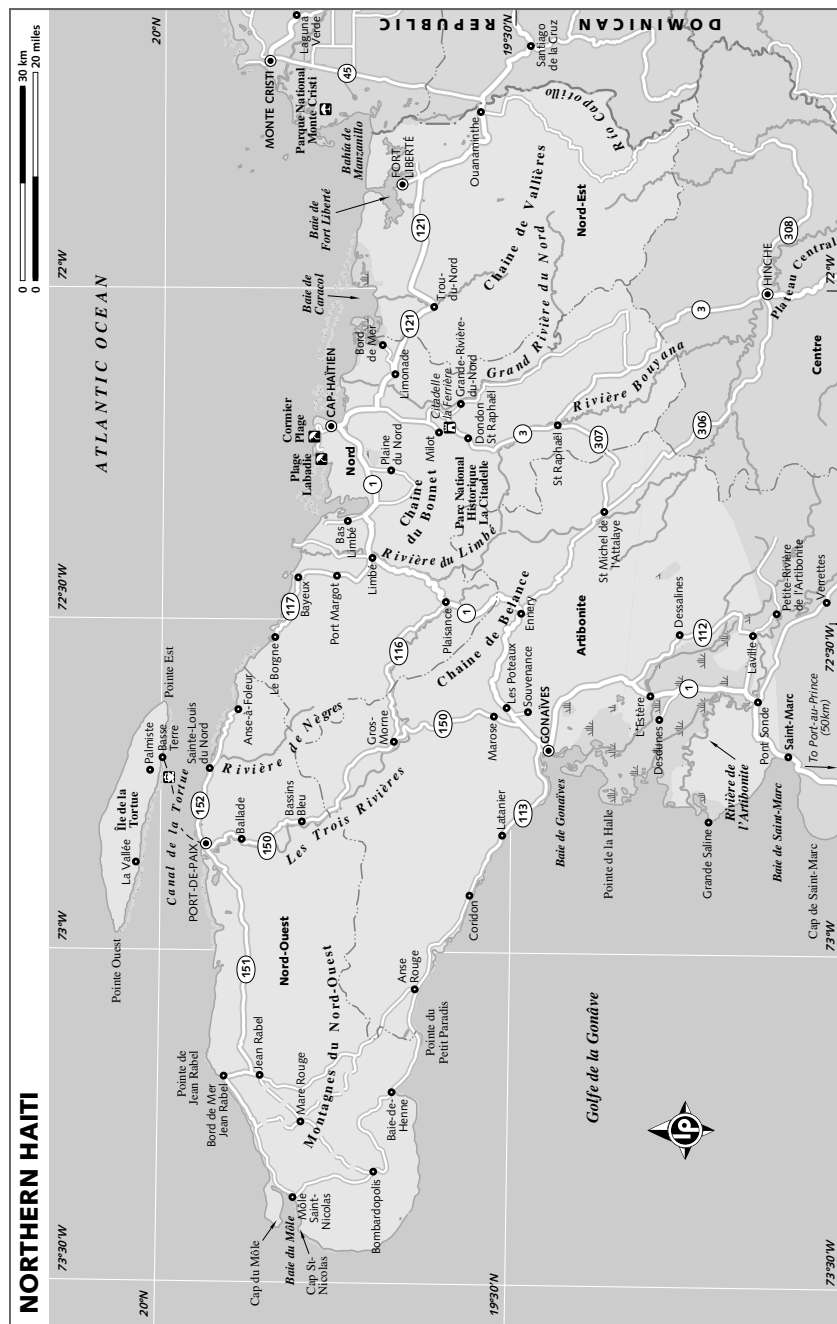
Police (Rue A)

INTERNET ACCESS

Discount Cybercafé (Rue 14H; per hr US\$1.15; 📧 8am-8pm)

Pale Klè Net (Rue G14; per hr US\$1.25; 📧 8am-8pm)

NORTHERN HAITI



MEDICAL SERVICES

Hôpital Justinien (☎ 2262-0512, 2262-0513; Rue 17Q) Cap-Haïtien's main hospital.

Rien Que Pour Vos Yeux (82 Rue 17Q) Well-stocked pharmacy.

MONEY

There's a useful cluster of banks along Rue 10-11A. When the banks are closed, you can change money on the street outside the Universal Hotel – moneychangers call to attract your attention.

Banque de L'Union Haïtienne (BUH; Rue 17A)

Sogebank (Rue 11A) Has an ATM open during banking hours.

Unibank (cnr Rue 11 A)

POST

Post Office (Rue 16-17A)

TELEPHONE

Telemo (Rue 17) Located between Rue A and the Boulevard.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Bureau du Tourisme (☎ 262-0870; cnr Rue 24 & the Boulevard)

TRAVEL AGENTS

Up 2 Date Travel (☎ 2262-5545; Rue 17L) Useful for domestic flight tickets.

Sights

CITY CENTER

Cap-Haïtien is centered on **Place d'Armes**, a wide and pleasant square between Rues 18 and 20. A statue of Dessalines stands guard over the square, which is liberally tricked out with red-and-blue Haitian flags on holidays. At other times it's a popular meeting place for students from the Roi Christophe University, on the southeast corner of the square. The **Notre Dame Cathedral** otherwise dominates proceedings, a simple and airy white basilica with pretty, abstract, stained-glass windows.

The earthquake of 1842 left few colonial-era buildings in Cap-Haïtien, and its streets are now lined with an amalgam of styles. Most common are the old commercial buildings, with high shop fronts and tall shuttered doors and windows. The floors above are residential and support wide balconies with ornate iron railings that give the sidewalks shade at almost all times of day.

The best architectural gems are in the immediate vicinity of the cathedral. On the

corner of Rue 16F is a tremendous (if slightly worn) red-brick Gothic mansion built in 1898, while on Rue 15 behind the cathedral are some charming gingerbread houses. The oldest accessible building is the Hostellerie du Roi Christophe, now a hotel (see p336), whose oldest parts were built in 1724.

Like Port-au-Prince and Jacmel, Cap-Haïtien has a **Marché de Fer** (Iron Market). This forms the hub of commercial activity, with market vendors spilling out in the streets around it to bring traffic to a halt, easily the most boisterous part of this otherwise laid-back city.

FORTS

As a major port, Cap-Haïtien has had a number of important forts to defend its harbor, all originally built by the French and found looking out to sea on the way to Plage Rival. All are ruins, but offer nice views and a chance to get out of the city center.

If you follow the Boulevard through Carenage, you'll quickly arrive at **Fort Etienne-Magny**, about 500m past the Hôtel Les Jardins de l'Océan. Only the foundations remain, but five cannons are still in place. Several benches have also been installed there, and the spot is a popular place for Haitian kids to meet and kick a football around. The next is **Fort St Joseph**, on the right on the edge of the cliff. There are more ruins here, but they aren't easily accessible.

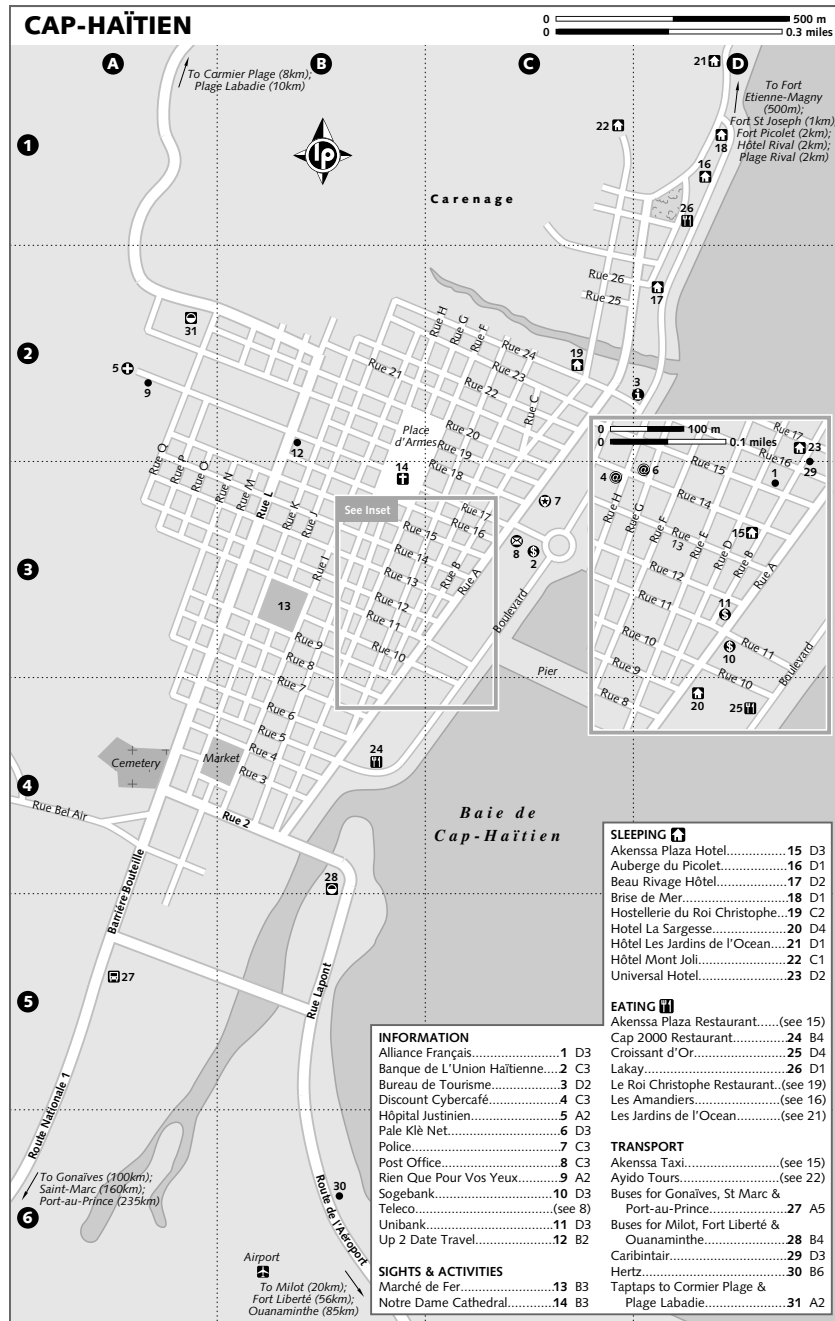
If you continue until the road peters out at Plage Rival, then continue along the sand, you'll reach **Fort Picolet**, about 1.5km from Fort Etienne-Magny. Although the fort itself is in ruins, some quite large walls and brick staircases are still standing, and you'll find an amazing array of cannons. The view is perfect, and the spot is often deserted. It's a peaceful place to watch the sunset, although it's a dark walk home.

Sleeping

Cap-Haïtien has a shortage of midrange beds. Rooms fill fast at the weekend, so advance booking is advised.

BUDGET

Hôtel la Sargesse (☎ 2262-2116; Rue 9A; r US\$12) Most of Cap-Haïtien's cheapies are fairly grim affairs, but this one just about makes the grade. Bathrooms are shared. Don't expect any frills, and bring some earplugs if



THE NIGHT OF FIRE

On the night of August 14, 1791, just outside Cap-Français in the woods of Bois Caïman, a gathering of slaves held a Vodou ritual, sparking the fire that eventually erupted into the slave revolution. The ceremony was led by Boukman, the headman from a local plantation and *hounngan* (Vodou priest). Against a thundering sky, a pig was sacrificed, binding the slaves to the *Iwa* (Vodou spirits) of Africa through Boukman's incendiary freedom cry:

'The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires him with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks to the hearts of us all.'

Within weeks, the plantations of the north were ablaze, their ashes falling like snow on Cap-Français like snow. Although this stage of the rebellion was crushed and Boukman executed, Toussaint Louverture participated in the uprising and used his experience in the final struggle for independence. Bois Caïman is now a national monument, and remains an auspicious Vodou site to this day.

you're a light sleeper. There's an OK restaurant out front.

Aknessa Plaza Hotel (☎ 2262-4354; Rue 14B; r US\$15-45; 🏠) The rooms here are better than the slightly depressing gray concrete entrance (on Rue 14 next to the restaurant). Rooms are simple, with lots of tiling that at least helps keep the place clean.

Universal Hotel (☎ 2262-0254; Rue 17B; r US\$22-30, with shared bathroom US\$18; 🏠) Definitely one of the better budget options. A large hotel with several terraces, its rooms are simple and clean. The management is helpful and pious, too: Bible passages remind guests that the meek shall inherit the earth. A handy sentiment if you're staying in the budget category.

Brise de Mer (☎ 2262-0821; 4 Carenage; r US\$30-50; 🏠) This hotel has just celebrated its centenary. It's a sweet place, but is slightly feeling its age. Rooms are fairly basic, although several are blessed with sea views and balconies, and the agreeable air in the garden complements the salty breeze from the ocean.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hôtel Rival (☎ 2262-0977; hotelrival@hotmail.com; Rte de Rival; s US\$45-65, d US\$51-71; 🏠 🏠 🏠) On the outskirts of the city by the sea near Fort Picolet, you can't miss this orange hotel. It's a bright option, and agreeably self-contained given its location. Rooms are fine (ask for a sea view), and it's the one place in Cap where you can happily dip your toes in the sea.

Hôtel Les Jardins de l'Océan (☎ 2262-2277; 90 Carenage; r with fan/air-con US\$50/80; 🏠 🏠) This French-run hotel seems to ramble up the side of the hill it sits on, so there's no shortage of terraces offering views to sea (the rooms themselves have none). Rooms come in a variety of shapes and sizes, all individually decorated to the owner's taste – we loved the one with the mosaic wall of broken mirror. Its restaurant is recommended.

Beau Rivage Hôtel (☎ 2262-3113; beaurivage@yahoo.com; 25 Blvd de Mer; s/d US\$60/80; 🏠 🏠 🏠) A new hotel facing the seafont, the Beau Rivage is a good addition to Cap's sleeping options. Service is good, and if some rooms are a little on the small and boxy side, they're all well appointed with modern fixtures and fittings.

Hôtel Mont Joli (☎ 2262-0300; www.hotelmontjoli.com; Rue B, Carenage; s/d US\$78/96; 🏠 🏠 🏠) On a hill overlooking Cap, the Mont Joli easily has the best views in the city. It's also the best standard hotel, and great value for the price. Rooms are generously sized, the restaurant has a good bar, and there's an exceedingly pleasant pool and terrace to chill out on.

Auberge du Picolet (☎ 2262-5595; Blvd de Mer; s/d US\$86/110; 🏠 🏠) A new kid on the block, this hotel is proving popular. Spacious rooms are uncluttered and centered on a small shady courtyard. Sympathetically designed, it feels more Dominican colonial than brand-new Haitian.

our pick **Hostellerie du Roi Christophe** (☎ 2262-0414; Rue 24B; s/d US\$96/120, ste US\$132; 📍 🚗 🚶 🚲) Cap-Haïtien's most charming hotel, this French colonial building has something of the Spanish hacienda about it. Set within lush gardens, there's an elegant, leafy central courtyard with plenty of rocking chairs, and a terrace restaurant. The rooms are large and comfy with plenty of period furniture and art; many have balconies. The story that Henri Christophe worked in the kitchens as a slave is sadly apocryphal.

Eating

Most restaurants in town serve Creole food, with a couple of French dishes thrown in. The fanciest options are all hotel restaurants, while at the other end of the scale, there are plenty of nondescript bar-restos where you can fill up on a cheap plate of rice and beans with chicken or fish.

Croissant d'Or (Rue 8 Blvd; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat) This small bakery sells fresh baguettes, cakes and savory pastries. It always seems packed out and one visit will explain why – it's the best bakery in town. Load up on sticky treats, or go for the quiche or pizza slices as filling snacks.

Cap 2000 Restaurant (Rue 5 Blvd; prices US\$4-8; ☎ 7am-11pm) This restaurant has a friendly atmosphere and good cheap Creole dishes at reasonable prices. The chicken *plat complet* (set meal) is well prepared, and tasty fish and chips and pasta dishes are also available.

Akensa Plaza Restaurant (Rue 14B; mains around US\$5-8; ☎ 6am-11pm) This is a cheap and cheerful place in the town center, although busier during the day than in the evening, when beer tends to win out over food in the ordering stakes. All the Creole standards are here, such as *griyo* (pork) and *lambi*, piled high with rice and plantain. Pasta dishes and burgers cater to other tastes.

Le Roi Christophe Restaurant (☎ 2262-0414; Rue 24B; mains US\$6-11; ☎ 11am-3pm & 6-10.30pm) Relaxing on the terrace of this hotel restaurant is an great way to spend a meal. There are some tasty sandwiches that make ideal lunchtime fillers, and a good range of pasta dishes. French and Creole round out the menu, along with a decent wine list.

our pick **Lakay** (☎ 2262-1442; Blvd de Mer; mains from US\$8; ☎ 5-10pm) One of the busiest restaurants in Cap-Haïtien, and it's not hard to see why. There are tables facing the seafront where you can enjoy a drink, otherwise you

step inside to eat under bamboo thatch and load up on generous plates of Creole food, plus a few pizzas. The atmosphere is lively, and at weekends there are often bands (an admission charge of US\$4 applies).

Les Jardins de l'Océan (☎ 2262-2277; 90 Carenage; mains US\$8-15; ☎ 12-3pm & 6-10pm) With its French owner, the menu here is decidedly Gallic. The menu is ambitious, including lamb with green herbs, Provençal shrimp and carpaccio of *lambi* (conch), but you're better off asking what's available before drooling over the menu too much. The resulting meals, however, are delicious.

Les Amandiers (☎ 2262-5595; Blvd de Mer; mains US\$8-15; ☎ 6-10pm) This pleasant restaurant at the Auberge du Picolet serves mainly French cuisine, with a couple of Creole classics in the mix. There are plenty of seafood options, or go for more unusual dishes such as duck with olives or chicken *confit d'ail*. All dishes come with a salad entrée.

Getting There & Away

The airport is 3.5km east of the city (US\$5/1.25 by taxi/moto-taxi). Both **Tortugair** (☎ 2250-2555) and **Caribintair** (☎ 2262-2300; Rue 16B) fly twice daily to Port-au-Prince (US\$85, 30 minutes).

Buses for Port-au-Prince (US\$12, seven hours) leave from near the Barrière Bouteille (City Gates) on Rue L from around 5am. Leave in good time as buses terminate in La Saline on the edge of Cité Soleil – not recommended after dark. Buses travel via Gonaïves (US\$6, three hours) and Saint-Marc (US\$7, four hours).

For Cormier Plage and Plage Labadie, taptaps (local buses or minibuses) leave regularly from Rue 21Q (US\$0.75, 30 minutes). For the Citadelle, taptaps to Milot (US\$0.40, one hour) leave from Rue Lapont on the eastern edge of town near the main bridge. The road is bad, especially after rain. Transport to Fort Liberté (US\$1.60, two hours) and Ouanaminthe (US\$2.50, three hours) also leaves from here.

Ayido Tours (☎ 3729-8711, 556-3082) runs a direct coach service to Santiago in the Dominican Republic every Wednesday and Saturday from the Hôtel Mont Joli. Buy tickets at the hotel shop.

Getting Around

Publiques (collective taxis) have a set rate of US\$0.30 anywhere in town – a few are signed

as taxis, otherwise look for the red ribbon hanging from the front windshield mirror. Taptaps (US\$0.15) run two main routes along Rue L (also called Rue Espanole) from Rue 15L to the Barrière Bouteille, and along Rue A from Rue 10A to the airport.

Moto-taxis here should never cost more than US\$0.40. They're weedy scooters, and coupled with the pot-holed roads are the most uncomfortable moto-taxis we found in Haiti. The Akensa Plaza Hôtel runs a metered taxi service, **Akensa Taxi** (☎ 2262-4934). For care hire go to **Hertz** (☎ 2262-0369; Rte de l'Aéroport).

AROUND CAP-HAÏTIEN

THE CITADELLE & SANS SOUCI

The awe-inspiring mountain fortress of La Citadelle la Ferrière is a short distance from Cap-Haïtien on the edge of the small town of Milot. Built to repel a possible French attack, it also stands as a monument to the vision of Henri Christophe, who oversaw its construction. A visit here is an essential part of any trip to Haiti, and actually takes in two sites – the Unesco World Heritage-listed fortress itself and the no-less amazing palace of Sans Souci. The Citadelle sits high above the town, and can be reached either on foot or horseback. Visiting in the morning is preferable, before the views are obscured by haze.

Information

The entrance to the site, formally known as the Parc National Historique La Citadelle, is at the far end of Milot town, next to an unmissable white church with a huge dome, and facing the ruins of Sans Souci. Opposite this is the **ticket office** (admission US\$5, horse rental US\$10; ☎ 8am-5pm). This is the one place in Haiti where tourist hassle is guaranteed, and the sight of a *blanc* (generic word for a foreigner; not color-specific) invariably attracts a throng of would-be guides and horse wranglers eager for your custom. Most of the guides can only parrot the most self-evident features of the site; one that comes recommended is **Maurice Etienne** (☎ 3667-6070), who really knows his history and also runs the Lakou Lakay cultural center (see p338). A reasonable fee for a good guide is US\$20 to US\$30, plus the hire of his horse.

Horses are the normal method of reaching the Citadelle, although they struggle on the

cobbled path after heavy rain. Each generally comes with two handlers (both of whom expect a tip of US\$4 to US\$5), one of whom is employed to help push the beast along. It's not always a pretty scene. From Sans Souci to the Citadelle takes a couple of hours by horse, although a 4WD can make it to a parking area 30 minutes' walk short of the top. There are further offers of horse rental here, as well as local women selling trinkets.

Sights

SANS SOUCI

Built as a conscious rival to the splendors of the Versailles in France, Henri Christophe's palace of Sans Souci has lain abandoned since it was ruined in the 1842 earthquake. The years of neglect have left it partially reclaimed by the tropical environment, creating a wonderfully bizarre and evocative monument at once elegant and truly alien.

Finished in 1813, Sans Souci was more than just a palace, but designed to be the administrative capital of Christophe's kingdom, housing a hospital, a school and a printing press, as well as an army barracks.

The palace sits on a wide terrace, and is approached by a grand staircase once flanked by bronze lions. You enter a series of rooms – the throne room, banqueting halls and private apartments, even a billiards room. Although the walls are now bare brick, during Christophe's reign they would have been hung with rich tapestries and paintings, all designed to show that although Haitians had once been slaves, they were now a cultured nation. Open to the sky, the palace originally had four stories and huge French picture windows. From his apartments, Christophe maintained correspondences with world figures of the day, from the Czar of Russia to the English abolitionist William Wilberforce.

Behind the palace are the remains of the King's and Queen's Gardens with their ornamental fountains and channels that brought cool mountain water into the palace. To one side are the remains of the hospital and, opposite, the old barracks. The Royal Corps were stationed here, originally slaves from Dahomey who were freed by Christophe when their slave ship (bound for the USA) was forced into port at Cap-Haïtien.

Just above the palace site, a roughly paved road winds up the mountain to the Citadelle.

CAVES, BATS & ANCIENT SCULPTURES

If you fancy yourself as Indiana Jones, head well off the beaten track to the caves of Dondon St Rafaël. This small town surrounded by coffee, cocoa and vanilla plantations is home to a series of caves once used by the Tainos for refuge. From Dondon it's a two-hour hike up the mountain to the caves (Des Grottes), but you'll probably require a local guide to show you the way, and possibly rent you a horse. The caves are now home to large numbers of bats, but the Tainos have left their mark on many of the stalagmites, the tops of which have been carved to resemble skulls. It's one of the most intriguing – and remote – Arawak sites in the country

It takes a 4WD one hour to reach Dondon St Rafaël from Cap-Haïtien; there are daily taptaps from Rue Lapont (US\$1.50, two hours).

LA CITADELLE LA FERRIÈRE

Haitians call the Citadelle the eighth wonder of the world, and having slogged to the 900m summit of Pic la Ferrière, which the fortress crowns, you may be liable to agree. This astounding structure with a battleship-like appearance overlooks Cap-Haïtien, the northern plain and routes leading to the south, giving astonishing views in every direction. It was completed in 1820, employing 20,000 people over 15 years. It held enough supplies to sustain the royal family and a garrison of 5000 troops for a year. With 4m-thick walls that reach heights of 40m, the fortress was impenetrable, although the French attack it was meant to repel never materialized and its cannons were never fired in anger.

Inside the ramparts, the fort has a series of further defensive entrances with drawbridges and blind corners to fox attackers. These lead through a gallery containing the first of several cannon batteries. The Citadelle contains over 160 cannons, mostly captured in battle from the English, the Spanish, and the French (look for the royalist cannons with their insignia scratched out by revolutionaries). Throughout the fort are huge piles of cannonballs – 50,000 in total – all neatly stacked and waiting patiently for Napoleon.

At the heart of the fort is the central courtyard, with its officers' quarters. Christophe himself was buried here after his suicide – his grave is under a huge boulder that forms part of the mountain. On the level above is the white-washed tomb of his son Prince Noel, killed in an explosion in the gunpowder store in 1818.

It's easily possible to spend a couple of hours exploring the site, which constantly reveals hidden passages, halls, new views from its ramparts or down into the huge cisterns designed to collect water. Sheer drops protect the Citadelle from every angle except its rear,

where you can look south to Site des Ramiers, a huddle of four small forts protecting its exposed flank.

In the main courtyard there's a small shop that sells postcards and drinks; the caretaker will open it for you.

Sleeping & Eating

Most people visit the Citadelle as a day trip from Cap-Haïtien, but if you're here overnight there's one good sleeping and eating option.

Lakou Lakay (☎ 2262-5189, 3667-6070; Milot; meal US\$10) This cultural center is a delight. Run by guide Maurice Etienne and his family, visitors are welcomed by traditional dancing and serenaded with folk songs and drumming while enjoying a huge Creole feast. Rooms for visitors are under construction and should be open by this book's publication. The whole center is also used for community celebrations and other events, so your visit is certain to get you close to traditional Haitian life.

Getting There & Away

A taptap from Cap-Haïtien costs US\$0.45 (one hour), and drops you a short walk from Sans Souci. Don't leave the return too late, as transport dries up by late afternoon.

BEACHES WEST OF CAP-HAÏTIEN

A rough road leads west from Cap-Haïtien, winding through the hills to the northwest coast of the cape. If you've been disappointed by the beaches surrounding Cap-Haïtien, you're heading in the right direction, toward some of the loveliest coastal scenery in the country, where richly wooded hills tumble straight into the Atlantic, the two divided by sheer cliffs or stretches of delicious golden sand.

The road hits the north coast of the cape near **Cormier Plage**, the picture of a Caribbean

beach and resort, where white breakers roll in to shore and rum punches are the order of the day. Further around the point is **Plage Labadie**, a small walled-off peninsula rented by Royal Caribbean Lines for its cruise-ship guests three or four times a week.

If you've been in Haiti for any length of time, the sight of a giant white ship with up to three thousand passengers – a sight common anywhere in the Caribbean – seems like a surreal event. Ferries shuttle guests back and forth all day, and the sea buzzes with jet skis and holidaymakers leaping from giant inflatable toys. During the rest of the week the place is empty, and you can pay US\$3 to enter and enjoy the place yourself and take out a sea kayak. Locals sell food and drink.

Royal Caribbean Lines is the single biggest contributor to Haitian tourism, with the ships worth an estimated US\$2 million to the economy. Although the company contributes to local education projects, little of the revenues are spent locally – the nearby Labadie village lacks decent electricity and the road to Cap-Haïtien remains a complete nightmare.

From Plage Labadie, *bateaux-taxis* (water taxis) ferry passengers to the beaches further west. Just around the cape is **Plage Belli**, from where the view of ocean-washed headland after headland fading into the far distance is spectacular. The village of **Labadie**, a small collection of rural dwellings, is a nice place to wander around watching kids playing basketball and women washing clothes. There are a few small shops, places to buy drinks and snacks, and fishermen selling their catch.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotels are listed in order of their distance from Cap-Haïtien.

Cormier Plage Resort (☎ 3528-1110; cormier@hughes.net; Route de Labadie; s/d US\$106/168 half-board; 📶 📺 📺) One of the loveliest resorts in Haiti, Cormier Plage has 36 big and airy rooms dotted amid palm trees looking out to sea, all with terrace and wi-fi, and meters from the gently shelving golden beach. The restaurant is one of the best seafood places in the country, and worth making a detour to from Cap-Haïtien.

Belli Beach Bar (☎ 2262-2338; Plage Belli; s/d US\$20/30) As the road west of Plage Labadie peters to an end, follow the narrow, steep steps leading down to Plage Belli. The tiny beach is lovely, but the hotel is exceedingly basic, with spartan rooms and frequent problems with

water supply. A restaurant serves seafood and Creole dishes.

Norm's Place (www.normsplacelabadee.com; Labadie; per person US\$25; 📶 📺 📺) A *bateau-taxi* hop between Plage Belli and Labadie village (ask for 'Kay Norm'), this charming guest-house was built from a restored French fort by an American who came to Haiti in the early 1970s and never quite left. Large rooms have four-poster beds with mosquito nets, there's a garden for lounging and a warm welcome throughout. Meals are home-cooked on request.

Getting There & Away

Taptaps going to Cormier Plage and Plage Labadie (both US\$0.80, 30 and 40 minutes respectively) leave regularly from Rue 21Q in Cap-Haïtien. Taptaps terminate (and leave from) the western side of Plage Labadie by the boundary fence of the Royal Caribbean Lines compound, from where brightly painted *bateaux-taxis* ferry passengers to Plage Belli and Labadie village. With other passengers, expect to pay around US\$0.30, and several times that if you have the boat to yourself.

THE NORTHEAST

The Nord-Est Department borders the Dominican Republic. In the colonial era it was a major plantation area, and remains an important coffee-producing area. Its pine forests are heavily exploited for charcoal but are hanging in there. In addition to the border area, there are several colonial forts of interest to visitors.

FORT LIBERTÉ

It's quiet now, but Fort Liberté was once one of France's most strategically important bases in Saint-Domingue, at the center of a wide bay with a natural harbor. Inaugurated as Fort Dauphin by the French in 1731, a huge fortress was built here, once four bases that guarded the bay like beads on a string. They couldn't withstand Toussaint Louverture, however, who captured the port in 1796 and renamed it Fort Liberté, before continuing into Santo Domingo to conquer the Spanish. In the 1860s Fort Liberté served as a meeting place for the world's antislavery movement. The area is now economically depressed,

the huge sisal plantations it once sustained long closed.

Fort Français (the fort's current name) is intact, and is one of the best French forts along the coast, with its ramparts, batteries and magazines. If the guardian is there, you'll be asked to pay a US\$0.70 entrance fee. The remains of the fort surrounding the Baie de Fort Liberté can also be visited in a couple of hours – the easiest way is by moto-taxi. Fort Labouque and the Batterie de l'Anse are on the eastern lip of the bay guarding its entrance. Between here and the town are Fort St-Charles and Fort St-Frédéric.

There are two hotels. The **Hôtel Bayaha** (Rues Vallières et Bourbon; s/d US\$35/60) is the better option, overlooking the bay. It has reasonable rooms and a restaurant. Cheaper and simpler is the **Hôtel La Sirene** (Rue Bory; r US\$12) near the main school. It's just about adequate.

Fort Liberté can be visited as a day trip from Cap-Haïtien (US\$1.60, two hours). It's about 5km off the main road to Ouanaminthe.

OUANAMINTHE

The very picture of a dusty border town, Ouanaminthe is an important trading centre across the Massacre River from Dajabón (p201) in the Dominican Republic. It's alive with small traders hurrying across to the Dominican side to buy goods, particularly on the market days of Monday and Friday. The contrast between the rubbish-strewn anarchy of Ouanaminthe and the paved streets and order of Dajabón is striking.

The border is open from 8am to 4.30pm. On arrival in Ouanaminthe, continue until the road splits in two. The left road leads to the bridge across the river that marks the border; the right to the customs and passport office. For more on crossing between the two countries, see p352.

Hôtel Paradis (Rue St-Pierre; s/d US\$10/16) hardly lives up to its name, but it's just about bearable if you get stranded in town. You're better off sleeping in Dajabón if you can.

Taptaps to Cap-Haïtien (US\$2.50, three hours) are plentiful.

THE NORTHWEST

Heading north from the Côte des Arcadins, you'll find the departments of Artibonite and Nord-Ouest. This is the birthplace of Haitian

independence, but its history extends to the earliest European contacts – Columbus first set foot on Hispaniola here, and the island of Île de la Tortue (Tortuga) was a free port during the golden age of piracy.

GONAÏVES

At first glance, Gonaïves looks like any other large town in Haiti, but it holds a very close place in the nation's heart. On January 1, 1804, Dessalines signed the act of Haitian independence here, creating the world's first black republic, and his wife, Claire Heureuse, is buried in the local cemetery. Gonaïves has played a revolutionary role in more recent years as well – it was rioting here in 1985 that showed the writing was on the wall for 'Baby Doc' Duvalier, while the rebel capture of Gonaïves in 2004 marked the beginning of the end for Aristide.

The town is a handy breaking point when traveling between Port-au-Prince, Cap-Haïtien and Port-de-Paix. Place de l'Indépendance is the town's focus, with its striking triangular modernist cathedral. In front of this is a martial statue of Dessalines in the prow of a ship, as if willing independence by the force of his presence alone. If you continue west from here, you'll reach the port and scrubby beach – locals will tell you that toxic ash from Philadelphia is buried beneath the sand.

Sleeping & Eating

Family Hotel (☎ 2274-0600; Ave des Dattes; d with fan/air-con US\$35/50; P ♻️) This is a decent medium-sized hotel, with a restaurant. Rooms are good value, although the service can be a bit poor.

Chachou Hôtel (☎ 3547-0172; 145 Ave des Dattes; s/d US\$60/80; P ♻️ 🚰 🚰) Gonaïve's best hotel, and frequently full of UN staff. Rooms are large and comfortable with satellite TV, and the restaurant is well recommended.

There are several cheap bar-restos near the main bus station and on Rue L'Ouverture.

Getting There & Away

Gonaïves is roughly halfway between Port-au-Prince and Cap-Haïtien. The bus station is east of the main square next to the Texaco gas station on the main highway. There are regular buses to Port-au-Prince (US\$7, 3½ hours) and Cap-Haïtien (US\$6, three hours). Buses south also stop at Saint-Marc (US\$1.30, one hour); there are also plenty of

SOUVENANCE & SOUKRI

Souvenance and Soukri are major dates on the Vodou calendar. People from all over Haiti congregate near Gonaïves to take part in these marathon ceremonies, used by celebrants for spiritual cleansing and revival.

Souvenance begins on Good Friday, and continues for a week, accompanied by the constant sound of *rara* music. During the week prayers are offered to a sacred tamarind tree, initiates bathe in a sacred pond, libations are poured and bulls are sacrificed for the Vodou spirits. The ceremonies include singing and dancing and go on every night, while the celebrants rest by day. The rituals are three centuries old and are said to have originated in the maroon camps, the secret communities of runaway slaves. Ogou, the warrior *lwa* who helped inspire slaves during the revolution, is particularly revered here.

Soukri is a ritual dedicated to the Kongo *lwa*. The service is divided into two branches: 'the father of all Kongo,' which takes place on January 6, and the second, larger ceremony, 'the mother of all Kongo,' occurs on August 14. The rituals last a mammoth two weeks each, a true test of endurance. Many of the celebrations are similar to those in Souvenance. If you wish to visit these ceremonies, you should introduce yourself to the head of the Vodou society when you arrive.

Souvenance is held off the road between Gonaïves and Cap-Haïtien, about 20km north of Gonaïves. The festival has become well-known enough that the place where it is held is also now known as Souvenance. As you leave Gonaïves on the road to Cap-Haïtien, you cross over the Rivière Laquinte on a bridge called Mapou Chevalier. The first immediate right after the bridge will take you to Souvenance. There are small houses for rent around the temple, although many of the participants just sleep on straw mats in the shade.

Soukri takes place off the same road from Gonaïves to Cap-Haïtien. Continue northward past the turnoff for Souvenance until you reach a small market town, Les Poteaux. A turning opposite the Saint-Marc Catholic Church leads to the *lakou* (a collection of dwellings) known as Soukri.

taptaps here. The highway to Cap-Haïtien is a microcosm of environmental climates. Having followed the road from the capital through banana plantations and the beaches of Côte des Arcadins, around Gonaïves the land turns to semidesert, with cacti the size of trees. Turning inland from here the road climbs through green mountains before finally descending to the coast. The highway is in definite need of improvement, but the ever-changing views are always interesting.

Buses to Port-de-Paix (US\$8, five hours) also leave from the bus station. The road is poor.

PORT-DE-PAIX & ÎLE DE LA TORTUE

Nord-Ouest Department, of which Port-de-Paix is the capital, is the most deforested and arid part of Haiti. The main reason to come here is to visit Île de la Tortue, the sliver of an island that forever seems to be on the cusp of development as the Caribbean's next big tourist thing. Although the island is covered

with rocky hills, it also holds some glorious beaches, particularly the truly gorgeous Pointe-Ouest (although you really need your own boat to get there).

Île de la Tortue is famous for its piratical associations (see boxed text, p32). The contraband heritage continues into the 21st century, as the island (and Port-de-Paix) are well-known smuggling transshipment points to Miami, from duty-free goods to cocaine.

Boats sail every morning from Port-de-Paix to Basse-Terre on Île de la Tortue (US\$4, one hour). From here you can get transport to the capital, Palmiste. Unfortunately there is no accommodation on the island. The **Hôtel Brise Marina** (☎ 2239-4648; Rte de St-Louis-du-Nord; r US\$60; P ♻️ 🚰 🚰) just outside Port-de-Paix is the best accommodation option in the region. Decent rooms have sea views and there's a restaurant.

There's regular transport to Gonaïves (US\$8, five hours), from where you must change for onward travel.

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