

Caribbean Coast



The thick jungle-lined coastline of Costa Rica's fierce and rugged Caribbean face has historically been a law unto itself. Deemed too wild and impassable by the conquering Spaniards, the area has developed at its own unbothered laidback pace.

However, this isn't your envisioned Caribbean stereotype. Salt-white beaches and gently lapping turquoise waters are replaced by brooding tempestuous seas and black volcanic shores that are skirted by jungle so raw and wild you expect to see a T Rex come roaring out onto the beach at any moment.

While you won't exactly find Jurassic Park (which isn't such a funny gag when you consider the rife rumors of creating Western-styled wildlife parks in the area) there are bountiful amounts of nonextinct animals such as jaguars, sloths, turtles and enough snapping crocodiles to make you skip with haste over any creek and river.

Also to be found are some of the more thriving indigenous tribes in this part of the world. The KéköLdi, Bribri and Cabécar tribes are strong flavors in the cultural hot pot that has evolved here. But the most obvious ethnic feature is the Afro-Caribbean community. With them comes the heady and colorful Rasta culture known the world over; reggae music, spicy jerk chicken and general *irie* (good) living are found at every turn.

Chinese, Italian and North Americans have more recently emigrated in their droves. The secret is already out about this sloth-paced hotchpotch of people, who live so happily in this wonderfully wild corner of the world. So, best check it out soon, before it's all turned into a theme park.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Taking snaps of snappy crocs on the canals of **Parque Nacional Tortuguero** (p458)
- Beaching it by day and partying by night in **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** (p477)
- Pedaling through the **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo** (p491) on the scenic cycle route from Puerto Viejo to Manzanillo
- Taking lounging tips from the overhanging sloths and gently rocking the day away in a hammock in **Cahuita** (p468)
- Rolling your sleeves up and searching the beaches to see and save the turtles of **Parismina** (p456)



History

Despite Columbus first dropping anchor off what is today Limón, and claiming to have witnessed untold riches, the wild jungle of the Caribbean coast was seen as too dense and wild, so the colonization of Costa Rica was done from the Pacific side. The Caribbean coast has its own story, largely as a result of its imposed isolation from the rest of the country. Once the Spanish invaders realized that little wealth was to be found on the alleged 'Rich Coast,' they left the steamy jungle-lined shores and its Indian inhabitants to their own devices. The pre-Columbian Cabécar, KéköLdi and Bribri tribes still thrived, for the most part unbothered, for centuries after the *conquistadors*' (conquerors') arrival.

In 1867 a port was built on the site of a grand old lemon tree, hence Limón, and the Caribbean coast had an access point to the world. Aside from a small group of cacao farmers in Matina, it wasn't until the 1870s that the first major influx of non-Indian residents arrived. Minor Keith's railroad laborers brought the strong West Indian culture that is the dominant feature of the region's makeup. However, despite a new speedy (for the time) railtrack to unify the country, division would remain. The black people of the Caribbean coast were not granted citizenship until 1949, and until then were not allowed to cross the border to leave the Caribbean provinces. Out of isolation has sprung a unique and independent culture that feels like a country within a country.

Climate

The fact that there is no traditional dry season is a mixed blessing. It pretty much rains all year, but that keeps the crowds away, while the bountiful land remains ocean-green and rich with wildlife. There's a steady year-round temperature of about 27°C/80°F to 8°C/46°F, while the driest months are February, March, September and October. Surfers might note that the biggest swells hit the southern Caribbean from December to March.

Parks & Reserves

Refuges and parks line the Caribbean coast.

Cahuita National Park (p475) In this park mangroves and river banks are home to plenty of point-and-giggle wildlife such as armadillo and sloth, while the protected reef is the most colorful on the coast.

Parque Nacional Tortuguero (p458) Offers kayak safaris around crocodile-infested backwaters, while howler,

spider and capuchin monkeys squawk and holler overhead. But the main draw is the green sea turtles, which come to lay their eggs from June to October.

Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Barra del Colorado (p465) This is where fishing enthusiasts come from all over to hook snook, tarpon and gar. Visitors hole up in luxury fishing lodges and spin lines all day. Wildlife rain-forest trips and deep-sea fishing are also popular.

Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo (p491) A rich rain forest and wetland tucked away in the country's southeastern corner. Home to the country's only mangrove oysters, the rivers are full of manatee, caiman and crocodile.

Dangers & Annoyances

The Caribbean coast region has had a bad reputation over the years for being more dangerous than other parts of Costa Rica. In reality, crime levels against tourists are no higher than in any other part of the country. This view has mainly been manifested by the ignorant few who feel threatened in a black environment. Still, as anywhere else, common sense is necessary. A very real problem all along the coast is the sea. Rips can be very strong, so make sure you always swim in safe areas (any local will tell you if it's OK to go in the water); if in doubt, just go in for a paddle, or not at all.

Getting There & Around

When traveling to Puerto Limón and the southern Caribbean, it's easy enough to hop on any of the regular buses from San José. Buses also connect up most towns along the coast, from Sixaola, on the Panamanian border, to Puerto Limón. Alternatively, the roads are pretty good, so self-drive is a good option. The north is a little trickier. Much of the area is only linked up by waterways, so boating is the sole means of transport, which essentially rules out self-drive. Both Tortuguero and Barra del Colorado have landing strips, to which there are flights daily from San José.

THE ATLANTIC SLOPE

The idea was simple: build a port on the Caribbean coast and connect it to the Central Valley by railroad, thus opening up important shipping routes for soaring coffee production. In 1867 present-day Puerto Limón was chosen as the site, perhaps not



accounting for the 150 unexplored kilometers of dense jungles, malaria-ridden swamps and steep, muddy mountainsides along the Atlantic slope.

Though things did not go exactly according to plan, the Costa Ricans eventually got their port and their railroad. They also got a booming banana business, which dominated this region for 100 years.

The railroad, once the lifeline of the region, is no longer. Today, a cloudy highway links the Central Valley to the Caribbean coast, starting in the foothills of the Cordillera Central, traversing a landscape dominated by banana and pineapple plantations, and ending in the swampy lowlands around Limón.

GUÁPILES & AROUND

This pretty, prosperous town in the northern foothills of the Cordillera Central is the transport center for the Río Frio banana-growing region. Some 60km northeast of San José, Guápiles is a bustling place, its main streets lined with shopping centers and other services. A lively agricultural market takes place on Saturdays.

Guápiles is about 1km north of Hwy 32. The two major streets are one way, running parallel to each other. Most of the services are on the loop these streets make through the busy downtown. The convenient **Café Internet Caribe** (☎ 2771 0631; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-10:30pm) is opposite the bus terminal.

Jardín Botánico Las Cusingas

Exhibits at the family-run **Jardín Botánico Las Cusingas** (botanical garden; ☎ 2710 2652; guided tour US\$5; ☎ by appointment) emphasize medicinal plants, rural life, conservation and the ethical use of plants. Eighty medicinal-plant species, 80 orchid species, 30 bromeliad species and more than 100 bird species have been recorded on the flower-filled property. There are several easy trails for walking, as well as courses, research projects and a library on offer.

In the middle of the gardens, a rustic two-room wooden **cabin** (r per person US\$5; [P]) houses up to four people. Its cozy living area is equipped with a wood-burning stove; meals are also available. Turn south at the Servicentro Santa Clara (the opposite direction from Cariari), then go 4km by rough paved road to the signed entrance.

Ecofinca Andar

Combining organic agriculture, environmental conservation and community activism, the **Ecofinca Andar** (ecological farm; ☎ 2272 1024; www.andarc.org; Santa Rosa; 1-day admission US\$14, home-stays US\$17; 📍) is an impressive educational facility. Demonstrations focus on plants cultivated for medicinal use, sources of renewable energy and the biodiversity of the surrounding rain forest. If you stick around for more than a day you can really get your hands dirty by planting or harvesting in the gardens, fishing and maintaining trails. The farm is 3km northeast of the village of Santa Rosa.

La Danta Salvaje

Make advance arrangements to visit **La Danta Salvaje** (☎ 2750 0012; www.greencoast.com/ladanta/ladantasalvaje.htm; 3-night package per person US\$210). On the Caribbean slope at 800m above sea level, this private 410-hectare rain-forest reserve is part of the critical buffer zone that protects Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo (p146). The rustic lodge hosts small groups for three days of hiking in the jungle, swimming under waterfalls and spotting wildlife like spider monkey and tapir. Prices include three meals a day, as well as transportation (45 minutes by 4WD, followed by a three-hour hike to the lodge).

Sleeping

Hotel Cabinas Lomas del Toro (☎ 2710 2934; d US\$10-15; 📍 📺 📶) If you'd rather not brave Guápiles proper, this ramp motel off Hwy 32 (about 3km before Guápiles) is efficient and easy to find. Besides the spotless guestrooms, you'll find a good restaurant and a recreation room with table-tennis and pool tables.

Hotel y Cabinas Wilson (☎ 2710 2217; d/tr US\$16/24; 📍 📺) This clean, comfortable spot is on the left-hand side as you drive into Guápiles north from the highway. A vibrant wall mural brightens up the otherwise nondescript décor of the open-air lobby, which overlooks the busy street.

Cabinas Quinta (☎ 2710 7016; d with fan/air-con US\$40/46; 📍 📺) Much nicer than the average cabina, these large, spotless rooms have cable TV, hot showers and cold refrigerators. The 19-hectare grounds have private trails, two rivers, horses and a motocross track. It's on the road to Cariari just as you leave Guápiles.

Country Club Suerre (☎ 2710 7551; www.suerre.com; s/d/ste US\$75/90/140; 📍 📺 📶 📶) Join banana executives and other VIPs at this swish spot, 1km north of the Servicentro Santa Clara. Spacious but sanitized rooms have all the required amenities. The Olympic-sized pool, tennis courts and children's play area make this a great spot for families, while everyone will appreciate the luxurious sauna and spa.

Eating

There is an assortment of *sodas* (inexpensive eateries), bakeries and fast-food joints in town.

Happy's Pizza (☎ 2710 2434; mains US\$1-5; 📍 9am-10pm) More than just pizza, this place anchors a food court with all sorts of independent fast food. Happy's is 100m from the Catholic church.

Restaurant El Unico (☎ 2710 6250; meals US\$3-5; 📍 10am-11pm) Around the corner from the bus terminal, this popular restaurant specializes in chop suey, General Chau's chicken and other Chinese fare.

Restaurant La Ponderosa (☎ 2710 2075; mains US\$3-10; 📍 11am-midnight) This roadside joint is 5km west of Guápiles. A popular stop for a steak, or just *bocas* (savory bar snacks) and a beer.

There's also a huge **Más X Menos supermarket** (📍 9am-9pm), 200m from the bus terminal.

Getting There & Away

The Guápiles bus terminal is just south of the center.

Cariari US\$0.50, 20 minutes, depart every 20 minutes from 6am to 10pm.

Puerto Limón via Guácimo & Siquirres US\$2, two hours, depart hourly from 6am to 7pm.

Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí US\$1, 45 minutes, depart at 5:30am, 8am, 10:30am, noon, 2:30pm and 5pm.

San José US\$1.75, 1¼ hours, depart every 30 minutes from 6:30am to 7pm.

CARIARI

Due north of Guápiles, Cariari is a blue-collar, rough-around-the-edges banana town. Corrugated-roof shops line the main thoroughfare and look a little like they were jumbled together yesterday and would collapse like dominoes under a slight breeze. There's a gas station, a bank (with ATM, opposite the San José bus terminal) and an internet café, **Comuser** (☎ 2767 8286; Tracopa bus terminal; per hr US\$1; 📍 7am-10pm Mon-Fri, 11am-8pm Sun).

The reason tourists cruise through Cariari is to catch a boat to Tortuguero (p461), which can usually be accomplished in an hour or two. If you get stuck, you can spend the night at the **Hotel Central** (☎ 2767 6890; r per person US\$10; 📍), which is conveniently close to the bus terminals. The proprietor Patricia – known as 'la mama en Cariari' – takes care of her guests, providing breakfast, luggage storage, long-term parking and other services. Plus she used to work in a hospital, so her brightly painted rooms (with shared bathrooms) are spotless.

Getting There & Away

The turnoff for the paved road to Cariari is about 1km east of Guápiles, at the Servicentro Santa Clara. If you are heading to Tortuguero, you can leave your car at the Hotel Central (per day US\$2) or at the guarded parking in La Pavona. (Do not drive to La Geest, as parking is not available.)

Cariari has two bus terminals: the one serving San José is at the southern end of town, while the one serving Guápiles and Caribbean destinations is about five blocks closer to the center, behind the police station.

Despite what you might hear from overzealous tour operators, the most common route to Tortuguero is through La Pavona, a private farm on the Río Suerte (La Pavona is not a town, and does not show up on most maps). Buses for La Pavona depart from the central bus terminal behind the police station; buy tickets from the Coopetraca window. Boats from La Pavona to Tortuguero are timed to meet the buses, so you won't have to wait long for your connection.

The private **Bananero** (☎ 2709 8005) boat company also provides transportation from Cariari to Tortuguero via a private plantation called La Geest (also not on maps). Bananero buses leave from the San José bus terminal. **Guápiles** US\$0.50, 20 minutes, depart every 20 minutes from 6:30am to 10pm.

Puerto Limón US\$2.25, 2½ hours, depart at 4:30am, 8:30am, noon and 3pm.

Puerto Lindo (for Barra del Colorado) US\$6, depart at noon and 2pm (dry season only).

San José US\$2, three hours, depart at 5:30am, 6:30am, 7:30am, 8:30am, 11:30am, 1pm, 3pm and 5:30pm.

Tortuguero via La Geest US\$10, three hours, depart at 1:30pm and 3:30pm.

Tortuguero via La Pavona US\$10, three hours, depart at 6am, noon and 3pm.

GUÁCIMO

There's not much to this little town, about 12km east of Guápiles, except the expansive campus of the **Escuela de Agricultura de la Región Tropical Húmeda** (Earth; ☎ 2713 0000; www.earth.ac.cr; guided tours US\$10). This private, not-for-profit university attracts students from around the world to research sustainable agriculture in the tropics. The university's nontraditional curriculum emphasizes agriculture as a human activity, integrating various academic disciplines and a philosophy of hands-on, active learning. As such, the 3300-hectare campus looks like a college campus at first glance, however, it also contains many hectares of experimental plots, plantations and rain-forest reserves.

A popular destination of the Limón cruise-ship crowd is **Costa Flores** (☎ 2717 6457; guided tour US\$15; 📍 by reservation), a huge tropical flower and palm farm, with incredible heliconia gardens. Its 48 hectares include landscaped gardens and fountain-fed ponds (much of it wheelchair accessible). The farm exports 120 varieties of blossoms to the USA and Europe.

Hotel Restaurant Río Palmas (☎ 2760 0330; d with/without air-con US\$40/25; 📍 📺 📶 📶) This hotel some 600m east of Earth stands out with its lush gardens and hiking trails. Very comfortable rooms have cable TV, hot showers and other amenities, and the restaurant is recommended. It's an excellent deal, in the middle of nowhere.

SQUIRRES

Squirres has long served as an important transportation hub as it sits at the intersection of Hwy 32 (the main road that crosses the Atlantic slope to Puerto Limón) with Hwy 10, the old road that connects San José with Puerto Limón via Turrialba.

Even before the roads came, Squirres administered the most important junction on the San José–Limón railway. And for the first part of the 20th century, the town delineated Costa Rica's segregated interior: without special permission, blacks were barred from traveling west of this internal border. Until the constitution of 1949 outlawed racial discrimination, black conductors and engineers would change places with their Spanish counterparts here, then head back to Limón.

Today, Squirres still seems to mark the place where Costa Rica proper takes a dip into the Caribbean – and it's not just the

TALLYING THE TRUE COST OF BANANAS *Beth Penland*

Banana cultivation, the second-largest industry (trailing tourism) in Costa Rica, began in 1878 when Minor Keith, the American entrepreneur contracted to build the Atlantic Railway (see p41), planted those first Panamanian cuttings to provide cheap food for his workforce. The sweet crop was a surprise hit in the USA and, after the completion of the Atlantic Railway in 1890, the banana boom began in earnest.

Mostly foreign investors bought and cleared the land that would become the 'banana coast.' In 1909 Keith consolidated his holdings as United Fruit, a banana empire that influenced Central American affairs for the next half century.

The banana industry has created an enormously lucrative monoculture that has been susceptible to a variety of parasites and other diseases, including a series of blights that swept through the region in the early 20th century, decimating banana crops throughout the northern lowlands and Caribbean coast. To combat these diseases and other parasitic organisms that might compromise the bottom line, growers use an arsenal of ecologically destructive methods to guarantee a profitable harvest.

For example, while still on the trees, bananas are wrapped in blue plastic bags impregnated with petrochemicals that shield them from pests, while also inducing the fruit to ripen more quickly. These baggies often end up in streams and canals around the fincas (plantations). The bags can kill wildlife directly by suffocation, or indirectly by contaminating the environment with chemicals. Moreover, runoff from the fincas, which are kept free of weeds and other undergrowth that could naturally stop serious erosion, is enriched with fertilizers that often promote radically increased growth in some plants, potentially denying space and light to organisms less capable of using the fertilizers for themselves.

These synthetic products can also affect humans. At least 280 pesticides are authorized for use in the cultivation of the fruit, including five that the World Health Organization (WHO) ranks as 'extremely hazardous.' Plantation owners and chemical companies have faced lawsuits from more

than 24,000 Latin American workers over the effects of Dibromochloropropane (DBCP), which has been linked to birth defects, tissue damage and sterility in male workers. Although it was banned in 1977 by the USA, where it is manufactured, it was used here until 1990.

In Costa Rica the right to acceptable working conditions is protected under the Declaration of Human Rights, but this does not include protection from hazardous toxins. Workers had to petition US courts to seek recourse against the producers and distributors of DBCP. Although Nicaraguan courts ordered US corporations in 2002 to pay out US\$490 million to 583 workers affected by DBCP, most of the 9000 Costa Rican workers who claim to have been rendered sterile are still waiting for a settlement. A Dow Chemical representative called the ruling 'unenforceable.'

Conditions for many Costa Rican banana workers are still poor. Wages are low, particularly among the under-regulated indigenous workforce along the Caribbean coast. Efforts to organize the labor force have reportedly resulted in the blacklisting of union representatives. Paraquat, a chemical that is banned in several European countries because of links to health problems including blurred vision, tissue damage and even death, is still used to the tune of 65kg per worker annually.

In the late 1990s a loose coalition of organizations began certifying bananas as 'Fair Trade'; these labeled, premium-priced fruits are usually grown on smaller farms, and companies must prove that they pay living wages and offer workers minimal protection from agrochemicals. This increased focus on social responsibility is finally moving US corporations to work with auditors to meet labor, human-rights and food-safety standards. However, these auditors have come under scrutiny as some have gained a reputation for loose standards. It has been claimed that some US companies have gained Fair Trade accreditation without ticking all the correct boxes the consumer would expect.

Despite efforts toward change, the long-term ecological damage done by the banana trade will be evident throughout Costa Rica for years to come. Fortunately, socioeconomic and sustainable growth in the industry are roughly on the right track.

geography. The lack of infrastructure to the east of Siquirres is subtle, but you'll notice it when you're charged twice as much for painfully slow internet access, then spend half a day locating an ATM to pay for it.

There is little reason to stop in Siquirres, unless you are heading north to Parismina (in which case you should definitely make use of the bank in town). If you need somewhere to crash for the night, head 800m north of Parque Central to **Chito's Lodge** (☎ 2768 9293; per person US\$20; 📍), which also has a lively bar and restaurant, as well as lovely grounds inhabited by many animals. Chito is something of a local celebrity, as he has appeared on TV, wrestling with crocodiles. **Castellana** (Parque Central; meals US\$1-3) is a friendly *soda* and bakery serving tasty, typical Tico fare.

Getting There & Away

If you are heading to Parismina, take the **Caño-Aguilar bus** (☎ 2768 8172) to Caño Blanco (US\$1.50, two hours) at 4:15am or 12:30pm Monday through Friday, or 7:15am or 3:15pm Saturday and Sunday. Boats to Parismina (US\$2, 10 minutes) wait for the buses in Caño

Blanco, departing at 6am and 3pm Monday through Friday, and 9am and 5pm Saturday and Sunday.

Siquirres is a regular stop on the San José-Limón route, so you can catch a bus to either destination every hour between 6am and 7pm.

PUERTO LIMÓN

This is the great city of Costa Rica's Caribbean coast, birthplace of United Fruit (see boxed text, above) and capital of Limón Province. In many ways, it's still removed from San José's sphere of influence. Around here, business is measured by truckloads of bananas, not busloads of tourists, so don't expect much pampering. Cruise ships do deposit passengers between October and May; we can only hope that they weren't expecting to spot a quetzal.

Most travelers simply pass through on their way to more user-friendly destinations, as this hard-working port city doesn't float everyone's boat. Breezes blow in off the Caribbean, but the seaside stretch is underutilized, at best. Only the guests at the Park Hotel and the

workers at the cruise-ship pier can appreciate that this is a coastal city. Further inland, the orderly grid of streets is lined with run-down buildings and overgrown parks, and the sidewalks are crowded with shoppers and street vendors.

If you're the rare traveler inclined to a little urban exploration, Limón is an interesting place. It is the heart of Costa Rica's Afro-Caribbean culture, reflected in the laidback hospitality, a growing music scene and the country's best African cultural festival (see p452). The city's dilapidated charm is giving way to more modern growth, as federal funds are slowly being invested in this side of the country.

Some urban-renewal programs have already been implemented, such as the pedestrian mall from the market to the sea wall and the new bus station. But Limón – both port and province – has a long and difficult history of complications with the capital, and locals don't expect their city to get a full federally funded face-lift anytime soon. (This might not seem such a bad thing to visitors who need a break from the zip-line economy.)

History

Christopher Columbus first dropped anchor in Costa Rica in 1502 at Isla Uvita, just off the coast of Puerto Limón. The Atlantic coast, however, was left largely unexplored by Spanish settlers until the 19th century. In 1867, construction began on an ambitious railroad connecting the highlands to the sea. Limón was chosen as the site of a major port, which would facilitate exports of coffee from the Central Valley.

The railroad project changed Costa Rica in dramatic ways. The freed Jamaican slaves that provided cheap labor for the railroad construction settled on the coast, introducing the English language and Caribbean culture to the previously homogeneous population. The bananas that were planted alongside the tracks as a cheap food source for the workers became the country's number-one export. And the American-owned United Fruit, which controlled the booming business, made Costa Rica a part of its banana empire (see p41).

In 1913 a banana blight shut down many Caribbean fincas, and much of the banana production moved to the Pacific coast.

Afro-Caribbean workers, however, were restricted by visa regulations to Limón Province, so were forbidden from following the employment opportunities. Stranded in the least-developed part of the country, many turned to subsistence farming, fishing or working on cocoa plantations. Others organized and staged bloody strikes against United Fruit.

In 1948 Limón provided key support to José Figueres during the 40-day civil war (see p42). In 1949 the new president enacted a constitution that finally granted blacks the right to work and travel freely throughout Costa Rica.

Orientation

Limón's streets are poorly marked and most do not have signs. Most locals can give you better directions using city landmarks such as the market, the old Radio Casino and Parque Vargas. Av 2 begins as the pedestrian mall, stretching from the sea wall past Parque Vargas to the market, where it becomes a main street. Several banks, bars, restaurants and hotels are within a few blocks, as is the main bus terminal.

Information

Note that banks are a rarity in other parts of the Caribbean coast, so whether you're headed north or south, stock up here with as many colones as you think you're going to need.

Banco de Costa Rica (☎ 2758 3166; cnr Av 2 & Calle 1) Exchanges US dollars cash and has an ATM.

Centro Médico Monterrey (☎ 2798 1723, emergency 2297 1010) Opposite the cathedral.

Hospital Tony Facio (☎ 2758 2222) On the coast at the northern end of town; serves the entire province.

Internet Café (☎ 2798 0128; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, noon-7pm Sat) Ten fairly fast computers, conveniently located upstairs at Terminal Caribeño.

La Casona de Parque (per hr US\$1; ☎ 7am-6pm) Another option for internet access, servicing the cruise-ship crowd.

Post office (Calle 4 btwn Avs 1 & 2; ☎ 9am-4pm)

Scotiabank (☎ 2798 0009; cnr Av 3 & Calle 2;

☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-3:30pm Sat) Exchanges cash and traveler's checks. Also has a 24-hour ATM on the Plus and Cirrus systems that dispenses US dollars.

Dangers & Annoyances

Limón is what you'd call gritty: take precautions against pickpockets during the day, particularly in the market. People do get mugged

here, so stick to well-lit main streets at night, avoiding the sea wall and Parque Vargas. Park in a guarded lot and remove everything from the car, as vehicle break-ins are common.

Sights & Activities

The city's main attraction is the waterfront **Parque Vargas**, an incongruous expanse of bench-lined sidewalks beneath a lost little jungle of tall palms and tropical flowers, centered on an appealingly decrepit bandstand.

From here, you can head inland along Avenida 2, the **pedestrian mall** that caters to the cruise-ship traffic. Keep an eye out for vendors selling home-burned CDs by local bands – Limón is getting a reputation for its growing hip-hop and Latin-reggae fusion scenes. You'll end up at the colorful **central market**. Two blocks away, the **Museo Etnohistórico de Limón** (Calle 4 btwn Avs 1 & 2; admission free), on the 2nd floor of the post office, was closed for renovations at press time (and has been for years). Past exhibits of Afro-Caribbean artifacts sound intriguing, so it's worth checking out if it ever opens again.

From the park, it's a pleasant walk north along the **sea wall**, where views of the rocky headland are set to a steady baseline of waves crashing against the concrete. After dark, this is a popular mugging and make-out spot.

Although there are no beaches for swimming or surfing in Limón. If you are keen to get in the water, **Playa Bonita** (p455), 4km northwest of town, has a sandy beach, while **Isla Uvita** (p455), 1km offshore, has one of the country's most powerful lefts.

Festivals & Events

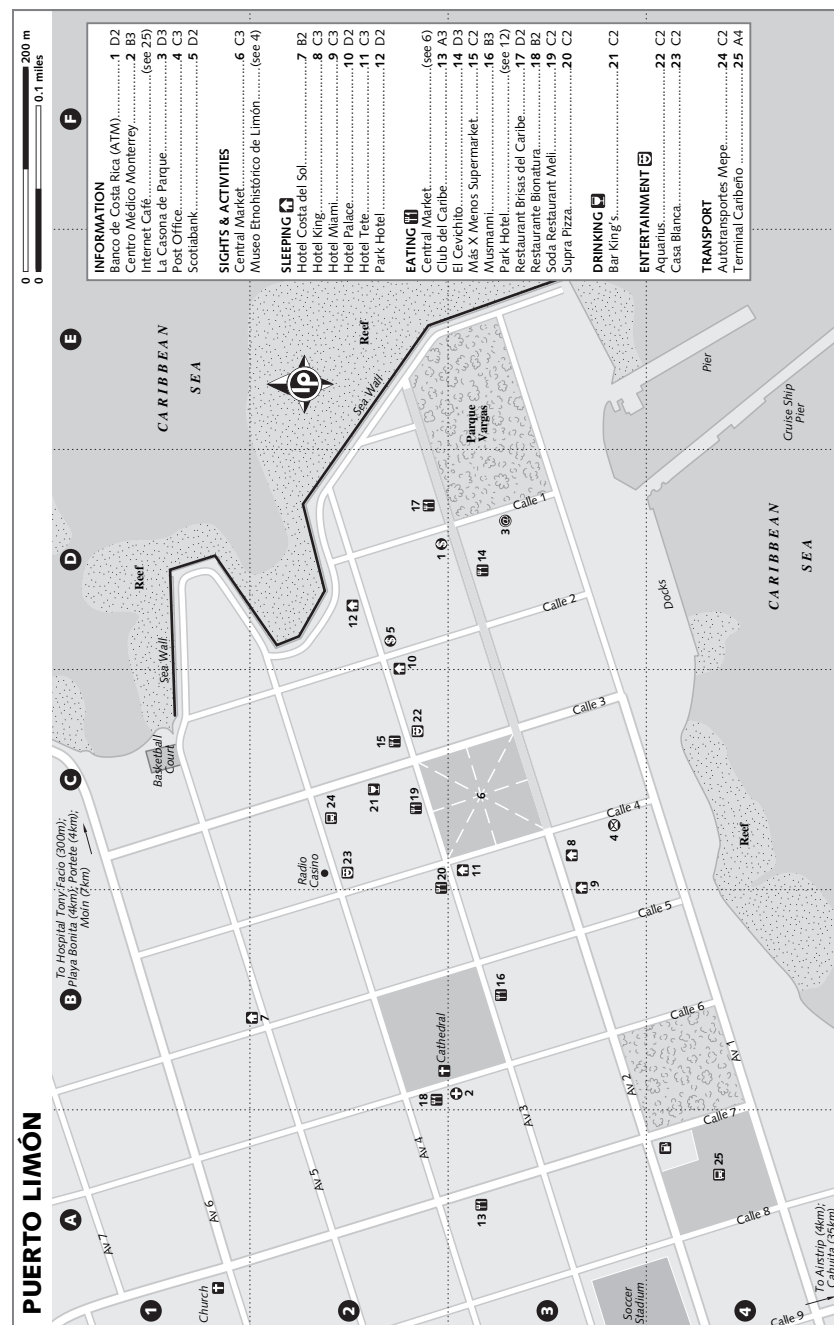
Festival Flores de la Diáspora Africana (Late

August) A celebration of Afro-Caribbean culture. While it is centered on Puerto Limón, the festival sponsors events showcasing African heritage throughout the province and San José.

Día de la Raza (Columbus Day; October 12) Columbus' historic landing on Isla Uvita inspires Limón to go all out, with a four- or five-day carnival of colorful street parades and dancing, music, singing and drinking. Book your hotel in advance.

Sleeping

Hotels all along the Caribbean coast are in demand on weekends and during vacations, when prices rise. Reserve ahead if possible during these periods.



BUDGET

The hotels listed here are at the more wholesome end of the budget spectrum, but they are still pretty gloomy; ask to see a room and check security.

Hotel Costa del Sol (☎ 2798 0909; cnr Calle 5 & Av 5; s/d with shared bathroom US\$10/12, with private bathroom US\$15/17, with air-con US\$18/20; **P** ♿) Limón's best budget option is this large hotel, staffed by friendly, young employees. Rooms, bearing the distinct odor of disinfectant, have fresh paint and clean sheets, as well as TV, telephones and cold-water showers.

Hotel Palace (☎ 2798 2604; Calle 2 btwn Avs 2 & 3; d US\$12) Ornamental stonework adorns the balconies of the bright yellow building, where the Hotel Palace is on the 2nd floor. Potted plants brighten the interior at this woman-owned place, which is otherwise characterized by cracked tiles and peeling paint. All quarters have built-in cold-water bathrooms, which do not offer much privacy.

MIDRANGE

Limón proper offers nothing remotely upscale. Nicer hotels are at Playa Bonita (opposite).

Hotel Miami (☎ 2758 0490; hmiamilimon@yahoo.com; Av 2 btwn Calles 4 & 5; s/d with fan US\$14/18, with air-con US\$24/32; **P** ♿) One of the few hotels in Limón with a hint of style, this safe, secure place has rooms with fresh, tasteful décor. All are equipped with cable TV and industrial-strength fans.

Hotel Tete (☎ 2758 1122; Av 3 btwn Calles 4 & 5; s/d/tr with fan US\$15/25/29, with air-con US\$15/22/30; **P** ♿) Hotel Tete has dark but pleasant rooms with clean linoleum floors and matching curtains and bedspreads. One big room faces the street, which means more light and more noise. This place is definitely nicer inside than out, so don't be put off by the foreboding exterior.

Park Hotel (☎ 2798 0555, 2758 3476; Av 3 btwn Calles 1 & 2; s/d US\$50/60; **P** ♿ ♿ ♿) Locals will act impressed if you tell them you are staying at the Park Hotel. This is downtown Limón's best stab at upscale, where simple, stylish rooms have high ceilings and attractive wooden furniture. Spacious rooms with sea views and little balconies cost US\$5 more.

Eating

Soda Restaurant Meli (Av 3 btwn Calles 3 & 4; meals US\$2-4) One of many cheap *sodas* surrounding the central market. It's popular for its

cheap prices and big servings of fried rice and *casados* (set meals).

Restaurante Bionatura (Calle 6 btwn Avs 3 & 4; mains US\$2-5; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) In a town where everything seems deep-fried, this restaurant stands out with its focus on healthy vegetarian cuisine, from fresh fruit salads to veggie burgers and 'bistek de soya' *casados*. There's a health-food store next door.

Restaurant Brisas del Caribe (☎ 2758 0138; mains US\$3-5; ☎ 7am-11pm Mon-Fri, 10am-11pm Sat & Sun) The best view in town isn't over the waves: right by the Parque Vargas, outdoor tables and a breezy balcony make for excellent people-watching and delicious Caribbean fare.

El Cevichito (Av 2 btwn Calles 1 & 2; mains US\$4) The outdoor patio along the pedestrian mall is one of the city's more pleasant spots. You'll find locals gathering here to guzzle beer, discuss soccer and devour tasty garlic fish.

Club del Caribe (Calle 7 btwn Avs 3 & 4; mains US\$3-6) Next to a pool hall, this homey eatery is chock-full of Creole flavor. Try a bowl of cow's-foot soup and a cold beer for US\$3.

Supra Pizza (☎ 2758 3371; Av 3 btwn Calles 4 & 5; mains US\$3-6, large pizza US\$10; ☎ 10am-11pm) Upstairs at the Plaza Caribe, this place caters to students and budget travelers with large portions of good pizza and pasta.

Park Hotel (☎ 2798 0555; Av 3 btwn Calles 1 & 2; meals US\$6-10; ☎ 6am-10pm) Go upscale at the semi-swanky restaurant attached to Limón's top hotel. With white linen tablecloths and big windows catching Caribbean breezes, it exudes a tropical, colonial ambience. The menu features seafood and many mysterious (but delicious) specialties of the house.

A budget traveler's best bet is the **central market** (☎ 6am-8pm Mon-Sat), with several *sodas* and plenty of groceries. The big supermarket **Más X Menos** (☎ 8am-9pm) across the avenue is useful for self-caterers. If you are looking for breakfast, you can't go wrong at **Musmanni** (☎ 6am-6pm), near the cathedral.

Drinking & Entertainment

No one in Limón need ever go thirsty, considering the wide selection of bars. Those by Parque Vargas and a few blocks west are popular hangouts for a variety of coastal characters: sailors, ladies of the night, entrepreneurs, boozers, losers and the casually curious. The standard warnings for solo women travelers go double here. This is a lousy town for getting drunk – keep your wits about you.

Bar King's (Calle 3 btwn Avs 3 & 4) More Latin and less Carib. Women travelers may feel more comfortable here, as some local señoritas usually make an appearance.

Casa Blanca (cnr Calle 4 & Av 4) On weekends this is the best place to check out the local music scene. On any day of the week it is packed from about 5pm onward with a primarily male clientele. It's easy to find; just follow the reggae beat emanating from the jukebox.

Aquarius (☎ 2758 1010; Av 3 btwn Calles 2 & 3; ☎ 8pm-2am) Inside the Hotel Acon, this is the hottest disco in town, with salsa, reggae and pop spinning on different nights.

Getting There & Away

Puerto Limón is the transportation hub of the Caribbean coast.

AIR

The airstrip is about 4km south of town. There are no regularly scheduled flights, but you can charter a flight to Puerto Jiménez (US\$1450) or Gofito (US\$1320) through Alfa Romeo Aero Taxi (see p434).

BOAT

Cruise ships occasionally dock in Limón, but most boats providing transportation use the major port at Moín, about 7km west of Limón. For information on boats to Tortuguero, see p456.

BUS

Buses to and from San José, Moín, Guápiles and Siquirres arrive at **Terminal Caribeño** (Av 2 btwn Calles 7 & 8) on the west side and within walking distance from all the hotels. Buses to points south all depart from **Autotransportes Mepe** (Mepe; Av 4 btwn Calles 3 & 4).

Bribri & Sixaola (Mepe) US\$3, three hours, depart at 5am, 7am, 8am, 10am, noon, 1pm, 4pm and 6pm.

Cahuita (Mepe) US\$1, 1½ hours, depart at 5am, 6am, 8am, 10am, 1pm, 2:30pm, 4pm and 6pm.

Guápiles via Siquirres & Guácimo (Empresarios Guápiles; Terminal Caribeño) US\$2, two hours, depart hourly 6am to 6pm.

Manzanillo (Mepe) US\$2, 2½ hours, depart at 6am, 10:30am, 3pm and 6pm.

Moín, for boats to Tortuguero (Tracasa; Terminal Caribeño) US\$0.25, 20 minutes, depart hourly 5:30am to 6:30pm.

Puerto Viejo de Talamanca (Mepe) US\$1.75, 2½ hours, depart at 5am, 8am, 10am, 1pm, 4pm and 6pm.

San José (Autotransportes Caribeños; Terminal Caribeño) US\$3.50, three hours, depart hourly 5am to 8pm.

CAR

There is only one gas station on the coast south of Limón, at the crossroads just north of Cahuita.

AROUND PUERTO LIMÓN**Isla Uvita**

The wild green rock just 1km off the coast of Limón is most famous as the site of Columbus' landing on his last trans-Atlantic voyage. It is also a popular destination for surfers, for its thrilling – and often punishing – left that breaks on a reef. Those in the know claim that this is the most powerful left in Costa Rica, with 3m waves on good days. Isla Uvita is a 20-minute boat ride from Limón – ask around the pier to try to hire a boat. Pack a picnic, as there are no facilities on the island.

Playa Bonita

While not the finest beach in the Caribbean, **Playa Bonita** offers sandy stretches of seashore and good swimming convenient to Limón. Surfers make their way to Bonita for its point/reef break, which makes for a powerful (and sometimes dangerous) left. Just north, **Portete** is a small bay with a wicked right working off the southerly point. Any Limón–Moín bus will drop you at these places.

SLEEPING & EATING

The road between Limón and Moín is home to some decent accommodations. The following are listed in order from Limón (east to west).

Oasys del Caribe (☎ 2795 0024; s/d/tr US\$28/32/38; **P** ♿) About 3km northwest of Puerto Limón, these cozy pink bungalows are decorated with lace curtains and bamboo furniture, worn sheets and clean towels. They are clustered around a small swimming pool, which is critical, as this place does not have beach access.

Hotel Maribú Caribe (☎ 2795 2543/2553; maribu@racsa.co.cr; s/d/tr US\$55/65/75; **P** ♿ ♿) Just west of Oasys del Caribe, several spacious white stucco bungalows are arranged atop a small hill amid tropical gardens. They all catch ocean breezes and enjoy good views, as does the Afro-Caribbean restaurant.

Cabinas Cocori (☎ 2795 1670; s/d/tr US\$35/50/60; **P** ♿ ♿ ♿) Enjoy your free continental

breakfast as you watch the waves crash on the rocks below. This citrus-colored motel is the best deal on the beach, with cute, clean rooms and a breezy restaurant. About 4km out of Limón (2.5km from the Moín dock).

Two side-by-side beach restaurants provide excellent seaside dining, about 5km from Limón. At **Reina's** (☎ 2798 0879; mains US\$6-8; ☎ 8am-last guest) loud music and good vibes make for a popular nighttime spot. Next door, **Quimbamba** (☎ 2795 4805; mains US\$5-7; ☎ 8am-close) is similar, offering a shady spot to watch the soccer game on the beach. *Mariscos* (seafood) and *cervezas* (beer) are on the menus.

Moín

The reason you're here, no doubt, is to catch a boat through the canals to Parismina, Tortuguero or perhaps Barra del Colorado. There has always been a series of natural waterways between Limón and Barra del Colorado, but they could only be used by small dugouts during the rainy season. In 1974 canals linking the system were completed, eliminating the need for boats to go out to sea when traveling north from Moín.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The journey by boat to Tortuguero can take anywhere from 1½ to five hours, depending on how often the boat stops to observe the copious wildlife along the way (many tours also stop for lunch). Indeed, it is worth taking your time. As you wind your way through these jungle canals, you are likely to spot howler monkey, morelet's crocodile, both two- and three-toed sloth and an amazing array of waterbird.

While this route is often used by tourist boats, it is not necessarily a regular transportation route to Tortuguero or Parismina (boats rarely go to Barra del Colorado). When canals north of Moín are blocked by water hyacinths or logjams, the route might be closed altogether. Schedules exist in theory only and they change frequently, depending on the boatload. If you are feeling lucky, you can just show up in Moín in the morning and try to get on one of the outgoing tour boats. But you are better off making a reservation in advance.

Asociación de Boteros de los Canales de Tortuguero (Abacat; ☎ 8360 7325) In theory, Abacat operates a daily colectivo (small bus; US\$30) to Tortuguero at 10am, although it may not run if there are not enough passengers.

Caribbean Tropical Tours (William Guerrero; ☎ 8371 2323; wguerrerotuca@hotmail.com) A highly recommended tour guide, with excellent sloth-spotting skills.

Moín-Parismina-Tortuguero water taxi (☎ 2709 8005) Departs Moín at 11am and Tortuguero at 1:30pm. Reservations are essential, especially if you are requesting a stop in Parismina.

Viajes al Tortuguero (Benjamin Gomez; ☎ 2795 0937; localbenjamin@hotmail.com) One way/round-trip US\$30/50, departs from 9:30am to 10am. A member of the association of Boteros Independente de Moín. Again, the schedule is subject to change if there are not enough passengers.

Tracasa buses to Moín from Puerto Limón (US\$0.25, 20 minutes) depart from Terminal Caribeño hourly from 5:30am to 6:30pm. Get off the bus before it goes over the bridge. If you are driving, it's worth leaving your car in a guarded lot in Limón.

NORTHERN CARIBBEAN

A vast network of rivers and canals wind their way through this remote region – Costa Rica's wettest. Lush forests, filled with waterbirds and sleepy sloths, line the edges of these waterways. The long stretches of otherwise empty beaches are nesting grounds for three kinds of sea turtles, and more green turtles are born here than anywhere else on earth. It's not easy to get here – in fact it's accessible only by boat – but the Amazonian atmosphere is well worth the journey.

PARISMINA

At the southern end of Parque Nacional Tortuguero, and at the mouth of Río Parismina, this friendly village attracts two kinds of travelers: turtle lovers and tarpon lovers. Though not as famed as the beaches of Tortuguero, Parismina is the preferred breeding ground of hundreds of discriminating leatherback, green and hawksbill turtles; and the coastal waters are rife with record-breaking Atlantic tarpon.

Surrounded on all sides by jungle rivers and the Caribbean Sea, Barra de Parismina is accessible only by boat, which has allowed it to preserve a remote 'island' atmosphere. Legend has it that the village was founded by a pregnant woman named Mina, who was traveling down the Caribbean coast. When the time came for her to have her baby, her traveling companion told her, 'Here you give

birth, Mina,' or '*Aqui pares, Mina.*' Thus the village was named.

Sportfishing is the traditional tourist draw to Parismina. The top tarpon season is from January to mid-May, while big snook are caught in Río Parismina from September to November.

More recently, with the growth of ecotourism, many travelers come to see (and protect) the endangered sea turtles. Leatherbacks nest on Parismina's beach between late February and early October, with the peak season in April and May. Green turtles begin nesting in June and the peak season is August and September. Hawksbills are not as common, but they are sometimes seen between February and September.

Information

There are no banks or post offices in Parismina. Credit cards and traveler's checks are not accepted, so be sure to bring as much cash as you need.

Asociación Salvemos Las Tortugas de Parismina

Information Center (ASTOP; Save the Turtles of Parismina; ☎ 2710 7703; www.costaricaturtles.org; ☎ 9am-8pm daily Mar-Oct, 2-6pm Mon-Sat Nov-Feb) Organizes homestays (US\$15), offers internet access (per hour US\$1.50) and posts information about local tour guides (US\$20), activities and events.

Sights & Activities

ASTOP has built a guarded **turtle hatchery** to deter increasing numbers of poachers and egg thieves. Travelers can volunteer as turtle guards to patrol the beaches alongside local 'turtle guides.' The daily fee of US\$20 to US\$25 includes three meals a day, lodging with a local family and turtle training (three-night minimum).

This local association is a wonderful way for travelers to get involved with the community; locals also offer Spanish lessons, Latin dance lessons, fishing trips and boat tours into Parque Nacional Tortuguero.

While villagers have traditionally depended on farming and fishing, the turtle project has become a crucial part of the local economy, as families depend on the income they receive from homestays and other activities. As explained in the ASTOP orientation materials, 'If you...support our turtle project, you support not only the turtles, but the whole town.'

The beach near Parismina is very rough, strewn with rubble and dangerous for swim-

ming. However, a nearby lagoon – known as the **Barrita** – is a popular spot for a cooling dip or a picnic. Walk south along the beach or follow the road from the airstrip.

Across the river in Caño Blanco, Don Victor and his wife Isaura run the **Jardín Tropical** (☎ 2200 5567; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm), an amazing heliconia farm. ASTOP organizes day trips to Caño Blanco, which include visiting a traditional Tico farm and riding horses to the Jardín Tropical (US\$20 including transportation from Parismina).

Sleeping & Eating

Besides the options listed here, Soda Parismina, at the boat dock, serves simple meals.

Don Alex (☎ 2710 1892; camping per person with/without kitchen use US\$3/2, cabins per person US\$5) Alex at the hardware store offers sheltered tent sites with access to showers, bathrooms and a kitchen for a small charge, as well as simple cabins.

Carefree Ranch (☎ 2710 3149; r per person US\$10) Opposite the Catholic church, this simple clapboard house – bright yellow with green trim – gives you a lot of charm for your colones. Perks include newish bathrooms with hot water and family-style meals (available for an additional charge).

Iguana Verde (☎ 2710 1528; d with/without air-con US\$25/10; ☎) Crazy Rick (or 'Loco Rico' as he is known) and his wife Yenri run this friendly spot, offering three clean rooms with private hot-water bathrooms. Rick is also a popular guide, offering highly entertaining guided hikes and boat tours. Rick and Yenri are both active in the turtle-conservation project, but who is looking out for the poor blue macaw that is caged out front?

Asociación Salvemos Las Tortugas de Parismina (☎ 2710 7703; www.costaricaturtles.com; r per person US\$15) Although volunteers get first choice of accommodations, this organization can arrange homestays, including three meals, with a local family. All lodging is in private rooms with locking doors and shared bathroom facilities.

Río Parismina Lodge (☎ 2229 7597, in the USA 800-338 5688, 210-824 4442; www.riop.com; s/d 3 days US\$2050/3700, 7 days US\$3350/6200; ☎) Employing many Parismina residents, this deluxe fishing lodge caters to top-end tourists on all-inclusive vacations. Package prices include fishing, lodging in cushy cabins and transfers from San José, as well as three meals a day, which

TORTUGUERO FOR DUMMIES

OK, so you want to get to Tortuguero from San José, but rather than sign up for a package (which arranges transport, accommodations and tours) you'd rather the freedom of going independently. Tour companies, and airline touts will tell you it's very difficult to get there off your own steam. Don't listen to them. Instead follow these simple steps and you'll be in the land of turtles in no time.

- Take the 6:30am, 9am or 10:30am bus from San José's Caribbean terminal to Cariari (two hours).
- Once at Cariari's San José terminal, you need to walk to its other bus station. Turn right down the street in front of the terminal for a few hundred meters and you'll find the town's Caribbean terminal. If you have lots of luggage, take a taxi or any passing vehicle will take you for a hundred colones.
- Jump on any bus for La Pavona, which leave hourly from this terminal.
- The bus ride to La Pavona from Cariari takes about an hour, stopping at a decontamination point where you have to walk through disinfectant before entering the park.
- There should be a boat waiting to collect everyone from the bus to bring you to Tortuguero village. The boat journey (40 minutes) is spectacular and you should have your camera ready to get some snaps of some snappy crocs.

feature plenty of freshly brewed coffee and fabulous seafood.

Getting There & Away

Parismina is only accessible by boat, and the only regular service is to Siquirres, via Caño Blanco.

From Siquirres, take the **Caño-Aguilar bus** (☎ 2768 8172) to Caño Blanco (US\$1.50, two hours) at 4:15am or 12:30pm Monday through Friday, 7:15am or 3:15pm Saturday and Sunday. Taxis make this run for about US\$40. Boats to Parismina (US\$2, 10 minutes) wait for the buses in Caño Blanco, departing at 6am and 3pm Monday through Friday, and 9am and 5pm Saturday and Sunday.

Boats leave from the Parismina dock to Caño Blanco at 5:30am and 2:30pm Monday through Friday, and at 8:30am and 4:30pm on Saturday and Sunday. Again, the buses wait for these water taxis, departing to Siquirres at 6am and 3pm Monday through Friday, and at 10am and 5pm on Saturday and Sunday.

A **water taxi** (☎ 2709 8005) is supposed to travel the route between Moín and Tortuguero every day (one way US\$20), and can stop and pick up passengers in Parismina if they make advance arrangements. In theory, the taxi departs Moín at 11am, stopping in Parismina at noon, en route to Tortuguero. The return trip is at 1:30pm, stopping in Parismina at 2:30pm and continuing south to Moín. The

boat driver will not stop in Parismina unless he knows passengers are waiting.

Otherwise, if you are trying to get to Tortuguero or Moín, your best bet is to hang around the dock in Caño Blanco and try to snag a spot on one of the tour boats passing through.

PARQUE NACIONAL TORTUGUERO

Parque Nacional Tortuguero is accessible from the village of Tortuguero in the north or from Parismina in the south.

'Humid' is the driest word that could truthfully be used to describe Tortuguero. With annual rainfall of up to 6000mm in the northern part of the park, it is one of the wettest areas in the country. There is no dry season, although it does rain less in February, March and October.

The famed **Canales de Tortuguero** are quite the introduction to this important park. Created to connect a series of naturally lazy lagoons and meandering rivers in 1969, this engineering marvel finally allowed inland navigation between Limón and the coastal villages in something sturdier than a dug-out canoe (though you'll still see plenty of those). There are regular flights, sure, but a leisurely ride through the banana plantations and wild jungle is equal parts recreation and transportation.

This 31,187-hectare coastal park (plus about 52,000 hectares of marine area) is the

Caribbean's most important breeding ground for the green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*). Of the world's eight species of sea turtles, six nest in Costa Rica and four lay their eggs right here in Tortuguero.

These black-sand hatching grounds gave birth to the sea turtle-conservation movement. The Caribbean Conservation Corporation (p461), the first program of its kind in the world, has continuously monitored turtle populations here since 1955. Today, green sea turtles are increasing in numbers along this coast, but both the leatherback and hawksbill turtles are in decline (see boxed text, p64).

But Tortuguero is more than just turtles: from sloths and howler monkeys in the tree-tops, to the tiny frogs and green iguanas that crawl among the roots, to the mighty tarpon and endangered manatee that swim the waters, this place is thick with wildlife.

Orientation & Information

Park headquarters is at **Cuatro Esquinas** (☎ 2709 8086; 1/3-day admission US\$7/10; ☎ 5:30am-6pm with breaks for breakfast & lunch), just north of Tortuguero village. This is an unusually helpful ranger station, with maps, information and access to a 2km-loop nature trail. Wear your boots: it's muddy, even in the dry season.

Jalova Station (☎ 6am-6pm), accessible from Parismina by boat, is on the canal at the south entrance to the national park. Tour boats from Moín often stop here for a picnic; you will find a short nature trail, bathroom, drinking water and camping facilities.

Activities

HIKING

Behind Cuatro Esquinas station, **El Gavilan Land Trail** is the only public trail through the park that is on solid ground. Visitors can hike the muddy, 2km loop that traverses the tropical humid forest and follows a stretch of beach. Green parrots and several species of monkeys are commonly sighted here. The short trail is well marked and does not require a guide.

BOATING

Four aquatic trails wind their way through Parque Nacional Tortuguero, inviting canoe paddlers, kayakers and other boaters to explore the ins and outs of this wild place. **Río Tortuguero** acts as the entrance way to

the network of trails. This wide, beautiful river is often covered with water lilies and frequented by aquatic birds like heron (especially the great blue heron and the night heron), kingfisher and anhinga. The **Caño Chiquero** is thick with vegetation, especially red guacimo trees and epiphytes. Black turtles and green iguana like to hang out here. Caño Chiquero leads to two more waterways. **Caño Mora** is about 3km long but only 10m wide, so it feels like it's straight from *Jungle Book*. **Caño Harold** is actually an artificially constructed canal, but that doesn't stop the creatures – like Jesus Christ lizard and caiman – from inhabiting its tranquil waters. Canoe rental and boat tours are available in Tortuguero village (p462).

TURTLE-WATCHING

Sea turtles usually nest every two or three years. Depending on the species, a female may nest up to 10 times during one season. She comes ashore about two weeks after mating to lay her eggs on the beach.

Most female turtles share a nesting instinct that drives them to return to the beach of their birth, or natal beach, in order to lay their eggs. Often, a turtle's ability to successfully reproduce depends on the ecological health of this original habitat. Only the leatherback returns to a more general region, instead of a specific natal beach.

The female turtle digs a cavity in the sand using her flippers, and then lays 80 to 120 eggs in the cavity. She diligently covers the nest with sand to protect the eggs, and she may even create a false nest in another location

TORTUGUERO BY KAYAK

Unbeknown to many, you can explore Parque Nacional Tortuguero from Parismina, but the only access is by water. The wildlife is just as abundant as at the northern end of the park, and you are unlikely to run into any tour boats in this neck of the woods. Local guides take passengers in dugouts (inquire at ASTOP, p457) for about US\$25. The truly adventurous (and experienced) can hire a kayak from Iguana Verde lodgings (p457) and go it alone, but make sure you have a detailed map and a compass. And don't forget to stop at Jalova Station (left) to pay your park admission fee.

DOING TIME FOR THE TURTLES

There are many opportunities to volunteer your time for the greater good of the turtles (and other creatures).

Asociación Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas (ANAI) (☎ 2224 3570, in San José 2277 7549; www.anaicr.org; Gandoca; registration US\$35, camping US\$8, homestays US\$15, cabins US\$30) At the other end of the Caribbean coast in the Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo (see p493).

Canadian Organization for Tropical Education and Rainforest Conservation (Coterc) (☎ 2709 8052, in Canada 905-831 8809; www.coterc.org; per day US\$65) Volunteers help with the upkeep of the station and assist ongoing research projects, including sea turtle conservation, bird banding, and animal- and plant-diversity inventories. The daily fee covers room and board. Lodging is in a brand-new dormitory building, with full access to the facilities and grounds at the research station. Make advance arrangements for transportation from Tortuguero village.

Caribbean Conservation Corporation (CCC) (☎ 2709 8091, in the USA 800-678 7853; www.ccturtle.org) From March through October volunteers can assist scientists with turtle tagging and research on green and leatherback turtles. During bird-migration seasons (March through May and August through October) volunteers can receive training and assist with mist-netting, walking transects and point-counts. Programs range from one week (US\$1400 to US\$1600) to three weeks (US\$2100 to US\$2500); prices include dorm lodging, meals and transport from San José.

Asociación Salvemos Las Tortugas de Parismina (ASTOP) (Save the Turtles of Parismina; ☎ 2710 5183, in the USA 538 8084; www.costaricaturtles.org; registration fee US\$25, per day US\$30) Good deeds for the financially challenged. Volunteers assist with turtle patrols and otherwise participate in the community of Parismina. See p457.

in an attempt to confuse predators. Then she makes her way back to the sea and the eggs are on their own.

Incubation ranges from 45 to 70 days. Hatchlings break out of their shells with a caruncle, or temporary tooth. Sometimes it takes several days for a group of hatchlings to dig their way up out of the nest cavity. The tiny hatchlings are small enough to fit in the palm of your hand. They crawl to the ocean in small groups, moving as quickly as possible to avoid dehydration and predators. Once they reach the surf, they must swim for at least 24 hours to get to deeper water, away from predators.

Visitors are allowed to check out the turtle rookeries at night from March to October (late July through August is prime time) and observe eggs being laid or hatching. Obviously, turtle sightings are not guaranteed. A licensed guide must accompany all visitors. Local lodges operate these tours for between US\$10 and US\$30 per person. Local guides charge about US\$10. Flashlights and any type of camera or video camera are not allowed on the beach (see boxed text, p270). Dark clothing is strongly recommended.

If you're unable to visit during the peak green turtle-breeding season, the next best time is April, when leatherback turtles nest in small numbers. Hawksbill turtles nest sporadically from March to October, and log-

gerhead turtles are also sometimes seen. For information about volunteering with turtle patrols, see boxed text, above.

OTHER WILDLIFE-WATCHING

Parque Nacional Tortuguero is, without a doubt, one of Costa Rica's top wildlife destinations. To get the best from Tortuguero, be on the water early or go out following rain. As soon as the downpour clears, mammals, birds and reptiles come out into the open to sunbathe and dry out. They're most conspicuous on the rain-forest edges lining the wide main canals.

More than 300 bird species, both resident and migratory, have been recorded in Tortuguero. Due to the wet habitat, the park is especially rich in heron (14 different kinds), kingfisher and wader. In September and October, look for huge flocks of migratory species like eastern kingbird, barn swallow and purple martin. The Caribbean Conservation Corporation (opposite) conducts a biannual monitoring program, in which volunteers can participate. Great green macaw are a highlight. They are most common from December to April, when the almendro trees are fruiting.

Certain species of mammals are particularly evident and relaxed in Tortuguero, especially mantled howler, Central American spider monkey and white-faced capuchin, as well

as both two- and three-toed sloth. Normally shy neotropical river otters are reasonably habituated to boats.

Turtles and turtle eggs are one of the favorite foods of jaguar, and turtle-watchers occasionally encounter these big cats, who swim the Laguna del Tortuguero to patrol the beach for nesting turtles. Tortuguero is also possibly Costa Rica's best chance to spot West Indian manatees.

Sleeping

Cuatro Esquinas ranger station has been closed to camping for the foreseeable future, but you can camp at **Jalova Station** (per person US\$2) at the southern end of the park. Choose your spot (and season) carefully, as parts of the camping area can become submerged after heavy rainfall.

TORTUGUERO VILLAGE

Wholly surrounded by protected forest and sea, accessible only by air or water, this magical spot is best known for the herds of hatching turtles that lurch across its dark sands. Indeed, the name Tortuguero means 'turtle place.' For the 'turtle season,' which peaks from late July through August, make all reservations well in advance.

Once the turtles are safely out at sea, however, both park and village sort of fall off the radar screen. Perhaps it is because these luxurious jungles rank among the rainiest of all rain forests, and thus are threaded by canals and rivers that are your only way into this place. It's not easy to get to, but it's worth it.

Tortuguero is a quieter destination than others on the Caribbean coast, and the vine-draped trails that weave through the lush, slender peninsula are frequented by a host of wild creatures. This is where the line between sea and dry land is blurred, which may be the reason why so many sea turtles, caught by a trick of evolution between these two worlds, begin their lives here.

It's certainly why so many fishermen originally settled this spot, and the recipes they stirred from the jungle and ocean are still served up faithfully by folks around town.

Information

Small hotels, tour operators and transportation providers compete fiercely for business in Tortuguero. Unfortunately, that means you won't always get a straight answer when

you ask for information. Places offering 'Free Tourist Information' are often hawking tours; and friendly 'advice' about lodging and transportation is sometimes outright lies.

Note that there are no banks or ATMs in town. Only a few businesses accept credit cards, so bring all the cash that you will need.

La Casona (☎ 2709 8092; per hr US\$2; ☎ 8:30am-9pm) There is a small internet café with two computers behind La Casona restaurant (p463).

Paraíso Tropical Store (☎ 2710 0323) Sells souvenirs and NatureAir airline tickets and cashes traveler's checks.

Tortuguero Info Center (☎ 2709 8055; tortuguero_info@racsa.co.cr; per hr US\$3; ☎ 8am-7pm) An independent information center that sells Sansa airline tickets and provides internet access. It is across from the Catholic church.

Sights

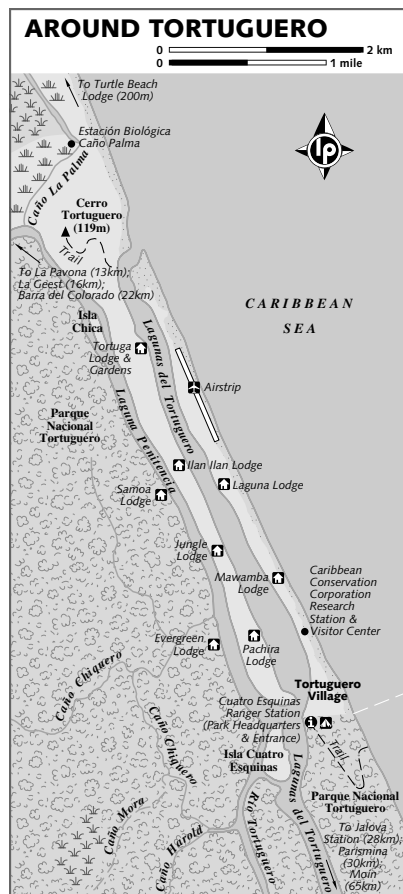
About 200m north of Tortuguero village, the **Caribbean Conservation Corporation** (CCC; ☎ 2709 8091, in the USA 800-678 7853; www.ccturtle.org; admission US\$1; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) operates a research station that has a small visitor center and museum. Exhibits focus on all things turtle-related, including a video about the history of local turtle conservation. For volunteer opportunities, see boxed text, opposite.

The **Canadian Organization for Tropical Education and Rainforest Conservation** (Coterc; ☎ 2709 8052, in Canada 905-831 8809; www.coterc.org; admission free) is the nonprofit organization that operates the Estación Biológica Caño Palma, 7km north of Tortuguero village. The onsite rancho (thatched-roof or open-air building) houses a museum that contains the station's collection of biological specimens – mainly an impressive though eerie collection of skulls from the area. You can also get up close with some serious insects, and there is a growing display of labeled seeds and fruit. If you'd rather look at live animals, a network of trails leads into the rain forest. This place is surrounded on three sides by water, so you'll have to hire a boat to get here. Coterc also has a volunteer program (again, see boxed text, opposite).

Activities

CANOING

Signs all over Tortuguero advertise boat tours and boats for hire. This is obviously the best way to explore the waterways of the national park and the surrounding environs (see p459).



For boat tours, see right. You can paddle yourself in a dugout canoe for about US\$2 per person per hour, but make sure you have a good map. Rent canoes at accommodations such as Hotel Miss Junie and La Casona or other places around town. This is an excellent way to see nature without disturbing the wildlife and with full access to all the nooks and crannies of the park.

HIKING

Apart from hiking in the park (see p459), hikers can climb the 119m **Cerro Tortuguero**, an extinct volcano about 6km north of the village within the Refugio Nacional de Silvestre Barra del Colorado. You need to hire a boat and guide to get there, and the 45-minute

hike to the top is muddy, steep and strenuous. The trek offers an excellent chance of spotting colorful poison-dart frog. And it is the highest point right on the coast anywhere north of Puerto Limón, so the views of the forest, canals and village are unparalleled. Unfortunately, this trail was closed for maintenance at the time of research; inquire further when you arrive in Tortuguero.

Tours

Guides have posted signs all over town advertising their services for canal tours and turtle walks. Ask at the **Tortuguero Info Center** (☎ 2709 8055; tortuguero_info@racsa.co.cr) or at **Soda El Muellecito** (🕒 6:30am-8pm), across from Super Morpho Pulpería, to get in touch with a guide. Going rates are about US\$10 per person for a two-hour turtle tour, and US\$15 for a three- or four-hour hiking or boat excursion. It's also worth noting that many locals blame the big motorboats that herd groups around as a major reason for scaring off the manatees, so it's probably more ethical to take a kayak tour.

Recommended local guides:

Barbara Hartung (☎ 2709 8004) Offers hiking, canoe and turtle tours in German, English, French or Spanish. Also offers a unique tour about Tortuguero history, culture and medicinal plants.

Castor Hunter Thomas (☎ 2709 8050; ask at Soda Doña María, p464)

Chico (☎ 2709 8033; ask at Cabinas Miss Miriam, opposite) Chico's hiking and canoe tours receive rave reviews from readers.

Daryl Loth (☎ 8833 0827, 2709 8011; safari@racsa.co.cr) This knowledgeable Canadian naturalist (formerly of Coterc) offers excellent boat trips in an environmentally friendly, supersilent electric motorboat, as well as turtle tours (in season) and guided hikes to Cerro Tortuguero.

Sleeping

Competition for business is fierce. Unfortunately, it often results in unethical 'touts' trying to lure tourists to an establishment where they will get a commission. Don't make any decisions about where to stay without exploring your options and looking at the rooms being offered.

TORTUGUERO VILLAGE

There is a wide range of budget and midrange options here. The following places are listed in order from south (near the park entrance) to north.

Tropical Lodge (☎ 8826 6246; r per person US\$10) This colorful and classically Caribbean setup behind the food store Tienda Bambú has cute yellow cabins right on the river. While the exterior is bright, the interior is dank concrete.

our pick Cabinas Princesa Resort (☎ 2709 8107; s/d US\$15/30) The best of the three Princesa hotels (there are others south of the soccer field and on the river) is the prettiest budget option in town. The lovely clapboard colonial house looks over a trim hammock-strung garden that stretches out to the crashing ocean only meters away.

La Casona (☎ 2709 8092; lacasonadetortuguero@yahoo.com; s/d US\$15/25; 📺) Long a favorite for eating, this friendly, family-run spot opposite the main dock is now an excellent sleeping option too. Handsome new rooms have tiled floors and sparkling hot-water bathrooms. Jenny and her sons offer canoe rental, as well as an interesting tour to an ecological finca in Guápiles. This is one of the few places that accepts credit cards.

Cabinas Miss Miriam (☎ 2709 8002, 8821 2037; s/d US\$15/30) A top choice, at the soccer field. Miss Miriam's rooms (actually run by her daughter) have tiled floors and firm beds, while those upstairs share a balcony with dramatic sea views. Miss Miriam's restaurant is one of Tortuguero's top spots for Caribbean fare.

Casa Marbella (☎ 8833 0827; http://casamarbella.tripod.com; s/d US\$35/40) Filling the void between budget hotels and luxury lodges, this five-room B&B opposite the Catholic church features light-filled rooms with fans suspended from the high ceilings and private hot-water showers. Room rates include a hearty breakfast, perhaps served on the shady riverside patio. Owner Daryl Loth also organizes excellent area tours.

Hotel Miss Junie (☎ 2709 8029, in San José 2709 7102; s/d US\$25/40) At the northern end of the village, Miss Junie's place is set on wide, grassy grounds, shaded by palm trees and strewn with hammocks. One side faces the river, while the other looks out to sea, so you can't go wrong. The clean, comfortable rooms smell of disinfectant, so you'll appreciate the big screened windows that let in the breeze. Prices include a full breakfast by Tortuguero's most celebrated cook (see Miss Junie's, p464).

NORTH OF THE VILLAGE

Lodges north of town cater primarily to groups on package deals, usually including transport

tation from San José, all meals and a guided tour through the park. Note that lodges on the west side of the lagoon don't have beach – or turtle – access. All these lodges will accept walk-ins if they aren't full, but only Mawamba Lodge can be walked to; others will pick you up. The following are listed from south to north, and all rates are per person, based on double occupancy, including meals.

Pachira Lodge (☎ 2256 7080, in the USA 800-644 7438; www.pachiralodge.com; 2-night package per adult/child US\$269/100; 📺) Rocky, Flintstones-style pathways lead through the landscaped jungle grounds, from the beautiful buffet-style restaurant to your pastel room in the rain forest. This place is right on the Laguna Tortuguero, opposite the CCC visitor center at the north end of the village. Across Laguna Penitencia, the lodge also operates the Evergreen Lodge, which has more privacy but smaller rooms. This is also where you will find the region's only canopy tour (US\$25).

Mawamba Lodge (☎ in San José 2293 8181; www.grupomawamba.com; 2-night package per adult/child US\$280/144; 📺) Rustic rooms are airy and spacious, with fan and hot shower, all fronted by a veranda with hammocks and rocking chairs. A network of trails leads into the rain forest and to the beach, while the fully equipped recreation room will entertain kids of all ages. But the real draw is that you can walk to town, unlike guests at most of the other lodges.

Samoa Lodge (☎ 2258 6244; www.samoalodge.com; 2-night package US\$240; 📺) On the far side of Laguna Penitencia, colorful A-frame bungalows are nestled into tropical gardens. The rooms are simple, but brightly painted in citrus tones and furnished with bamboo and hardwood. The restaurant is recommended for the fusion creations from the kitchen.

Ilan Ilan Lodge (☎ 2296 7378, 2296 7502; www.milantour.com; r US\$40, 2-night package US\$215; 📺) Named for the pretty-scented yellow-flowered tree that adorns the grounds. Smallest, fan-cooled rooms are arranged around a rather overgrown courtyard that the birds adore. This hotel is set on 8 hectares between the Lagunas Tortuguero and Penitencia, with a network of trails connecting them. It's a good place to spot poison-dart frogs and other critters.

our pick Tortuga Lodge & Gardens (☎ 2257 0766, 2222 0333; www.costaricaexpeditions.com; s/d US\$116/140, 2-night package per person US\$379; 📺) This cushy lodge is operated by Costa Rica Expeditions. Superior rooms are spacious and screened,

and rocking chairs and hammocks await invitingly in covered walkways outside. Beyond the restaurant, an enticing free-form swimming pool flows serenely by, mirroring the languid movement of the canals. The lodge is on 20 hectares of landscaped gardens, with private trails and a quiet pond.

Turtle Beach Lodge (☎ 2248 0707, after hr 8837 6969; www.turtlebeachlodge.com; 2-night package per adult/child US\$275/110; 📍) Flanked on either side by the beach and the river, this lodge is surrounded by 70 hectares of tropical gardens and rain forest. Spacious, elegant rooms have hardwood furniture and huge screened windows to let in the breezes. You can explore the grounds on the network of jungle trails, or lounge around the turtle-shaped pool or in the thatch-roofed hammock hut.

Eating

One of Tortuguero's unsung pleasures is the cuisine: the homey restaurants lure you in from the rain with steaming platters of Caribbean-style seafood. The following restaurants are listed from south to north.

Soda Doña María (☎ 2709 8050; 🕒 7am-8pm) Recover from a hike in the park at this riverside *soda*, serving fresh *jugos* (juices) and other cold drinks. Just north of the park entrance.

Miss Miriam's (☎ 2709 8002; mains US\$5-8, lobster US\$12) It's worth blowing off your lodge's meal plan and getting a boat into town just for this fine food, from delicious *gallo pinto* (rice and beans) to whole lobsters served up by Miss Miriam's friendly and fabulous daughter. It's at the soccer field.

Buddha Cafe (☎ 2709 8084; meals US\$4-8; 🕒 9am-9pm) If the New Age music doesn't lure you inside, the aromas of fresh-from-the-oven pizza certainly will. Peruse the menu before deciding, however, as it features many tempting options: savory crepes, filled with grilled shrimp or chicken and cheese; and the namesake Buddasalata, with avocado, sweet corn and *palmito* (palm hearts). It's just a short walk north of the boat dock.

La Caribeña (meals US\$3-5; 🕒 8am-10pm) A simple enough place that serves up spicy Caribbean fare to tourists and locals alike. It's worth ducking your head in to find out if they're serving *roncón* (an exceptional seafood stew, not to be missed) as a special that day.

Dorling Bakery (☎ 8845 6389; pastries US\$1-3; 🕒 6am-8pm) Outstanding homemade breads

and pastries baked fresh every day get you even more wired when combined with good coffee and espresso beverages. It's cozy.

our pick Miss Junie's (☎ 2709 8029; dinner US\$9-15; 🕒 6-9pm) The great thing about quality Caribbean-style meals – and this place is Tortuguero's best-known restaurant – is that the longer seafood and veggies simmer in coconut sauce, the better they taste. This is why you should order dinner early in the day. It's worth it.

Grab groceries at the **Super Morpho Pulpería** (☎ 2709 8110; 🕒 6:30am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8am-8pm Sun).

Drinking

La Taberna (☎ 2710 6716; 🕒 11:30am-close) Adjacent to Tropical Lodge, and overlooking Laguna Tortuguero, this tavern is Tortuguero's most popular and pleasant spot for a drink. It's particularly enjoyable in the afternoon, when you'll appreciate the cool breezes off the canal, the ice-cold *cerveza* and the sun dropping behind the trees. There's also a karaoke mic, for when things get rowdier.

La Culebra (🕒 8pm-close) The only nightclub in town is a barren concrete space where thumping music makes for a good dance floor, or you can retire to the waterside bar area for a beer and a *boca*. This place rocks during turtle season. It's next to the boat dock.

Getting There & Away

First of all, it is not *that* hard to get here on your own. However, if you do not care to go it alone, the options for package tours are everywhere, from the moment your airplane lands in San José. Most include meals, lodging, transportation and at least one canal tour. Costs vary widely depending on accommodations and transportation.

Jungle Tom Safaris (☎ 2280 0243; www.jungletom-safaris.com) Two-night packages US\$119 to US\$240. Also offers a one-day trip from San José (US\$79) or just round-trip transportation (US\$59) – useful for independent travelers who want to be free upon arrival, but don't want the hassle of getting here alone.

Learning Trips (☎ 2258 2293, 8396 1979; www.costa-rica.us) One-/two-night packages US\$155/195. Packages include lodging, meals, boat tours and transportation from San José.

Riverboat Francesca Nature Tours (☎ 2226 0986; www.tortuguero-canals.com) Two-day packages US\$175 to US\$190. Highly recommended tours on the riverboat *Francesca*. Prices include food and lodging, canal tours and a nighttime turtle walk (in season).

AIR

The small airstrip is 4km north of Tortuguero village. **NatureAir** (☎ 2220 3054) and **Sansa** (☎ 2709 8055) both have daily flights to and from San José – one way/round-trip US\$68/136 with NatureAir, US\$63/126 with Sansa. Many of the upscale lodges offer transportation by charter flight as a part of their package tours.

BOAT

Tortuguero is accessible by boat from Cariari or Moín. If you are traveling to Parismina, you should be able to get one of the boats to Moín to drop you off on the way.

To/From Cariari

The most common and least expensive route to/from Tortuguero is through Cariari, from where you can catch buses to San José or Puerto Limón (via Guápiles). Three companies provide transportation along this route for US\$10 per person:

Clic Clic (☎ 8844 0463) Via La Pavona, 6am and 11:30am.

Coopetraca (☎ 2767 7137) Via La Pavona, 6am, 11:30am and 3pm.

Viajes Bananeros (☎ 2709 8005) Via La Geest, 7am and 11am.

Buy tickets on the boat or at any of the information centers around Tortuguero. Once you arrive in La Pavona or La Geest, a bus will pick you up and take you to Cariari (buses meet the boats). If you are traveling to San José, you are better off taking a 6am boat because bus connections are better earlier in the day.

If you are coming to Tortuguero through Cariari, you may be greeted by touts luring you onto their buses and boats. Despite what they insist, the common route to Tortuguero is through La Pavona. Coopatraca buses for La Pavona depart from the central bus terminal in Siquirres, behind the police station, at 6am, noon and 3pm. The private Bananero boat company also provides transportation from Cariari to Tortuguero via Geest. Bananero buses leave from the San José bus terminal at 1:30pm and 3:30pm. See also p449.

Transportation schedules and fares for Tortuguero change frequently. For the latest details, see www.geocities.com/tortuguero-info/main.html.

To/From Moín

Moín–Tortuguero is primarily a tourist route. While tour boats ply these canals

frequently, there is not a reliable, regularly scheduled service.

In theory, **Viajes Bananeros** (☎ 2709 8005; www.tortuguero-costarica.com) offers a daily transfer to Moín at 10am in the high season (US\$30).

Otherwise, you can check with the **Tortuguero Info Center** (☎ 2709 8015; tortuguero_info@rca.co.cr) to try to find out about tour boats going to Moín that might have space for independent travelers. In any case, call to confirm: schedules change, or they may not run if there are not enough passengers.

BARRA DEL COLORADO

At 90,400 hectares, including the frontier zone with Nicaragua, Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Barra del Colorado, or 'Barra' for short, is the biggest national wildlife refuge in Costa Rica.

It forms a regional conservation unit with the adjacent Parque Nacional Tortuguero, and their landscapes are similar. The refuge has 50km of coastline, and countless square kilometers of canals, lagoons, rivers and marshes. Some hilly areas, none higher than 230m, are ancient volcanic cones (like Cerro Tortuguero). Rain – lots of it – falls year-round.

The Ríos San Juan, Colorado and Chirripó all wind through the refuge and eventually make their way to the Caribbean Sea. The alluvial plain is often flooded, which means the whole place is very marshy, with various islets occasionally appearing and disappearing. The only feasible way to get around is by boat.

Barra is much more remote, more expensive and more difficult to visit than Tortuguero, but adventurous travelers will be rewarded with a wildlife bonanza. The area is home to the endangered West Indian manatee, caiman, crocodile and tarpon. Mammals that live here include four kinds of big cat and two species of monkey, as well as Baird's tapir and three-toed sloth. The bird population includes the colorful keel-billed toucan and the great green macaw, raptor such as osprey and white hawk, as well as many waterbirds.

The northern border of the refuge is the Río San Juan, the border with Nicaragua (many local residents are Nicaraguan nationals). This area was politically sensitive during the 1980s, which contributed to the isolation of the reserve. Since the relaxing of Sandinista-Contra hostilities in 1990, it has become straightforward to journey north along the Río Sarapiquí

and east along the San Juan, technically entering Nicaragua (see boxed text, opposite). However, while Costa Ricans have right of use, the Río San Juan is Nicaraguan territory. Other territorial disputes in this area mean that tensions between the countries still exist; carry your passport when you are out fishing.

Orientation & Information

The village of Barra del Colorado lies near the mouth of the Río Colorado and is divided by the river into Barra del Norte and Barra del Sur. There are no roads. The airstrip is on the south side of the river, but more people live on the north side. The area outside the village is swampy and travel is almost exclusively by boat, though some walking is possible around some of the lodges.

The Servicio de Parques Nacionales (SPN) maintains a small **ranger station** (refuge admission US\$6) near the village, on the south side of the Río Colorado. However, there are no facilities here. Stop by **Diana's Souvenirs** (☎ 2710 6592), close to the airport, for weather reports, tourist information, internet access or a public telephone.

Activities

FISHING

Despite the incredible wildlife-watching opportunities, fishing is still the bread and butter of most of the area's lodges. Anglers go for tarpon from January to June and snook from September to December. Fishing is good year-round, however, and other tasty catches include barracuda, mackerel and jack crevalle, all inshore; or bluegill, *guapote* (rainbow bass) and machaca in the rivers. There is also deep-sea fishing for marlin, sailfish and tuna, though this sort of fishing is probably better on the Pacific. Dozens of fish can be hooked on a good day, so 'catch and release' is an important conservation policy of all the lodges.

CANOING & KAYAKING

The best way to explore the rivers and lagoons of the refuge is by boat. If you are not fishing, you can paddle these waters in a canoe or kayak, available from some of the local lodges. Silver King Lodge rents 5m aluminum canoes, which are used both for fishing and for exploring the backwater lagoons.

Sleeping & Eating

From the airport, only Tarponland Cabanas and Río Colorado Lodge are accessible on foot. All other lodges require a boat ride (a boat operator will be waiting for you at the airport if you have a reservation). Packages include air transfers from San José, all fishing, accommodations, meals and an open bar. Trips of varying lengths can be arranged.

Tarponland Cabanas (☎ 2710 2141; r per person US\$25, d with sportfishing US\$295; 🍷) This is it as far as budget lodgings go in Barra. Within walking distance from the airport, these basic hardwood rooms are pretty run-down, but there is a good onsite restaurant.

Río Colorado Lodge (☎ 2232 4063, in the USA 800-243 9777; www.riocoloradolodge.com; r per person with/without fishing US\$450/120; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Built in 1971, this is the longest-established lodge on the Caribbean coast. The rambling tropical-style buildings near the mouth of the Río Colorado are constructed on stilts, with covered walkways that make a lot of sense in the rain forest. Rooms are breezy and pleasant. For relaxation after a day of fishing the lodge features a happy hour with free rum drinks, a pool table, a breezy outdoor deck and satellite TV. This is the only upscale lodge from which you can walk to the airport; the local crowd it attracts has earned it a reputation as a 'party lodge.' Rates include meals.

Silver King Lodge (☎ 2711 0708, in the USA 800-847 3474; www.silverkinglodge.net; r per person US\$135, 3-day package per person US\$1875, extra day US\$325; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This excellent sportfishing lodge caters to couples and families, besides just fishers. Huge hardwood guestrooms have beautiful 3.5m cane ceilings, colorful woven tapestries and plenty of amenities. Outside, covered walkways lead to the waterfall-filled pool, an international buffet-style restaurant and an open-air bar serving tropical drinks (like the specialty 'Funky Monkey'). This lodge closes in July and December.

Casa Mar Lodge (☎ in the USA 800-543 0282; www.casamarlodge.com; 5-night package per person US\$2495-3100) When CEOs hang a 'gone fishing' sign on the office door, you can bet this is the type of place they've gone to. Luxurious cabins with nicely tiled hot showers are set in a pleasant 2.8-hectare garden that attracts lots of birds, and meals are home-cooked. But the real drawcards are the big-engine boats and the impressive 75kg tarpon that make the covers of all those sportfishing maga-

GETTING TO SAN JUAN DEL NICARAGUA

Day trips along the Río San Juan and some offshore fishing trips technically enter Nicaraguan territory. Carry your passport and US\$10, in the unlikely event that you are stopped and checked.

If you are planning to head further into Nicaragua, you can make arrangements with your lodge (or hire a boat independently for about US\$300) to take you to the border town of San Juan del Norte – now called San Juan del Nicaragua, in light of the recent border disputes. Though you can get your passport stamped here, you should probably check with immigration officials in San José before doing this independently. (If you are coming from Nicaragua into Costa Rica here, you will need to get your passport stamped in Limón.)

San Juan del Nicaragua, at the mouth of the Río San Juan, is a tranquil village with very few services but an interesting history. Founded in 1549, it became something of a boomtown when English settlers took over in 1847, naming it 'Greytown.' During the gold rush, the Río San Juan became an important transportation route connecting the Atlantic and the Pacific. Huge amounts of cargo, travelers and money passed through this town. Today, the former Greytown is more of a ghost town: only ruins remain from this heyday.

The 'living' (though very wet) village of San Juan del Nicaragua is across the bay. **Río Indio Lodge** (☎ 8381 1549, 2296 0095, in the USA 866-593 3176; www.rioindiolodge.com; s/d US\$200/225; 🍷 🍷) has 34 spacious rooms, a gourmet restaurant and a well-stocked bar. Sportfishing is the lodge's forte, but you can also hike on the old railroad track that remains from the Greytown days or kayak on Laguna Silico.

San Juan del Norte is linked with the rest of Nicaragua by irregular passenger boats sailing up the San Juan to San Carlos, on Lago de Nicaragua.

zines. Incidentally, you may have seen the owner, Bill Barnes, in one of those magazines, as he currently holds the world record for catching a 12kg snook on a fly rod.

Getting There & Away

By far the easiest way to Barra is by air, and both Sansa (one way/round-trip US\$63/126) and NatureAir (US\$68/136) will drop you off here on their daily Tortuguero runs.

There is no regular boat service to Barra, although you may be able to arrange a boat ride from Tortuguero (US\$50 per boat), Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí (p518; US\$60 per boat) or Moín (p456; for a price). During the dry season, buses run from Cariari (see p449) to Puerto Lindo, from where you can try to hop on a lodge boat or a water taxi continuing on to Barra.

SOUTHERN CARIBBEAN

This is the heart and soul of Costa Rica's Afro-Caribbean community. Jamaicans were brought here by United Fruit to build the backbone of the original banana republic and they learned to call this country home. For more than half a century, the communities of the southern Caribbean existed almost

independent of the rest of the country, turning to subsistence farming and fishing when the banana plantations, and later cacao fincas, fell to devastating blights.

These Afro-Caribbean communities had good neighbors among the ancient indigenous groups, now encompassed by the nearby Cocles/KékóLdi, Talamanca Cabécar and Bribri reserves. The two peoples, isolated from the goings-on of mainstream Costa Rica, exchanged the ancient wisdom of medicinal plants, agriculture and jungle survival, and they thrived.

Although the racial borders fell in 1949, electricity, roads and phones all came late to this perfect stretch of beachfront property. The result of all this isolation is a culture still largely independent of everyday Costa Rica.

Inevitably, however, improved infrastructure and an expanding tourism industry are inexorably wearing away the cultural quirks that many folks come to experience. Puerto Viejo in particular has experienced an influx of North American and European transplants, starting with surfers but now including all kinds of folks looking for a change of pace. (And with this picture-perfect setting and low-key vibe, who can blame them?)

Not to worry, not yet anyway: the music of the islands is everywhere, reggae and

calypto pouring from homes and businesses into the streets. The cuisine is extraordinary, where even the simplest rice-and-beans dish conjures flavors of Jamaica. And while most residents speak Spanish, a patois of English remains common, if a little bit difficult to decipher for those unused to it.

Dangers & Annoyances

The southern Caribbean gets a bad rap for being dangerous, with Pacific-coasters warning about hurricanelike weather, prohibitively bad roads and rampant theft and drug use. Most of these warnings are exaggerated. But as in the rest of Costa Rica, it is wise to take the usual precautions: lock your hotel room; don't leave anything in your car; never leave gear unattended on beaches; don't walk the beaches alone at night. While drug use is not uncommon in some places, most residents do not condone or appreciate this activity. Remember that buying drugs is illegal as well as dangerous.

RESERVA BIOLÓGICA HITOY-CERERE

One of the most rugged and rarely visited reserves in the country, **Hitoy-Cerere** (☎ 2795 1446; admission US\$6; 🕒 8am-4pm) is only about 60km south of Limón (half that distance as the crow flies). The 9950-hectare reserve sits on the edge of the Cordillera de Talamanca, characterized by varying altitudes, evergreen forests and rushing rivers. This may be one of the wettest reserves in the parks system; its evergreen forests are inundated with 4000mm to 6000mm of rain annually.

Wildlife is abundant in this moist, humid forest. The most commonly sighted mammals include the woolly opossum, gray four-eyed opossum, tayra, howler monkey and white-faced capuchin. You can hardly miss the Montezuma oropendola, whose nests are suspended from trees like unexpected pendulums. Other ornithological highlights include the keel-billed toucan, spectacled owl and green kingfisher.

The reserve is surrounded by some of the country's most remote indigenous reserves, which you can visit with a local guide (see opposite, and boxed text, p494).

Although there is a ranger station at the reserve entrance, there are no other facilities nearby. A 9km trail leads south from the ranger station, but it is steep, slippery and poorly maintained.

Getting There & Away

By car (4WD recommended), head west on the signed road to Valle de la Estrella and Penuhurst (just south of the Río Estrella bridge). Another small sign at the bus stop sends you down a good dirt road about 15km to the reserve.

By public transport, catch a bus from Limón to Valle de la Estrella. From the end of the bus line (Fortuna/Finca 6) you can hire a taxi to take you the rest of the way and pick you up at a prearranged time (US\$25).

You can also arrange taxis and guided hikes, including transportation, from Cahuita. **Cahuita Tours** (☎ 2755 0000/0232) offers an all-day guided hike, departing at 6am for optimal wildlife-sighting, for US\$100 per person.

CAHUITA

While neighboring Puerto Viejo is rapidly developing into a can't-miss destination on the groovier travel circuit, Cahuita has managed to maintain a more relaxed relationship with folks discovering the Caribbean coast. Most of the businesses are still locally owned and the vibe is still very laidback.

What's more, the place is breathtakingly beautiful. The black sand gives the very swimmable Playa Negra an unusual and ethereal presence.

While the Bribri and Cabécar Indians were the original inhabitants of this area (see boxed text, p494), Cahuita claims the first Afro-Caribbean settler, one turtle fisherman named William Smith, who moved his family to Punta Cahuita in 1828. Mr Smith's descendants – and the descendants of many other immigrants – are now cooking with coconuts in the kitchen and playing reggae music on the radio, giving this town a decidedly Afro-Caribbean flavor.

Along with excellent meals and quality beach time, an itinerary in this relaxed paradise certainly includes a wander into neighboring Parque Nacional Cahuita, only a five-minute walk from 'downtown.' Here are even more perfect beaches, trails through protected jungle and one of Costa Rica's two living coral reefs.

With the Playa Negra stretching out to the north of town, and the Parque Nacional Cahuita immediately to the south, Cahuita's little center is nestled into a small point that sticks out into the Caribbean Sea. It consists of only two gravel roads, neither of which sees too much traffic. But that doesn't stop the

townsfolk from spending the afternoon sitting in the shade and watching it pass by.

Information

Banco de Costa Rica (📞 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) The ATM here works on Plus and Visa systems.

Centro Turístico Brigitte (☎ 2755 0053; www.brigittecahuita.com; Playa Negra; per hr US\$2; 🕒 7am-6pm) Internet access.

Internet Palmer (per hr US\$2; 🕒 9am-8pm)

Mercado Safari (🕒 6am-4pm) Changes US and Canadian dollars, euros, Swiss francs, British pounds and traveler's checks but has a steep commission.

Spencer Seaside Lodging (☎ 2755 0210/027; per hr US\$2; 🕒 8am-8pm) Internet access.

Willie's Tours (☎ 8843 4700; per hr US\$2; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 4-8pm Sun) Internet access.

Dangers & Annoyances

Women should know that Cahuita enjoys a free-love reputation and evidently some female travelers do come here for a quick fling. Be prepared to pay your gent's way around town and bring (and use!) your own condoms.

Sights & Activities

SWIMMING & SURFING

At the northwest end of Cahuita, **Playa Negra** is a long, black-sand beach flying the *bandera azul ecológica*, which is a flag that indicates the beach is kept to the highest ecological standards. This is undoubtedly Cahuita's top spot for swimming. Most importantly, it is far enough from town to never be crowded.

Unknown to many surfers, Playa Negra has an excellent beach break. It is not one of the regular stops on the Costa Rica surfer circuit, which means more waves for you. Conditions are best in the early morning, especially with

a swell from the south or east. Sign up for a lesson (US\$25 for two hours) or just rent a board at the Beach House (p475). Closer to the beach, Centro Turístico Brigitte (below) may also give lessons.

The relatively remote Playa Negra contrasts with the **Playa Blanca** at the entrance to the national park (see p476).

Tours

Snorkeling, sportfishing and horseback riding are standard offerings:

Cahuita Tours (☎ 2755 0000/0232) One of the oldest established agencies in town, this place offers guided hikes to the Hitoy-Cerere (opposite) and all-day trips to the Reserva Indígena Talamanca Bribri (US\$55).

Centro Turístico Brigitte (☎ 2755 0053; www.brigittecahuita.com) Brigitte specializes in horseback-riding tours (three/five hours per person US\$35/45) along the beach or to jungle waterfalls. Also an excellent place to rent a bike (per day US\$8).

Roberto's Tours (☎ 2755 0117) Arranges snorkeling trips and dolphin tours in the national park, but Roberto's real claim to fame is inshore/offshore sportfishing (per person US\$60/300). Bonus: after all your hard work, Roberto can have your haul cooked for dinner in his recommended restaurant.

Willie's Tours (☎ 8843 4700; www.willies-costarica-tours.com) Willie's signature tour takes visitors to visit a Bribri family and a Kékoldi iguana farm (US\$35).

Sleeping

There are two possible areas for lodgings in Cahuita – the town center or north of town along the Playa Negra.

CENTER

Within the town, hotels are mostly cheaper and noisier (though there are a few upscale

SELVA BANANITO LODGE

At the foot of Cerro Muchito, on the edge of Parque Internacional La Amistad, this family-run **farm and ecolodge** (☎ 2253 8118; www.selvabanano.com; 3-day package US\$475; 📍) has about 1200 hectares of pasture, plantation and reforested areas. Conscious of the environmental impact of all their activities, the Stein family employs solar energy, recycled hardwood for construction and biodegradable products. And they are deeply committed to preserving the Limón watershed. While this lodge does not offer beach access, there is plenty to keep the adventurous traveler occupied: tree climbing, tree planting, waterfall hiking and horseback riding. Rates, based on double occupancy, include three meals daily and transportation from San José, as well as the above-mentioned activities.

If you are driving yourself, take the turnoff just south of the Río Vizcaya crossing (about 19km south of Limón). The lodge is about 8km inland. Detailed driving directions are posted on the website.

CAHUITA

0 300 m
0 0.3 miles

<p>INFORMATION</p> <p>Banco de Costa Rica.....1 A4</p> <p>Internet Access (Centro Turístico Brigitte).....(see 6)</p> <p>Internet Access (Spencer Seaside Lodging).....(see 39)</p> <p>Internet Access (Willie's Tours).....(see 9)</p> <p>Internet Palmer.....2 B3</p> <p>Kelly Creek Ranger Station.....3 E4</p> <p>Mercado Safari.....4 A3</p> <p>SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES</p> <p>Cahuita Tours.....5 A3</p> <p>Centro Turístico Brigitte.....6 C3</p> <p>Mariposario de Cahuita.....7 C4</p> <p>Roberto's Tours.....8 B4</p> <p>Willie's Tours.....9 A4</p>	<p>SLEEPING</p> <p>Alby Lodge.....10 E4</p> <p>Atlantida Lodge.....11 C3</p> <p>Bluespirit.....12 D3</p> <p>Bungalows Aché.....13 E4</p> <p>Bungalows Malú.....14 B2</p> <p>Cabinas Algebra.....15 A1</p> <p>Cabinas Atlántic Surf.....16 E4</p> <p>Cabinas Brisas del Mar.....17 B3</p> <p>Cabinas Iguana.....18 C3</p> <p>Cabinas Jenny.....19 B3</p> <p>Cabinas Mamba.....20 C3</p> <p>Cabinas Nirwana.....21 C3</p> <p>Cabinas Rhode Island.....22 E4</p> <p>Cabinas Riverside.....23 E4</p> <p>Cabinas Safari.....24 B3</p> <p>Cabinas Surfside (Annex).....25 B3</p> <p>Cabinas Surfside (Main Site).....26 A3</p> <p>Cabinas Tito.....27 D3</p> <p>Cahuita National Park Hotel.....28 B4</p> <p>Clay Hill Biscuits.....29 A1</p> <p>El Encanto B&B.....30 D3</p> <p>Hotel Belle Fleur.....31 B4</p> <p>Hotel La Diosa.....32 B1</p> <p>Jardin Tropical.....33 C3</p>	<p>EATING</p> <p>100% Natural Coffee Shop.....41 B4</p> <p>Bluespirit Restaurant.....(see 12)</p> <p>Café del Parqueico.....42 B3</p> <p>Cahuita National Park Restaurant.....(see 28)</p> <p>Chao Cha Chai.....43 A3</p> <p>Chao's Paradise.....44 C3</p> <p>El Cactus Bungalows & Pizzeria.....45 D3</p> <p>Kelly Creek Hotel Restaurant.....(see 34)</p> <p>La Casa Creole.....(see 37)</p> <p>Miss Edith's.....46 A3</p> <p>Reggae Restaurant.....47 C3</p> <p>Restaurant Bananas.....(see 15)</p> <p>Restaurant El Palenque Luisa.....48 A3</p> <p>Restaurant Lu Pe.....49 A4</p> <p>Restaurant Pico Cahuita.....50 B4</p> <p>Restaurant Tropical Reef.....51 A4</p> <p>Sobras Las Olas.....52 B4</p> <p>Soda Café Caribbean Flavor.....54 B3</p> <p>DRINKING</p> <p>Beach House.....55 A3</p> <p>Chao's Paradise.....(see 44)</p> <p>Coco's Bar.....56 A4</p> <p>Jardin Tropical Bar.....(see 33)</p> <p>Ricky's Bar.....57 B4</p> <p>TRANSPORT</p> <p>Bus Terminal.....58 A4</p> <p>Centro Turístico Brigitte.....(see 6)</p> <p>Ciclo Safari.....59 A3</p>
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options). The advantage is being close to many restaurants and to the national park. For more upscale hotels there is greater choice outside of town along Playa Negra.

Budget

Budget accommodations dominate in Cahuita. Most are clean and basic, geared for folks content with a cold shower and décor revolving around mosquito nets.

Cabinas Rhode Island (☎ 2755 0264; r per person US\$14; **P**) Good-sized, reasonably clean rooms with comfy chairs and cold showers surround a grassy parking lot. The office is in the yellow house across the street.

Villa Delmar (☎ 2755 0392/75; d with/without air-con US\$30/14, extra person US\$6; **P** ♻️) In a quiet, out-of-the-way spot close to the national park, the Villa Delmar has colorful cabins, ranging in size from small singles to more spacious family-sized quarters. Set around a grassy yard, the rooms are dark and musty, brightened only moderately by the pleasant pastel paint job.

Cabinas Riverside (☎ 2553 0153; s/d US\$15/20; **P**) Efficient service and superclean rooms are found at this spot near Kelly Creek. With painted wood furniture and colorful woven hammocks strung up around the grounds, this charming place is definitely the best of the budget bunch. Simple rooms have mosquito nets and stone showers with hot water.

Cabinas Safari (☎ 2755 0405; s/d/tr/q US\$15/18/22/25; **P**) These basic but well-maintained rooms all have tiled floors and a few frilly details. Be sure to ask the staff for the ocean-view rooms. The helpful owners also provide money-changing services. Big breakfasts are worth the extra US\$2.

Cabinas Surfside (☎ 2755 0246; evadardling1930@yahoo.com; s/d/tr US\$20/25/35, d annex US\$35; **P**) These concrete-block rooms do not look like much, but they are spotless, from the tiled floor to the wood ceiling. The less expensive cabins surround a pleasant courtyard, while slightly pricier rooms are in the adjacent annex, facing the waterfront.

Cabinas Bobo Shanti (☎ 2755 0128, 8829 6890; tr US\$30; **P**) Come here if you are in a reggae mood. This place is characterized by Rasta colors, plenty of hammocks and very laid-back service. The rooms are a good deal if you can fill the beds, but single travelers may want to look elsewhere. The outdoor kitchen facilities are useful for self-caterers.

Brigitte at Centro Turístico Brigitte rents a few **cabinas** (s/d/q US\$25/30/40). As well, you can camp in Parque Nacional Cahuita (see p477) or just north of town at Reggae Restaurant (p475).

Midrange

The midrange options have private bathrooms with hot water, unless otherwise noted.

Linda's Secret Garden (☎ 2755 0327; d US\$20; **P**) The namesake garden really is an enticing retreat, and a lovely setting for Linda's four airy cabins. They all have fresh paint jobs and bamboo furniture, with a wicker screen that separates the bathroom from the rest of the room. The new dorm that sleeps five people, plus communal kitchen facilities, makes this a good option for families.

Spencer Seaside Lodging (☎ 2755 0210; spencer@racsa.co.cr; s/d downstairs US\$16/25, upstairs US\$30; **P** ♻️) A seaside setting makes this the perfect place to take advantage of hammocks strung beneath the coconut palms. The cottages are nothing fancy, but the lizards, turtles and other creatures stenciled on the walls add an element of jungle charm. You'll pay a bit more for the unobstructed view and the hot water in the 2nd-floor rooms.

Cabinas Atlantic Surf (☎ 2755 0116, 8846 4622; www.cabinasatlanticsurf.com; s/d/tr US\$20/25/30; **P**) The vibe is definitely cool at this sweet spot, thanks to the manager, Kenneth, and the reggae tunes emanating from within. Attractive hardwood rooms have semiprivate porches, each with a hammock for optimum relaxation. Stone showers – straight out of Bedrock – are hot, unless you choose the cold-water option and save your self US\$5.

Cabinas Brisas del Mar (☎ 2755 0011; s/d US\$21/25) Spotless if not stylish, these cabins are set in overgrown gardens that face the water. Hammocks are conveniently strung to catch the breeze off the sea, as the name promises, but they don't allow for much privacy.

Cahuita National Park Hotel (☎ 2755 0244; s/d/tr/q US\$25/30/35/65; **P** ♻️ ♻️) Overlooking the beach at the entrance to the park, this large building looks like a proper hotel. Wood paneling and balconies characterize the rooms, while the family room comes complete with multiple bedrooms and a full kitchen. Views from the upper floors are excellent, and one of Cahuita's favorite restaurants (casados US\$3 to US\$5, seafood US\$8 to US\$15, open 11am to 10pm) is just downstairs.

Cabinas Jenny (☎ 2755 0256; d US\$25-35, extra person US\$7; 📍) A stone's throw from the advancing waves, this straightforward place has great views from the shared porches. Linoleum floors, fresh paint and mosquito nets constitute the décor, but the rooms are functional and offer plenty of storage space. Upstairs, the more private rooms are a few dollars more. Call in advance to make sure that somebody is here when you arrive.

Hotel Belle Fleur (☎ 2755 0283; hotelbellefleur@hotmail.com; d standard/deluxe/king US\$25/35/55; 📍 📺) Although this hotel is right smack dab in the middle of town, the grounds are completely enclosed, making it a private, peaceful site. The exception is the standard rooms, which are above the Vaz supermarket on the main drag. The pricier rooms are clustered around lovely gardens at the back. A cool hammock hangout and a refreshing swimming pool make it a welcome retreat in a superconvenient locale.

Top End

Bungalows Aché (☎ 2755 0119; www.bungalowsache.com; s/d/tr US\$40/45/50; 📍 📺) In Nigeria, *Aché*

means 'Amen,' and you'll likely say the same thing when you arrive at this little piece of paradise. With its back to the national park, it is surrounded by wildlife, and these spacious octagonal bungalows have almost every amenity. High ceilings and spacious woody interiors are brightened by colorful print curtains and linens.

Alby Lodge (☎ 2755 0031; www.albylodge.com; d/tr/q US\$40/45/50; 📍) This fine German-run lodge on the edge of the park has spacious landscaped grounds, littered with trees that attract loads of howler monkeys. Four thatch-room bungalows are spread out across the grounds, allowing for plenty of privacy. High ceilings, mosquito nets and driftwood details make for a pleasant jungle décor. A common rancho has excellent communal kitchen facilities.

Kelly Creek Hotel (☎ 2755 0007; www.hotelkellycreek.com; d US\$58, extra person US\$10; 📍 📺 📺) This snazzy hotel is on a busy stretch of beach, right next to the park entrance. The location allows for welcome sea breezes, which blow right into the rooms; it's also not a bad spot for wildlife-watching, as animals sometimes sneak out from the park. Four hardwood

rooms each have high ceilings, two double beds with mosquito nets, and two big windows letting in plenty of light. The onsite Spanish restaurant (dishes US\$8 to US\$10, open 6:30pm Thursday to Tuesday) serves up a mouthwatering paella.

Sia Tami Lodge (☎ 2755 0374; www.siatamilodge.com; d/q US\$67/74, extra person US\$14; 📍) A gravel road leads from town, past the other lodges, to this tranquil spot on the edge of the park. This place is ideal for families, as the 10 *casas* (houses) are fully equipped with two bedrooms, living space and kitchen. From each, a terrace overlooks a large private garden. With rain forest all around, this the next best thing to staying in the park itself.

PLAYA NEGRA

Northwest of town, along Playa Negra, you'll find more expensive hotels and a few pleasant cabins, which offer more privacy and quiet but a limited choice of restaurants and services. All of the options have private bathrooms with hot water.

Budget

Cabinas Algebra (☎ 2755 0057; d US\$18, d/tr with kitchen US\$25/39; 📍) This friendly, family-run option is a 2km trek from town. But the owners will pick you up (for free!) if you call in advance. The rooms are cheerful and inviting, as is the onsite Restaurant Bananas (meals US\$7 to US\$12), serving top-notch Creole food.

Cabinas Nirwana (☎ 2755 0110; nirwana99@racsa.cr; d US\$35-40; 📍) This good budget choice offers a range of lodging options, from small doubles to larger quarters (sleeping up to four) with kitchenettes. Built by a friendly Italian, the wooden cabins are cool and comfortable, with plenty of windows for cross-ventilation. A wide porch overlooks the grounds, which are perhaps too well maintained.

Midrange

Cabinas Tito (☎ 2755 0286; s/d incl breakfast US\$20/25; 📍) Surrounded by extensive tropical gardens and banana plants, this atmospheric spot offers excellent value. The bright rooms are furnished in wicker, with mosquito nets and jungle accents. If you absolutely love it, there is a furnished house available for long-term rental.

Cabinas Iguana (☎ 2755 0005; www.cabinas-iguana.com; d with shared bathroom US\$20, cabins US\$35-40; 📍 📺) Set back from the beach, these cabi-

nas are in the middle of the jungle: agouti and sloth have been sighted on the grounds. Three comfortable, small rooms share warm showers and a small terrace. More spacious cabins have handsome woody interiors, big beds with mosquito nets and hammock-hung porches. One large furnished house with a kitchen sleeps up to six (US\$65).

La Piscina Natural (☎ 2755 0146; d US\$35; 📍) This gem is about 2km out of town and 100% worth the walk or cab ride. The comfortable rooms are recently renovated, but what makes this place are the gorgeous grounds fronting a scenic stretch of beach and the neat natural pool for which the complex is named. With drinks available from the breezy bar, you may never feel the need to trek back into town.

Jardin Tropical (☎ 8811 2754; jardintropical@racsa.cr; cabins US\$35-40, house US\$50-60) Deep in the middle of overgrown tropical gardens, two cozy cabins have high ceilings and porch hammocks. It doesn't get more tranquil than this, unless of course there's a rowdy crowd at the popular onsite bar. The same fine folks also run Cabinas Mambo (double/triple US\$30/40) opposite. Inquire at Jardin Tropical about these spacious rooms that share a shady porch.

Bluspirit (☎ 2755 0122; bluspirit@hotmail.com; d US\$50) Three delightful blue A-frame cabins are lined up on this pleasant stretch of waterfront property. They each have a thatched-roofed porch – hung with a hammock, of course – for maximum breeze-catching. The onsite seaside restaurant (pasta US\$5 to US\$7, seafood US\$9 to US\$15) is Cahuita's most romantic dining spot.

Top End

Atlantida Lodge (☎ 2755 0115; d US\$64-93; 📍 📺 📺) The 34 sturdy wood cabins that are spread over resort-feel grounds provide more creature comforts than you'd expect in rough-and-ready Cahuita. The main draws are the large swimming pool and the jungle-like floral gardens. Yoga, reiki and massage are available to ensure your chis and chakras are all in order.

Chalet Hibiscus (☎ 2755 0021; www.hotels.co.cr/hibiscus.html; d/q US\$45/55, chalets US\$100-120; 📍 📺) The rooms in the 'principal chalet' are very comfortable, with all the necessary amenities, plus wide balconies and a few artsy touches. The two-story private chalets, however, are fabulous. The balconies, strung with hammocks,

GET OUT OF THAT HAMMOCK!

It's easy to let time slip away while you are lounging in a hammock or catching the waves in this tropical paradise. If you need a break from all that relaxation, here are some suggestions:

- **Avarios del Caribe & Buttercup Center** (☎ 2750 0725; www.ogphoto.com/aviaros; 🕒 6am-5pm) About 10km north of Cahuita, this small wildlife sanctuary sits on an 88-hectare island in the delta of the Río Estrella. The now-famous orphaned sloth named Buttercup reigns over the grounds, ever since she was adopted by owners Luis and Judy at the age of five weeks. Their passion for these funny creatures is contagious; informative guided tours (US\$20 to US\$30) allow visitors to meet some of the resident sloths. The center also offers a variety of excursions through the canals and lagoons of the Estrella delta, where 312 (and counting!) species of birds have been recorded. Besides the prolific birdlife, this lowland rain forest is home to monkey, caiman, river otter and, of course, sloth. The recommended way to explore this lush tropical setting is by canoe (US\$30, three hours), but hiking tours are also available. The reserve and research center also contains a restful B&B (doubles US\$87 to US\$110).
- **Cacao Trails** (☎ 8812 7460; www.cacaotrails.com; Hone Creek; guided tour US\$25; 🕒 8am-5pm) Visit this exquisite new botanical garden and outdoor museum, where educational tours demonstrate the various uses of medicinal plants and the workings of a cacao plantation (plus you can see and sample the final product), with plenty of opportunities for wildlife sightings along the way. An additional expedition allows further exploration by kayak. It's midway between Cahuita and Puerto Viejo; any bus between the two can drop you at the entrance. This is a great outing for kids.
- **Mariposario de Cahuita** (☎ 2755 0361; admission US\$8; 🕒 9am-4pm) Almost all local tours include a visit to this wonderful garden that's all flutter with beautiful butterflies. Stroll around the fountain-filled grounds and admire the local residents, including many friendly caterpillars. Descriptions are posted in several languages; guided tours are also available.

overlook private gardens; other practical perks include full kitchens and separate bedrooms. The chalets sleep six to 10 people.

Bungalows Malú (☎ 2755 0114; www.bungalowsmalu.com; s/d/tr/q US\$46/58/64/70; 🏠 🚿 🚿) At this lodge along Playa Negra, five stone bungalows are scattered across the palm-shaded grounds, surrounding an open-air rancho and a sunken swimming pool. They feature cool Stone Age bathrooms and tropical hardwood interiors, individually decorated with poignant paintings by local artist Alessandra Bucci.

El Encanto B&B (☎ 2755 0113; www.elencantobedandbreakfast.com; s/d US\$49/59; 🏠) This B&B, run by French-Canadian artists Pierre and Patricia, is set in lovingly landscaped grounds, with statuettes and nooks reflecting the creative nature of the owners. An Asian-style pavilion has hammocks and lounge chairs – yoga, massage and meditation also take place here. Attractive wooden bungalows have ceiling fans and private patios.

Hotel La Diosa (☎ 2755 0055; www.hotelladiosa.net; s/d US\$58/63, with air-con US\$76/87, with air-con & Jacuzzi US\$88/99; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Cabins with names like Aphrodite and Isis evoke the feminine energy of La Diosa, or ‘the goddess.’ This place is designed to please the senses, from the spacious, cool, tiled cabins with king-size beds, to the swimming pool set amid tropical gardens, to the new hardwood yoga and meditation space. Prices include breakfast – with plenty of fresh-brewed coffee – served in the open-air rancho.

Magellan Inn (☎ 2755 0035; www.magellaninn.com; d with fan/air-con US\$93/115, extra person US\$17; 🏠 🚿 🚿) At the northern end of Playa Negra, this elegant, upscale inn isn’t really within a casual stroll of town, but it is worth the extra effort. Comfortable, classy rooms with king-size beds have beautiful wood furniture, and their private terraces look out into the tropical garden, which is filled with orchids and bromeliads. Prices include breakfast.

Eating CENTER

A few excellent restaurants in the town center are conveniently attached to hotels, including the Kelly Creek Hotel and Cahuita National Park Hotel.

100% Natural Coffee Shop (☎ 2755 0317; ☎ 6am-8pm) There is no better place in Cahuita to greet the morning with a cup o’ joe or unwind in the afternoon with a refreshing *jugo*. A few tapas

are also on the menu. Rare is the individual who can walk by this place on the main drag without being lured over to the beckoning bar.

Café del Parquecito (☎ 2755 0279; breakfast US\$3-5; ☎ 6:30am-noon) Early risers come for the coffee, but breakfast lovers at any hour of the morning will delight in this menu. The specialty is the huge crepes, wrapped around fresh fruit or other fillings.

Roberto’s Restaurant (☎ 2755 0117; seafood dishes US\$3-8; ☎ 7am-10pm) Owned by one of the top fishing guides in the region, you know the seafood is fresh. The restaurant uses organic ingredients and fresh produce whenever possible.

Restaurant El Palenque Luisa (☎ 2755 0400; dishes US\$5-8) Tree-trunk beams, bamboo roof and plant-filled interior create quite the jungle décor in this inviting open-air restaurant. It’s an ideal spot to feast on tasty vegetarian fare, as well as fish and meat dishes cooked Caribbean Creole style.

Restaurant La Fé (meals US\$5-10; ☎ 7am-11pm) You can’t miss this inviting spot on the main drag, draped in swinging oropendola nests. It’s particularly atmospheric in the evening, when the open-air terrace is lit by candles. The specialty is anything in coconut sauce, from octopus to marlin to delectable shrimp, served up with a side of plantains.

Cha Cha Cha! (☎ 8394 4153; mains US\$6-9; ☎ noon-10pm Tue-Sun) In a corner veranda of an old blue-painted clapboard house, this attractive eatery offers recommended *cuisine del mundo*. Well-prepared dishes range from Jamaican jerk chicken to Tex-Mex cuisine. There are plenty of vegetarian options, including the ‘zen salad’ (mandarin oranges with basil, sprinkled with cashews and macadamia nuts). It’s all savored against a background of world music and jazz.

Miss Edith’s (☎ 2755 0248; mains US\$7-12; ☎ 11am-10pm) As local people earn respect in the community, they are called Miss or Mister, followed by their first name – hence, Miss Edith. Miss Edith’s is undoubtedly Cahuita’s most famous restaurant, and deservedly so, for mouthwatering, cooked-to-order Caribbean cuisine. Reserve in advance so your dinner has time to simmer.

our pick **Restaurante Coral Reef** (☎ 2755 0133; ☎ 11.30am-10pm) Seafood lovers should come for the best seafood stew in town. This new place has jumped to the top of the heap in Cahuita, and it’s often hard to get a table, so book or

dine early – it’s worth it. Not to mention it’s right next to the main bar in town, making post-dinner drinks within easy reach.

You can’t really go wrong in Cahuita if you stop for lunch at one of the local sodas:

Soda Café Caribbean Flavor (mains US\$2-5; ☎ 6am-9pm) Caribbean-style Tico standards, particularly fresh juices, and *gallo pinto*.

Restaurant Típico Cahuita (mains US\$4-8, seafood US\$5-15; ☎ 8am-close) A spacious spot beneath a *palapa* (shelter with a thatched, palm-leaf roof and open sides) with a wide-ranging menu.

PLAYA NEGRA

Near Playa Negra, you can also head to El Cactus Bungalows y Pizzeria, the restaurant at Bluspirit (p473) and Restaurant Bananas at Cabinas Algebra (p473).

Reggae Restaurant (☎ 2755 0515; mains US\$4-9; ☎ 7-11am & noon-9pm) Exuding a friendly, laid-back vibe, this *soda* serves Caribbean-style standards, from inexpensive casados to the house specialty, shrimp in coconut milk. This place also has facilities for camping (per person US\$3), plus some comfortable cabins (US\$20 to US\$30).

Chao’s Paradise (☎ 2755 0421; seafood mains US\$6-10; ☎ 11am-close) It’s worth the short beachside jaunt out of town to enjoy the catch of the day simmered in spicy Chao sauce. The open-air restaurant-bar also has a pool table and live reggae and calypso music some nights.

Sobre Las Olas (☎ 2755 0109; meals US\$8-10; ☎ noon-10pm Wed-Mon) Cahuita’s top option for waterfront dining. The Italian owners guarantee excellent homemade pasta and an impressively stocked wine cellar, while the location ensures the freshest of ingredients straight from the sea. Vegetarians will also find plenty to sate their appetites.

La Casa Creole (☎ 2755 0035; mains US\$7-20; ☎ 6-9pm Mon-Sat) Set in the tropical gardens of the Magellan Inn, this candlelit restaurant serves some of Cahuita’s finest fare. The French-fusion cuisine emphasizes seafood and Caribbean flavors. The house specialty is the shrimp Martinique (that’s ginger and garlic sauce to make your mouth water). Reservations are required.

Drinking

Though low-key, Cahuita certainly has some fine spots for a few drinks or live music.

Beach House (☎ 8369 4254; cariberen@yahoo.com) ‘Eat, Drink and Go Surfing.’ So implores

Rennie Leone, owner of this expat hangout. By day, the place rents surfboards; by night, it serves sandwiches (US\$5), quesadillas (US\$6) and cold beers at the cozy bar or on the breezy terrace. Live calypso music plays Thursday through Saturday.

Coco’s Bar (☎ noon-midnight) You can’t miss Coco’s at the main intersection, painted in Rasta red, yellow and green. It embodies Cahuita’s Caribbean atmosphere, so it comes as no surprise that it’s famous for fruit rum concoctions and Friday ‘reggae night.’

Ricky’s Bar (☎ 2755 0228; ☎ 4pm-midnight) Across from Coco’s, Ricky’s has a jungle vibe, outdoor seating and a nice dance floor. This place really gets hopping on Wednesday and Saturday nights, when live bands sometimes take the stage.

Along Playa Negra, stop by Chao’s Paradise restaurant-bar or the bar at Jardín Tropical cabins.

Getting There & Away

Grayline (☎ 2262 3681; www.graylinecostarica.com) runs a daily bus departing at 11am to San José (US\$27) and on to Arenal (US\$38). All public buses arrive and depart from the terminal half a block southwest of Parque Central.

Puerto Limón/San José (Autotransportes Mepe) US\$17, 1½/four hours, depart at 7:30am, 8:30am, 9:30am, 11:30am and 4:30pm, additional bus at 2pm on weekends.

Puerto Viejo de Talamanca/Bribri/Sixouala US\$1/2/3, 30 minutes/one hour/1½ hours, depart hourly from 7am to 9pm.

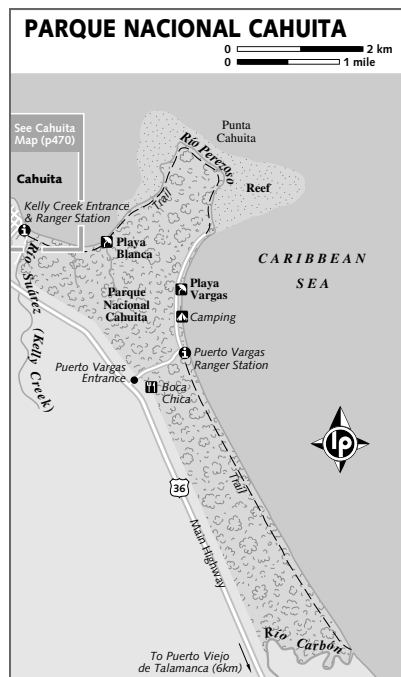
Getting Around

The best way to get around Cahuita – especially if you are staying out along Playa Negra – is by bicycle. In town, rent bikes at **Ciclo Safari** (☎ 2755 0020; per hr/day US\$1.50/8; ☎ 7am-6pm). Near the Playa Negra, bikes are available at Centro Turístico Brigitte (see p469) for similar prices. Many lodges also provide bikes for their guests.

PARQUE NACIONAL CAHUITA

This small park – just 1067 hectares – is one of the more frequently visited national parks in Costa Rica. The reasons are simple: the nearby town of Cahuita provides attractive accommodations and easy access; more importantly, the white-sand beaches, coral reef and coastal rain forest are bursting with wildlife.

Declared a national park in 1978, Cahuita is typical of the entire coast (very humid), which



town of Cahuita, while 1km down Hwy 32 takes you to the well-signed **Puerto Vargas ranger station** (☎ 2755 0302; admission US\$6; 🕒 8am-4pm).

Technically, you do not have to pay the US\$6 admission fee if you enter at Kelly Creek. This is the result of a local stir-up in the 1990s, when locals feared high park fees would deter the tourists. Keep in mind, however, that these fees provide important income for the park service. Tourist dollars support education about and maintenance and conservation of the national park, so it is important to pay the fee, or donate it, as the case may be.

Activities

HIKING

An easily navigable 7km **coastal trail** leads through the jungle from Kelly Creek to Puerto Vargas. At times the trail follows the beach; at other times hikers are 100m or so away from the sand. At the end of the first beach, Playa Blanca, hikers must ford the Río Perezoso. Inquire about river conditions before you set out: under normal conditions, this river can be thigh-deep at high tide. During the rainy season, it is often too dangerous to cross.

The trail continues around Punta Cahuita to the long stretch of Playa Vargas. The trail ends at the southern tip of the reef, where it meets up with a road leading to the Puerto Vargas ranger station. From the ranger station, it is another 2km along a gravel road to the park entrance. From here, you can hike back to Cahuita along the coastal highway, or you can catch a ride going in either direction.

SWIMMING

Almost immediately upon entering the park, you'll see the 2km-long **Playa Blanca** stretching along a gently curving bay to the east. The first 500m of beach may be unsafe for swimming, but beyond that, waves are gentle. These conditions may change, so inquire at the ranger station before diving in. The rocky Punta Cahuita headland separates this beach from the next one, **Playa Vargas**. It is unwise to leave clothing or other belongings unattended when you swim.

SNORKELING

Parque Nacional Cahuita contains one of the last living coral reefs in Costa Rica. The reef is accessible from the beach, but the best way to see the creatures under the sea

is to hire a guide with a boat in Cahuita. If you prefer to walk, hike along the beach trail. After about 6km, you will come to a sandy stretch that is cut off from the coastline by a rocky headland of Punta Cahuita. The offshore coral reef represents Cahuita's best snorkeling.

In an attempt to protect the reef from further damage, snorkeling is permitted only with a licensed guide. Local guides include Roberto and Willie (see Tours, p469). The going rate is US\$15 to US\$25 per person, but prices vary according to the size of your group and the mood of the guide. Cahuita Tours (p469) offers an all-day trip in a glass-bottom boat, which includes snorkeling and hiking (US\$35 per person).

Snorkeling conditions vary greatly, depending on the weather and other factors. In general, the drier months in the highlands (from February to April) are best for snorkeling on the coast, as less runoff occurs in the rivers and there is less silting in the sea. Conditions are often cloudy at other times. Indeed, conditions are often cloudy, period.

Sleeping & Eating

Within the park, **camping** (per person US\$3; 📍) is permitted at Playa Vargas, less than 1km from the Puerto Vargas ranger station. The limited facilities include cold outdoor showers, drinking water and pit latrines.

After the long, hot hike through the jungle, you may think you are hallucinating when you see the Italian restaurant beckoning at the end of the road. But **Boca Chica** (☎ 2755 0415; meals US\$6-12) is not a mirage, just a well-placed eatery, offering cold *jugos*, homemade pasta and fresh *mariscos* (shellfish) to hungry and tired trekkers coming out of the park. If you stop for lunch, they'll spot you the bus fare for your return all the way to Cahuita.

PUERTO VIEJO DE TALAMANCA

Time was that the only disturbances to this sleepy Rasta town were superintrepid surfers who would lazily flip-flop around the dusty streets, board under arm, on their way to ride the infamous Salsa Brava break. While those days are certainly gone, this town has still got a long way to go before it becomes the almost Disneyfied experience you can find on the Pacific coast.

Undoubtedly, Puerto Viejo's sole purpose is tourism, but the one-street town skirts a

fine line between providing both local charm and all your traveler amenities. There is still a strong Afro-Caribbean flavor to the place; the dirt streets swing to soca, dancehall and reggae sounds, while the distinct green, gold and red Rastafarian colors are flown from almost every building. Sadly, as more and more expats move in and take over local businesses, it becomes glaringly obvious that the culture is becoming heavily diluted.

But you'll certainly get your fill of local flavor by night. Puerto Viejo is one of the best party towns in the country and the *guaro* (local firewater) and ganja-fueled nightlife is as hedonistic as you'll find in Costa Rica. If that's not your scene you can still escape it all by staying on the outskirts of town, on either of the two dramatically sweeping beaches, Playa Negra or Cocles.

Whether you stay on the beach or in town, it's a great spot for basing yourself and exploring the region. It's possible to trek through rain forest, kayak upstream, surf the Caribbean's best breaks and still be back by sundown for a slap-up meal in any of the town's fantastic eateries.

The easy and amenable touristy nature of the town is unavoidable, but so to is the sleepy slothlike charm of the place. However, you do get that sinking feeling that Puerto Viejo is a hop, skip and a jump from golden arches and soya mochachinos. Thankfully, it's hard to imagine anyone mustering the energy to hop or skip... let alone jump... for the time being.

Dangers & Annoyances

Do keep in mind that as tourism grows, a cottage industry of sketchy drug dealers and irritating touts is growing with it. Stay alert late at night, choose your own accommodations (and use the hotel safe!) and always remember that an ounce of caution is worth more than a pound of weed.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is expensive and slow. **Asociación Talamancaña de Ecoturismo y Conservación** (ATEC; ☎ 2750 0191, 2750 0398; per hr US\$2.40; 🕒 8am-9pm) Painfully slow internet access. **books librería y bazar** (☎ 2750 2005; per hr US\$2.40; 🕒 9am-9pm) Ten machines with decent internet speeds. **Jungle Internet** (☎ 2750 2003; per hr US\$3.40; 🕒 8am-11pm) Fast computers plus free wireless access.

results in dense tropical foliage (mostly coconut palms and sea grapes). The area includes the swampy **Punta Cahuita**, which juts into the sea between two stretches of sandy beach. Often flooded, the point is populated with cativo and mango trees, green ibis, yellow-crowned night heron, boat-billed heron and the rare green-and-rufous kingfisher.

The dark Río Perezoso, or 'Sloth River,' bisects the Punta Cahuita (and sometimes prevents hiking between the ranger stations). This is the discharge for the swamp that covers the point.

Red land and fiddler crab live along the beaches, attracting mammals like crab-eating raccoon and white-nosed coati. White-faced capuchin, southern opossum and three-toed sloth also live in these parts. The mammal you are most likely to see (and hear) is the mantled howler monkey, which makes its presence known. The coral reef represents another rich ecosystem that abounds with life.

Information

The **Kelly Creek ranger station** (☎ 2755 0461; admission by donation; 🕒 6am-5pm) is convenient to the

PUERTO VIEJO MARINA – BEGINNING OF THE END?

Nothing has got the sleepy residents of Puerto Viejo more animated of late than proposed plans to build a marina out on Playa Negra. US and Costa Rican investors want to build a US\$40 million dollar, 389-slip marina. The plans include a shopping center, art and craft vendors, yacht maintenance and repair areas, offices, storage areas and two breakwaters. Obviously, if the plans go ahead they will drastically change the face of the town.

Local surfer, Jim Richards said: 'We don't want or need a marina here. This is a special town, with a special vibe. All of that will be lost if we allow this to happen. It won't be good for anyone in the town. No one will make money except the already rich investors, who are building this marina.'

However some disagree. Local businessman, Jorge Ramos said: 'What difference does it make if tourists arrive by boat or by car? The belief that the locals will make no money simply isn't true. Two thousand jobs will be created and the property value of the local-owned land will skyrocket. At present local business in Puerto Viejo is being taken over one-by-one by incoming expats. The locals have already been muscled out of most of the lucrative aspects of tourism and need the jobs. There are a lot of social problems in Puerto Viejo that could be cured by the influx of this business, if it's managed correctly.'

Either way, at the time of research, this development looked as though it was a little way off. Currently, there is only one legal marina in the country, in Jacó, while the government is in the process of considering 21 other marina plans for different parts of the country. Watch this space...

MONEY

Banco de Costa Rica (☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) The ATM here works on the Plus and Visa systems. However, it often runs out of cash after the weekend.

Cabinas Almendras (☎ 2750 0235; 🕒 7:30am-7:30pm) Stop in at the front desk at Cabinas Almendras to change Canadian and US dollars, British pounds and euros at 1% commission, 2.5% on traveler's checks.

Pulperia Manuel León (☎ 8am-8pm) Change US dollars and euros with 'El Chino,' who charges 1.5% commission on cash and more on traveler's checks.

Sights

To the west of town is **Finca La Isla Botanical Garden** (☎ 2750 0046; www.greencoast.com/garden.htm; self-guided/guided tour US\$2/5; 🕒 10am-4pm Fri-Mon), a working tropical farm where the owners have been growing local spices, tropical fruits and ornamental plants for more than a decade. Part of the farm is set aside as a botanical garden, which is also good for birding and for wildlife observation (look for sloths and poison-dart frogs). The informative guided tour (in English) includes admission, fruit tasting and a glass of homemade juice to finish, or you can buy a booklet and take yourself on a self-guided tour.

West of Puerto Viejo, the **Jungles of Talamanca** is actually a small tropical nursery and cacao finca. This Bribri family welcomes visitors to its home, where you can

see cacao toasted over an open fire then hand-ground into delicious chocolate or rich cocoa butter. Nutmeg, black pepper or cinnamon, all grown onsite, may be added. The resulting product is truly decadent – it's amazing that something so luscious comes from such humble origins. This place is on the road to Bribri; look for the sign just past the clinic.

Activities SURFING

Outside the reef in front of Stanford's Restaurant Caribe, the famed **Salsa Brava** is known as the country's best wave (see boxed text, p480). The reef here is shallow, so if you lose it, you're liable to smash yourself and your board on the reef; this place is not for beginners. Salsa Brava offers both rights and lefts, although the right is usually faster. Conditions are best with an easterly swell.

The waves at **Playa Cocles** are almost as impressive and less-damaging than Salsa Brava. Cocles is about 2km east of town (an area known as 'Beach Break,' which is an accurate description). Lefts and rights both break close to the steep beach. Conditions are usually best early in the day, before the wind picks up.

The waves are generally at their peak here from December to March, and there is a mini-

PUERTO VIEJO DE TALAMANCA

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TO TALAMANCA (4km): Cahuita (7km), Samasá (10km), Bribri & Escalón (10km), Finca Farm (12.5km)

TO PLAYA COCLES (2.5km): Salsa Brava, Reef, Playa Negra, School, Field, Trail, See Enlargement

season for surfing in June and July. From late March to May, and in September and October, the sea is at its calmest.

There are several surf schools around town, more or less independent operations charging US\$30 to US\$35 for two hours of lessons. Note that Puerto Viejo isn't the best spot for true beginners to pick up the sport; the Pacific coast has smaller, more user-friendly waves. Folks with some experience will benefit from local advice before tackling the big breaks. It's not a bad deal as boards rent for about US\$10 to US\$15 per day. Surf schools around town include:

Caribbean Surf School & Tours (☎ 8357 7703; www.caribeansurfschoolandtours.com) Run by supersmile surf instructor, Hershel, who is widely considered the best teacher in the town. Call Hershel to organize a surf (the school has no office).

Cut Bak (☎ 8366 9222, 8885 9688) Also a popular place for surfers to pitch a tent (per person US\$3, rent-a-tent US\$4) and sleep on the beach.

Salsa Brava Surf School (☎ 2750 0689; salsabrava.surfshop@hotmail.com) Opposite Hotel Puerto Viejo.

SALSA BRAVA

The biggest break in Costa Rica, for expert surfers only and dangerous even then, Salsa Brava is named for the heaping helping of 'sauce' it serves up on the sharp, shallow reef, continually collecting its debt of fun in broken skin, boards and bones. There are a couple of take-off points: newbies waiting around to catch the popular North Peak should keep in mind that there are plenty of people in this town who gave up perks like mom's cooking and Wal-Mart just to surf this wave regularly. Don't get in their way.

In a sense, it was the Salsa Brava that swept Puerto Viejo into the relaxed limelight it enjoys today. Although discrimination against the primarily black residents of the southern Caribbean was officially outlawed in 1949, luxuries such as paved roads, electricity and telephone lines came more slowly here than elsewhere in Costa Rica. Most tourists – nationals and foreigners – still spend most of their beach time on the more accessible and developed Pacific coast.

But surfers are a special breed. Even 30 years ago, they would not be dissuaded by the bumpy bus rides and rickety canoes that hauled them and their boards from San José on the weeklong trip (assuming the bus didn't get stuck in the mud for a night or two) to this once-remote outpost. Bemused locals first opened their homes, then basic *cabanas* and *sodas* (cheap eateries), to accommodate those rugged souls on their quest.

In the wake of the wave riders came other intrepid explorers, eager to see those storied sunrises over perfect coastlines and monster curls; residents, who were by this time surfing with the best of them, happily developed a grassroots tourist infrastructure to keep everyone happy – *pura vida*, baby.

And though today's visitors enjoy internet access, fine dining and a paved route that's shortened travel time by several orders of magnitude, the magnificence of Salsa Brava and its attendant waves still flood Puerto Viejo with tanned troopers on a mission.

So if you find yourself wondering what stirred up this marvelous mix of Caribbean culture and tourist trappings amid all this natural beauty, grab a beer at the Stanford and watch the waves roll in.

SWIMMING

The entire southern Caribbean coast – from Cahuita all the way south to Punta Mona – is lined with unbelievably beautiful beaches. Just northwest of town, **Playa Negra** offers the area's safest swimming, as well as excellent body boarding.

But southeast of town is where you will find the region's gems. This is where the jungle meets the sea; stretches of smooth sand (quite slender at high tide) are caressed by waves perfect for swimming and body surfing, all fringed with the requisite swaying coconut palms. Toucans, monkeys and sloths frolic in these treetops, making it all the more exotic. So take your pick: **Playa Codes** (2km east of town), **Playa Chiquita** (4km east), **Punta Uva** (6km east) and **Manzanillo** (see p492) all offer picture-perfect beach paradises.

Swimming conditions vary and they can be dangerous. Riptides and undertows can be deadly. It is always wise to inquire at your hotel or with local tour operators about current conditions.

SNORKELING

The waters from Cahuita to Manzanillo are protected by Costa Rica's only two living reef systems, which form a naturally protected sanctuary, home to some 35 species of coral and more than 400 species of fish, not to mention dolphin, shark and, occasionally, whale. Generally, underwater visibility is best when the sea is calm, ie when surfing is bad, snorkeling is good.

Just south of **Punta Uva**, in front of the Arrecife restaurant, is a decent spot for snorkeling, when conditions are calm. The reef is very close to the shore and features some stunning examples of reindeer coral, sheet coral and lettuce coral. The reef at **Manzanillo** (p492) is also easily accessible for snorkeling. Rent equipment at Aquamor Talamanca Adventures (p492) in Manzanillo. Most of the tour companies offer snorkeling trips for about US\$45 per person.

DIVING

Divers in the southern Caribbean will discover upward of 20 dive sites, from the coral gardens in shallow waters to deeper sites with amazing underwater vertical walls. Literally hundreds of species of fish swim around here, including angelfish, parrotfish, triggerfish, shark and different species of jack and snapper.

The only dive operation in Puerto Viejo is **Reef Runner Divers** (☎ 2750 0480; www.reefrunnerdivers.net; 1/2-tank dive US\$65/80; ☎ 7am-8pm). If you are not certified, you can use a temporary license for US\$65, or spring for the full PADI certification for US\$325. Aquamor Talamanca Adventures (p492), in Manzanillo, also coordinates diving trips.

HIKING

The immediate vicinity of Puerto Viejo is not prime hiking territory: the proximity of the Parque Nacional Cahuita (p476) and the Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo (p492) means that most trekkers will head to these protected areas to look for toucan and sloth. Getting to the indigenous reserves often requires a pretty serious trek, usually with a guide (see Tours, right).

Still, the edge of town is the edge of the jungle. So, if you are up for some independent exploring, you can discover your own destination. Pack a picnic and follow the town's most southerly road, which goes past the soccer field and the Cashew Hill Jungle Lodge. Once

WHITE-WATER RAFTING

Plenty of rafters head straight for Turrialba (see boxed text, p159) but it's also possible to do rafting from the Caribbean. **Exploradores Outdoors** (☎ 2750 2020; www.exploradoresoutdoors.com; trips incl lunch & transport US\$95) is one of the best companies in the region that offer one- and two-day rafting trips on the Pacuare, Reventazón and Sarapiquí rivers. They can pick you up and drop you off in either Cahuita, Puerto Viejo, Tortuguero, San José or Arenal, and you're free to mix and match your pick-up and drop-off points. This is particularly useful if you're short on time and don't want to lose days to traveling across the country.

out of the village, the road dwindles to a path and leads into the hills.

Festivals & Events

The **South Caribbean Music & Arts Festival** (☎ 2750 0062; www.playachiquitalodge.com) fills weekends in March and April with eclectic offerings, all homegrown on the Caribbean coast. calypso to jazz, reggae to Celtic and classical artists perform; dancing troupes take the stage with Jamaican and African flair; and Costa Rican-produced films are shown. This is a family event, with many programs for kids. Dates for the festival vary but are usually weekends in March and April (for about five weeks before Easter). Most performances are held at the Playa Chiquita Lodge (see p489).

Tours

Tour operators generally require a minimum of two people on any excursion. Rates are per person, but they may be discounted for larger groups.

Asociación Talamancaña de Ecoturismo y Conservación (ATEC; ☎ 2750 0191, 2750 0398; www.greencoast.com/atec.htm; half-day US\$20-25, day trip US\$35-55, overnight US\$55-70; ☎ 8am-9pm) This nonprofit organization promotes environmentally sensitive local tourism by working with local guides and supporting local communities. Hiking, horseback riding and canoeing trips involve birding, visiting indigenous reserves and visiting local farms.

Aventuras Bravas (☎ 2750 2000, 8849 0626) It now has an office in the town and at Rocking J's (see p482) and works largely as a booking agent arranging almost every tour possible in the region. Popular activities include surf

lessons (US\$45) as well as kayak (US\$20), rafting (US\$95) and canopy (US\$50) tours.

Terra Venturas (☎ 2750 0750/489; www.terra-venturas.com; ☎ 8am-7pm) Offers overnights in Tortuguero (US\$120), hiking (US\$38) and snorkeling (US\$55) in Cahuita, white-water rafting (US\$95), plus its very own 18-platform, 2.1km-long canopy tour (US\$50), with a Tarzan swing.

Sleeping BUDGET

Cold water is the norm in budget places, but you won't miss the hot water.

Camping Mis Helena (☎ 2750 0580; camping US\$10, rent-a-tent US\$4) Campers who are not interested in the surfer party scene should seek out this family-oriented site off the main drag. It offers covered campsites in the likely event of rain. The onsite Soda Mis Helena (mains US\$2 to US\$4, open 7am to 6pm Tuesday to Sunday) serves inexpensive Caribbean-Tico standards and daily soup specials made over a wood-burning stove. Cool off with a glass of spicy homemade ginger ale.

our pick **Rocking J's** (☎ 2750 0657; www.rockingjs.com; pitch-a-tent/rent-a-tent US\$4/6, hang-a-hammock/rent-a-hammock US\$4/5, dm/d/tr/q US\$20/30/50; ☎) This truly individual backpacker abode has the personality of J, the boisterous owner, stamped all over it. In the day it feels like a hippy artists' workshop as guests create broken-tile mosaics and splash paint on canvas. When the sun does down, Rocking J's *rocks*. Beachside bonfires, round-the-table drinking games and frivolous flirting are standard. Accommodations fit all budgets, from the 'hammock hotel' to the luxury apartment, fitted with retractable roof (which enables on-the-loo stargazing), king-size bed and private kitchen. J's also rents surfboards (per day US\$15), bikes (per day US\$5) and other fun stuff. A word of warning: if you are uncomfortable with pot smoking you may feel out of place.

Hotel Puerto Viejo (☎ 2750 0620; r per person with/without bathroom US\$14/10; ☎) 'No shoes, no shirt, no problem,' dude, and that goes for the clean, functional rooms with hot showers and the shared kitchen. Boards can be hung in the reception area, where talk revolves around surfing big waves, a topic about which owner Kurt Van Dyke is a respected local expert. All the running water in the hotel is taken from giant drums that recycle the great amounts of rain water Puerto Viejo receives.

Chimuri Jungle Lodge (☎ 2750 0119; www.green-coast.com/chimurilodge.htm; dm/d/q US\$10/30/46; ☎) On the edge of the KékóLdi reserve, this is about as private and peaceful as it gets in Puerto Viejo. Four bungalows mimic the indigenous architecture, with thatched roofs, mosquito nets and private balconies, while one dormitory sleeps eight. All units share a communal kitchen. Follow the 2km walking trail to explore the jungle grounds, which attract an amazing array of birds and wildlife.

Monte Sol (☎ 2750 0098; www.montesol.net, in German; d US\$20-30; ☎) Away from the noise of the main road, this German-run place has a lovely, laidback atmosphere. Simple, stylish cabins have stucco walls and tile bathrooms, with a welcoming hammock-hung terrace. An awesome jungle house, sleeping up to eight, is available for weekly or monthly rental.

Hotel Pura Vida (☎ 2750 0002; www.hotel-puravida.com, in German; s/d/tr with shared bathroom US\$20/25/33, with private bathroom US\$20/25/30) This place is getting an overhaul, thanks to new German owners. They started with the beautiful, breezy terrace, which has been spruced up with polished-wood floors and furniture, and surrounded with gardens. Comfortable, airy rooms feature high ceilings and big windows; four have brand-new bathrooms with stone floors, elaborate tile work and solar-heated showers.

Coconut Grove (☎ 2750 0093; s/d with shared bathroom US\$20/25, with private bathroom US\$25/35; ☎) Attentive and efficient Heidi oversees this two-story complex just east of town. Wood-beamed rooms – painted in tropical colors – have mosquito nets, fans and hammocks overlooking the street. Your first stop in the morning should be downstairs at Heidi's Café (open 7am to noon), serving pancakes, eggs and terrific smoothies.

Cabinas Jacaranda (☎ 2750 0069; www.cabinas-jacaranda.net; s/d/tr/q US\$30/45/50/60; ☎) In a beautiful blooming garden woven with mosaic walkways, this colorful spot proves that personal touches and attention to detail are what constitute luxury. Magic inhabits each differently decorated room, with fanciful stenciled designs on the walls, tropical hardwood furniture and mosaic-tiled, hot-water bathrooms. The rooms all have access to a security box – use it!

Several hotels offer camping, including Rocking J's. There's also camping in Manzanillo (see p490).

MIDRANGE

Midrange hotels offer private bathrooms with hot water, unless otherwise indicated.

Kaya's Place (☎ 2750 0690; www.kayasplace.com; s/d/tr/q with shared bathroom US\$19/27/35/43, with private bathroom from US\$25/35/45/55) This rustic lodge on Playa Negra has been completely renovated and now features inviting lounge areas on two floors, furnished with hammocks and couches and ocean views. The guestrooms facing the ocean are a bit dark and dreary; airy, light-filled rooms facing the garden are more pleasant and more private (thus the price difference).

Cabinas Guaraná (☎ 2750 0244; www.hotelguarana.com; s/d/tr US\$25/35/45; ☎) A lot of attention has gone into the details in these delightful cabins, set amid tropical gardens. Painted wood furniture, colorful *molas* (indigenous tapestries made with layers of colorful cloth cut into patterns depicting local flora and fauna) and other local handicrafts decorate each room, while a private terrace with a woven hammock is just outside. On the practical side, all rooms have access to a communal kitchen. Grab a drink and climb up to a perch in the tree house for a spectacular view of the sun setting over the Caribbean Sea.

Lizard King Resort (☎ 2750 0614; lizardkingresort@net.com; s/d/tr/q US\$25/35/45/60; ☎) This slick resort features 15 spacious hardwood cabins overlooking a sweet swimming pool. Rates include a hearty breakfast. If you can't afford these cushy quarters, stop by the laidback lounge upstairs for Mexican food, movie night or – bonus – happy hour.

Cashew Hill Jungle Lodge (☎ 2750 0256; www.cashewhillodge.co.cr; s/d/tr with shared bathroom US\$30/40/52, with private bathroom US\$29/40/52, with private patio US\$46/58/70; ☎) Set on a hectare of land in the far southeast corner of town, this lodge is surrounded by jungle gardens. The brightly painted bungalows feature lots of hardwood and whimsical décor, with simple, sturdy beds draped in mosquito nets. Two rooms share kitchen facilities – useful for families – while the pricier rooms boast ocean views in the distance. Daily yoga classes are offered at the studio onsite.

Bungalows Calalú (☎ 2750 0042; www.bungalows-calalu.com; s/d/tr/q US\$26/34/42/50, with kitchen US\$40/40/50/60; ☎) You hear a lot of talk about 'tropical paradise' in Puerto Viejo, but Calalú has actually created it. This hidden gem is set in gardens blooming with exotic

flora like heliconia and bromeliads. A rock-formation swimming pool is fed by a gushing waterfall. Breakfast is served at the 'butterfly balcony' with hundreds of the beauties fluttering around. The bungalows themselves are attractive but simple, with tiled floors and wood-beam ceilings, as well as private porches overlooking the gardens.

Cabinas Tropical (☎ 2750 0283; www.cabinastropical.com; s/d US\$30/35, tr with kitchen US\$45; ☎) Ten spacious rooms – decorated with varnished wood and shiny tiles – surround a primly landscaped garden on the edge of town. The comfortable quarters are just part of the appeal: the biologist owner leads jungle hikes for birders from dawn until about 11am (per person US\$40, three minimum, breakfast provided).

Cabinas Exotica (☎ 2750 0542; cabinas_david@yahoo.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$30/35; ☎) Formerly Cabinas David, new owner Gabriel has only recently taken over this row of eight cabins to the east of town. At the time of research they were undergoing a much-needed revamp (with plans to build more rooms and a pool). The formerly dingy cabins have been decluttered, so the newly tiled look is simple enough but bright, airy, spanking clean and very good value. Breakfast, included in the price, is served on the shady terrace.

Casa Verde (☎ 2750 0015; www.cabinascasaverde.com; s/d standard US\$32/36, s/d/tr/q deluxe US\$60/76/96/110; ☎) Tiled walkways wind through gardens showcasing local flora to 14 sparkling rooms, each with spacious interiors decorated with local artwork and dark stained wood furniture, and private terraces with hammocks. The new swimming pool and hot tub are straight out of *Fantasy Island*. Bikes are available (per day US\$6) and breakfast is served daily except Monday.

Agapi (☎ 2750 0446; www.agapisite.com; r/ste from US\$35/65, apt for 6 from US\$100 ☎) In a prime seaside location east of town, this sweet spot is run by a Greek-Tico couple. All the accommodations are individually decorated, ranging from simple, colorful single rooms to more-spacious multiroom suites with kitchenettes. The pricier rooms have private balconies with ocean views, but all guests have access to lovely beachfront grounds that are sprinkled with gazebos and towering palm trees. The newly built wood-paneled apartments are excellent value if you can fill them.

our pick **Banana Azul** (☎ 2750 2035; www.bananaazul.com; d incl breakfast US\$48-105; (P)) Lost in the jungle at the far end of Playa Negra this wonderfully wild hotel is right on the cusp of a dramatic black-sand beach and sloth-filled rain forest. Each wood-paneled room has a hammock-swinging balcony looking onto the Caribbean only meters away. At night the isolated location means guests are serenaded by howler monkeys, macaws and the crashing surf.

Escape Caribeño (☎ 2750 0103; www.escapcaribeno.com; s/d/tr US\$55/65/75, air-con extra US\$10; (P) (♿)) Take your pick from bungalows facing the beach or others surrounded by lush tropical gardens, about 500m east of town. They range in size, but all 14 are equipped with refrigerators and fans and – most importantly – hammocks hanging on the porches.

El Pizote Lodge (☎ 2750 0227; d/q standard US\$66/82, bungalows US\$82/115; (P) (♿) (♿)) On a quiet backroad 1km west of town, this comfortably rustic lodge is a 10-minute walk from town, but just a few steps from the waves lapping at Playa Negra. Spacious but simple standard rooms have shared bathrooms, while the nicer wooden bungalows offer more privacy.

TOP END

Lotus Garden (☎ 2750 0232; www.lotusgarden.net; d US\$60-90; (P) (♿) (♿)) The luxury suites here feature king-size, four-poster beds, rich varnished wood floors and in-room whirlpools. Set in tropical gardens, the place has a distinctive Asian elegance. To complete the mood, the onsite Lotus Garden restaurant (open 7am to 11pm) offers an impressive menu of pan-Asian cuisine, including an all-you-can-eat sushi special for US\$14. Lotus Garden was formerly known as Jordan's.

Samasati Retreat Center (☎ 2750 0315, in the USA 800-563 9643; www.samasati.com; s/d with shared bathroom US\$94/150, s/d/tr with private bathroom US\$162/230/282) Set on a lush hillside 8km north of Puerto Viejo, this well-built, attractive complex affords lovely sweeping views of the coast and the village far below. Nine private bungalows have cool, wraparound screened walls, while the guesthouse has simple rooms with wood interiors and single beds. Tasty vegetarian meals (included) are served buffet-style on a wooden terrace with ocean views. There are daily yoga classes (US\$12) that are open to all guests.

Eating

Cooking up the most impressive restaurant scene on the coast, Puerto Viejo has the cure for *casado* overkill. Besides the listings here, see also the Lotus Garden Restaurant (left) and Heidi's Cafe at Coconut Grove (p482).

BUDGET

If you can't get enough of the Caribbean flavors, **Soda Miss Sam** (☎ 2750 0108; mains US\$2-6) and **Miss Lidia's Place** (☎ 2750 0598; mains US\$2-6) are the local favorites for *gallo pinto* and spicy coconut sauce. Both ladies have been around for years, pleasing the palates and satisfying the stomachs of locals and tourists alike.

Café Pizzeria Coral (☎ 2750 0051; breakfast US\$2-3, pizzas US\$4-6; ☎ 7am-noon & 5:30-9:30pm Tue-Sun) Beloved for healthy breakfasts and homemade wholemeal bread, this old stand-by now serves excellent pizza, including lots of vegetarian options.

Pan Pay (☎ 2750 0081; light meals US\$2-4; ☎ 7am-7pm) This beachside spot is excellent for strong coffee and freshly baked goods, not to mention delicious sandwiches that are a perfect picnic for a long hike or a beach day. This is a popular spot for tourists and Ticos to meet, post announcements and exchange books.

Bread & Chocolate (☎ 8830 3223; breakfast US\$2-4, lunch US\$4-8; ☎ 6:30am-2:30pm Wed-Sun) This classy café invites early risers to sit on the spacious, covered porch, sip fresh-brewed coffee and peruse the *Tico Times*. Breakfast favorites include oatmeal like your mom used to make; big, fluffy omelets; and the classic crunchy granola and yogurt.

Soda Tamara (☎ 2750 0148; breakfast US\$2-4, seafood dinners US\$6-10; ☎ 7am-10pm) With its signature red, green and yellow paint job, this is a popular spot to grab breakfast overlooking the street and watch the village wake up. During the day seafood is the specialty, but don't skip the coconut bread.

Café El Rico (☎ 8am-4pm) Dark, rich coffee – iced, even – is served alongside light breakfasts and lunches. Bonus: you earn yourself a free cappuccino by doing your laundry (US\$5 for 4kg) onsite. Bikes are rented here, too.

Veronica's Place (☎ 2750 0132; meals US\$3-5; ☎ 7am-9pm Sun-Thu, 7am-4:30pm Fri) This vegetarian café behind Supermercado El Pueblo is a delightful find, and not only for nonmeat-eaters. Veronica offers a fresh, healthy interpretation of Caribbean food, focusing on fresh fruits and vegetables. This is the only place in

town where you'll find veggie favorites like soy burgers and soy milk.

EZ-Times (☎ 2750 0663; mains US\$5-9; ☎ 10-2:30am) The reggae music and groovy vibe lure in hungry beach bums for pizza, pasta and salads. The outdoor terrace is strewn with colorful cushions, making it a comfy place to sit back and enjoy the fine food, not to mention the live music on Friday nights.

You've got two choices for dessert: homemade ice cream or homemade ice cream. Opposite the Hotel Puerto Viejo, a darling old woman sells creamy concoctions out of her clapboard house (US\$0.30). Described by one reader as 'frozen bliss,' this is kind of like a milkshake in a bag, and it hits the spot. For a more traditional *helado*, **Lechería Las Lapas** (☎ 11am-11pm) is in a little kiosk fronting the beach, near the bus stop. The creamy, cool stuff comes in a wide variety of tropical flavors (the macadamia nut is highly recommended), and there is also *arroz con leche* (rice pudding).

The best spot for groceries is **Super el Buen Precio** (☎ 6:30am-8:30pm). Don't miss the weekly **Organic Market** (☎ 6am-6pm Sat), when area vendors and growers sell snacks typical of the region.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

@E's (☎ 2750 0657; meals US\$3-7; ☎ 10am-11pm) The restaurant and bar at Rocking J's is much more than just a travelers hangout. Run by cordon bleu-trained chef, Eric, the food is a fusion of flavors inspired by Thai, Mexican and American cuisine. Each dish, be it the burger and fries or pan-fried shark steak, is as delicious as the next. Cordon bleu food at backpacker prices sounds like a good deal to us.

Chile Rojo (☎ 2750 0025; mains US\$7-12; ☎ noon-10pm) If you are yearning for something spicy, head to this popular spot for excellent Thai and Middle Eastern fare. It's a tiny place, but one whiff of the curry – or whatever daily special is on the menu – and you'll know it's worth whatever wait it takes. The cooked breakfast in the morning is also excellent.

our pick **El Loco Natural** (☎ 2750 0263; meals US\$8-14; ☎ 6-11pm) This upstairs open-air music café features creative fusion cuisine, combining elements of Italian, Asian and Caribbean cooking. Tropical gazpacho soup and Caribbean fish tacos are some of the delicacies you can enjoy while watching the street scene below. There is live music on Thursday and Saturday,

and local artwork on display every night of the week.

Café Viejo (☎ 2750 0817; mains US\$6-15; ☎ 11am-dose) Though elegant and a little bit pricey, this fine Italian restaurant gets high marks for its excellently dressed fresh pastas and fancy cocktails. The upscale, romantic ambience makes it a definite date destination if you've got someone to impress. It's also an excellent people-watching spot if you are on your own.

Patagonia Steak House (☎ 8390 5677; meals US\$10-15; ☎ 5-11pm) This friendly, family-run restaurant is a real-deal Argentinean-owned steak house. There is not much going on in the basic interior – just plain wooden tables and chairs – and there's an open kitchen, where you can see (and smell) the steaks sizzling on the grill. Washed down with a delicious Malbec from Mendoza, it's a meal you won't forget.

Restaurant Salsa Brava (☎ 2750 0241; meals US\$10-15; ☎ 11am-11pm) This well-recommended hot spot specializes in seafood and open-grill cooking in an intimate atmosphere. The ever-popular onsite 'juice joint' is an oasis for thirsty surfers and beachcombers.

Trattoria da Cesare (☎ 2750 0161; meals US\$10-15; ☎ 5:30-10pm Thu-Tue) This lovely trattoria west of town features wonderful homemade pastas with fresh cheeses and sauces made from locally grown produce.

Drinking

Restaurants often metamorphose into rollicking bar scenes after the tables are cleared. Try Soda Tamara for some people-watching over a beer, or Café Viejo for being seen over a fancy cocktail. If you want a cool ocean breeze with your frosty mug, stop by the bar at Stanford's during happy hour.

Baba Yaga (☎ 8388 4359) Go on Wednesday for ladies' night, Sunday for reggae night or any day for happy hour.

Coco Cielo (☎ 2750 0263) Restaurant by day/ beach bar by night – this slick new addition is the hippest place in town for margaritas and mojitos.

Entertainment

As you might expect in such a hip town, there is plenty to do after the sun goes down. So put away that surfboard and fluff those dreadlocks – Puerto Viejo is an entirely different sort of paradise after dark.

CINEMA

Café Hot Rocks (☎ 2750 0525; meals US\$3-8; 🕒 11-2:30am) In a big red tent in the center of town, this place shows fine flicks for free most evenings and also hosts live (and often new) calypso, reggae and rock bands. Recommended for fun, not for food.

Cine Playa Cocolé (☎ 2750 0128, 2750 0507; Playa Cocolé; admission free, minimum purchase US\$4.50; 🕒 screenings 7pm Mon-Fri, 5:30pm Sat & Sun) At Cabinas El Tesoro (see opposite), this popular big screen shows a cool selection of camp, cult and classic movies plus plenty of Hollywood blockbusters. Weekend showings are specially for kids.

LIVE MUSIC & DANCING

Maritza's Bar (☎ 2750 0003) This live music bar below a hotel is *the* place to go on Tuesdays. Allegedly it's open-mic, but it seems to be the same bunch of locals who come and play fun reggae every week.

Johnny's Place is a Puerto Viejo institution. DJs spin reggae, hip-hop and salsa, and patrons light beach bonfires outside.

Getting There & Away

Grayline (☎ 2262 3681; www.graylinecostarica.com) runs a daily bus departing at 11am to San José (US\$27) and on to Arenal (US\$38). Call for a reservation so the bus will pick you up at your hotel. All public buses arrive and depart from the terminal half a block southwest of Maritza's Bar.

TOP REGGAE BARS

Looking to tap into the Caribbean beat? Look no further than these reggae spots:

- **Casa Blanca** (p455) is an authentic reggae bar that is well off the tourist track and the hottest spot to shake your dreadlocks in the city.
- **Johnny's Place** (above) may put off reggae purists with the new reggaetón sound that sneaks into the DJ's play list here, but it's still the most jumping bar on the coast.
- **Maritza's Bar** (above) is a good spot on Tuesdays for open-mic night.
- **Coco's Bar** (p475) is at the heart of Cahuita's chilled night scene and blares out Kingston sounds all week.

Bribri/Sixaola US\$1/2, 30 minutes/1½ hours, depart every hour from 7:30am to 8:30pm.

Cahuita/Puerto Limón US\$1/2, 30 minutes/1½ hours, depart every hour on the half-hour from 5:30am to 7:30pm.

Manzanillo US\$1.50, 30 minutes, depart at 7:30am, 11:45am, 4:30pm and 7:30pm.

San José US\$7.50, five hours, depart at 7am, 9am, 11am and 4pm.

Getting Around

Bicycle is a fine way to get around town, and pedaling out to Manzanillo or to the other beaches east of Puerto Viejo is one of the highlights of this corner of Costa Rica. You'll find bicycle rentals all over town (including at many lodges):

Dragon Scooter (☎ 2750 0728; per 4hr from US\$15; 🕒 8am-late) If you prefer your wheels motorized.

Los Ticos (☎ 2750 0611; 🕒 7am-6pm) Right next to Rocking J's.

Tienda Marcos (☎ 2750 0303; per day US\$3; 🕒 7am-6pm)

PUERTO VIEJO TO MANZANILLO

The 13km road heading east from Puerto Viejo was paved for the first time in 2003. This dramatically shortened the time that it takes to drive or cycle past the sandy, driftwood-strewn beaches and the rocky points, through the small communities of Punta Uva and Manzanillo, and through sections of Reserva Indígena Cocolé/KéköLdi and Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo.

The road is still considered the property of folks without internal combustion, and drivers should be particularly careful at night as cyclists and pedestrians make their way between the different bars, restaurants and lodges. Hitching is quite common on this stretch, which does not mean it is risk-free.

This route more or less follows the shoreline, but you usually can't see the beach from the road, once past Playa Cocolé. The vegetation is thick – coconut palms and sea grapes protect the coast, while tropical rain forest covers the lowland hills further inland.

If you want to stay close to a nice beach but still have access to restaurants and accommodations, Cocolé has a good mix of isolation and amenities. There are wide variety of places to stay and eat that are spread out along the road through Cocolé, while

there's a small cluster around Punta Uva – the prettiest beach in the region.

It's probably just as easy to head into Puerto Viejo to take care of business, but **Playa Chiquita Services** (☎ 2750 0575; Playa Chiquita; 🕒 9am-8pm), across from Miraflores Lodge, has a public phone, internet access (US\$2 for 30 minutes) and a small café. Buses heading from Puerto Viejo to Manzanillo will drop you at any of these places along the way.

Sights**MARIPOSARIO PUNTA UVA**

The **Mariposario Punta Uva** (butterfly farm; ☎ 2750 0086; Punta Uva; adult/child US\$5/free; 🕒 8am-4pm) is less a tourist attraction and more a breeding center. Some 70 species of butterfly are bred annually, including four species staff claim exist in captivity nowhere else in the world: Prepona, Filatiniás, Mintorio and Inmanius. What you'll see depends on the time of year. Lydia, the biologist in charge of the project, can lead interesting guided tours in Spanish by request.

CRAZY MONKEY CANOPY TOUR

Affiliated with Punta Uva's Almonds & Corals Lodge (see p490), this is the only **canopy tour** (☎ 2759 9057/56, in San José 2272 2024; www.almondsandcorals.com; tour US\$40; 🕒 8am-2pm) in the south Caribbean. Set in the heart of Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo, this tour starts in the rain forest and ends on the beach, offering plenty of opportunities for wildlife-spotting and adrenaline-rushing.

Activities

The region's biggest draws involve surf, sand, wildlife-watching and attempts to get a decent tan between downpours. Playa Cocolé is known for its great **surfing** and organized lifeguard system, which helps offset the dangers of the frequent riptides, while Punta Uva features the best and safest beaches for **swimming**. At the north end of the Punta Uva beach, a footpath leads out to the point, with some interesting rock formations and a wonderful lookout along the way.

Sleeping & Eating
PLAYA COCLÉ

This stretch begins about 1.5km east of Puerto Viejo. The following places are listed from

west to east and the accommodations have hot water, unless otherwise noted.

Echo Books (desserts US\$1-3; 🕒 11am-6pm Fri-Tue; 📖) Admittedly, it seems a strange place for a bookstore, but resident expats and tourists alike are overjoyed to drop into this Caribbean-style Borders. It serves coffee and desserts in a deliciously cool, air-conditioned spot, and features thousands (really, thousands) of new and used books. Plus, the homemade chocolates are worth the whole trip to Costa Rica.

Cabinas El Tesoro (☎ 2750 0128; www.puertoviejo.net; dm/s/d/tr US\$9/21/28/41; 📞 📺 📺) Accommodations to suit every budget, from the basic Beach Break hostel with shared bathroom and bunk beds, to the fully loaded 'executive suites' (US\$68) with air-con and TV. El Tesoro offers a list of perks a mile long, including free coffee and free internet access to community kitchens. Evening entertainment is also included: movies every night and a fun mobile disco on Saturdays.

La Isla Inn (☎ 2750 0109; islainn@racsa.co.cr; d with/without air-con US\$104/75; 📞 📺) You can't miss the magical mosaic welcoming guests into La Isla, one of Playa Cocolé's upscale options. The elegant lodging features sparkling new bathrooms and unobstructed ocean views. The rooms are furnished with exotic handmade wood pieces, created from the slightly curved outer boards that are discarded during lumber processing. These rates include breakfast, but they are still on the high side.

Totem (☎ 2750 0758; www.totemsite.com; d US\$82, extra person US\$15, air-con extra US\$10; 📞 📺) Opposite the lifeguard tower at the main hub of the beach you'll find unique modern suites decorated in jewel tones, with terracotta floors and bamboo furniture. This is the Caribbean with a contemporary edge. By day there's the onsite Totem Beach Bar; by night, the Italian restaurant Osteria (mains US\$7 to US\$10) serves up fresh-baked bread, homemade pasta and fresh seafood prepared by a talented European chef.

Caribblue (☎ 2750 0518; www.caribblue.com; d US\$99, bungalows US\$128, extra person US\$16; 📞 📺) Set in lovely gardens (plants and trees are labeled for the botanically curious), this complex has nine standard cabins with fans and high ceilings that keep them airy, quiet and cool. Four spacious hardwood bungalows – each decorated with mosaics – have thatched

roofs and hammock-hung porches. Prices include breakfast.

Cabinas Garibaldi (☎ 2750 0101; r US\$20; (P)) Many surfers stay at this place, which is among the cheapest along this stretch. The concrete row of reasonably clean cabinas share kitchen facilities and a porch with sea views. The waves are right across the street.

Azania Bungalows (☎ 2750 0540; www.azania-costa-rica.com; s/d with breakfast US\$76/87; (P) (S)) Spacious but dark thatch-roofed bungalows are hidden away in these landscaped jungle grounds. The details here are delectable, including woven bedsprings, elegant bathrooms and wide-plank hardwood floors. A loft allows sleeping space for four people; rates include breakfast. The new free-form swimming pool, fringed with greenery and topped with a hot tub, adds to the exotic ambience.

La Costa de Papito (☎ 2750 0704; www.lacostade-papito.com; d US\$48-69, extra person US\$10; (P)) Relax in Rasta luxury in sculpture-studded jungle grounds. Hardwood bungalows vary in size, but all feature artistically tiled showers, hand-carved furniture and private porches. For an extra US\$6 you can have breakfast delivered to your table (or hammock) on the porch – nice. Set amid these gorgeous grounds is the thoroughly decadent Pure Jungle Spa (☎ 2750 0536; www.purejunglespa.com), which offers a one-hour facial/massage for US\$50/60. Indulge in the signature chocolate facial or a ‘Rain forest Immersion’ massage, using locally grown, hand-mixed natural products.

El Tucán Jungle Lodge (☎ 2750 0026; www.eltucan-junglelodge.com; s/d/tr US\$25/30/35) You may wonder if you missed your turn, as you follow the signs into the depths of the jungle in search of this little lodge on the banks of the Caño Negro. It’s only 1km off the road, but it feels miles from anywhere. Four brand-new wood cabins have balconies that are perfect for bird-watching in the treetops. You are guaranteed to see at least one howler monkey: the orphan, Rubio, who is being raised by the lodge’s loving owners.

Hotel Yaré (☎ 2750 0106; www.hotelyare.com; s/d/tw US\$30/41/58, bungalows US\$70; (P)) Somewhere between Playa Cocles, Playa Chiquita and Wonderland is Hotel Yaré. Vine-strewn covered walkways weave through a marshy setting, connecting fanciful citrus-colored cabañas (cabins). Inside, the dark rooms are not as stylish as some of the other options, but they are fully equipped (some with kitchens).

At night, the air is filled with the music of frogs, which drifts across the complex to the pleasant onsite restaurant.

La Pecora Nera (☎ 2750 0490; mains US\$10-15; ☎ 11am-close, closed Mon in low season) Arguably the region’s finest dining, this recommended spot is marvelously free of pretensions, as you savor delicacies like starfruit-and-shrimp carpaccio, fresh pasta dishes, steak and seafood – all perfectly prepared by the amicable Italian chef Ilario. No menu makes an appearance; the chef or a server will consult about what you’d like and suggest an Italian red to accompany it.

Café Rio Negro (dishes US\$3-7; ☎ 9am-11pm; (S)) This pretty little spot at the far end of Cocles serves tasty snacks and juices all day and has live music on Thursdays. Run by cheery Dutch girl, Marleen, the authentic Dutch pancakes are a favorite among the expat community.

PLAYA CHIQUITA

It isn’t exactly clear where Playa Cocles ends and Playa Chiquita begins, but conventional wisdom applies the name to a series of beaches 4km to 6km east of Puerto Viejo. The following are listed in order from west to east.

Villas del Caribe (☎ 2750 0202, in San José 2233 2200; www.villascaribe.net; standard with/without air-con US\$92/80, ste US\$104/92, villa US\$115; (P) (S) (S)) Stressing function over form, these 20 motel-style beachside villas offer a comfortable, convenient lodging option. The pricier rooms include kitchens and private terraces with sea views, but even the standard lodgings have king-size beds.

Aguas Claras (☎ 2750 0131; www.aguasclaras-cr.com; 1-2-/3-room cottages US\$70/130/220; (P) (S)) Five cozy cottages are distinguished by their color of the rainbow, each one brighter than the next. They offer fully equipped kitchens and easy access to the beach. The delightful gazebo out front – this one sea blue with yellow trim – is Miss Holly’s Kitchen (open 8am to 4pm), which serves delicious breakfasts, lunches and snacks on the breezy porch.

Cabinas Slothclub (☎ 2750 0358; d US\$20, with kitchen US\$30, bungalows US\$60; (P)) Five clean wood cabins have great views, beach access and a snorkeling reef out the front. This is the best and only budget option along Playa Chiquita. These little places often attract long-term renters, so call in advance.

Jungle Love Garden Café (☎ 2750 0356; mains US\$6-8; ☎ 1-9:30pm Tue-Sat, 3-9:30pm Sun) It’s hard to resist this bohemian, Caribbean, cosmo-

politan café. The eclectic menu features fusion masterpieces like mango chicken with cilantro (US\$7) and Tokyo tuna with tamarind and ginger sauce (US\$8). The garden setting is always inviting, but it’s particularly romantic after sunset.

Kashá (☎ 2750 0205, in the USA 800-521 5200; www.costarica-hotellkasha.com; s/d/q US\$97/105/163; (P) (S)) These stucco bungalows are pretty basic, for what you are paying, though semiprivate porches and custom-designed furniture are nice perks. Most guests come here on all-inclusive packages. Breakfast is included in the rates quoted; you’ll surely want to return for dinner at Magic Ginger (mains US\$5 to US\$10, open 6pm to 10pm Tuesday to Sunday), the only French restaurant (featuring a chef straight from *la belle France!*) on the Caribbean coast.

Miraflores Lodge (☎ 2750 0038; www.miraflores-lodge.com; d US\$30-60) Ten rooms with refrigerator, hot water, hammocks and nice décor are tucked away on beautiful grounds. Each one is different and prices vary accordingly. Owner Pamela Carpenter is an expert on local botany and medicinal plants. Breakfast (included) consists of seasonal fruits grown on the grounds.

Bar y Restaurante Elena (☎ 2750 0265; mains US\$4-7; ☎ 8am-11pm) The culinary-gifted chef scores high marks with hearty plates of whole red snapper, shrimp dishes and big breakfasts. The *gallo pinto* gets rave reviews. The bar is festive and has a big TV and occasionally live music.

Playa Chiquita Lodge (☎ 2750 0408; www.playa-chiquitalodge.com; s/d US\$58/70; (P)) After spending an afternoon at the namesake Playa Chiquita, wind your way through the jungle grounds and stop along the way to rinse off in the funky shower in the roots of a huge sangrillo tree, before retiring to your cozy bungalow. Rooms are simple but elegant, with white stone walls, ceiling fans, big bathrooms and private hammock-hung terraces. Rates include breakfast.

Shawandha Lodge (☎ 2750 0018; www.shawandha-lodge.com; d incl breakfast US\$116; (P) (S)) This upscale lodge has 10 large, airy bungalows, all with fabulous bathroom mosaics – a feature that seems to represent a minor cultural movement along this stretch of coast. The elegant French-Caribbean restaurant (mains US\$5 to US\$14, open 7am to 9:30pm) adds *flambé panache* and Provençale flavorings to Caribbean classics.

PUNTA UVA

Punta Uva is known for the region’s most swimmable beaches, each lovelier than the next. Don’t miss the turnoff to the point, about 7km east of Puerto Viejo. The following places are listed in order from west to east.

Itaitá Villas (☎ 2750 0414; labvaco@racsa.co.cr; d incl breakfast US\$75; (P)) Huge, no-nonsense rooms offer festive furnishings and kitchenettes, not to mention the private porches, excellent for catching a coastal breeze. Jungle and beach setting, all in one.

Selvin’s Bar (mains US\$4-12; ☎ 8am-8pm Wed-Sun) Selvin is a member of the extensive Brown family, noted for their charm and unusual eyes, which have attracted both romantic and scientific attention. His place is considered one of the region’s best, specializing in shrimp, lobster and chicken *caribeño*.

Albergue Walaba (☎ 2750 0147; r per person from US\$12) This very basic spot has colorful rooms – some dorms and some with private bathroom, but all heavenly hippy havens. The place is tucked away in its own personal jungle. Kitchen facilities, friendly, funky management and a groovy vibe make it a popular spot for budget travelers.

Casa Viva (☎ 2750 0089; www.puntauva.net; d per night/week US\$130/800; (P) (S)) Enormous elegantly constructed and fully furnished hardwood houses, each with tiled shower, kitchen, two bedrooms and wraparound veranda, are set on property that fronts the beach. Hang out on your hammock and spy on the sloths, howler monkeys, hummingbirds and toucans that frequent these tropical gardens.

Chawax (☎ 2750 0219) This friendly spot has good music, original food and a cool vibe. Open for breakfast, lunch and – most importantly – happy hour.

Ranchito Beach Restaurant (☎ 2759 9048; mains US\$3-8; ☎ 10am-6pm) Fronting a fine, palm-lined swimming beach, this mellow outpost features a thatch-roofed outdoor bar and a few romantic little tables scattered about beneath their own personal *palapas*. Fruity cocktails, pizzas and seafood are happily served to folks in swimsuits and sandy feet.

Cabinas Angela (☎ 2759 9092; r per person US\$10) If you are counting your colones but you still want to be right next to the beach, Angela has the place for you. It could use some maintenance, to say the least, but Angela keeps the cabinas adequately clean and some of them have kitchen facilities. Did we mention it’s

right next to the beach? Take the turnoff to Punta Uva.

Almonds & Corals Lodge (☎ 2759 9057/56, in San José 2272 2024; www.almondsandcorals.com; s/d/tr US\$160/200/280; (P) 📍) These ‘campsites’ are actually huge, fully furnished canvas tents with hardwood floors, big beds draped in mosquito nets and hot-water bathrooms nearby. Set in the middle of the wildlife refuge, it offers all the adventure of camping – including the nighttime serenade of insects and frogs, and the wake-up call from resident howler monkeys – without any of the discomfort. Rates include breakfast and dinner, served family-style in the main lodge.

our pick Tree House (☎ 2750 0706; www.costarica.treehouse.com; tree or beach house/beach ste US\$225/350, extra person US\$40; (P) 📍) The ‘tree house’ is only one of three ecologically sound and architecturally amazing options on this property (but it *is* our favorite). This bi-level beauty is constructed around a living sangrillo tree, whose roots and branches accentuate the gorgeous hardwood décor. If you prefer to remain closer to the ground – or closer to the ocean – the beautiful ‘beach house’ is for you. With equally enticing (but nonphotosynthesizing) hardwood construction, the beach house has a wide veranda with a spectacular Caribbean view. All houses offer total seclusion, courtesy of the jungle setting, as well as easy access to a pristine stretch of beach.

MANZANILLO

The idyllic little village of Manzanillo has long been a destination off the beaten track. Until 2003 the 13km road from Puerto Viejo de Talamanca was a rutted, bumpy affair that could take 45 minutes by car or bus. Today, a paved road has cut drive time down to 15 minutes; even better, cycling the gorgeous stretch of perfect, palm-lined beaches is now a relatively smooth option.

Though some worry that the easier access will funnel too many tourists in from Puerto Viejo, this region has remained among the most pristine on the coast, thanks to ecologically minded locals and the 1985 establishment of the Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo, which encompasses the village and imposes strict regulations on further development of the region.

The pristine stretch of sandy white beach – protected by a rocky headland – is the focal point of the village. Most of Manzanillo’s ac-

tivity takes place right here, including sunning, snorkeling and surfing (see p492). A few simple *casas* and *sodas* are sprinkled along the dusty streets that run parallel to the beach. Beyond that, it’s just trees and monkeys.

Wildlife, not nightlife, is the main attraction on this end of the road, where folks wake up early to take advantage of the fog-shrouded beauty of the morning, while those in Puerto Viejo are still rocking out. (Though Manzanillo does have its moments, courtesy of Maxi’s.) Beaches are pristine and postcard perfect, but note that the stretch from the Almonds & Coral Lodge all the way to Punta Mona has potentially dangerous riptides. Swimmers are cautioned to inquire locally about conditions before diving in.

The **Casa de Guías** (☎ 2759 9064) provides internet access (per hour US\$3), camping facilities (per person US\$8) and local tours.

Sleeping & Eating

Most of the facilities for sleeping and eating are concentrated in the village of Manzanillo, with a few additional options scattered along the road to Punta Uva. The following hotels have hot water, unless otherwise noted, and are listed from east to west.

Maxi’s Cabinas (☎ 2759 9042; deluxe/basic q US\$35/15; (P) 📍) This family-owned landmark close to the entrance of the park has two sets of cabins: the older portion with rustic, cold-water, rather ramshackle (but clean and cozy) rooms; the newer, much nicer rooms with TV, hot water and refrigerator, set a bit further back.

Cabinas Something Different (☎ 2759 9014/97; d/tr/q US\$35/40/50; (P) 📍) In a quiet setting one block off the beach, these quaint cabins are named for local fauna. So, in theory, you could spot a sloth from your porch perch in the ‘Sloth.’ In reality, the private terraces face the parking lot, so this scenario is unlikely, but it’s still a pleasant spot.

Pangea B&B (☎ 2759 9204; r per person incl breakfast US\$35; (P) 📍) Tucked into a corner of the wildlife refuge, this sweet spot has only two rustic rooms that are completely secluded. The wood cabins are equipped with mosquito nets and ceiling fans, and surrounded by extravagant gardens. The included breakfast features organic produce (grown onsite).

Cabinas Las Veraneras (☎ 2759 9050; s/d with fan US\$16/26; (P) 📍) About 100m off the main drag, these 13 simple cabins smell of fresh paint and disinfectant. They are all equipped with

televisions and hot water. The pleasant *soda* (breakfast US\$2, other meals US\$4 to US\$8, open 7am to 9pm), serves Caribbean and Tico standards.

Cabinas Manzanillo (☎ 2759 9033, 8839 8386; d US\$20) The ever-helpful Sandra Castrillo and Pablo Bustamante have eight almost-brand-new cabins at the western end of town. All the rooms have fresh coats of pastel-colored paint, hardworking ceiling fans and spacious bathrooms. Other facilities include bicycle rental, laundry and a recommended restaurant (seafood mains US\$4 to US\$8, open from 11am).

Congo Bongo (☎ 2759 9016; mvleevwenzeguel@dwx.ni; d/q US\$75/120, per week US\$450/720; (P) 📍) On the road between Manzanillo and Punta Uva, four beautiful houses are totally secluded, surrounded by a reclaimed chocolate plantation (now dense forest). They offer fully equipped kitchens and plenty of living space, including open-air terraces and strategically placed hammocks that are perfect for spying on the wildlife. The hardwood construction blends seamlessly with the surroundings, especially the thatch-roofed Bribri ‘Indian rancho.’ A network of trails leads through the six hectares of grounds to the beautiful beach.

El Colibri Lodge (☎ 2759 9036; www.elcolibrilodge.com; d/tr US\$75/85; (P) 📍) Designed with romance in mind, six bright and comfortable rooms open onto a terrace surrounded by gardens alive with interesting insects and colorful birds. Breakfast is included, served on the terrace or in the privacy of your room. A 300m trail winds through the rain forest to the beach.

our pick Maxi’s Restaurant (mains US\$2-3, seafood US\$4-10; 🍷 6am-dose) Maxi’s Cabinas’ onsite restaurant is generally accepted as serving the best food on the coast. The fare includes inexpensive red snapper, casados and extravagant fresh lobster served by weight. It’s all topped off with good mixed drinks, local color and occasional live music, plus it’s a fine spot to ask around about trail conditions and local guides.

Soda Miskito (casados US\$3; 🍷 7am-9pm) Wood furniture, Indian lamps and lots of greenery and bamboo adorn the terrace of this friendly *soda*. Place your order for a home-cooked casado and sit back and relax, because this place operates on Caribbean time.

Getting There & Away

The most rewarding way to get to and from Manzanillo is to bike along the 13km road. It is paved (though won’t be the smoothest ride you ever take) and not heavily trafficked. In Manzanillo, you can rent bikes at Cabinas Manzanillo (see left; per day US\$6).

Buses to Manzanillo depart from Puerto Viejo (US\$1.50, 30 minutes) at 7:30am, 11:45am, 4:30pm and 7:30pm. They return from Manzanillo to Puerto Viejo at 5am, 8:15am, 12:45pm and 5:15pm, departing from the Sodita La Playa.

REFUGIO NACIONAL DE VIDA SILVESTRE GANDOCA-MANZANILLO

This refuge (called Regama for short) protects nearly 70% of the southern Caribbean coast, extending from Manzanillo southeast to the Panama border. It encompasses 5013 hectares of land plus 4436 hectares of sea, making it the ultimate in surf-and-turf exploration.

The park was created with special provisions for folks already living here, and the dry (well, drier) land portion encompasses various habitats including farmland. This was once a productive cocoa-growing region, but after a devastating blight swept through, the monoculture was replaced by a patchwork of fincas, ranches and encroaching jungle.

The peaceful, pristine stretch of sandy white beach is one of the area’s main attractions. It’s the center of village life in Manzanillo, and stretches for miles in either direction – from Punta Uva in the west to Punta Mona in the east. Just off the coast, the colorful coral reef comprises almost 5 sq km, providing a nutrient-rich habitat for lobster, sea fan and long-spined urchin.

Besides the farmland and the marine areas, the wildlife refuge is mostly rain forest. Cativo trees form the canopy, while there are many heliconia in the undergrowth. A huge 400-hectare swamp – known as **Pantano Punta Mona** – provides a haven for waterfowl, as well as the country’s most extensive collection of holillo palms and sajo trees. Beyond Punta Mona, protecting a natural oyster bank, is the only red mangrove swamp in Caribbean Costa Rica. In the nearby Rio Gandoca estuary there is a spawning ground for Atlantic tarpon, and caiman and manatee have been sighted.

The variety of vegetation and the remote location of the refuge attract many tropical birds; sightings of the rare harpy eagle have

been recorded here. Other birds to look out for include the red-lored parrot, the red-capped manikin and the chestnut-mandibled toucan, among hundreds of others. The area is also known for incredible raptor migrations, with more than a million birds flying overhead in the fall.

This southeastern corner of Costa Rica is widely considered one of the most scenic spots in the country. Hopefully, this will not change as a result of an ongoing dispute about the status of the wildlife refuge. The federal Ministerio del Ambiente y Energía or Ministry (Minae) and the local municipality are struggling over who has the right and responsibility to administer the refuge – an issue that is currently hung up in a drawn-out court case. In the meantime, nobody seems to be taking the right or the responsibility very seriously, resulting in a lack of signage, no official park entrance and no entrance fee.

Information

Aquamor Talamanca Adventures (☎ 2759 0612; www.greencoast.com/aquamor.htm) An excellent source of general information about the refuge (particularly if you don't speak much Spanish), with an informative display of articles and tips about enjoying the park and reef, as well as the many conservation programs on the coast.

Casa de Guías (☎ 2759 9064) Prominently placed opposite the Minae office, this operation offers internet access (per hour US\$3), as well as camping facilities (per person US\$8) and local tours.

Minae (☎ 2759 9100; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm) In the green wooden house as you enter town. Offers maps of the refuge and trails. An excellent book of photos featuring local flora and fauna, including the folks who live here, with commentary in Spanish and English, is *Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo* by Juan José Puccí, available locally and online.

Activities

HIKING

The trails within the wildlife refuge are not marked, but they are well traveled and easy enough to follow, should you wish to explore independently. However, readers have reported armed robberies in the depths of the reserve, so it is advisable to hire a guide, or at least avoid hiking alone.

There is a coastal trail leading 5.5km from Manzanillo to **Punta Mona**. From the east end of Manzanillo, follow the dirt road until it turns

into a path and continue along the coastline all the way. This hike is spectacularly beautiful and rewards hikers with amazing scenery, as well as excellent (and safe) swimming and snorkeling at the end.

Another more difficult 9km trail leaves from just west of Manzanillo and skirts the southern edges of the Pantano Punta Mona, continuing to the small community of **Gandoca**. Again, this trail is fairly easy to follow, but a guide is recommended for enhancing your experience and your knowledge of local flora and fauna. In any case, be sure to pick up the Instituto Geografico Nacional map of the wildlife refuge (available at the Minae office) before you set out.

SNORKELING & DIVING

The undersea portion of the park cradles one of two living coral reefs in the country. Comprising five different types of coral, the reefs begin in about 1m of water and extend 5km offshore to a barrier reef that local fishers have long relied on and researchers have only recently discovered. This colorful undersea world is home to some 400 species of fish and crustaceans. **Punta Mona** is a popular destination for snorkeling, though it's a bit of a trek so you may wish to hire a boat (see opposite). Otherwise, you can snorkel right offshore at **Manzanillo** at the eastern end of the beach (the riptide can be dangerous here; be sure to inquire about conditions).

As at Punta Uva and in Cahuita, conditions vary widely, and clarity can be adversely affected by weather changes. Visit the excellent **coral reef information center** at Aquamore Talamanca Adventures (see left), where you can also rent snorkeling equipment (per day US\$8) or organize dive excursions.

KAYAKING

If you prefer to stay dry, you can explore the wildlife refuge in a kayak, also available from Aquamore Talamanca Adventures (per hour US\$8). Paddle out to the reef, or head up the **Quebrada Home Wark**, in the west of the village, or the tiny **Simeon Creek**, at the east end of the village.

SPORTFISHING

Manzanillo does not have the same high-falutin facilities that many fishers expect, but it does have the same fish-filled waters that attract them to places like Barra del Colorado, Parismina and Cahuita. If you don't mind

more rustic accommodations, the waters off the coast of Manzanillo are filled with tarpon, sailfish, tuna, snook, wahoo, grouper, jacks, barracuda and even blue marlin – all waiting for your hook, line and sinker. **Los Cielos Charters** (☎ 2750 0408; half-/full-day charters from US\$300/500) organizes fishing trips, as does the manager at Pangea B&B (see p490) in Manzanillo.

DOLPHIN OBSERVATION

In 1997 a group of local guides in Manzanillo identified tucuxi dolphins, a little-known species previously not found in Costa Rica, and began to observe their interactions with the bottlenose dolphins. A third species – the Atlantic spotted dolphin – is also common in this area. This unprecedented activity has attracted the attention of marine biologists and conservationists, who are following these animals with great interest.

The **Talamanca Dolphin Foundation** (☎ 2759 0715/612; www.dolphinlink.org), housed at Aquamore Talamanca Adventures, is dedicated to the study and preservation of local dolphins through outreach programs. It offers daily dolphin-observation outings, as well as a four-day, all-inclusive tour (US\$380 per person).

TURTLE-WATCHING

Marine turtles, especially leatherback but also green, hawksbill and loggerhead – all endangered, nest on the beaches between Punta Mona and Río Sixaola. Leatherbacks nest from March to July, with a peak in April and May. Local conservation efforts are underway to protect these nesting grounds – the growth in the human population of the area has led to increased theft of turtle eggs and contributed to the declining local population.

During turtle season, no flashlights, beach fires or camping are allowed on the beach. All tourists must be accompanied by a local guide (see right) to minimize the disturbance to the nesting turtles.

The **Asociación Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas** (National Association of Indigenous Affairs; ANAI; ☎ 2759 9100, in San José 2277 7549; www.anaicr.org; Gandoca; registration US\$30, camping US\$7-15, homestays US\$15, cabins US\$30) is a grassroots organization that works with locals to protect the sea turtles. Volunteers assist efforts to collect nesting and size data, patrol beaches and move eggs that are in danger of being destroyed by high tides or predation. Rates include train-

ing, accommodations and meals; minimum commitment seven days.

Tours

Sure, you can explore the refuge on your own (if you've made it to Manzanillo, you already are). But without a guide you'll probably be missing out on the refuge's incredible diversity of medicinal plants, exotic birds and earth-bound animals. Most guides charge US\$20 to US\$30 per person for a four- to five-hour trek, depending on the size of the group. Ask around at Maxi's (p491) or at the Casa de Guías (below).

Recommended local guides include **Florentino Grenald** (☎ 2759 9043, 8841 2732), who used to serve as the reserve's administrator; **Ricky Alric** (☎ 2759 9020), a specialist in birding and medicinal plants; and **Abel Bustamonte** (☎ 2759 9043). A local boat captain, Willie Burton, will take you boating and snorkeling from Manzanillo.

Aquamor Talamanca Adventures (☎ 2759 9012; www.greencoast.com/aquamor.htm; 1-/2-tank dives US\$45/60, PADI certification US\$300) This unique outfit is devoted as much to conservation as recreation. As well as diving packages, it also leads kayak and snorkeling tours (per person US\$40) and rents equipment for independent use.

Asociación Talamanqueña de Ecoturismo y Conservación (ATEC; ☎ 2750 0191, 2750 0398; www.greencoast.com/atec.htm) This community organization, based in Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, offers a variety of tours into the refuge, including day and overnight trips on foot, horseback or by boat.

Casa de Guías (☎ 2759 9064) A much-needed though poorly organized initiative to hook up travelers with local guides. Offers guided hikes (four hours US\$25), snorkeling (US\$25), turtle-watching (US\$100) and sportfishing (US\$150).

Sleeping & Eating

Many options for sleeping and eating are in the village of Manzanillo, which is contained within the Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo and is the easiest access point.

Punta Mona (www.puntamona.org; dm US\$30, transportation US\$10; ☐) Five kilometers south of Manzanillo, this organic farm and retreat center is an experiment in permaculture design and sustainable living that covers some 40 hectares. More than 200 varieties of edible fruits and veggies are grown here, which make up about 85% of the huge vegetarian

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN COSTA RICA

This long-forgotten corner of Costa Rica is one of the few parts of Central America where indigenous culture still thrives. Today the communities can be visited by tourists, but it's always handy to brush up on some local knowledge first:

Bribri & Cabécar

At least two indigenous groups occupied the territory on the Caribbean side of the country from pre-Columbian times. The Bribri tended to inhabit lowland areas, while the Cabécar made their home high in the Cordillera de Talamanca. Even today the Bribri tend to be more acculturated, while the Cabécar remain more isolated.

Over the last century many of these folks migrated across the mountain range to the Pacific side. But many stayed on the coast, intermingling with Jamaican immigrants, and even seeking employment in the banana industry. The most significant populations of Bribri and Cabécar are still in the Talamanca region, where several indigenous reserves are found today.

The Bribri and Cabécar have distinct languages, which are preserved to some degree. They share similar architecture, weapons and canoe style.

Tellingly, these indigenous groups share an enlightened spiritual belief that the planet – and the flora and fauna contained therein – are precious gifts from Sibö, or God, and should be conserved and respected. *Taking Care of Sibö's Gifts*, by Juanita Sanchez, Gloria Mayorga and Paula Palmer, is a remarkable record of Bribri oral history that provides some rare insights into this culture.

Visiting Indigenous Communities

There are several reserves on the Caribbean slopes of the Cordillera de Talamanca, including the Talamanca Cabécar reserve (which is the most remote and difficult to visit) and the Bribri reserve, where locals are a bit more acculturated and tolerant of visitors.

meals that are included in the daily rate. You can visit Punta Mona on a guided day trip (US\$35 including transportation). Volunteers (per day/week/month US\$15/125/300) work on trail maintenance, community cooking and tending gardens (one-week minimum); advanced arrangements required.

Finca Lomas (☎ 2759 9100, in San José 2277 7549; www.analc.org; per month US\$90) Besides the turtle conservation project, ANAI has an agroforestry and crop experimentation project at nearby Finca Lomas, where volunteers work on trail maintenance, data recording and caring for species of tropical lowland flora, including fruit, nut and spice trees. The work can be physically demanding and conditions are very basic (no electricity or running water). There's a six-week minimum; a one-time US\$160 registration fee covers training.

BRIBRI

This small, pleasant town is en route from Cahuita to Sixaola and the Panama border, at the end of the paved (and badly potholed) coastal road. From Bribri, a 34km gravel road takes the traveler to the border. Bribri is a

lively little town, with little to offer the casual tourist except for a handful of restaurants and a few accommodations options.

Bribri is the center for the local indigenous communities in the Talamanca mountains, but there's not too much to see here. These indigenous communities are only now starting to welcome tourists and take advantage of the growing interest in their culture. See boxed text, above.

Sleeping & Eating

There are a couple of basic lodging options, a good-sized supermarket and some restaurants, including the requisite Musmanni Bakery. Accommodations tend to fill up on market days (Monday and Tuesday).

Cabinas El Piculino (☎ 2751 0130; d US\$12-25; 📍 🚻) Fifteen clean, pleasant rooms have private hot showers; some have TV and air-con. A recommended *soda* (mains US\$2 to US\$3, open 7am to 10pm Monday to Saturday) run by the same family serves a fine *sopa consomé de pollo* (chicken soup) and good rice dishes.

Complejo Turístico Mango (☎ 2751 0115; s/d/tr/q US\$7/10/12/14; 📍) Various configurations of basic

The most interesting destination is **Yorkín**, in the Reserva Indígena Yorkín (it's a long trip, so it's best to spend the night). While you are there, you can meet with a local women's artisan group, **Mujeres Artesanas Stibrawpa** (☎ 8375 3372). These women offer demonstrations of basket-weaving (with plenty of fine examples you can purchase), roof thatching and cooking, not to mention lots of storytelling. Yorkín is a rewarding trip, but it is not easy to get there: it requires traveling in a traditional dugout canoe from the village of Bambú (midway between Puerto Viejo and Cahuita). To make arrangements contact Stibrawpa or **ATEC** (☎ 2750 0191, 2750 0398; www.greencoast.com/atec.htm; 🕒 8am-9pm).

Alternatively, you can visit the larger village of **Shiroles**, about 20km west of Bribri. This is one of the most populous indigenous communities in the country and one of the easiest to access. It's a relatively modern place, and so it's very interesting to see how the indigenous people are adapting to outside influences and preserving their traditional customs.

ATEC is a comprehensive source of information about finding local guides to visit the reserves. Note that it is not really recommended to visit the reserves independently, for two reasons: these places are remote and very difficult to reach; and the villages do not have facilities for tourists. A guide will make arrangements for you to visit a local family, participate in daily life and learn about their customs and traditions.

It's wise to be aware of the issues that arise from this form of tourism. Most of the local tribes are very friendly people who welcome outsiders and are keen to show off their proud way of life, hoping that this in turn will encourage international support for them to exist as they do. However, as more tourists come and wave cash around, the more their *raison d'être* turns into a tourist attraction. As has happened in other parts of the world, increased Western contact and wealth could encourage the indigenous people to abandon their methods of survival, which in turn could drastically change their culture. So, it's worth taking into consideration the possible consequences of visiting these communities before signing up for a trip.

rooms, some with hot water, are adjacent to a large restaurant on the outskirts of town.

Delicias de Mi Tierra (mains US\$2-5; 🕒 6am-9pm Mon-Sat) You can't miss this wide-open and popular spot close to the bus terminal, with a steam table and quality local meals.

Restaurante Bribri (mains US\$2-5; 🕒 5am-5pm Mon-Sat) A bit more plush, this restaurant not only serves good *casados*, *gallos* (tortilla sandwiches) and recommended fried plantains, but is also an excellent place to ask about tours to indigenous villages.

Getting There & Away

Buses to and from Sixaola usually stop in front of Restaurante Bribri. Buses going north then continue to Puerto Viejo de Talamanca (30 minutes) and Cahuita (one hour), departing at 6:30am, 8:30pm, 10:30am and 3:30pm.

SIXAOLA

This is the end of the road as far as the Costa Rican Caribbean is concerned. Sixaola marks the country's secondary border crossing with Panama, though most foreign tourists travel overland via Paso Canoas on the

Interamericana. Sixaola is a border town, which – by definition – is not a nice place. But the crossing here is more relaxed than Paso Canoas; it's popular among expats without residency visas who take their required 72-hour vacation on the lovely islands of Bocas del Toro, Panama.

Sixaola is centered on the optimistically named Mercado Internacional de Sixaola, a gravelly square where you can find taxis, a handful of *sodas* and several small stores selling a wide selection of rubber boots. The market is about two blocks from the border crossing.

If you need to change money or use the toilet, ask at Restaurante La Prada, just north of the bridge on the main drag. For details on crossing the border at this point, see boxed text, p496.

Sleeping & Eating

While it's not exactly a layover in Tokyo, there are worse places to be stuck if you miss immigration hours. Accommodations and restaurants are basic, but certainly acceptable for any seasoned budget traveler.

GETTING TO GUABITO & BOCAS DEL TORO, PANAMA

With a reputation as one of Costa Rica's most relaxed border crossings, Sixaola is popular among folks embarking on their three-day 'visa vacation' to the islands of Bocas del Toro. The picturesque archipelago of jungle islands has more than a dozen beaches, home to everything from endangered red frogs and leatherback turtles to a dilapidated *Survivor* set, plus a range of accommodations, all accessible by convenient water taxis – paradise.

Get to Sixaola as early as possible. The border is open 7am to 5pm (8am to 6pm in Guabito, Panama, which is an hour ahead of Costa Rica); one or both sides may close for lunch at around 1pm. Begin crossing the high metal bridge over the Río Sixaola, stopping at Costa Rica **migración** (☎ 2754 2044) to process your paperwork. Cars can cross here, but be prepared for a long wait.

Once over the bridge, stop in the small office on the left-hand side which is home to Panama immigration. US citizens will be required to pay an entry fee of US\$5. There is no bank, but in a pinch you can change your colones at the market across the street. Guabito has no hotels or banks, but it has plenty of taxis ready to take you further into Panama.

There are two ways to get to Bocas del Toro. The easiest, cheapest route is to take a taxi to Finca 63 near Changuinola (US\$5), from where a water taxi goes regularly to Bocas (US\$5, 45 minutes). Note that the last water taxi departs at 5:30pm Panama time (so if you are crossing the border at 5pm Costa Rica time you already missed it). Alternatively, you can take a taxi to Almirante (US\$20, one hour), where there is another water taxi (US\$3, 45 minutes) that runs every hour between 6:30am and 6:30pm.

Cabinas Sanchez (☎ 2754 2196; d US\$10) This squat orange building has six clean rooms, offering cracked tiles in the bathroom and mismatched sheets. But it's a clean place to spend the night, about one block west of the main drag.

Hotel Imperio (☎ 2754 2289; d US\$16) Cleaner and quieter, this basic motel's biggest selling point is its enviable location, 1km from the border but directly across the street from the police checkpoint.

Soda Navi (mains US\$2-4; ☎ 6am-9pm) Facing the Mercado Internacional, it's a nice spot with crocheted décor specializing in *gallo pinto* and fried fish casados.

Restaurante Las Cabinas (mains US\$2-5; ☎ 7am-9:30pm) This is as upscale as it gets in Sixaola, with pretty checkered tablecloths, fried chicken and to-go food.

Getting There & Away

The bus station is one block north of the border crossing, on the east side of the main drag. Buses to either San José or Puerto Limón all stop at Bribri and Cahuita, but only some go through Puerto Viejo.

Puerto Limón US\$3, three hours, depart at 5am, 7am, 8am, 10am, noon, 1pm, 4pm and 6pm.

San José US\$9.50, five hours, depart at 6am, 8am, 10am and 3pm.