

Central Valley & Highlands



The rolling verdant valleys of Costa Rica's midlands have traditionally only been witnessed during travelers' pit stops on their way to the country's more established destinations. The area has always been famous for being one of the globe's major coffee-growing regions, and every journey involves twisting and turning through lush swooping terrain with infinite coffee fields on either side. You'll also find misty rain forests and brooding volcanoes here, which you'll rarely have to share with more than a handful of other tourists.

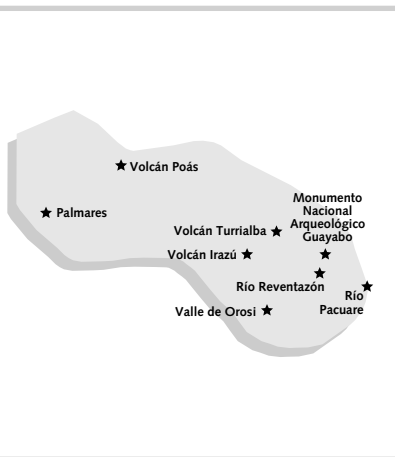
Only Alajuela and Turrialba have really featured on the tourist radar to date. As a result of Alajuela's proximity to the airport, visitors have been opting to stay in the tranquil town before moving on to the beach, thus bypassing San José's urban grime. The cascading rapids outside Turrialba, meanwhile, are top of the list for white-water rafters and kayakers the world over, and should not be missed by any thrill-seeking visitors.

The area is fantastic for self-drive exploration. Roll the top down and drive through the winding roads, using distant volcano peaks as a compass when the local road maps inevitably let you down. Those who give the region more than the standard half hour at the roadside restaurant will discover that unknown beauty, culture and charm are sitting in the country's heartland and, surprisingly, right under the nose of the nation's capital.

This chapter is arranged in a roughly west–east sequence of the four major population centers – Alajuela, Heredia, Cartago and Turrialba.

HIGHLIGHTS

- White-knuckle riding down the swooping and diving rapids of the **Río Reventazón** and **Río Pacuare** (p159)
- Tentatively peering into the mammoth craters of the area's live volcanoes, **Volcán Irazú** (p151), **Poás** (p139) and **Turrialba** (p162)
- Driving through the lush coffee fields in the **Valle de Orosí** (p152)
- Going back in time at the country's major archaeological site, **Monumento Nacional Arqueológico Guayabo** (p160)
- Not sleeping for a week at Costa Rica's largest fiesta in **Palmares** (p137)



History

Of the 20 or so tribes that inhabited pre-Hispanic Costa Rica, it is thought that the Central Valley Huetar Indians were the most dominant. But there is very little historical evidence from this period, save for the archaeological site at Guayabo. Tropical rains and ruthless colonization have erased most of pre-Columbian Costa Rica from the pages of history.

In 1561 the Spanish pitched their first permanent settlement at Garcimuñoz, in the western Central Valley. Two years later, real colonization got under way. Cartago was founded and the Spanish began farming the land and enslaving the indigenous population. The rich fertile lands of the volcanic valleys led to increasing numbers of settlements, and Heredia, San José and Alajuela all sprang up in the 18th century.

It wasn't until the beginning of the 19th century that the area really began to prosper, due to its enormous coffee-growing revenues. The planting of the 'golden bean' brought riches to the local community, and encouraged the development of a large and powerful agrarian middle class. More recently, the decrease in the value of coffee has seen agriculture become more diversified, but the region's educated and well-to-do community remains a heavy influence on the rest of the country.

Climate

For this part of the world, the weather is surprisingly mild. Year-round the mercury hovers around 25°C/77°F. The elevated altitude and landlocked location mean the heat that most of the country endures doesn't pose a problem. From June to December, it's not uncommon for a light afternoon shower, but the sun usually pokes through after an hour of rain, so nothing to fret about.

Parks & Reserves

Watch wildlife and explore volcanic landscapes in some of the Central Valley's magnificent national parks.

Los Angeles Cloud Forest Reserve (p137) This away-from-the-crowds activity-based reserve offers the chance to whiz through the leaves on the zip-line canopy tour or trot through the branches on the horseback trails.

Los Jardines de la Catarata la Paz (p141) Offers 3.5km of hiking trails through rich wildlife-filled rain forest, with a hummingbird garden, serpentarium, frog

exhibit, trout lake and the world's largest butterfly enclosure.

Monumento Nacional Arqueológico Guayabo (p160) The country's only significant archaeological site isn't quite as impressive as anything found in Mexico or Guatemala, but the rickety outline of forest-enclosed villages will still spark your inner Indiana Jones.

Parque Nacional Tapantí-Macizo Cerro de la Muerte (p155) This park receives more rainfall than any other part of the country, so it is full of life. Jaguars, ocelots and tapirs are some of the more exciting species.

Parque Nacional Volcán Irazú (p151) One of the few lookouts on earth that affords views of both the Caribbean and the Pacific, Irazú also lays claim to being the country's highest live volcano.

Parque Nacional Volcán Poás (p139) A shimmering crater lake and surrounding cloud forest make this one of the prettiest volcanoes in the region. The steaming geysers sometimes get so aggressive that the park has to close down.

Dangers & Annoyances

While the area is generally considered to be very safe and welcoming, there have been reports of car break-ins, particularly in the larger towns like Alajuela. Try and secure off-street parking and never leave valuables in your car.

Getting There & Around

It makes sense to hire a car to seek out all the hard-to-find corners of this part of the country. All the towns are well connected by regular buses from San José, but getting between them by public transport can be a pain. Locals (and the odd gung ho Lonely Planet author) occasionally wave down passing cars. If you do this, beware that there are risks (see p549), and always offer to help with gas costs.

ALAJUELA & THE NORTH OF THE VALLEY

Cradled by the gentle undulations of coffee fincas and tamed jungle parks, the provincial capital of Alajuela lies about 18km northwest of San José. Originally known as Villa Hermosa, it's still a very 'pretty city,' not to mention the country's second largest, with a population of more than 185,000. And, contrary to what most taxi drivers will tell you, Alajuela is only 3km from Juan Santamaría

international airport, and is rapidly becoming the preferred base for travelers leaving and entering the country.

From coffee barons to conglomerate banks, the pulse and ebb of Alajuela has always been fast paced and modern, though a short drive into the north of the valley will change your perspective on the area. The colonial heyday of coffee exportation has left its mark on the terraced hillsides, and the lives of many *campesinos* (farmers) still revolve around the cycle of the harvest.

ALAJUELA

Alajuela is known as Costa Rica's second city, though this diminutive status is perhaps unwarranted. In addition to having a rich colonial history, Alajuela is an attractive place resonating with a warm and welcoming vibe that is virtually absent from the capital. Its mango-tree-lined center is as relaxed as any you'll find in the provinces, and the soaring whitewashed cathedral is a testament to the city's past as a colonial administrative center for nearby coffee plantations. Alajuela is also clean, modern and full of hard-working urbanites who take their jobs almost as seriously as their football.

Alajuela is not a 'destination' for tourists, though it's a convenient base if you're flying into or out of the nearby airport, or if you plan on spending a few days exploring the north of the valley. And although Costa Rican cities are nowhere near as beautiful as historic cities in Mexico, Guatemala or Nicaragua, the crumbling colonial buildings in the city center are attractive, especially when the sun is beaming overhead. So, take a stroll, eat some ice cream and grab a beer if the local football team Liga Alajuelense is playing (especially if it's against its archrival Saprissa!).

Orientation & Information

Central Alajuela is a pedestrian-friendly grid of calles (streets) and avenidas (avenues). Although street signs are never a guarantee in Costa Rica (see p537), Alajuela is fairly well signed and easy to navigate. The city center is at the intersection of Calle Central and Av 1. **BYTE** (☎ 2441 1142; cnr Calle 3 & Av 1, 2nd fl; per hr US\$0.75; ☎ Mon-Sat) Internet access.

Clínica Norza (☎ 2441 3572; Av 4 btwn Calles 2 & 4; ☎ 24 hr) Basic medical services.

Goodlight Books (☎ 2430 4083; Av 3 btwn Calles 1 & 3) If you've got a long trip (or flight) ahead of you, stop by and

visit the friendly and always helpful owner, Larry. In addition to selling used and new books, Larry also runs a small café and provides internet access and useful tourist information.

Hospital San Rafael (☎ 2441 5011; Av 9 btwn Calles Central & 1)

Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT); ☎ 2442 1820) There's no tourist office, but ICT has a desk at the airport.

Scotiabank (☎ 2443 2168; cnr Av 3 & Calle 2; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat) There are probably a dozen banks where you can change money, including Scotiabank, which has an ATM on the Cirrus network.

Sights

The shady **Parque Central** is a pleasant place to relax beneath the mango trees. It is surrounded by several 19th-century buildings, including the **cathedral**, which suffered severe damage in an earthquake in 1991. The hemispherical cupola is unusually constructed of sheets of red corrugated metal. The interior is spacious and elegant rather than ornate; two presidents are buried here.

A more baroque-looking church (though it was built in 1941) is the **Iglesia La Agonía**, six blocks east of Parque Central.

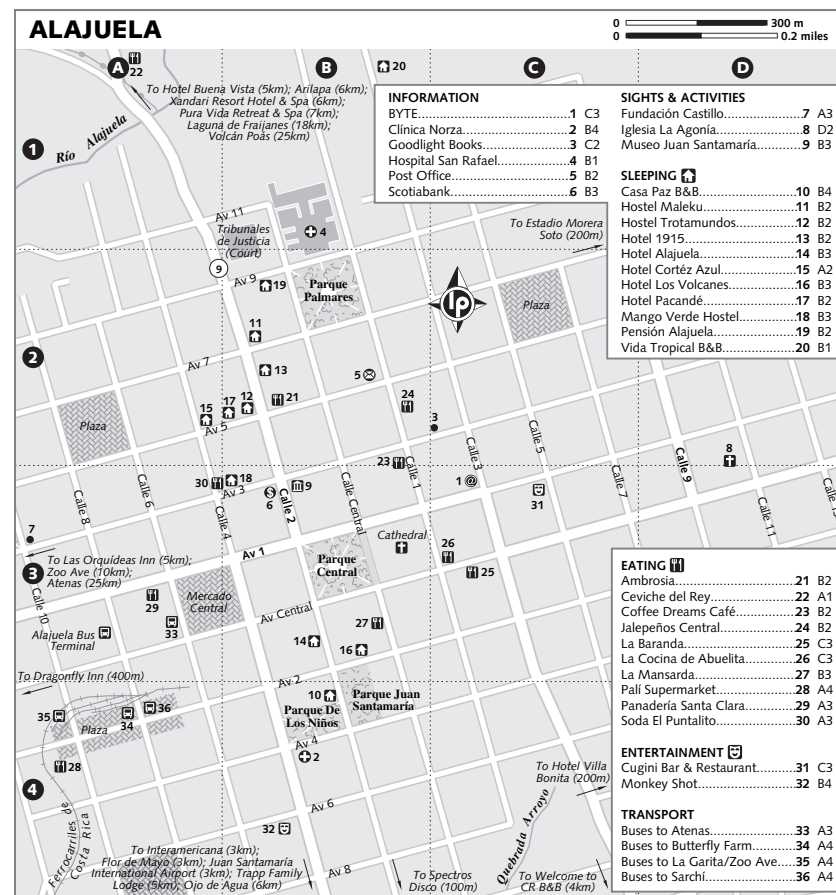
Two blocks south of the park is the rather bare **Parque Juan Santamaría**, where there is a statue of the hero (see below) in action, flanked by cannons.

Three kilometers southeast in Río Segundo de Alajuela is **Flor de Mayo** (☎ 2441 2658), a very successful green and scarlet macaw breeding program. Run by Richard and Margot Frisius, the botanical garden is an early home for infant macaws and has three aviaries that each house a pair of macaws. Visitation is by appointment only, and it's best to get detailed directions as it's difficult to find.

MUSEO JUAN SANTAMARÍA

Alajuela's main claim to fame is as the birthplace of national hero Juan Santamaría, for whom the nearby international airport was named and to whom this small **museum** (☎ 2441 4775; cnr Av 3 & Calle 2; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is devoted.

Santamaría was the drummer boy who volunteered to torch the building that was being defended by North American filibuster William Walker in the war of 1856. Santamaría died after succeeding in his quest. The museum was once the town jail, and it now contains maps, paintings and historical artifacts that are related to the war with



Walker, as well as a rotating art exhibition. There is a small auditorium where performances are occasionally staged.

OJO DE AGUA

About 6km south of Alajuela are the **Ojo de Agua** (☎ 2441 2808; admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-5pm) springs, a picturesque working-class resort that's packed on weekends with folks from San José and Alajuela. Approximately 20,000L of water gush out from the spring each minute, filling swimming pools and an artificial boating lake before being piped down to Puntarenas, for which the springs are a major supply of water. There are also snack stands, game courts and a small gymnasium. From San José, drivers can take the San Antonio de Belén exit off

the Interamericana; Ojo de Agua is just past San Antonio.

Courses

Slightly more tranquil than the capital, Alajuela is a lovely spot to base yourself and do a Spanish course, and there are a number of choices for schools. See boxed text Spanish Schools in the Central Valley, p130, as well as boxed text A Natural Education, p148, for more details.

Festivals & Events

The anniversary of the **Battle of Rivas**, April 11, is particularly celebrated in Alajuela, the hometown of the battle's young hero, Juan Santamaría. After William Walker and

SPANISH SCHOOLS IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY

Unless otherwise noted, prices are given for five four-hour days of instruction, with/without a week's homestay with a local family. All prices include breakfast and dinner.

Adventure Education Center (Map p158; ☎ 2556 4609, 2556 4614; www.adventurespanishschool.com; US\$415/315) Folks who want to combine Spanish classes and, say, white-water rafting, should head to Turrialba, where this cool school also offers courses tailored for medical professionals.

Finca la Flor de Paraíso (☎ 2534 8003; www.la-flor-de-paraíso.org; with homestay US\$370) On an organic farm – see boxed text A Natural Education (Part II), p153 – not far from Cartago, vegetarian meals are the specialty and your cultural experiences could include seeing traditional Costa Rican farming techniques.

Fundación Castillo (Map p129; ☎ 2440 8771; US\$310/200) A few blocks from central Alajuela, this school also offers courses in business Spanish for a bit extra. There are activities and field trips around town every afternoon, and students get a discount at a local Latin dance school.

Intercultura (Map p142; ☎ 2260 8480, in the USA 800-552 2051; www.spanish-intercultura.com; US\$370/260) This Heredia school also arranges volunteer positions throughout the country, and your new language comes with cooking and dance classes included.

Montaña Linda (☎ 2533 3640; www.montanalinda.com; with homestay US\$155) All classes are one-on-one at this Orosi outpost, also a fine hostel (see p154). The rate given is for homestays, though you can save money by sleeping in the hostel or camping. Classes are only three hours a day, instead of the customary four.

our pick Hostel Maleku (☎ 2430 4304; www.malekuhostel.com; Av 9 btwn Calles Central & 2; dm/s/d/tr US\$12/25/30/40; (P) (Q)) This sweet little backpackers' abode is clean and run by a charming family who can help with onward bookings to other parts of the country (useful if you're just off the plane). Free airport transfers included.

Hotel Pacandé (☎ 2443 8481; www.hotelpacandé.com; Av 5 btwn Calles 2 & 4; s US\$27-50, d US\$28-50, all incl breakfast; (P) (Q)) This popular option is spick-and-span throughout, plus the owners are welcoming to travelers and a great source of information. The outdoor breakfast nook is a great spot to have a morning brew and some fresh pineapple. Shared and private bathrooms are available.

Hotel Cortéz Azul (☎ 2443 6145; Av 5 btwn Calles 2 & 4; s/d/tr US\$15/30/45; (P)) The owner, Eduardo Rodríguez, is a talented artist who displays his unique work (we're talking about surreal vases growing out of cement walls) throughout the property. Homey rooms are comfortable, with polished wood floors, and there's a fine common area and two kitchens (check out the mural of the Last Supper). Original art is available for purchase at reception.

Mango Verde Hostel (☎ 2441 6330; mirafloresbb@hotmail.com; Av 3 btwn Calles 2 & 4; s/d US\$15/30, with bathroom US\$20/40) This popular hostel has bare and basic rooms, though there's a nice kitchen, plenty of hammocks and enough lounge space to strike up a conversation.

Filibusters were ousted from Santa Rosa on March 20, 1856, the Costa Rican militia chased them into Nicaragua. On April 11 the Battle of Rivas climaxed when Santamaría was shot and killed after torching Walker's stronghold. The event is commemorated with a parade, civic events and a whole lot of firecrackers.

Sleeping

Since Alajuela is so close to the airport, most hotels and B&Bs can arrange transfers for a small fee.

BUDGET

There are some great budget hotels and hostels in Alajuela. All hotels have hot water.

Casa Paz B&B (☎ 2431 2691; casa-paz@mail.com; Calle 2 btwn Aves 2 & 4; d US\$15-45; (P) (Q)) As the name (House of Peace) implies, this place is totally mellowed out with pastel paints and friendly management. There is a variety of different room sizes for different budgets, but you'll probably agree that the biggest room (complete with a huge balcony overlooking Parque Juan Santamaría) is worth the splurge – go on, treat yourself!

Hostel Trotamundos (☎ 2430 5832; www.hosteltrotamundos.com; Av 5 btwn Calles 2 & 4; dm incl breakfast US\$10, d US\$25-30; (P) (Q)) This reader-recommended hostel is a winner – we're talking cheap dorms, a communal kitchen, TV lounge, free internet and plenty of communal space for hanging out with other travelers.

Pensión Alajuela (☎ 2441 6251; www.pensionalajuela.com; Av 9 btwn Calles Central & 2; s/d US\$25/35, with bathroom US\$30/40; (P) (Q) (R)) Another great option, as attractive rooms are centered on a 'jungle lounge,' where you chat up other travelers and give (or get) advice on your trip. There's a communal kitchen, optional air-con (US\$10) and wi-fi internet.

Arilapa (☎ 2443 6941; www.arilapa.com; dm/s/d/tr US\$8/30/35/45; (P) (Q)) Just outside of town, this is a great option if you want to go straight from the airport to nature. Set in a delightful orange grove, the rural getaway is run by a lovely couple, Arnold and Ileana, who throw in free airport pick-ups and tortilla-making lessons in the in-house bakery.

Welcome to CR B&B (☎ 2265 6563; www.welcometocr.com; dm/d US\$14/35; (P) (Q)) This solid backpacker option is about 5km east of the airport on the road to San Joaquín. The American-Tico owners spent years managing the famous Toruma Hostel in San José, and now they've finally got a place of their own. The colonial town of San Joaquín is a pleasant alternative to Alajuela, and the hostel itself is newly constructed and full of nature-loving travelers. Rates include breakfast and airport transfer (if there are two people or more).

MIDRANGE

For a few dollars more, there are some lovely B&Bs to choose from.

Hotel Alajuela (☎ 2441 1241; alajuela@racs.co.cr; Calle 2 btwn Aves Central & 2; d US\$30-45; (P) (Q)) Fifty simple rooms make up this hotel. Some of the rooms at the front are a little dingy: it's worth having a look around the various rooms before deciding. There's also a nice little plant-filled patio for reading and relaxing.

Hotel Los Volcanes (☎ 2441 0525; www.montezumaexpeditions.com/hotel.htm; Av 2 btwn Calles Central & 2; s/d incl breakfast US\$30/45; (P) (Q) (R)) This 1920s refurbished home, which has been converted into an intimate six-room B&B, definitely aims to please. Rooms are furnished with period pieces and have hardwood accents and a combination of private and shared bathrooms.

Vida Tropical B&B (☎ 2443 9576; www.vidatropical.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$30/45; (P) (Q)) In a quiet residential neighborhood just north of downtown is this Colombian-American-run B&B (the owners also own the recommended Jalapeños Central restaurant, see p132). The entire house is awash in bright murals, and the backyard garden is perfect for getting some sun. There

are also plenty of hammocks, comfy couches and the warm company of the owners.

Dragonfly Inn (☎ 2443 4152; www.dragonflyinn.cr.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$45/65; (P) (Q)) About 1km west of downtown, in a quiet residential neighborhood northwest of Parque La Trinidad, this charming inn is run by a North American couple named Dawn and Michael. Bright and airy rooms in this two-story, white colonial home share two immaculate bathrooms (one of which has a Jacuzzi), and the upstairs balcony and 'business center' is perfect for relaxing (or checking your email).

our pick Hotel 1915 (☎ 2441 0495; www.1915hotel.com; Calle 2 btwn Aves 5 & 7; s/d US\$45/55, s/d/tr with air-con US\$50/65/75; (P) (Q) (R)) This highly recommended hotel is in one of the most beautiful buildings in Alajuela. Although it looks closed from the outside (and, indeed, taxi drivers will tell you the same), the interior of the 101-year-old Spanish-colonial-style hotel is breathtaking, and it's easy to feel as if you've been transported to a different era.

Hotel Villa Bonita (☎ 2441 0239; www.hotelvilla bonita.com; Av 8, Calle 9; s/d US\$47/57; (P) (Q)) A charming and homey hotel, on the outskirts of the town center. Rooms are comfy, with plump white pillows and deep mattresses. The main draw is the floral garden where guests lounge on the manicured lawn and swing away the afternoon in hammocks.

TOP END

Hotel Buena Vista (☎ 2442 8595; www.hotelbuena vistacr.com; d US\$75-130; (P) (Q) (R) (S) (T)) About 5km north of Alajuela on the road to Poás, this whitewashed Mediterranean-style hotel is perched on a mountaintop and has panoramic views of the nearby volcanoes, particularly from the balconies of the more expensive rooms. Rooms are fully equipped and come in a variety of shapes and sizes, though everyone can walk around the expansive grounds and soak up the dizzying views.

Las Orquídeas Inn (☎ 2433 9346; www.orquideasinn.com; d US\$79-99, ste US\$99-150, apt US\$140; (P) (Q) (R) (S) (T)) About 5km west of Alajuela on the road to San Pedro de Poás is this stately Spanish-colonial mansion. Standard rooms are decked out with Guatemalan bedspreads and are just steps from the pool, while the varied suites are lavish (our favorites are the geodesic domes). The restaurant and bar are both well known: the first for its gourmet

cuisine, and the second for its full-on Marilyn Monroe paraphernalia.

our pick **Trapp Family Lodge** (☎ 2431 0776; www.trappfam.com; d US\$110; P ♿ ♻️) This is certainly the comfiest option within reach of the airport landing strip. Each of the 20 terracotta-tiled rooms have two queen-size beds, the best of which have balconies overlooking the lovely pool and garden. Free airport transfers provided.

Pura Vida Retreat & Spa (☎ 8392 8099, in the USA 888-767 7375; www.puravidaspas.com; d US\$165-185, 7-day package per person US\$1465; P ☒ ♻️) Rates include two daily yoga classes, which is your first clue that this is a very different resort. A renowned yoga and alternative-health center that's a destination in itself, the retreat puts guests up in plush but zen 'tentalows' or more comfortable indoor suites, and offers classes and organized outings that usually include a spiritual or alternative-healing angle. It's about 7km north of Alajuela on the road to Carizal, signed from the Estadio.

Xandari Resort Hotel & Spa (☎ 2443 2020; www.xandari.com; d villa US\$192-280; P ☒ ♻️) Set in a coffee plantation overlooking the Central Valley, about 6km north of Alajuela, this relaxed resort seems like it would make for an even better chick trip than a romantic holiday. Rooms are predictably plush and views are postcard perfect, with 3km of private trails and waterfalls running through them. But the Xandari also offers visitors fitness classes and full spa packages, from facials and pedicures to exotic massages, plus two swimming pools, a jacuzzi and, the real clincher, a gourmet restaurant that specializes in low-fat and vegetarian meals.

Eating

Soda El Puntalito (cnr Calle 4 & Av 3; snacks US\$1-3) Do as the locals do and grab a bar stool at this dirt-cheap, unassuming roadside stand.

Panadería Santa Clara (Av 1 btwn Calles 6 & 8; items US\$1-3) Follow your nose to this outstanding bakery, which is stocked with all types of homemade breads as well as eye-popping pastries and cakes.

Coffee Dreams Café (Calle 1 btwn Avs 1 & 3; dishes US\$2-5) This adorable café is a great place to sample the local blend, but it's worth bringing your appetite along, too, as the tamales here are hot and heavenly.

La Cocina de Abuelita (Cnr Av Central, btwn Calles 1 & 3; meals US\$2-5; ☎ 11am-3pm) A real locals' haunt,

this place serves up a buffet of such Tico treats as pork stew and fried plantains. It's as cheap, hearty and authentic as a farmer's cackle.

Ceviche del Rey (☎ 2442 3977; Calle 2 north of Río Alajuela; meals US\$3-6; ☎ 11am-11pm) It's definitely worth the trek to the northern outskirts of town to get the best *ceviche* (uncooked but well-marinated seafood) in the area, which is served up by boisterous Peruvian waiters.

Jalepeños Central (☎ 2430 4027; Calle 1 btwn Avs 3 & 5; dishes US\$3-6; ☎ 11:20am-9pm Mon-Sat) Don't leave Alajuela without eating here! Run by an animated Colombian-American from Queens, New York, this Tex-Mex spot provides the much needed spice in your life.

La Baranda (Av Central btwn Calles 1 & 3; dishes US\$3-7) Though this *soda* (inexpensive eatery) caters to tourists, it's still packed with locals in search of hearty casados and fresh *ceviche*.

La Mansarda (☎ 2441 4390; Calle Central btwn Central & 2, 2nd fl; meals US\$4-9; ☎ 11am-11pm) The top place in town for Costa Rican fare is this wonderfully casual balcony restaurant overlooking the street milieu. Fresh seafood dishes and grilled meats can be complemented by something special from the wine list.

Head to the enclosed **Mercado Central** (Calles 4 & 6 btwn Avs 1 & Central; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat) for lots of *sodas*, produce stands and much, much more. If you're having a little bit of culture shock, all of your favorite fast-food chains are conveniently located downtown. Self-caterers can stock up on groceries at the **Palí supermarket** (cnr Av 2 & Calle 10; ☎ 8am-8pm).

Entertainment

The perennial Costa Rican soccer champions, Alajuela's own La Liga, play at the Estadio Morera Soto at the northeast end of town on Sundays during soccer season. If you can't get seats, stop by **Cugini Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 2440 6893; cnr Av Central & Calle 5; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Sat) and you can catch the game over a brew or two.

There's no shortage of dive bars in Alajuela, and there's a good chance that karaoke will be on offer after 10pm (there's nothing like a bunch of drunken Ticos mumbling *Let It Be*). If this is your first night in Costa Rica, we recommend the Guaro Cacique. Bottoms up!

If you're looking to experience the melodic monotony that is reggaetón, check out **Monkey Shot** (Calle 4), a huge indoor-outdoor bar that sometimes has male and female strippers. Or head to **Spectros Disco** (Calle 2 btwn

Avs 10 & 12), which has the biggest dance floor in the city.

Getting There & Away

For details of flights to Aeropuerto Internacional Juan Santamaría, see p108 and p545. You can take a taxi (US\$3) to the airport from Parque Central.

There are several bus stops in Alajuela, the largest being the **Alajuela bus terminal** (Calle 8 btwn Avs Central & 1) for buses to San José, the international airport, Volcán Poás and other destinations.

Atenas US\$0.50, 30 minutes, depart from the corner of Calle 6 and Avenida Central every 30 minutes from 6am to 9pm.

Butterfly Farm US\$0.50, 30 minutes, depart from the corner of Calle 8 and Avenida 2 at 6:20am, 9am, 11am and 1pm.

Heredia US\$0.50, 30 minutes, depart from Alajuela bus terminal every 15 minutes from 5am to 11pm.

La Garita/Zoo Ave US\$0.50, 30 minutes, depart from the corner of Calle 10 and Avenida 2 every 30 minutes from 6am to 9pm.

Laguna de Fraijanes US\$0.50, 30 minutes, depart from Alajuela bus terminal at 9am, 1pm, 4:15pm and 6:15pm.

San José (Tuasa) US\$0.75, 45 minutes, depart from Alajuela bus terminal every 10 minutes from 5am to 11pm.

Sarchí US\$0.50, 30 minutes, depart from Calle 8 between Avenidas Central and 2 every 30 minutes from 5am to 10pm.

BUTTERFLY FARM

Built in 1983, back when tourism was just a small sector of the country's economy, the **Butterfly Farm** (☎ 2438 0400; www.butterflyfarm.co.cr; adult/child 5-12yr/student US\$15/7/10; ☎ 8:30am-5pm) originally opened as the first commercial butterfly farm in Latin America. In the wild it's estimated that less than 2% of caterpillars survive to adulthood, while breeders at the farm boast an astounding 90% survival rate. This ensures a steady supply of pupae for gardens, schools, museums and private collections around the world. If you visit on a Monday or a Thursday from March to August, you can watch thousands of pupae being packed for export.

The butterflies are busiest when it's sunny, particularly in the morning, so try to get there early. Your entrance fee includes a guided two-hour tour, where you can learn about the stages of the complex butterfly life cycle, and the importance of butterflies in nature. Tours in English, German, Spanish or French run three times daily, more often when it's busy.

The complex also has other attractions, primarily gardens devoted to bees, orchids and other tropical species, and you can take a traditional oxcart ride.

The Butterfly Farm also offers several one-day package tours (adult/child/student US\$63/48/53) that include transportation from any San José hotel, lunch and a tour of the farm, plus a Coffee Tour at the Café Britt Finca (see p144) and any number of other side trips.

Drivers can reach the Butterfly Farm by heading 12km south of Alajuela to the village of La Guácima; it's almost in front of the well-signed El Club Campestre Los Reyes. The farm provides a round-trip shuttle service from San José hotels for US\$10 per person, or you can take a direct bus from Alajuela (see left).

WEST TO ATENAS

The road west from Alajuela to Atenas (25km) is a pleasant day trip for anyone who's even remotely interested in corn, though the perfect climate and rural atmosphere are reasons enough to linger.

La Garita

This pilgrimage-worthy destination for folks who really appreciate corn is 11km west of Alajuela. At La Garita you can stop for a quick bite at a number of 'corny' restaurants (sorry, we couldn't resist!), as well as visiting the largest collection of birds in Central America.

Zoo Ave (☎ 2433 8989; www.zooave.org; adult/child US\$9/1; ☎ 8:30am-5pm), 10km west of Alajuela, just before La Garita, has more than 80 Costa Rican species of birds on colorful, squawking display in a relaxing parklike setting – this is a great stop for families. All four Costa Rican species of monkey as well as other critters are on view, though the 'zoo' is actually a breeding center that aims to reintroduce native species into the wild. There are volunteer opportunities here as well, especially if you have experience handling animals.

SLEEPING & EATING

Martino Resort & Spa (☎ 2433 8382; www.hotelmartino.com; d standard/deluxe US\$187/244; P ☒ ♻️) Couples who can't decide between Las Vegas and Central America can compromise here amid over-the-top, Roman-style luxury, complete with 'Costa Rica's most elegant casino.' Gourmet organic Italian meals, a bird sanctuary, an outrageous spa, huge pools, sauna and

full gym are also on offer. It's 2km north of the Alajuela exit from the Interamericana, about 15 minutes from the airport.

Scientists from around the world come to Costa Rica's corn breadbasket to study maize. Everyone else comes to dine at one of a number of unusual restaurants to do their own tasty investigation.

La Fiesta del Maíz (☎ 2487 7057; mains US\$1-5; ☎ 6am-9:30pm) This understated spot is famed for its wide variety of corn concoctions, as well as fried pork skins.

Delicias del Maíz (☎ 2433 7206; mains US\$3-9; ☎ 8am-9:30pm) Delicias is decidedly more up-market, with its rustic dining room and grill, and also adapts just about every possible recipe to include corn. Iowa, eat your heart out.

La Casa del Viñedo (☎ 2487 6086; mains US\$4-15; ☎ 11am-11pm) Dare we say it – if corn is not your thing, visit this vineyard on the edge of La Garita, which produces small batches of seven different wines. You can sample them alongside the recommended steaks, Argentine or American style.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses (US\$0.75, 30 minutes) run between Alajuela and La Garita, via Zoo Ave, every half hour. If you're driving, take the Atenas exit off the Interamericana, then go 3km east to Zoo Ave.

Atenas

This small village is on the historic *camino de carretas* (oxcart trail) that once carried coffee beans as far as Puntarenas, though it's best known as having the most pleasant climate in the world, at least according to a 1994 issue of *National Geographic*. It's not too heavy on sights, though springtime is always in the air.

Follow the signs to **El Cafetal Inn B&B** (☎ 2446 5785; www.cafetal.com; s/d from US\$80/90; (P)), a sweeping coffee plantation 5km north of Atenas, where you can stay the night or simply stop by to sample the local specialty – that'd be coffee. There's a large garden (with two easy trails to waterfalls), a pool and several attractive rooms that vary in size and amenities, but that all have lots of light and great country views. The onsite café **Mirador del Cafetal** (dishes US\$1-5; ☎ 7am-5pm) sells its own brand of coffee, La Negrita – as beans or in an outstanding selection of beverages, drunk hot or cold while gazing across the entire Central Valley.

The **Rancho Típico La Trilla** (☎ 2446 5637; mains US\$3-8), 75m east of the gas station, serves rustic-style casados and is a popular tourist stop where you can opt for the caffeine theme at the 'coffee mill' (the restaurant's name refers to an old mill, nearby).

Frequent buses connect Atenas to San José and Alajuela.

NORTHWEST TO SARCHÍ

Scattered across the carefully cultivated hills to the northwest of Alajuela are the small towns of Grecia (22km), Sarchí (29km), Naranjo (35km) and Zarcero (52km), which are popular romantic getaways for josefinos in search of flowering trees and fresh country air. In addition to its charming atmosphere, the region also boasts excellent coffee and a subdued collection of eccentric attractions, including the country's most famous topiary bushes and its arts-and-crafts capital.

Grecia

Centered on the incongruous, bright-red metal **Catedral de la Mercedes**, which was boxed up in Belgium and shipped to Costa Rica in 1897, Grecia is a modern town spiced up with a fair dash of Costa Rican folklore. The small **Casa de Cultura** (☎ 2444 6767) has the official version, with Spanish-colonial artifacts, articles about Grecia's 'Cleanest Little Town in Latin America' award and an impressive insect collection.

INFORMATION

Theoretically, **Minae** (Ministry of Environment and Energy; ☎ 2494 0065; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) has information about the surrounding parks. The town has several simple *sodas* and bars, plus banks with 24-hour ATMs and a post office.

SIGHTS

Check out the **18th-century rock bridge** south of town connecting the hamlets of Puente de Piedra and Rincón de Salas. Grecians say that the only other rock bridge like this is in China, and some tales have it that it was built by the devil. In 1994 it was declared a National Site of Historical Interest.

The premier attraction, however, is **World of Snakes** (☎ 2494 3700; adult/child US\$12/7; ☎ 8am-4pm), 1.5km southeast of the town center, a well-run attraction with an endangered-snake breeding program. More than 150 snakes (40 species in all) are displayed in large cages as

'Snakes of the World' or 'Snakes of Costa Rica.' Informative tours in English, German or Spanish may include the chance to handle certain snakes if there's time. Any bus to Grecia from Alajuela can drop you at the entrance.

Mariposario Spirogyra (adult/child US\$5/3; ☎ 8am-5pm), 150m from the church, is a small but pretty butterfly garden with a few informative plaques. Guided tours are included with the price.

About 5km south of Grecia, toward Santa Gertrudis, are **Las Cataratas de Los Chorros** (admission US\$4; ☎ 8am-5pm), two gorgeous waterfalls and a swimming hole surrounded by picnic tables. It's a popular spot for weekend couples.

ACTIVITIES

Is Costa Rica's safe and peaceful image just not doing it for you? Live dangerously at **Tropical Bungee** (☎ 2290 5629; www.bungee.co.cr; 1st/2nd jump US\$60/30), where you can hurl yourself off the 75m bridge that spans the Río Colorado. Your impending doom is 2km west of the turnoff for Grecia.

SLEEPING & EATING

Healthy Day Country Inn Resort (☎ 2444 5903; d incl breakfast US\$45; (P) ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Although the crumbling, jungle facade adorning the entrance looks like it's seen better days, this Tico resort is a great city break, especially if you're looking to slim down. Rooms with shared bathrooms are great value considering guests have access to the on-site tennis court, gym and Jacuzzi, as well as less taxing weight-loss opportunities like homeopathic therapies, massages and macrobiotic meals. It's 800m northeast of the church on the main road.

ourpick Vista del Valle Plantation Inn (☎ 2450 0800; www.vistadelvalle.com; s/d US\$100/120, ste incl breakfast US\$155-200; (P) ☎ ☎) In the village of Rosario, about 7km southwest of Grecia as the parrot flies, this choice property with a regular airport shuttle may well be one of the swankiest jungle lodges in Costa Rica. Elegant garden cottages scattered throughout the luxuriously landscaped botanical garden have balconies that overlook the Río Grande, various volcanoes and even San José city lights. Trails lead past a 90m-high waterfall into the adjoining Zona Protectora Río Grande, a cloud-forest reserve at about 800m. Horseback tours and massage therapy are available, and there is also a pool and Jacuzzi for soaking off the hike.

There are a few well-stocked markets, bakeries and basic *sodas* in town.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The bus terminal is about 400m south of the church, behind the *mercado* (market).

San José US\$0.50, one hour, depart every 30 minutes from 5:30am to 10pm.

Sarchí, connecting to Naranjo US\$0.25, one hour, depart every 25 minutes from 4:45am to 10pm.

Sarchí

There's just one problem with vacationing in Costa Rica: lousy souvenir shopping. Blame the whole ecotourism thing – it just seems wrong to buy a plastic bauble commemorating your visit to some of the last untouched rain forests in the world. But here it is, the end of your trip, and you've got to face jealous friends and family who won't care that you spotted a rare three-wattled bellbird while trekking through waist-deep mud. Nope, they want presents.

Welcome to Sarchí, Costa Rica's most famous crafts center, where artisans showcase the country's deeply ingrained woodworking tradition. The pretty town is a jumble of bungalow-size stalls, surrounded by undulating coffee-growing valleys. Unfortunately, a 45-minute stop in town (especially if you're on a tour bus) is likely to give you the impression that you've landed in a tourist trap, albeit one with free coffee. But keep in mind that there are more than 200 workshops peppered around the nearby countryside, and if you're a little bit independent it's often possible to meet different artists, and even custom-order your own creation or arrange a lesson or two.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Sarchí is divided by the Río Trojas into Sarchí Norte and Sarchí Sur, and is rather spread out, straggling for several kilometers along the main road from Grecia to Naranjo. In Sarchí Norte you'll find the main plaza with the typical twin-towered church, a hotel and some restaurants. There is a **Banco Nacional** (☎ 2454 4262; ☎ 8:30am-3pm Mon-Fri) for changing money.

SLEEPING & EATING

Cabinas Mandy (☎ 2454 2397; s/d US\$10/15; (P)) Close to the fire station in Sarchí Norte is the best budget option in town. Small but well-kept rooms have cable TV and private hot showers.

A SHOPPERS GUIDE TO SARCHÍ

Elegantly polished or brightly painted, Sarchí work is unmistakable. Although the range of crafts available for purchase is extensive, most travelers are interested in *carretas*, the elaborately painted ox carts that are the unofficial souvenir of Costa Rica (and official symbol of the Costa Rican worker).

Painting the elaborate mandala designs requires a steady hand and active imagination, and is a process well worth watching. Though pricier models are ready for the road (oxen sold separately), most are scaled-down versions designed for display in gardens and homes, while others have been customized to function as indoor tables, sideboards and minibars. Smaller models are suitable for every budget and backpack.

In addition to *carretas*, shoppers in the know come to Sarchí for leather-and-wood furniture, specifically rocking chairs that collapse Ikea style for shipping. Other items you won't find elsewhere include gleaming wooden bowls and other tableware, some carved from rare hardwoods (which you should think twice about buying unless you want to contribute to further deforestation). Most of the hardwoods sculpted in Sarchí are grown locally on plantations, though it's best to inquire about a piece if you're feeling unsure.

What makes Sarchí so much more than another stop on the tourist circuit is that the top artisans are part of renowned woodworking families, many of whom are very welcoming to inquisitive travelers. If you're interested in commissioning a custom piece, artisans will be happy to listen to your ideas as well as to offer suggestions, and prices are generally fair and reasonable. There are also plenty of opportunities in Sarchí for taking woodworking classes or organizing an apprenticeship – talk to different artisans, ask for a few prices and work out a deal that makes everyone happy.

Workshops are usually open from 8am to 4pm daily, and they accept credit cards and US dollars. Below is a list of recommended spots, though with over 200 places to choose from, it pays to shop around and enjoy the experience.

Fábrica de Carretas Joaquín Chaverri (☎ 2454 4411) The oldest and best-known factory in Sarchí.

This is a good spot for watching artisans from the old school of transportation aesthetics emblazon those incredible patterns on ox carts by hand.

Los Rodríguez (☎ 2454 4097), **La Sarchiseño** (☎ 2454 3430) and **El Artesano** (☎ 2454 4304) All are located along the main road, and specialize in rocking chairs and other furniture.

Pidesa Souvenirs (☎ 2454 4540) By the main plaza, this spot specializes in hand painting local souvenirs Sarchí style, including full-size milk cans.

Plaza de la Artesanía (☎ 2454 3430) In Sarchí Sur, this is the top choice for connoisseurs of kitsch. It's a shopping mall with more than 30 souvenir stores selling everything from truly beautiful furniture to mass-produced key chains.

Taller Lalo Alfaro Two blocks north of the church is Sarchí's oldest workshop, where they still make working ox carts using machinery powered by a waterwheel.

Hotel Daniel Zamora (☎ 2454 4596; d US\$35; Ⓟ)

On a quiet street east of the soccer field, this is a slightly more upmarket choice. Rooms have cable TV and private hot showers, and are large and nicely furnished.

Las Carretas (☎ 2454 1636; mains US\$5-10; ☎ 11am-9pm) The most popular restaurant in town for tour buses and locals alike serves up Tico classics in an elegant dining room adorned with local woodwork.

A great farmers market is held on Fridays behind Taller Lalo Alfaro, where you can grab homemade snacks, palmetto cheese and lots of produce.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

If you're driving, you can take the unpaved road northeast from Sarchí to Bajos del Toro and on through Colonia del Toro to the northern lowlands at Río Cuarto. The main attraction of this route is the beautiful waterfall north of Bajos del Toro. Look for local signs for the 'Catarata.'

Alajuela (Tuasa) US\$0.75, 30 minutes, depart every 30 minutes from 6am to 11pm.

Grecia US\$0.50, 20 minutes, depart every 30 minutes from 6am to 11pm.

San José US\$2, 1½ hours, depart at 6am, 1pm and 4:05pm.

PALMARES

Palmares' claim to fame is the annual **Las Fiestas de Palmares**, a 10-day beer-soaked extravaganza that takes place in mid-January and features carnival rides, parades, a *tope* (horse parade), fireworks, discotheques, big-name bands, small-name bands, exotic dancers, fried food, Guaro Cacique tents and the highest proportion of drunken Ticos you've ever seen. Unsurprisingly, it's one of the biggest events in the country, and is widely covered on national TV.

For the other 355 days of the year, Palmares is a bit of a tumbleweed town, where what little life exists is centered on the ornate stained-glass church in the central plaza.

During festival time, crowds can reach upwards of 10,000 people. Over the 10-day period, the fiesta continues unabated virtually day and night, and you won't believe how hard Ticos can party until you've seen it for yourself. If you're traveling in Costa Rica in January, look for posters advertising the festival, which will detail what events are taking place on which days.

Give up any plans you have of staying in Palmares unless you know someone with a house in the area. Buses run continuously from San José to Palmares throughout the festival, though it's common for groups of Ticos to rent private shuttles. If you're driving, the road from Sarchí continues west to Naranjo, where it divides – head south for 13km to reach Palmares.

SAN RAMÓN

The colonial town of San Ramón is no wallflower in the pageant of Costa Rican history. The 'City of Presidents and Poets' has sent five men to the country's highest office, including ex-president Rodrigo Carazo, who built a tourist lodge a few kilometers to the north at the entrance to the Los Angeles Cloud Forest (see right).

Stories of the former presidents, plus poets and more, can be found on plaques around town or at the **Museo de San Ramón** (☎ 2437 9851; admission free; ☎ 8:30-11am Wed-Sat, 1-5pm Mon-Fri) on the north side of the park. It's worth working around the museum's schedule to see life-size dioramas depicting colonial Costa Rica and well-done exhibits on the area's impressive history.

At the center of San Ramón are the twin spires of the ash-gray **Iglesia de San Ramón**,

which soar high above the town and give it a dignified air. In front of the church is **Parque Central**, which is surrounded by a few colonial buildings and has a bizarre collection of lime-green *torii*, the traditional Japanese gates found at the entrance to a Shinto shrine.

The best time to come is on Saturday for the weekly farmers market, when all manner of cheeses and chorizo are on display and the area's old women do their weekly shopping and gossiping.

Sleeping & Eating

There are a few inexpensive places to stay in town, as well as two upscale lodges in the nearby Los Angeles Cloud Forest Reserve (see p138).

Hotel Gran (☎ 2445 6363; s/d US\$10/15; Ⓟ) Three blocks west of the park is this decent budget option, which has completely standard rooms that surround a courtyard and come with private hot-water bathrooms and cable TV.

Hotel la Posada (☎ 2445 7359; s/d incl breakfast US\$30/40) Spend the extra money and upgrade to this executive-worthy hotel, which has seriously plush rooms complete with beautiful wooden furniture and huge TVs. Private bathrooms have steaming-hot showers that will make you realize what you've been missing!

Il Giardino (dishes US\$4-8) On the southwestern corner of the central park, Il Giardino specializes in wood oven-fired pizzas and thick, juicy steaks.

The Saturday farmers market is a big one, with smaller markets on Wednesday and Sunday.

Getting There & Away

There are hourly buses to San José as well as frequent buses to Ciudad Quesada via Zarcero. Buses depart from Calle 16 between Avenidas 1 and 3.

LOS ANGELES CLOUD FOREST RESERVE

This **private reserve** (☎ 2661 1600; per person US\$18), about 20km north of San Ramón, is centered on a lodge and dairy ranch that was once owned by ex-president Rodrigo Carazo. Some 800 hectares of primary forest have a short boardwalk and longer horse and foot trails that lead to towering waterfalls and misty cloud-forest vistas. The appeal of this cloud forest (which is actually adjacent to the reserve at Monteverde, see p190) is that it is comparatively untouristed, which means you

will have a good chance of observing wildlife (jaguars and ocelots are occasionally spotted), and the birding here is simply fantastic. Although quetzals do not roost in the reserve, other trogons are commonly sighted.

Bilingual naturalist guides are available to lead hikes (per person US\$25) and you can also rent horses (per hour US\$20) or take to the zip lines on a canopy tour (per person US\$40). Tours of the reserve are arranged through Villablanca Cloud Forest Hotel & Spa (below), though guests of the hotel can enter for free. A taxi to the reserve and hotel costs US\$10 from San Ramón, and the turnoff is well signed from the highway.

Sleeping

Villablanca Cloud Forest Hotel & Spa (☎ 2228 4603; www.villablanca-costarica.com; d US\$135-175) The large main lodge, restaurant and about 30 white-washed, red-tiled, rustic adobe *casetas* (huts) here are surrounded by the Los Angeles Cloud Forest Reserve. Comfortable cabins have refrigerators, bathtubs and fireplaces, and there's a fine onsite restaurant and spa. The big perk here, however, is free and easy access to the adjacent reserve.

Valle Escondido Lodge (☎ 2231 0906; s/d US\$70/94) The lodge's collection of luxurious cabins are adjacent to another private reserve featuring 20km of cloud-forest trails and a working ornamental-plant and citrus-fruit farm. Nonguests can pay US\$8 for day use of the trails. There is also a pool, Jacuzzi and a locally popular restaurant with Italian specialties. It's about halfway between Hotel Villablanca and the village of La Tigra.

ZARCERO

North of Naranjo, the road winds for 20km until it reaches Zarcero's 1736m perch at the western end of the Cordillera Central. The mountains are gorgeous and the climate is famously fresh, but the reason you've come is evident as soon as you pull into town.

Parque Francisco Alvarado, in front of the already off-kilter pink-and-blue 1895 Iglesia de San Rafael, was just a normal plaza until the 1960s (of course), when gardener Evangelisto Blanco suddenly became inspired to shave the ordinary, mild-mannered bushes into bizarre abstract shapes and, over the years, everything from elephants to bull fights (the latest creation is a double tunnel of surreal, melting arches).

Today the trippy topiary is certainly the town's top sight, but space-age trees aren't the only thing growing in Zarcero – this is a center for Costa Rica's organic-farming movement. You can find unusual varieties of pesticide-free goodies all over town, and the surrounding mountains are just perfect for an afternoon picnic.

Activities

The roads around Zarcero are lined with small stores selling picnic supplies – be on the lookout for *queso palmito*, a locally made cheese that has a delicate taste and goes well with fresh tomatoes and basil. Once you've packed your picnic basket, explore the surrounding countryside and find your own grassy spot beneath the shade of a Guanacaste tree.

If you brought your swimsuit, stop into **Piscinas Apamar** (☎ 2463 3674; per person US\$2; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Sat), 500m west of the park on the road to Guadalupe, where there's not only a huge swimming pool but also three hot tubs and a Jacuzzi.

Sleeping

Hotel Don Beto (☎ 2463 3137; www.hoteldonbeto.com; d without/with bathroom US\$28/33, tr US\$35; ☎) Just north of the town church is this hotel, which has homey rooms with either shag rugs or hardwood floors and private balcony. The Tico owners treat everyone as if they were visiting family, and they're a great resource for organizing trips throughout the area, especially to nearby Los Angeles Cloud Forest Reserve and Parque Nacional Juan Castro Blanco.

Getting There & Away

Hourly buses traveling between San José and Ciudad Quesada stop at Zarcero, though some buses may be full by the time they reach Zarcero, particularly on weekends. There are also buses from Alajuela and San Ramón.

PARQUE NACIONAL JUAN CASTRO BLANCO

This 143-sq-km **national park** (admission US\$6, camping US\$2) was created in 1992 to protect the slopes of Volcán Platanar (2183m) and Volcán Porvenir (2267m) from logging. The headwaters for five major rivers originate here as well, making this one of the most important watersheds in the entire country.

The park is in limbo, federally protected but still privately owned by various plantation families – only those parts that have already been purchased by the government are technically open to the traveler. As yet, there is almost no infrastructure for visitors, though there is a **Minae office** (☎ 2460 7600) in El Sucre, next to the only official entrance, where you can pay fees for camping or day use. However, the office is usually closed, and fees are rarely collected.

The park is popular among anglers as each of the five rivers is brimming with trout, and the difficult access means that the park is nearly always abandoned. Also, the lack of infrastructure and tourist traffic means that your chances of spotting rare wildlife are very high. However, since there are no facilities and few marked trails in the park, it's recommended that you hire a guide, which can be arranged at any of the hotels in the area.

PARQUE NACIONAL VOLCÁN POÁS

Just 37km north of Alajuela by a winding and scenic road is the most heavily trafficked **national park** (admission US\$7; ☎ 8am-3:30pm) in Costa Rica. However, there are few places in the world where you can peer into an active volcano – without the hardship of actually hiking up one. The centerpiece of the park is, of course, Volcán Poás (2704m), which had its last blowout in 1953. This event formed the eerie and enormous crater, which is 1.3km across and 300m deep. There are also two other craters, one of which contains a lake, that serve as evidence of the volcano's violent past.

Poás continues to be active to varying extents with different levels of danger. The park was briefly closed in May 1989 after a minor eruption sent volcanic ash spouting more than 1km into the air, and lesser activity closed the park intermittently in 1995. In recent years, however, Poás has posed no imminent threat, though scientists are still worried – the water level of the lake has dropped dramatically in the past decade, which is a major warning sign of an impending eruption (see boxed text *Feelin' Hot, Hot, Hot!*, p243).

In the meantime, the most common hazard for visitors is the veil of clouds that the mountain gathers around itself almost daily (even in the dry season), starting at around 10am. Even if the day looks clear, get to the park as early as possible or you won't see much.

But, crowds and clouds aside, the sight of the bubbling and steaming cauldron is truly astonishing, especially when it belches sulfurous mud and steaming water hundred of meters into the air.

Information

Some 250,000 people visit the park annually, making Poás the most packed national park in the country – visiting on weekends in particular is best avoided. The visitors center has a coffee shop, souvenirs and informative videos hourly from 9am to 3pm. A small museum offers explanations in both Spanish and English. There's no camping at the park.

The best time to visit is during the dry season, especially early in the morning before the clouds roll in and obscure the view. Even if the summit is clouded in, don't despair! Take a hike to the other craters and then return to the cauldron later – winds change rapidly on the summit, and sometimes thick cloud cover is quickly blown away.

Be advised that overnight temperatures can drop below freezing, and it may be windy and cold during the day, particularly in the morning. Also, Poás receives almost 4000mm of rainfall each year. Dress accordingly.

Hiking

From the visitors center, there is a wheelchair-accessible paved road that leads directly to the crater lookout. Because of the toxic sulfuric-acid fumes that are emitted from the cauldron, visitors are prohibited from descending into the crater.

From the crater, there are two trails that branch out – to the right is **Sendero Botos**, to the left **Sendero Escalonia**. Sendero Botos is a short, 30-minute round-trip hike that takes you through dwarf cloud forest, which is the product of acidic air and freezing temperatures. Here you can wander about looking at bromeliads, lichens and mosses clinging to the curiously shaped and twisted trees growing in the volcanic soil. Birds abound, especially the magnificent fiery-throated hummingbird, a high-altitude specialty of Costa Rica. The trail ends at **Laguna Botos**, a peculiar cold-water lake that has filled in one of the extinct craters.

Sendero Escalonia is a slightly longer trail through taller forest, though it gets significantly less traffic than the other parts of the park. While hiking on the trail, look for other highland specialties, including the sooty robin,

black guans, screech owls and even the odd quetzal (especially from February to April). Although mammals are infrequently sighted in the park, coyotes and the endemic montane squirrel are present.

Tours

Numerous companies offer daily tours to the volcano, but readers frequently complain that they're an overpriced affair. Typically, they cost US\$40 to US\$100, and the kicker is that you usually arrive at the volcano around 10am – right when the clouds start rolling in. Also, readers complain that they're often rushed off the crater, though there always seems to be time for stopping at a few souvenir stores on the way back.

As always, it's important to shop around and ask questions. Generally, the cheaper tours are large-group affairs providing only transportation, park entrance and limited time at the crater. The more expensive tours feature smaller group sizes, bilingual naturalist guides and lunch. However, just remember that it's possible to visit the volcano quite easily using public transportation from San José, and it's definitely cheaper for two people to rent a car for the day and drive themselves.

Sleeping

ON THE ROAD TO POÁS

Lo Que Tu Quieres Lodge (☎ 2482 2092; s/d/tr cabins US\$19/25/30; 📍) About 5km before the park entrance, the name of this place translates to 'Whatever You Want Lodge.' This is a good budget option as cabins are all equipped with heaters and hot water, and the owners will usually let you camp for a few dollars. There is a small restaurant (dishes US\$3 to US\$8) on the grounds that serves simple, typical food.

Lagunillas Lodge (☎ 2448 5506; d/tr US\$25/30, cabinas US\$30-40; 📍) The closest accommodation to the volcano is recommended for its stellar views and the warm welcome you'll get on arrival. Rooms and larger cabinas, which can accommodate up to six people, have hot-water showers and heaters, and all are surrounded by good hiking trails. There's also a fish pond out back where you can catch dinner, and the restaurant (mains US\$4 to US\$10) will prepare it – with side dishes. To get here, a signed turnoff about 2km before the park entrance sends you along a steep 1km dirt road that may require a 4WD – call ahead.

AROUND POÁS

Poás Volcano Lodge (☎ 2482 2194; www.poasvolcano.lodge.com; s/d US\$45/55, with bathroom US\$55/75, ste US\$90-115; 📍) About 16km east of the volcano near Vara Blanca, a high-altitude dairy farm frames this attractive stone building, which blends architectural influences from Wales, England and Costa Rica (the original owners were English farmers). Trails radiate from the eclectically decorated rooms, and common areas include a billiard room ('pool' doesn't do it justice). There's a sitting area with a sunken fireplace, and books and board games to while away a stormy night.

Bosque de Paz Rain/Cloud Forest Lodge & Biological Reserve (☎ 2234 6676; www.bosquedepaz.com; s/d/tr incl 3 meals US\$121/196/279; 📍) Tastefully decorated in rustic luxury, this 1000-hectare biological reserve offers access to what forms a wild corridor between Parque Nacional Volcán Poás and Parque Nacional Juan Castro Blanco: not your average lodge grounds. There are 22km of trails, sometimes used by researchers from all over the world, and the owners can arrange guided hikes. If driving north from the Interamericana through Zarcero, take a right immediately after the church and head north about 15km. The reserve will be on your right, just before the last bridge to Bajos del Toro.

Eating

On sunny days the road to Poás is lined with stands selling fruit, cheese and snacks – it's worth picking up picnic supplies because the coffee shop at the visitors center has a limited menu. Bring your own bottled water, as proximity to primordial seepage has rendered the tap water undrinkable.

Colbert Restaurant (dishes US\$5-10) About 2km east of the Poás Volcano Lodge (above), on a ridge overlooking the volcano, this reader-recommended rustic French restaurant highlights locally produced cheeses in traditional, continental dishes.

Getting There & Away

You can take a taxi to the park for around US\$80 from San José, US\$40 from Alajuela. If you're driving, the road from Alajuela to the volcano is well signed. Most visitors using public buses come from San José. Get to the terminal early.

From San José (US\$4, three hours) Tuasa buses depart 8:30am daily from Avenida 2

between Calles 12 and 14, stopping in Alajuela at 9:30am and returning at 2:30pm.

LOS JARDINES DE LA CATARATA LA PAZ

La Paz Waterfall Gardens (☎ 2265 0643; www.waterfallgardens.com; adult/child & student US\$25/15; 🕒 8:30am-5:30pm) are built around an almost impossibly scenic series of waterfalls formed as Río La Paz drops 1400m in less than 8km down the flanks of Volcán Poás. The lowest, whose name means 'Peace Waterfall,' is one of the most loved (and photographed) sights in Costa Rica.

Visitors, many on tours from San José, follow 3.5km of well-maintained trails that wind past a butterfly conservatory (the largest in the world), a hummingbird garden and a rare orchid display before plunging down alongside five cascading waterfalls. Small children, city slickers and active seniors won't have any problems with this adventure, especially since there is a shuttle bus at the bottom of the falls that brings hikers back up to the visitors center.

The gardens are administered by the **Peace Lodge** (☎ 2482 2720; www.waterfallgardens.com; d US\$185-215), one of six 'Small Distinctive Hotels of Costa Rica.' Take a long, hard look at your travel companion – if you love him or her in the slightest way (and money isn't an option), you'll change your plans and spend the night here. Standard rooms are a work of art with waterfall showers that gush at the slightest turn of a knob, manicured-stone fireplaces for those cool, crisp nights and exotic design schemes that will bring all of your rain forest fantasies to life. Deluxe rooms are all this and more (we're talking two Jacuzzis for all your indoor and outdoor soaking pleasures).

Even if you're not staying in the hotel, you can still visit the lodge's buffet (adult/child US\$10/5), where you can dine alongside a huge fireplace that provides welcome respite from the weather on a rainy day.

HEREDIA AREA

Despite outward appearances and a convenient location, Heredia (population 33,000) isn't just a suburb of San José. Since the late 1990s the city has come into its own as the high-tech capital of Costa Rica – microchips produced here have become the country's

most important export. Career opportunities make Heredia a magnet for this highly educated nation's tech heads, and considering that the historic coffee center also produces some of the world's strongest brews, programmers have little excuse to stop coding. Ever.

But there's much more to this province than its well-to-do capital. The Heredia area retains its heritage as a coffee-production center, and indeed it's possible to visit the headquarters of the most famous roaster in the country, Café Britt Finca (p144). The town itself has a very young vibe, particularly around the western edge of town, where students lounge around the cafés and bars at all hours of the day. The area is also home to one of Costa Rica's largest swaths of rain forest, Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo (p146).

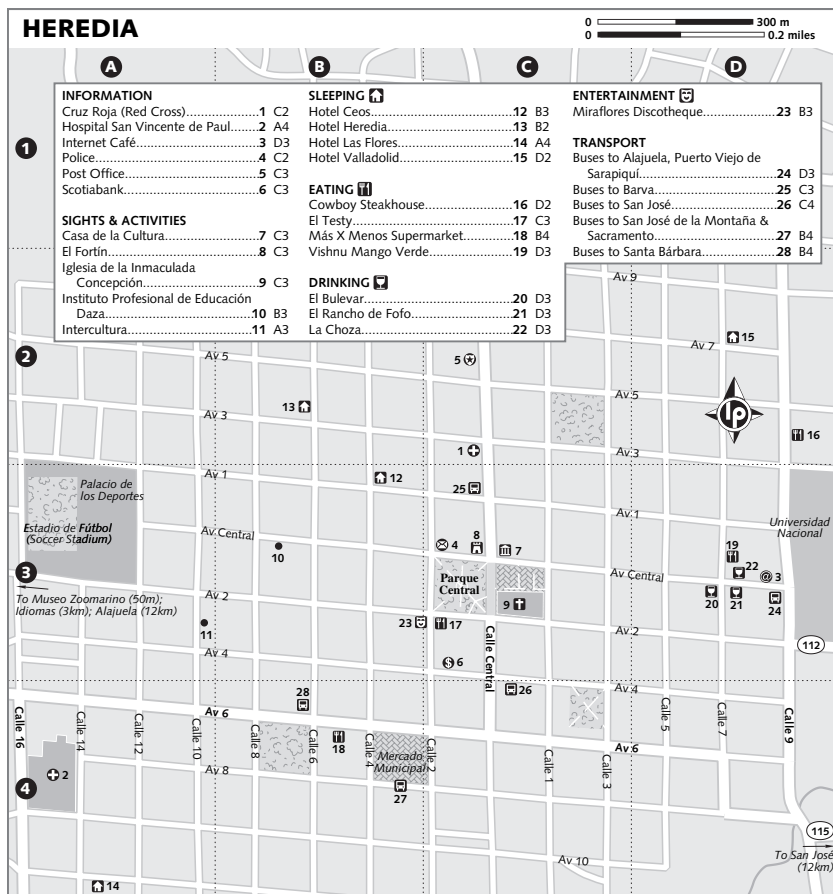
HEREDIA

During its colonial heyday, la Ciudad de las Flores (the City of the Flowers) was home to the Spanish aristocracy, who made their fortunes by exporting Costa Rica's premium blend. Over the years, the Spanish built an attractive colonial city on an orderly grid, and although Heredia grew in both size and prominence, it managed to retain its charming elegance and small-city feel. Following the independence of Costa Rica, Heredia was even considered for the seat of federal government.

Although it is only 11km from San José, Heredia is a world away from the grit and grime of the capital. The cosmopolitan bustle comes courtesy of the multinational high-tech corporations that have their Central American headquarters here, while more bohemian stylings radiate from the National University, whose local bars are abuzz with young folk idling away afternoons. Heredia's historic center is one of the most attractive in the country, with a lovely, leafy main square that is overlooked by the stocky cathedral. From a tourist perspective, the city serves as a convenient base for exploring the diverse attractions of the province.

Information

Though there's no tourist office, most other services are readily available. The university district is full of copy places, internet cafés, cell phone shops, and music and video stores.



Hospital San Vicente de Paul (☎ 2261 0001; Av 8 btwn Calles 14 & 16)

Internet Café (Av Central btwn Calles 7 & 9; per hr US\$0.75) For 24-hour access to the web.

Scotiabank (☎ 2262 5303; Av 4 btwn Calles Central & 2; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat) The only place that changes money, it has a 24-hour ATM that dispenses US dollars.

Sights

Heredia was founded in 1706, and in true Spanish-colonial style it has several interesting old landmarks arranged around **Parque Central**. To the east is **Iglesia de la Inmaculada Concepción**, built in 1797 and still in use. Opposite the church steps you can take a break and watch old men playing checkers at the park tables

while weddings and funerals come and go. The church's thick-walled, squat construction is attractive in a Volkswagen Beetle sort of way. The solid shape has withstood the earthquakes that have damaged or destroyed almost all the other buildings in Costa Rica that date from this time.

To the north of the park is an 1867 guard tower called simply **El Fortín**, which is the last remaining turret of a Spanish fortress and the official symbol of Heredia. This area is a national historic site, but passageways are closed to the public.

At the park's northeast corner, **Casa de la Cultura** (☎ 2262 2505; cnr Calle Central & Av Central; www.heredianet.co.cr/casacult.htm, in Spanish; admission free; ☎ hours vary), formerly the residence of

President Alfredo González Flores (1913-17), now houses permanent historical exhibits as well as rotating art shows and other events.

The campus of **Universidad Nacional**, six blocks east of Parque Central, is a great place for doing a little guerrilla learning – strap on your backpack (the small one) and follow the student crowds. While you're on campus, keep an eye out for posters advertising cultural offerings and special events happening around the city. Also, check out the marine biology department's **Museo Zoomarino** (☎ 2277 3240; admission free; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri), where more than 2000 displayed specimens give an overview of Costa Rica's marine diversity. The Museo Zoomarino is not on campus, but located about 1km west of the university.

Courses

There are three Spanish-language schools in town: **Centro Panamericano de Idiomas** (☎ 2265 6306; www.cpi-edu.com), **Intercultura** (☎ 2260 8480, in the USA 800-552 2051; www.spanish-intercultura.com) and **Instituto Profesional de Educación Daza** (☎ 2238 3608; www.learnspanishcostarica.com). See also boxed text Spanish Schools in the Central Valley, p130, for more details.

Sleeping

Most travelers prefer to stay in nearby San José, though there are plenty of budget hotels in town that cater to students – if you like paper-thin walls. Plenty have cheap monthly rates.

Hotel Las Flores (☎ 2261 8147; www.hotel-lasflores.com; Av 12 btwn Calles 12 & 14; s/d/tr US\$12/24/36; P) Though it's a bit of a walk from downtown, this hotel has a warm, welcoming management and bright, sunny rooms complete with steamy showers and thick mattresses.

Hotel Ceos (☎ 2262 2628; cnr Calle 4 & Av 1; s/d/tr US\$20/30/40; P) This is another good option as newly furnished rooms have private solar-heated showers, cable TV and a large communal balcony – perfect for those Imperial-swigging nights. Check out the old photos that adorn the walls of the ground floor.

Hotel Heredia (☎ 2238 0880; Calle 6 btwn Avs 3 & 5; s/d/tr US\$20/30/40; P) This adorable white-and-blue house features sparkling rooms with private solar-heated showers and cable TV, not to mention plenty of green space for lounging about.

Hotel Valladolid (☎ 2260 2905; valladolid@racsa.co.cr; cnr Calle 7 & Av 7; s/d incl continental breakfast US\$80/93/107; P) Fully equipped rooms at the most established hotel in town caters primarily to discerning business travelers. It's a good choice if you're looking for a few added comforts, namely a sauna, Jacuzzi and top-floor solarium.

Eating

In the grand tradition of university towns worldwide, Heredia offers plenty of spots for pizza slices and cheap vegetarian grub, not to mention one branch of every fast-food outlet imaginable.

El Testy (Cnr Calle 2 & Av 2; dishes US\$1-5) Here it is folks, your one-stop shopping for burritos, ravioli, hamburgers, tacos, chicken and fries. Feeling indecisive? It also sells ice cream, candy, cookies and snacks!

Vishnu Mango Verde (Calle 7 btwn Avs Central & 1; dishes US\$3-5; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) This branch of the famous San José chain is the top spot in town for cheap and healthy vegetarian fare – your stomach (and your karma) will thank you.

Cowboy Steakhouse (Calle 7 btwn Avs 3 & 5; dishes US\$4-9; ☎ 5-11pm Mon-Sat) A rough-and-ready all-wood shack that serves up the best cuts of beef in town. As the title suggests, steak is the focal point, making it a meat-lovers' must. But the hearty salads are worth a nibble as well.

You can fill up for a few hundred colones at the **Mercado Municipal** (Calle 2 btwn Avs 6 & 8; ☎ 6am-6pm), with sodas to spare and plenty of very fresh groceries. **Más X Menos** (Av 6 btwn Calles 4 & 6; ☎ 8:30am-9pm) has everything else.

Drinking & Entertainment

With a thriving student body, there's no shortage of live music, cultural events and the odd happening. For info on what's going on, look for fliers near the campus or ask a student to fill you in on the scene.

The university district is hopping most nights of the week (Tico students live it up like you wouldn't believe). **La Choza** (Av Central btwn Calles 7 & 9), **El Bulevar** (cnr Calle 7 & Av Central) and **El Rancho de Fofó** (Av Central btwn Calles 5 & 7) are three popular student spots.

After a few rounds of beers and bocas (savory bar snacks), the party really kicks off at the **Miraflores Discotheque** (Av 2 btwn Calles Central & 2), on the southern edge of the Parque Central. Stay aware, however: Heredia can get dodgy

'NO TLC'

No doubt you'll see the graffiti sign 'No TLC' on almost every corner. This is in reference to the free trade agreement, DR-Cafta (known as TLC in Costa Rica), which was narrowly passed in October 2007. The whole country was divided down the middle on the issue. And it's still a sensitive subject not to be brought up lightly, especially in this industrious part of the country where the agreement has the most impact. We spoke to two politics students from Heredia to give us the opposing arguments:

Si

Juande Catarini: Whether we like it or not, we need free trade with the US. Regardless of their political actions over the years, we can't afford not to be affiliated with them. We're too small. Also, internally, there is one major reason we needed to approve the TLC, and that's competition. For too long, major sections of the market had become monopolized by government-backed institutions. The best example of this is the national telecommunications company, ICE, which has been running an inefficient service for way too long. ICE was at the center of the debate because they had the major monopoly for all of Costa Rica's telecommunications. While I don't expect costs to change dramatically under the influx of foreign competitors, I do expect the quality of service to improve greatly. This will benefit the country in every angle of commerce, and it will finally allow us to compete in the global call-center market, in which we have been lagging behind.

If we had opted out of TLC, our formerly leading, but now slow-paced, technology industry would have been left eating the dust of our competitor countries. In the early '90s we were light years ahead of the rest of Central America in technological infrastructure, but we have rested

at nighttime, though there is an established police presence.

Getting There & Away

There is no central bus terminal, and buses leave from bus stops near Parque Central and market areas. Buses for Barva leave from near **Cruz Roja** (Red Cross; Calle Central btwn Avs 1 & 3). Buses to San José de la Montaña and Sacramento, with connections to Volcán Barva in Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo, leave from Avenida 8 between Calles 2 and 4. Ask around the market for information on other destinations.

Alajuela US\$0.75, 20 minutes, depart from corner of Avenida Central and Calle 9 every 15 minutes from 6am to 10pm.

Barva US\$0.50, 20 minutes, depart from Calle Central between Avenidas 1 and 3 every 30 minutes from 5:15am to 11:30pm.

Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí US\$2, 3½ hours, depart from the corner of Avenida Central and Calle 9 at 11am, 1:30pm and 3pm.

San José US\$0.50, 20 minutes, depart from Avenida 4 between Calles Central and 1 every 20 to 30 minutes from 4:40am to 11pm.

Santa Bárbara US\$0.50, 20 minutes, depart from Avenida 6 between Calles 6 and 8 every 10 to 30 minutes from 5:15am to 11:30pm.

Taxis are plentiful and can take you to San José (US\$5) or the airport (US\$8).

BARVA

Just 2.5km north of Heredia is the historic town of Barva, which dates from 1561 and has been declared a national monument. The town center is packed with 17th- and 18th-century buildings, and is centered on the towering **Iglesia San Bartolomé**. With its scenic mountainside location and colonial ambience, the town is a popular residence among the Costa Rican elite – Cleto González Víquez, twice president of Costa Rica, used to live here. The town is perfect for a lazy afternoon stroll, and although Barva proper doesn't have any lodgings, some truly spectacular luxury hotels are just outside of town.

Sights

The most famous coffee roaster in Costa Rica, **Café Britt Finca** (☎ 2277 1600; www.coffeetour.com, www.cafébritt.com; adult with/without lunch US\$30/20, student US\$27/18; ☎ tours 11am year-round, 9am & 3pm in high season) is headquartered just 1km south of Barva. Although the tour is a bit pricey, it comes highly recommended by readers. For 90 minutes, bilingual guides will walk you through the plantation and the process-

on our laurels since then and we certainly can't afford to stay in our dreamy elevated bubble any longer. The momentum is with our progressive neighbors, and we don't want to lose our business to them.

We also have to look beyond our neighbors. How can we hope to trade and compete with rising world leaders such as China and India if we can't do the same with states on our own doorstep? Now we have to heal the bitter wounds, caused in large part by the old-fashioned unions, that this heated debate has inflicted on our country.

No

Carlos Angulo: If there's one glaringly obvious fact that has come to light from historical and contemporary international politics of late, it is that the US looks after its own interests and will pay any price to protect them. Granted, that's their prerogative, but all you have to do is look at the increasing unemployment in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Mexico to see that free trade with the US doesn't benefit Central American countries. Even Canada is at loggerheads with, and is constantly involved in international tribunals against, the US.

As a nation we have created a position of being the most socially developed country in Central America, and this is because historically we have maintained an independent position and rejected these treaties. While we don't want to go to their political extremes, both Venezuela and Cuba are proving that it's possible to prosper without favorable US trade. We will lose our sovereignty and become another pawn state that will be subject to the political and economical agenda of the US. In Costa Rica we have a certain way of going about business. It isn't always motivated or measured by profit margins, but by respect and trust. These values will be forgotten if we involve ourselves with the hyper-capitalism that TLC will encourage.

ing center where you can learn the difference between regular and organic coffee-growing processes, as well as the history of coffee production in Costa Rica. And don't worry – there are plenty of free samples. For an extra US\$5, you can combine your tour with a one-hour trip to the *benefico* (processing plant), where you can learn about the wonders of coffee-bean harvesting. Café Britt operates a daily shuttle that will pick you up from San José – call for a reservation. If you drive or take the bus, you can't miss the signs between Heredia and Barva.

Located in Santa Lucía de Barva, about 1.5km southeast of Barva, the **Museo de Cultura Popular** (☎ 2260 1619; admission US\$2; ☎ 9am-4pm) recreates colonial Costa Rica in a century-old farmhouse, restored with period pieces and ingenious tools. If you're lucky, docents in period costumes may use the beehive-shaped ovens to make typical Tico foods, which you can purchase anytime at the **garden café** (dishes US\$2-5; ☎ 11am-2pm).

INBio (☎ 2507 8107; www.inbio.ac.cr/en/default2.html; adult/child/student US\$15/8/12; ☎ 7:30am-4pm), the El Instituto Nacional de Bioversidad (the National Biodiversity Institute), is a private research center that was formed in 1989 to catalog the biological diversity of Costa Rica

and promote its sustainable use. Visitors to the center spend their time at **INBioparque**, a high-quality collection of attractions, including biodiversity exhibition halls, wildlife-viewing stations, a butterfly garden, an aquarium, a working farm, medicinal plant garden and sugar mill. However, the center functions primarily as a biodiversity management center, and if you have an appropriate background, there are great volunteer opportunities here.

Festivals & Events

Each July and August, the Hotel Chalet Tirol (below) is the site of the **International Music Festival**, which, true to the hotel's Austrian motif, is heavy on the classical music.

Sleeping

More affordable accommodations can be found in nearby Heredia (p143), but each of the following luxury hotels comes highly recommended.

Hotel Chalet Tirol (☎ 2267 6222; www.costarica-bureau.com/hotels/tirol.htm; d chalet US\$80; ☎) Between Monte de la Cruz and Club Campesino El Castillo, you'll find this quaint country hotel, formerly the residence of Costa Rican president Alfredo González Flores. The cloud-forest enclave is rustic-chic, with comfy

Austrian-style chalets arranged around open-air common spaces, including a pizza parlor where you can relax and watch the mist drift by. The hotel plays host to an international music festival in the summertime.

Hotel Bougainvillea (☎ 2244 1414; www.hb.co.cr; [s/d/tr/steUS\\$102/110/122/133](https://www.google.com/maps/place/Hotel+Bougainvillea/@10.983333,-84.233333,15z); P) In the town of Santo Domingo de Heredia, on the road between Heredia and San José, this luxury property is situated among stately coffee fincas, old-growth trees and stunning flowers. Wood-accented rooms and suites have dramatic balconies that overlook either the nearby mountains or the flickering lights of San José. Several private trails wind through the jungle and fruit orchards, passing the swimming pool, restaurant and tennis courts en route to the hills. Best of all, this rural wonderland comes with free hourly shuttles to downtown San José.

Finca Rosa Blanca (☎ 2269 9392; www.fincarosa.com; d US\$250-350; P) Just outside Santa Bárbara, this honeymoon-ready confection of gorgeous garden villas and architecturally outstanding suites, cloaked in fruit trees that shade trails and cascading rivers, ranks as one of the most exclusive hotels in Costa Rica. Rooms with balconies overlooking the rain forest are individually and lavishly appointed; one tops a tower with a 360-degree view, reached by a winding staircase made from a single tree trunk. Shower in an artificial waterfall, take a moonlight dip in the sculpted garden pool and hot tub, or have a romantic dinner.

Getting There & Around

Half-hourly buses travel between Heredia and Barva (US\$0.75, 20 minutes), and pick up in front of the church.

PARQUE NACIONAL BRAULIO CARRILLO

Thick virgin forest, countless waterfalls, swift rivers and deep canyons – it will be difficult to believe that you are only 30 minutes north of San José when you're walking around this underexplored national park. Braulio Carrillo has an extraordinary biodiversity attributable to the steep range of altitudes, from the misty 2906m cloud-forest camp sites atop massive Volcán Barva to the lush, humid 50m lowlands stretching toward the Caribbean Sea.

The park's creation was the result of a unique compromise between conservation-

ists and developers. For more than a century, San José's only link to Puerto Limón was limited to the crumbling railway and a slow rural road. In the 1970s, however, government and industry agreed that a sleek modern highway was required to link the nation's capital to its most important port. But the only feasible route was through a low pass between Volcán Barva and Volcán Irazú, which was still virgin rain forest – conservationists were not happy campers.

The compromise was simple – Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo (named after Costa Rica's third president, who conceived the cultivation of coffee) was established in 1978, off-limits to development beyond a single major highway to bisect it. Conservationists rejoiced in the creation of a nearly 48,000-hectare national park (we're talking the size of Rhode Island!) that was comprised of 85% primary forest, and protected the watershed for San José. Government and industry rejoiced in the creation of the San José–Guápiles highway, which was completed in 1987, effectively cutting the park into two smaller preserved areas (though it's still administered as a single unit).

Driving through the park will give you an idea of what Costa Rica looked like prior to the 1950s – rolling hills cloaked in mountain rain forest. About 75% of Costa Rica was rain forest in the 1940s, while today less than one quarter of the country retains its natural vegetative cover.

Orientation & Information

The two most popular hiking areas can be accessed from the San José–Guápiles highway. At the southern end of the park is the **Zurquí ranger station** (☎ 2257 0992; admission US\$6; ☎ 7am-4pm), 19km northeast of San José, while **Quebrada González ranger station** (☎ 2233 4533; admission US\$6; ☎ 7am-4pm) is at the northeast corner, 22km past the Zurquí tunnel. There is a guarded parking lot, toilets and well-marked trails.

People who want to climb Volcán Barva on a day trip or camp overnight can stop by the **Barva Sector ranger station** (☎ 2261 2619; ☎ 7am-4pm), in the southwest of the park, 3km north of Sacramento.

There are also two remote outposts, El Ceibo and Magasay, in the extreme northwest corner of the park.

Temperatures can fluctuate drastically in the park, and annual rainfall can be as high as

8000mm. The best time to go is the supposedly 'dry' season (from December to April), but it is liable to rain then, too. Bring warm clothing, appropriate wet-weather gear and good hiking boots.

Wildlife-Watching

Birding in the park is excellent, and commonly sighted species include parrots, toucans, hummingbirds and even quetzals at higher elevations. Other rare but sighted birds include eagles and umbrella birds.

Mammals are difficult to see due to the lushness of the vegetation, though deer, pacas, monkeys and tepezcuintle (the park's mascot) are frequently seen. Pumas, jaguar and ocelots are present but rare.

Hiking

From Zurquí, there is a short but steep 1km trail that leads to a viewpoint. You can also follow the **Sendero Histórico**, which follows the crystal-clear Río Hondura to its meeting point with the Río Sucio (Dirty River), whose yellow waters carry volcanic minerals.

From Quebrada González, you can follow the 2.8km **Sendero La Botella** past a series of waterfalls into Patria Canyon. There are several other unmarked trails that lead through this area, including a few places where you are permitted to camp, although there are no facilities.

Keep an eye out for the distinctive huge-leaved Gunnera plants, which quickly colonize steep and newly exposed parts of the montane rain forest. The large leaves can protect a person from a sudden tropical downpour – hence the plant's nickname *sombrilla del pobre* (poor folks' umbrella).

Climbing Volcán Barva

Climbing Volcán Barva is a good four- to five-hour round-trip adventure along a well-maintained trail. Because of its relative inaccessibility, there is a good chance you can commune with the volcano solo. Begin on the western side of the park at the Sacramento entrance, north of Heredia. From there the signed track climbs to the summit at a leisurely pace. Trails are often muddy, and you should be prepared for rain any time of the year.

The track leads to three lagoons – Lagos Danta, Barva and Copey – at the volcano's summit, and several spur trails lead to water-

WARNING

Unfortunately, there have been many reports of thefts from cars parked at entrances to some trails in Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo, as well as armed robbers accosting tourists hiking on the trails or walking along the highway. Readers have reported hearing shots fired on the trails, and hitchhikers have reported being told it is a dangerous area. Stay alert. Don't leave your car parked anywhere along the main highway. As a general rule, you should always register at a station before setting out on a hike. When possible, it's also advised that you either hike with a park ranger or arrange for a guide through any of the stations. You can also visit the park as part of a tour, which is usually arranged in San José.

falls and other scenic spots along the way. If you wish to continue from Barva north into the lowlands, you will find that the trails are unmarked and not as obvious. It is possible, regardless, to follow northbound 'trails' (overgrown and unmaintained) all the way through the park to La Selva (p519) and La Virgen (p511). A Tico who has done it reported that it took him four days, and it is a bushwhacking adventure only for those used to roughing it and able to use a topographical map and compass.

If you're visiting on a day trip, get there as early as possible as the mornings tend to be clear and the afternoons cloudy. The nighttime temperatures can drop to several degrees below freezing. Camping is allowed at the basic **campsites** (per person US\$2) near the chilly but impossibly scenic summit, though you will need to bring your own drinking water.

Getting There & Away

Both Zurquí and Quebrada González stations are on Hwy 32 between San José and Guápiles. Buses between San José and either Guápiles or Puerto Viejo can drop you off 2km from the entrance, but pick-up on the major freeway will be dangerous and difficult.

Barva station can be reached by following the decent paved road north from Heredia through Barva and San José de la Montaña to Sacramento, where a signed, 3km-long, 4WD-only trail leads north to the entrance.

El Ceibo and Magasay can be accessed via rough roads from La Virgen (p511).

RAINFOREST AERIAL TRAM

The brainchild of biologist Don Perry, a pioneer of rain forest canopy research, the **Rainforest Aerial Tram** (☎ 2257 5961; www.rainforesttram.com; adult/student & child US\$50/27.50) is a highly recommended splurge to the heights of the cloud forest in an airborne gondola.

The pricey entrance fee is worthwhile, as it includes a trained guide who can point out all the small and important things you'd otherwise miss, and who also leads the (optional) hike through the 400-hectare reserve, contiguous with Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo. Although the area is rich with wildlife, the sheer density of the vegetation makes observing animals difficult.

The 2.6km aerial tram ride takes 40 minutes each way, affording a unique view of the rain forest and unusual plant-spotting and birding opportunities. Amazingly, the whole project was constructed with almost no impact on the rain forest (canopy tour operators could learn a thing or two; see boxed text Canopy Fighting, p178). A narrow footpath follows the tram, and all 250,000kg of construction material was carried in on foot or by a cable system to avoid erosion, with the exception of the 12 towers supporting the tram that were brought in by helicopter by the Nicaraguan Air Force (needless to say, pacifist Costa Rica is decidedly lacking in air support).

From the parking lot a truck takes you about 3km to the tram-loading point, where

there is a small exhibit area, restaurant and gift shop. Here you can see an orientation video, and there are short hiking trails that you can use for as long as you want. Tram riders should be prepared for rain – although the cars have tarpaulin roofs, the sides are open to the elements.

Driving from San José, the well-signed turnoff to the tram is just past the national-park entrance, on your right. To get here by public transport from San José, take the bus for Guápiles from Terminal Caribe (US\$1.50, 1¼ hours), departing hourly from 6:30am to 7pm, and ask the driver to let you out at the *teleferico*. Tram staff will help you flag down a return bus.

MORAVIA

Just 6km northeast of San José, Moravia was an important center for Costa Rica's coffee fincas. Workers hauled sacks of ruby-red fruit down hillsides and into the town, where the beans were packed on oxcarts and transported to nearby *beneficos*. After being milled and dried, the beans were then shipped to cafés throughout Europe and North America.

The coffee industry has sadly moved on, though Moravia remains in the spotlight as a famous production center for handicrafts, including leather, ceramics, jewelry and wood. A visit here is a popular day trip from San José, and perfect for filling up on souvenirs before heading home.

Around and nearby the spacious Parque Central are several stores. Some started as saddle shops but now sell a variety of leather

and other goods. Look for **Artesanía Bribri**, which sells work made by the Bribri people of the Caribbean slope, and the pleasant **Mercado de Artesanías Las Garzas**, a festive complex with arts and crafts stores, a few *sodas* and clean toilets. It's 100m south and 75m east of the *municipio* (town hall).

Local buses to San Vicente de Moravia depart San José from Avenida 3 between Calles 3 and 5.

CARTAGO AREA

The stunning riverbank setting of the city of Cartago was handpicked by Spanish Governor Juan Vázquez de Coronado, who said that he had 'never seen a more beautiful valley.' Cartago was founded as Costa Rica's first capital in 1563, and Coronado's successors endowed the city with the country's finest Spanish colonial architecture. However, as things tend to happen in Costa Rica, Cartago was destroyed during the 1723 eruption of Volcán Irazú, with remaining landmarks taken care of by earthquakes in 1841 and 1910.

Although the city was relegated to backwater status when the seat of government was moved to San José in 1823, the surrounding area, particularly the Orosi Valley, flourished during the days of the coffee trade. Today this tradition continues to leave its mark on the landscape, and although Cartago is merely a provincial capital, it is an important commercial hub and continues to retain the most important religious site in the country.

CARTAGO

After the rubble was cleared, nobody bothered to rebuild Cartago (population 127,000) to its former quaint specifications – though it is an attractive modern city, in a heavily reinforced sort of way. One exception is the bright white Basílica de Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles, which is visible from any part of the city and stands out like a snow-capped mountain above the plane of one-story edifices. It is considered to be the holiest shrine in Costa Rica and has been religiously rebuilt after each of the city's trials and tribulations.

The city is thrown briefly into the spotlight each year on August 2, when pilgrims

from every corner of the country descend on the basilica to say their most serious prayers. The remainder of the year, Cartago exists mainly as a bustling commercial and residential center, though the beauty of the surrounding mountains helps to take the edge off modern life.

Orientation & Information

The city is based around the standard Latin American grid system. As always, street signs are infrequent and sometimes inaccurate. If in doubt, look for the ever-present cathedral and use that as your bearing. There is no tourist office in Cartago.

Banco Nacional (cnr Av 4 & Calle 5) Several banks downtown change money, including Banco Nacional.

Hospital Max Peralta (☎ 2550 1999; Av 5 btwn Calles 1 & 3) Offers emergency health care.

Internet Alta Velocidad (Calle 1 btwn Avs 1 & 3; per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am-9pm) Check your email here, 50m east of Las Ruinas.

Sights

The most important site in Cartago is the **Basílica de Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles** (cnr Av 2 & Calle 16), which has a formal Byzantine grace and an airy spaciousness, with fine stained-glass windows and a polished-wood interior. This latest version is the result of a 1926 makeover that followed its near-total destruction in the 1910 earthquake. Though the outer walls have crumbled numerous times since 1635, La Negrita (a famed holy 'Black Virgin' statue) has miraculously remained intact, and she continues to sit on a golden altar beset with precious stones. The basilica is absolutely jammed during pilgrimages and holy days, but it's the perfect atmosphere for experiencing the aura of La Negrita.

Las Ruinas de la Parroquia (cnr Av 2 & Calle 2), or Iglesia del Convento, was built in 1575 as a shrine to St James the Apostle, destroyed by the 1841 earthquake, rebuilt a few years later and then destroyed again in the 1910 earthquake. Today only the outer walls of the church remain, but 'the Ruins' are a popular spot for picnicking and people-watching.

For an insight into Costa Rica's pre-Columbian cultures, there are two local museums worth visiting. The **Elias Leiva Museum of Ethnography** (☎ 2551 0895; Calle 3 btwn Avs 3 & 5; ☎ 7am-2pm Mon-Fri) has a fine display of historical artifacts, while the **Kirietí Indian History**

A NATURAL EDUCATION

The **Cerro Dantas Wildlife Refuge** (www.cerrodantas.co.cr) is a research center and education facility that works with scientists, teachers and students to promote environmental conservation. In addition to protecting rare fauna, including jaguars, tapirs and quetzal, Cerro Dantas runs a variety of educational programs aimed at students, teachers and researchers. Day and long-term visitors are welcome.

Programs are varied, but the emphasis is on various facets of the ecosystem, including endangered-species preservation, environmental protection, rain forest ecology and global warming. Basic rates are quoted on individual bases, with or without meals, while special rates are available for students, teachers and researchers. It is advised that you make reservations 30 days in advance as space is often limited.

Cerro Dantas is headquartered in Monte de la Cruz, and is a part of the large Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo. For more information on the programs offered, visit the website or contact the refuge at pavoreal@racsa.co.cr.



Museum (☎ 2573 7113; 🕒 10am-4pm Mon-Fri), 6km southwest of Cartago in Tobosi, emphasizes history through documentation.

Sleeping & Eating

Lodging options are limited and your best bet for food is to stroll along Avenidas 2 and 4 downtown, where *sodas* and bakeries can be found.

Hotel Dinastia (☎ 2551 7057; Calle 3; d without/with bathroom US\$13/16) The cheap price and private hot-water bathrooms balance out the thin walls and aging rooms.

Los Angeles Lodge (☎ 2551 0957, 2591 4169; Av 4 btwn Calles 14 & 16; s/d incl full breakfast US\$30/35; 📶) With its balconies overlooking the Plaza de la Basílica, this comfy B&B stands out with spacious and comfortable rooms, hot showers and a big breakfast made to order by the cheerful owners.

La Puerta del Sol (Av 4 btwn Calles 14 & 16; mains US\$3-6; 🕒 8am-midnight) This *soda* opposite the basilica is a good choice for its attractive dining room and good variety of cooked-to-order dishes.

Getting There & Away

While Cartago may not be a hotbed of excitement, the surrounding areas provide plenty to do – from botanical gardens, serene mountain towns and organic farms to an active volcano – all easy to reach via local buses and never more than an hour or two away. Most buses arrive along Avenida 2 and go as far as the basilica before returning to the main terminal on Avenida 4. The following buses serve destinations in the area:

Finca la Flor de Paraíso (US\$1) Take a La Flor/Barrisito/El Yas bus from in front of Padres Capuchinos church, 150m southeast of Las Ruinas. Get off at the pink church in La Flor; the entrance to the finca is 100m to the south.

Paraíso & Lankester Gardens (US\$0.75, depart from the corner of Calle 4 and Avenida 1 hourly from 7am to 10pm) For the gardens, ask the driver to drop you off at the turnoff. From there, walk 750m to the entrance.

Orosi (US\$0.75, 40 minutes, depart from the corner of Calle 4 and Avenida 1 hourly from 8am to 10pm Monday to Saturday) The bus will stop in front of the Orosi Mirador.

San José US\$0.75, 45 minutes, depart from Avenida 4 between Calles 2 and 4, north of Parque Central every 15 minutes.

Turrialba US\$1.50, 1½ hours, depart from Avenida 3 between Calles 8 and 10, in front of Tribunales de Justicia, every 45 minutes from 6am to 10pm weekdays, 8:30am, 11:30am, 1:30pm, 3pm and 5:45pm weekends.

Volcán Irazú (US\$5, one hour) Depart only on weekends from Padres Capuchinos church, 150m southeast of Las Ruinas. The bus originates in San José at 8am, stops in Cartago at about 8:30am and returns from Irazú at 12:30pm.

PARQUE NACIONAL VOLCÁN IRAZÚ

Looming quietly (though not too quietly) 19km northeast of Cartago, Irazú, which derives its name from the indigenous word *ara-tzu* (thunderpoint), is the largest and highest (3432m) active volcano in Costa Rica. In 1723 the Spanish governor of Costa Rica, Diego de la Haya Fernández, watched helplessly as the volcano unleashed its destruction on the city of Cartago. Since then 15 major eruptions have been recorded, and although Diego de la Haya Fernández never restored Cartago to its former grandeur, his name was bestowed upon one of Irazú's craters.

The volcano's most recent major eruption on March 19, 1963, welcomed the visiting US president John F Kennedy with a rain of hot volcanic ash that blanketed most of the Central Valley (it piled up to a depth of more than 0.5m). During the two-year eruption, agricultural lands northeast of the volcano were devastated, while clogged waterways flooded the region intermittently. In 1994 Irazú unexpectedly belched a cloud of sulfurous gas, though it quickly quieted down. At the time of writing, Irazú was slumbering peacefully aside from a few hissing fumaroles, though it's likely that farmers will be reminded again why the soil in the Central Valley is so rich. For more information on predicting a volcanic eruption, see boxed text Feelin' Hot, Hot, Hot!, p243.

The national park was established in 1955 to protect 2309 hectares around the base of the volcano. The summit is a bare landscape of volcanic-ash craters. The principal crater is 1050m in diameter and 300m deep; the Diego de la Haya Crater is 690m in diameter, 100m deep and contains a small lake; and the smallest, Playa Hermosa Crater, is slowly being colonized by sparse vegetation. There is also a pyroclastic cone, which consists of rocks that were fragmented by volcanic activity.

Information

There's a small **information center** (☎ 2551 9398; admission to park & center US\$7; 🕒 8am-3:30pm) and basic café but no accommodations or camping facilities. Note that cloud cover starts thickening, even under the best conditions, by about 10am, about the same time that the weekend bus rolls in. If you're on one of those buses, do yourself a favor and don't dally – head straight for the crater. Folks with cars will be glad that they made the extra effort to arrive early.

From the summit it is possible to see both the Pacific and the Caribbean, but it is rarely clear enough. The best chance for a clear view is in the very early morning during the dry season (January to April). It tends to be cold, windy and cloudy on the summit, and there's an annual rainfall of 2160mm – come prepared with warm and rainproof clothes.

Although not nearly as crowded as Volcán Poás (p139), Irazú is still one of the most popular destinations in the Central Valley.

Hiking

From the information center, a 1km trail leads to a viewpoint over the craters; a longer, steeper trail leaves from behind the toilets and gets you closer to the craters (note that this trail is intermittently closed). While hiking, be on the lookout for high-altitude bird species, such as the volcano junco.

Tours

Tours are arranged by a variety of San José operators and cost US\$30 to US\$60 for a half-day tour, and up to US\$100 for a full day combined with lunch and visits to the Lankester Gardens and the Orosi Valley.

Tours from hotels in Orosi (US\$25 to US\$40) can also be arranged – these may include lunch and visits to the basilica in Cartago or sites around the Orosi Valley.

Eating

Restaurant 1910 (☎ 2536 6063; mains US\$4-9) It's worth stopping here for lunch or dinner to see its collection of old photographs documenting the 1910 earthquake that completed the destruction of colonial Cartago. Cuisine is standard Tico fare, though there are a few European-style dishes available. It's about 500m north of the Pacayas turnoff.

Getting There & Away

Barring a 20km hike, there are three ways to get here on weekdays: an organized tour; a US\$30 to US\$40 taxi from Tierra Blanca, which includes the driver waiting for you at the park for a few hours; or by car. Drivers can take Hwy 8 from Cartago, which begins at the northeast corner of the plaza and continues 19km to the summit.

Frustratingly, the only public transport to Irazú departs from San José (US\$4.50, 1½ hours) on Saturday and Sunday. It stops in Cartago (US\$4, one hour), departing at about 8:30am. The bus departs from Irazú at 12:30pm.

VALLE DE OROSI

This river valley and renowned road trip southeast of Cartago is famous for its mountain vistas, colonial churches (one in ruins), hot springs, orchid garden, lake formed by a hydroelectric facility, its truly wild national park, and coffee – lots and lots of coffee. A 60km scenic loop of the valley winds through a landscape of rolling hills terraced with shade-grown coffee plantations and expansive valleys dotted with pastoral villages. If you're lucky enough to have a rental car (or a good bicycle), you're in for a treat, though it's still possible to navigate most of the loop via public buses.

ROAD-TRIP PIT STOPS

Get out of the car and stretch your legs at some of the best pit stops in the Central Valley:

- Pick up some famous Turrialban Cheese for an on-the-road snack, either at the weekly Turrialban Farmers Market or at **La Castellana** (p160).
- Park at the area's most spectacular lookout point at **Mirador Orosi** (right).
- After a long and winding drive through endless coffee fields, recharge your batteries by getting a cup o' joe straight from the source at **Finca Cristina** (right) organic coffee farm.
- Soothe your pedal-weary feet in the hot springs at **Los Balnearios** (opposite).
- Fill the boot up with all kinds of tat at one of the woodwork shops in **Sarchi** (p136).

The loop road starts 8km southeast of Cartago in Paraíso, and then heads south to Orosi (opposite). At this point you can either continue south to Parque Nacional Tapantí-Macizo Cerro de la Muerte (p155) or loop back to Paraíso via Ujarrás (p156).

Paraíso

The town of Paraíso has been absorbed into the urban sprawl of the provincial capital, only 8km away, and fails to capture the attention of travelers. Although the concrete-block houses lining the road into town are hardly picturesque, the Orosi Valley emerges just outside of Paraíso. A few kilometers further along the road to Orosi is the **Mirador Orosi**, which is the official scenic overlook, complete with toilets, a parking lot and plenty of great photo opportunities. There are also two noteworthy sights near Paraíso that are definitely worth visiting before heading into the valley.

The University of Costa Rica now runs the exceptional **Lankester Gardens** (☎ 2552 3247; jbl@cariari.ucr.ac.cr; admission US\$3.50; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm), which was started by British orchid enthusiast Charles Lankester in 1917. Orchids are the big draw, with 800 at their showiest from February to April. In addition, you can see lush areas of bromeliads, palms, secondary tropical forest, heliconias and other tropical plants from the paved trails winding through the gardens.

With many plant species labeled and informative plaques throughout the unbelievable grounds, this is a shady introduction to Costa Rica's wealth of flora before you hit the wilder (and unlabeled) national parks. This is also one of the very few places where foreigners can legally purchase orchids to take home. Guided walks through the gardens are offered on the half hour from 8:30am to about 2:30pm daily. The entrance to the gardens is well signed, 5km west of Paraíso on the road to Cartago.

Two kilometers east of Paraíso on the road to Turrialba is **Finca Cristina** (☎ 2574 6426; www.cafecristina.com; admission US\$10), a working organic coffee farm that is open to visitors by appointment only (call ahead for a reservation). Linda and Ernie have been farming in Costa Rica since 1977, and a 90-minute tour of their *microbenefico* (miniprocessing plant) is a fantastic introduction to the processes of organic-coffee growing, harvesting and roast-

A NATURAL EDUCATION (PART II)

The **Finca la Flor de Paraíso** (www.la-flor-de-paraíso.org) is a nonprofit organic farm operated by the Association for the Development of Environmental and Human Consciousness (Asodecah). The farm operates an 'Alternative Spanish Institute,' which combines formal Spanish-language education alongside the themes of environmental conservation and community development.

The farm also operates a volunteer-work program that emphasizes organic agriculture, reforestation, animal husbandry, medicinal-herb cultivation, construction, arts and crafts, community outreach and childhood education. Volunteers can rotate between projects, and are housed in onsite guesthouses and dormitories.

The cost for one week at the Alternative Spanish Institute, including 20 hours of classes, a local homestay and three daily vegetarian meals, is US\$370. Prices for the volunteer-work programs, including full room and board, are US\$15 daily for the first two weeks and US\$12 after the first two weeks. Prices for visitors on vacation, including private accommodation and guided hikes, are US\$22 for a day visit, US\$35 for two days and US\$210 for six days. All profits are invested directly into a number of community-development initiatives.

Finca la Flor de Paraíso is 7km northeast of Paraíso on the road to El Yas, and can be reached via buses from Cartago. For more information on the programs offered, visit the website or contact Asodecah at asodecah@racsa.co.cr.

ing. Finca Cristina also sells its product to guests at wholesale prices.

The most beautiful places to stay are just outside of town. On the road from Paraíso to Orosi stands **Orosi Valley Farm** (☎ 2533 3001; www.orosivalleyfarm.com; r incl breakfast US\$45; ☎), a picturesque old farmhouse with a trickling creek flowing through the grounds and jaw-dropping views of the lush green valley.

About 2km south of Paraíso, **Sanchirí Mirador** (☎ 2574 5454; www.sanchiri.com; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$47/60/70 ☎) is a delightful, family-run hotel that offers as good a reason as any to break up your trip. Older wooden cabins and newer concrete rooms are fairly basic, but it's wonderful to be able to linger amid the beauty of the natural surroundings. Even if you're not staying here, stop by the open-air restaurant (dishes US\$4 to US\$7), which faces out toward the valley and is a good consolation prize if you're pressing on. The complex is also home to a **butterfly garden** (adult/child US\$5/3), a picnic area and a system of trails that can be explored either on foot or horseback.

Orosi

This town was named for a Huetar chief who lived here at the time of the conquest. Spanish colonists quickly became enamored of the town's wealth of water – from lazy hot springs to bracing waterfalls – perfect climate and rich soil. So, in the typical fashion of the day, they decided to take property off Orosi's hands.

Orosi is one of the few colonial towns to survive Costa Rica's frequent earthquakes, which have left the whitewashed 1743 **Iglesia de San José Orosi** the oldest church still in use in Costa Rica. The roof of the church is a combination of thatched cane and ceramic tiling, while the altar is carved entirely out of wood and adorned with religious paintings of Mexican origin. Adjacent to the church is a small **museum** (☎ 2533 3051; admission US\$0.50; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) with some interesting examples of Spanish-colonial religious art and artifacts.

And while the attractive town has thus far managed to avoid the more rattling aspects of living in a volcanic region, it's got two big perks, namely the hot springs at **Los Balnearios** (☎ 2533 2156; admission US\$2; ☎ 7:30am-4pm), on the southwest side of town next to the Orosi Lodge, and **Los Patios** (☎ 2533 3009; admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-4pm Tue-Sun), 1.5km south of town. Los Balnearios is more convenient as it's in town, but Los Patios is a larger complex with a few more springs. Both, however, are modest affairs with simple pools of warm water that are popular with locals and a few foreigners in the know.

INFORMATION

Orosi Tourist Information & Arts Café (Otiac; ☎ 2533 3640; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Sat), two blocks south of the park, is run by the multilingual Toine and Sara, two long-term residents who have collected a wealth of information and advice on

HIGHER GROUNDS

In 1779 Spanish colonists discovered that the cool climate and rich volcanic soil of the Central Valley were perfectly suited for the cultivation of coffee, and began to terrace the hillsides with massive plantations. Since dried beans are relatively nonperishable and thus easy to ship, coffee quickly surpassed cacao, tobacco and sugar in importance, and became the major source of revenue for the colony as early as 1829. By the late 19th century (thanks to a strong push by the young independent government), Costa Rican coffee was being served in cafés throughout Europe, and became famous for its high caffeine content and acidic, multidimensional flavor.

In the past 20 years, however, the Costa Rican coffee market has suffered greatly. Following a collapse in the world quota cartel system, the world coffee price plummeted nearly 40% in just a few years. Although the market eventually stabilized in 1994, this was the same year that Vietnam entered the world market following the lifting of the US trade embargo. Since the market rewarded the efficiency of Vietnamese coffee suppliers, many coffee-exporting nations (Costa Rica included) lost a large percentage of their traditional market share.

Today, Costa Rican coffee continues to be grown in the provinces of Alajuela, Heredia and Cartago. Harvesting occurs primarily in the dry season, and is dependent on cheap, seasonal labor (predominantly Nicaraguan migrant workers). Once picked, the ripened berries are transported to *beneficos*, where they are separated from the fruit and dried in the sun. Green coffee beans are then vacuum sealed to retain their characteristic acidity, and shipped to roasters throughout the world.

In recent years, it's ironic that the price of green coffee beans has plummeted at the same time that the price of a cup of coffee has skyrocketed. While coffee suppliers like Starbucks continue to run lucrative enterprises, coffee farmers (not to mention migrant workers) are receiving an absurdly small percentage of the profits. This phenomenon initiated a push for fair trade, which is an economic (and increasingly political) term referring to the unhindered flow of goods and services between countries. When a coffee advertises itself as fair trade, it is usually sold at a sustainable price to ensure that profits are more evenly distributed.

With *Cafta* (or *TLC* as it's locally known) on the horizon, trade barriers are about to be redefined throughout the Americas. However, since Costa Rica is a comparatively small player in Latin America, it is difficult to say whether this legislation will be enough to secure a market niche in light of the growing production capabilities of countries like Brazil (see p144).

the valley. They organize a variety of outings to surrounding volcanoes and hot springs for the traveler on a budget, as well as guided walks (US\$10), camping and overnight stays at the private **Monte Sky Reserve** (per person incl meals US\$25).

In addition to providing the usual tourist services, Otiac functions as a cultural hall, town center and café. It's also a great place for interacting with both travelers and locals. If you're looking for information on volunteering, teaching English or becoming involved in environmental conservation or community development, Otiac is an invaluable resource.

PCOrosi (☎ 2533 3302; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-7pm) has a reasonably fast internet connection.

COURSES

Toine and Sara also run **Montaña Linda** (☎ 2533 3640; www.montanalinda.com), one of the most af-

fordable Spanish schools in the country. For more information, see boxed text Spanish Schools in the Central Valley, p130.

SLEEPING

Montaña Linda (☎ 2533 3640; www.montanalinda.com; camping per person US\$3.50, dm US\$6.50, s/d with shared bathroom US\$10.50/17, d with private bathroom US\$25; ☎ ☎) Two blocks south and three blocks west of the bus stop is this great budget option, which has a festive hostel environment, hot showers and kitchen privileges (US\$1) or excellent cheap home-cooked meals (US\$1 to US\$3). Accommodations are in dorms, but there are a few doubles for couples.

Hotel Reventazón (☎ 2533 3838; d incl breakfast US\$35-55; ☎) Clean, modern rooms sleeping three are two blocks west of Otiac, and come with a nice collection of creature comforts: cable TV, hot-water shower and fridge. The onsite restaurant (dishes US\$4 to US\$8) is

definitely touristy, but it does whip up a good casado.

Orosi Lodge (☎ 2533 3578; www.orosilodge.com; d US\$52; ☎) This peaceful hotel is run by a friendly German couple and has simple and intimate rooms with excellent views of the valley. Rooms include a private hot shower, a wet bar with minifridge and a shared balcony or patio – the perfect combination for a sun-downer. A small garden separates the rooms from the reception area, which is in the highly recommended Cafetería Orosi (mains US\$4 to US\$8, open from 7am to 7pm). The cafeteria serves the dreamy coffee you keep smelling in the air as well as a mix of homemade pastries, salads and sandwiches. Los Bañerios hot springs is just a few steps away.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

All buses stop about three blocks west of the *fútbol* (soccer) field; ask locally about specific destinations. Buses from Cartago (US\$0.50, 40 minutes) depart hourly from Calle 6, between Avenidas 1 and 3, close to the church.

Cachí Dam & Ruinas US\$0.50, 20 minutes, depart every 30 minutes from 6am to 9pm.

Cartago US\$0.75, 40 minutes, depart every 45 minutes from 5am to 9pm.

South of Orosi

If you're continuing south toward Parque Nacional Tapantí-Macizo Cerro de la Muerte rather than looping back via Ujarrás to Paraíso, you'll follow a rough road that slices through coffee plantations while passing the rural villages of Río Macho, Palomo and Purisil (13km). From Purisil, a dirt road leads a few more kilometers to **Parque Purisil** (☎ 2228 6630; ☎ 8am-5pm), where nature lovers can take a guided three-hour hike (US\$10) into the nearby cloud forests and anglers can catch dinner at the well-stocked trout pond (price per kilo US\$3). The onsite restaurant prepares your catch to order.

Note that buses from Cartago to Orosi occasionally continue as far south as Purisil, though you need to check with the driver to make sure.

Parque Nacional Tapantí-Macizo Cerro de la Muerte

Despite its unwieldy name, this **park** (admission US\$7; ☎ 6am-4pm) protects the rain-forested northern slopes of the Cordillera de

Talamanca, and boasts a rainy claim to fame – this is the wettest park in the entire country. In 2000 the park was expanded to 583 hectares, and now includes the infamous Cerro de la Muerte (p373). The 'Mountain of Death' marks the highest point on the Interamericana as well as the northernmost extent of the *páramo*, a highland shrub and tussock grass habitat that's commonly found throughout the Andes and is home to a variety of rare bird species.

On the other hand, Tapantí (as it's locally known) protects wild and mossy country that's fed by literally hundreds of rivers. Waterfalls abound, vegetation is thick and the wildlife is prolific, though not easy to see since the terrain is rugged and the trails are few. Nevertheless, Tapantí is a popular destination for dedicated bird-watchers, and opens at 6am to accommodate its avian-searching needs.

INFORMATION

There is an **information center** (☎ 6am-4pm) near the park entrance and a couple of trails leading to various attractions, including a picnic area, a swimming hole and a lookout with great views of a waterfall. Rainfall is about 2700mm in the lower sections but reaches more than 7000mm in some of the highest parts of the park – pack an umbrella. Fishing is allowed in season (from April to October; permit required), but the 'dry' season (from January to April) is generally considered the best time to visit.

WILDLIFE-WATCHING

Quetzals are said to nest on the western slopes of the valley, where the park information center is located. More than 300 other bird species have also been recorded in the park, including hummingbirds, parrots, toucans, trogons and eagles.

Though rarely sighted due to the thick vegetation, monkeys, coatis, pacas, tayras and even pumas, ocelots and oncollas are present.

HIKING

There are three signed trails leading from the information center, the longest a steep 4km round-trip, while a well-graded dirt road that is popular with mountain bikers runs through the northern section of the park. Unfortunately, the Tapantí is not open to backcountry hiking, and some visitors walk

away feeling as if they only caught a glimpse of the park. However, the birding here is legendary, and most people are satisfied simply being able to spot a large variety of birds in such a small area.

SLEEPING & EATING

There is a basic but adequate **guesthouse** (dm US\$5) with a shared kitchen and bathrooms at the ranger station. Cooked meals (US\$1 to US\$3) are available with prior notice.

On the road between Purisil and Tapantí, **Kiri Lodge** (☎ 2592 0638; s/d incl breakfast US\$25/35), has six rustic cabins with private hot showers resting on 50 mossy hectares of land. There are also expansive trails leading into the Río Macho Forest Preserve, which is adjacent to Tapantí and inhabited by much of the same wildlife. The restaurant (mains US\$3 to US\$6, open from 7am to 9pm) specializes in trout, which can be caught in the well-stocked pond and then served up anyway you like it.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

If you have your own car, you can take a good gravel road passable to all vehicles from Purisil to the park entrance.

Buses are a bit trickier. From Cartago, take an Orosi-bound bus (though make sure it's going to Purisil). From there, it's a 5km walk to the entrance. Or, you can take a **taxi** (☎ 2771 5116, 2551 2797) from Orosi to the park for about US\$12 one way.

Orosi to Paraíso

From Orosi, the loop road heads north and parallels the Río Orosi before swinging around the artificial **Lago de Cachi**. The lake was created following the construction of the **Cachí Dam** (the largest in the country), which supplies San José and the majority of the Central Valley with electricity. Buses run from Orosi to the dam and nearby ruins, though this stretch is best explored by car or bicycle.

About 2km south of the Cachí Dam is the **Casa del Soñador** (Dreamer's House; ☎ 2577 1186; admission free; ☎ 8am-6pm), a whimsical house designed and built by the renowned Tico carver Macedonio Quesada. Every detail of the construction, built largely of coffee branches and bamboo, is elaborately chiseled to divine effect. Quesada's sons, who have managed the workshop since Macedonio's death in 1995, continue the family wood-

working tradition, and carvings of local *campesinos* (peasants or farmers), religious figures and other characters, some life-size, are on display. Some of them are available for purchase.

Past the dam, you'll find the small village of **Ujarrás** at the bottom of a long, steep hill – a couple of stores with the word 'Ujarrás' tell you that you've arrived. Turn right at a sign for Restaurant La Pipiola to head toward the old village (about 1km), which was damaged by a flood in 1833 and abandoned.

The waters have since receded, revealing the ruins of the 1693 **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Limpia Concepción**, once home to a miraculous painting of the Virgin discovered by a local fisherman. Using similar tactics as La Negrita, the relic refused to move, forcing area clerics to build the church here. In return, the Virgin helped locals defeat a group of marauding British pirates in 1666. After the floods and a few earthquakes, however, the painting conceded to move to Paraíso, leaving the ruins to deteriorate photographically in an overgrown park. Every year, usually on the Sunday closest to April 14, there is a procession from Paraíso to the ruins, where Mass, food and music help celebrate the day of **La Virgen de Ujarrás**. The church's grassy grounds are a popular picnicking spot on Sunday afternoons.

After Ujarrás, the road continues for a few more kilometers before returning to Paraíso.

SLEEPING & EATING

Cabañas de Montaña Piedras Albas (☎ 2577 1462; www.cabinas.co.cr/costa_rica1.htm; s/d US\$46/53; P) If you're looking to slow down and enjoy the scenery, stay at these well-equipped cabins. You can pretend you're roughing it on the private trails, then relax in front of the cable TV, take a hot shower, fix some dinner in the kitchen and perhaps arrange a tour at the desk. The cabins are on a signed turnoff just past La Casona.

La Casona del Cafetal Restaurant (☎ 2533 3280; mains US\$5-15; ☎ 11am-6pm) This restaurant is about 3km southeast of the dam, where you can enjoy a really fresh cup of coffee or a meal while watching the next batch of beans being picked (November to March). It's popular on Sunday, when families with kids go for short horseback or horse-drawn cart rides, also available here.

TURRIALBA AREA

At an elevation of 650m above sea level, the Río Turrialba flows into the Río Reventazón and gouges a mountain pass through the Cordillera Central. In the 1880s this hydrogeological quirk allowed the 'Jungle Train' between San José and Puerto Limón to roll through, and the mountain village of Turrialba grew prosperous from the coffee trade. Later, the first highway linking the capital to the coast exploited this same quirk. Turrialba thrived.

However, things changed in 1991 when an earthquake shut down the nation's rail system, and the smooth and straight (read as boring) Hwy 32 was completed. Suddenly, Turrialba (population 70,000) found itself off the beaten path, but no one cared to move away – it's too gorgeous here.

Today Turrialba is a low-key agricultural town that's renowned for its mountain air, strong coffee and Central America's best white water. It's also situated in the wake of the undertouristed Volcán Turrialba and close to the country's most important cultural site, Guayabo (p160).

TURRIALBA

The residents of Turrialba are a proud people, and following the relegation of their city to backwater status in 1991, folks here humbly returned to their coffee-cultivating roots. Railways and highways come and go, but life must always go on.

By this time, rafters the world over were already whispering about Turrialba, a modest mountain town with access to some of the best white water on the planet. Tourism was suddenly on the rise, and residents were happy to share their town's charms with curious travelers. However, when the ICE (the national power company) began making good on plans to dam the scenic waterways, the town united with conservation groups and put up a fierce fight (see boxed text Damming the Rivers?, p161). Fair enough – Turrialba has sacrificed enough to the bulldozers of progress. So far, it seems as if the residents are winning the battle, though it's always a very fine line between conservation and capitalism in Costa Rica.

Information

There's no official tourist office, but better hotels and most white-water rafting outfits

can organize tours, accommodations and transportation throughout the region.

Banco Popular (9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Has a 24-hour ATM. **Dimension Internet** (per hr US\$0.75; ☎ 9am-9pm) Check your email here, on the northeast corner of Parque Central.

Sights

About 4km east of Turrialba, and known throughout Costa Rica by its acronym of Catie (which is just as well), **Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza** (Catie; Center for Tropical Agronomy Research & Education; ☎ 2556 6431; www.catie.ac.cr; admission free; ☎ 7am-4pm) consists of about 1000 hectares dedicated to tropical agricultural research and education. Agronomists from all over the world recognize this as one of the most important agricultural stations in the tropics. You need to make reservations for a guided tour of the various agricultural projects, including one of the most extensive libraries of tropical-agriculture literature anywhere in the world, laboratories, greenhouses, a dairy, herbarium, seed bank and experimental plots. Or you can pick up a map and take a self-guided tour through the gardens to the central pond, where waterbirds such as the purple gallinule are a specialty. Another good birding area is the short but steep trail descending from behind the administration building to the Río Reventazón. You can walk to Catie or get a taxi (US\$2) from Turrialba.

About 10km east of Turrialba, in the village of Pavones (500m east of the cemetery), **Parque Vitorana** (☎ 2538 1510; admission US\$3; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) is known for its serpentarium. Here you can see a variety of Costa Rican snakes, including some unusual albino specimens and several boas, one of which weighs as much as a good-size person. The serpentarium has a rustic visitors area with educational exhibits.

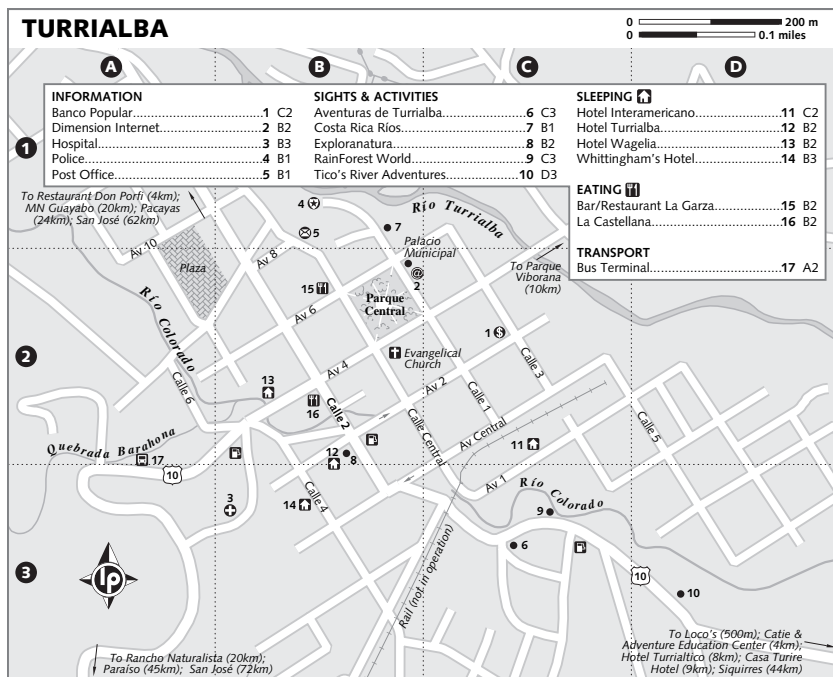
Tours

The following operators all offer either kayaking or rafting, and most can arrange tours throughout the area.

Aventuras de Turrialba (☎ 8363 4539; kayakers@latinmail.com) Specializes in kayaking, though it can arrange put-ins and pick-ups.

Costa Rica Ríos (☎ in the USA 888-434 0776; www.costaricarios.com) Offers weeklong rafting trips that must be booked in advance. It's 25m north of Parque Central.

Exploranatura (☎ 2556 4932; www.costarica.canyoning.com) Also runs a reader-recommended canyoning course and waterfall rappelling trips.



Loco's (☎ 2556 6035; riolocos@racs.co.cr) A local company that works with small groups.

RainForest World (☎ 2556 0014; www.rforestw.com/welcome2.cfm) Offers an overnight in the Cabécar Indigenous Reserve while running the river.

Tico's River Adventures (☎ 2556 1231; www.tico-river.com) A local company that also offers a trip down the Class IV Río Chirripó from June through November.

Sleeping TURRIALBA

Whittingham's Hotel (☎ 2550 8927; Calle 4 btwn Avs 2 & Central; s/d US\$6/8) Seasoned budget travelers won't mind the cool, clean (just like the showers) and cavernous rooms with private bathroom.

Hotel Interamericano (☎ 2556 0142; www.hotelinteramericano.com; Av 1; r per person without/with bathroom US\$11/18; P) On the south side of the old train tracks is this hotel, which is regarded by kayakers and rafters as *the* meeting place in Turrialba. Rooms with big windows and shared hot-water bathrooms are well maintained. However, the real reason to stay here is to meet up with like-minded white-water enthusiasts, and to take advantage of the hotel's

(white-water) shuttle services. There is also a bar, restaurant and very professional staff.

Hotel Turrialba (☎ 2556 6654; Av 2 btwn Calles 2 & 4; d without/with air-con US\$26/30; P) This is great value, as small and standard rooms with attractive wood accents are well equipped with air-con, cable TV and private hot shower. The onsite restaurant (dishes US\$3 to US\$5) whips up a tasty casado.

Hotel Wagelia (☎ 2556 1566; www.hotelwagelia.com; Av 4 btwn Calles 2 & 4; s/d incl breakfast US\$55/69; P) The most established hotel in town is a good choice if you're looking for a bit more comfort in your life. Standard but well-furnished rooms have air-con, private (steaming) hot shower, a huge cable TV and a sitting area for, well, all your sitting needs.

AROUND TURRIALBA

There are some stellar hotels around the Turrialba area. All hotels have private hot-water bathrooms, and can arrange tours and rafting trips.

Hotel Turrialtico (☎ 2538 1111; www.turrialtico.com; s/d US\$52/62) On the old highway to Siquirres and Limón, 8km from town, this Tico-run

WHITE-WATER RAFTING (AND KAYAKING) 101

Let's start at the beginning. There are two major rivers in the Turrialba area that most rafters are interested in – the Río Reventazón and the Río Pacuare. The following is a quick guide to the ins, outs, ups and downs of each river, as well as tips on how to organize a trip and estimated costs.

Río Reventazón

The Cachí Dam across the Río Reventazón created the artificial lake, Lago de Cachí, from which the river now tumbles, starting at 1000m above sea level and running down the eastern slopes of the mountains to the Caribbean lowlands. The river is a favorite and is one of the most difficult runs in the country. With more than 65km of rapids, you can get as hard-core as you like.

Tour operators divide the river into four sections between the dam and take-out in Siquirres. **Las Máquinas** (Power House) is a Class II-III float that's perfect for families, while **Florida**, the final and most popular segment, is a scenic Class III with a little more white water to keep things interesting. The **Pascua** section, with 15 Class IV rapids featuring names like 'The Abyss,' is considered to be the classic run. The Class V **Peralta** segment is the most challenging white water in the country, and tour operators will not always run this section due to safety concerns.

Water levels stay fairly constant year-round because of releases from the dam. Note that there are no water releases from the dam on Sunday and, although the river is runnable, this is considered the worst day.

Río Pacuare

The Río Pacuare is the next major river valley east of the Reventazón, and has arguably the most scenic rafting in Costa Rica, if not Central America. The river plunges down the Caribbean slope through a series of spectacular canyons clothed in virgin rain forest, through runs named for their fury and separated by calm stretches that enable you to stare at the near-vertical green walls towering hundreds of meters above – a magnificent and unique river trip.

The Class III-IV **Lower Pacuare** is the more famous and more accessible run: 28km through rocky gorges and isolated canyons, past an indigenous village, untamed jungle and lots of wild-life curious as to what the screaming is all about. The **Upper Pacuare** is also classified as Class III-IV, but there are a few sections that can go to Class V depending on conditions. It's about a two-hour drive to the put-in, though it's worth it – you'll have the prettiest jungle cruise on earth all to yourself.

The Pacuare can be run year-round, though June to October are considered the best months. The highest water is from October to December, when the river runs fast with huge waves. In March and April the river is at its lowest, and though waves aren't as big, the river is still challenging.

Organizing Trips

Agencies in Turrialba (p157) can organize trips. Children must be at least nine years old for most trips, older for tougher runs.

Day trips usually raft the Class III-IV Lower Pacuare or Class III segments of Río Reventazón, which both have easy-access put-ins that reduce your travel time. There are other runs, however, including the less accessible (and less crowded) Upper Pacuare and Pascua segment of Reventazón, which folks willing to spend more time in a van will find rewarding. These should be arranged in advance. Most operators also offer rafting on other rivers, including Río Sarapiquí (p152), the Class IV Río Chirripó and white-water-free Río Pejibaye (perfect for families).

Two-day trips are offered by almost every operator, usually including a very comfortable campsite or a fairly plush lodge, guided hikes and borderline gourmet meals.

Prices

For day trips, you can expect to pay anywhere from US\$80 to US\$120 depending on transportation and accessibility. Generally, the cheapest trips leave from Turrialba, and put-in on the Lower Pacuare or Class III segments of the Reventazón. For two-day trips, prices vary widely depending on amenities, but expect to pay around US\$175 to US\$300 per person.

lodge has been owned and managed by the García family since 1968. There are 14 wood-paneled rooms in an old farmhouse that have locally sewn bedspreads and paintings from local artists. The restaurant (dishes US\$4 to US\$10) shows off the family's woodworking prowess, though it's hard to beat the dramatic views (and the fresh fish).

Casa Turire Hotel (☎ 2531 1111; www.hotelcasaturire.com; d US\$156, ste US\$165-330; 📍 🚗 🚚 🚚) This elegant three-story mansion belongs to the group of 'Small, Distinctive Hotels of Costa Rica,' and recalls the colonial heyday of gracious plantation living. The hotel has 12 deluxe rooms and four suites with lofty ceilings and private verandas, from where you can gaze wistfully at the sweeping fields of sugar cane, coffee beans and macadamia nuts.

our pick Rancho Naturalista (☎ 2297 4134; www.costaricagateway.com/lodges/index1.php; s/d incl 3 meals US\$175/350, 7-day package per person with 3 meals US\$1138; 📍 🚗) Located 20km southeast of Turrialba near the village of Tuis (4WD needed), this Spanish-style, five-bedroom lodge with accompanying cabins is legendary among bird-watchers. The North American owners are avid birders who have recorded over 400 species in the area – over 200 species have been recorded from their balcony alone. Hundreds of species of butterflies can be found on the grounds as well, and there is an expansive trail system leading through the nearby rain forest.

Eating

There are several *sodas*, Chinese restaurants, bakeries and grocery stores in town.

La Castellana (Cnr Calle 2 & Av 4; snacks US\$1-3; 🕒 7am-7pm Mon-Sat) Follow your nose to the soft warm smell of this bakery that serves up cakes, *empanadas* (corn turnovers filled with ground meat, chicken, cheese or sweet fruit) and local cheese.

Bar/Restaurant La Garza (Cnr Av 6 & Calle Central; mains US\$3-6; 🕒 10am-10pm) This Turrialba institution has been serving good seafood, chicken and beef to happy customers, tourists and locals alike for as long as anyone can remember.

Restaurant Don Porfi (☎ 2556 9797; mains US\$4-8; 🕒 10am-10pm) Four kilometers north of town on the road to San José is this reader-recommended spot, which is regarded by locals as one of the top eats in the Turrialba area. Portions of European-influenced dishes are sizable, delicious and best when accompa-

nied by a glass of wine. The delightful owner, Sergio, will even arrange transportation for you if you don't have a car.

Getting There & Away

The bus terminal is on the western edge of town off Hwy 10. In addition to the services listed below, there are also frequent local buses to the villages of La Suiza, Tuis and Santa Cruz.

Monumento Nacional Guayabo US\$0.75, one hour, depart at 11:15am, 3:10pm and 5:20pm.

San José US\$2, two hours, depart hourly from 5am to 9pm.

Siquirres, for transfer to Puerto Limón US\$1.50, 1½ hours, depart almost hourly.

MONUMENTO NACIONAL ARQUEOLÓGICO GUAYABO

The largest and most important archaeological site in the country is 19km northeast of Turrialba. Although Guayabo is not nearly as breathtaking as Maya and Aztec archaeological sites (don't expect pyramids), excavations have unearthed sophisticated infrastructure and mysterious petroglyphs. Polychromatic pottery and gold artifacts found here are exhibited at the Museo Nacional (see p89) in San José.

The most impressive find at Guayabo is the aqueduct system, which may have served more than 20,000 people in AD 800, the height of the city's prominence. It uses enormous stones hauled in from far-off Río Reventazón along an 8km road that's still in pretty good shape, by Costa Rican standards. The extra effort was worth it – the cisterns still work, and (theoretically) potable water remains available onsite, which you can enjoy among various unearthed structures and unexcavated but suspicious-looking mounds.

The site, which may have been occupied as early as 1000 BC, was mysteriously abandoned by AD 1400 – the Spanish *conquistadors* (conquerors), explorers and settlers left no record of having found the ruins. Though underfunded archaeologists continue to hypothesize about Guayabo's significance, most believe it was an important cultural, religious and political center. However, it's unfortunate that no written records have been recovered from Guayabo, and it's difficult to credit a particular group with having built the site.

In 1968 Carlos Aguilar Piedra, an archaeologist with the University of Costa Rica, began the first systematic excavations of

DAMMING THE RIVERS?

Considered one of the most beautiful white-water rafting trips in the world, the wild Río Pacuare became the first federally protected river in Central America in 1985. Two years later, Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE), Costa Rica's national energy and communications provider, unveiled plans to build a 200m gravity dam at the conveniently narrow and screamingly scenic ravine of Dos Montañas.

This dam would be the cornerstone of the massive Siquirres Hydroelectric Project, proposed to include four dams in total, linked by a 10km-long tunnel that would divert water from the Río Reventazón to the Río Pacuare. If built, rising waters on the Pacuare would not only flood 12km of rapids, up to the Tres Equis put-in, but also parts of the Awari Indigenous Reserve and a huge swath of primary rain forest where some 800 animal species have been recorded.

When the project was first proposed, ICE was in debt and struggling to keep up with rapidly increasing power demands (tourists, after all, must have their air-conditioning). Costa Rica uses fossil fuels only for vehicles; all other power is generated using renewable resources, including geothermal, solar and wind energy, with a whopping 81% of its power produced by a dozen hydroelectric dams. Technically, this is a renewable resource, but in practice, dams not only interrupt rivers and wash away ecosystems, they have long-term impacts that are not completely understood.

As the project moved from speculation toward construction, a loose coalition of local landowners, indigenous leaders, conservation groups and, yep, white-water rafting outfits were already organizing a resistance movement. They filed for the first Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in history, an independent audit of such projects that the Central American Commission for Environment and Development first proposed in 1989. The paper shuffling didn't come to much legally, but it stalled the dam's construction and earned international attention for the Río Pacuare's plight.

Today Costa Rica is a net exporter of electricity (not including oil), primarily to Panama and Nicaragua. Because of new geothermal plants built since the dam was proposed, as well as coordinated national efforts to reduce electricity usage, the dam is not currently needed. For now.

Plans for the project have not been abandoned, not by a long shot. Siquirres would be relatively easy to build, and could generate a tremendous amount of income and electricity in a country modernizing more rapidly than most. However, pressure from international conservation groups is holding ICE at bay, while growth in white-water rafting has helped the Pacuare prove its worth on a spreadsheet somewhere in San José, protecting it for another day.

The neighboring Río Reventazón, however, has not been so lucky: the (in)famous Peralta section has already lost one-third of its Class V rapids due to the first phase of the Siquirres Project. Don't put your white-water rafting trip off until the next time you make it down to Costa Rica.

Guayabo. As its importance became evident, the site was declared a national monument in 1973, with further protection decreed in 1980. Although the site only occupies 232 hectares, most of the ruins are waiting to be uncovered, and there are hopes that future excavations will reveal more about the origins of Guayabo.

Information

There's an information and **exhibit center** (☎ 2559 1220; admission US\$4; 🕒 8am-3:30pm), but many of the best pieces are on display at the Museo Nacional in San José. Excavations are ongoing during the week, and some sections

may be closed to visitors at certain times. Guided tours are not currently available, but it's worth asking around in Turrialba or at the ranger station about independent local guides.

Camping (per person US\$2) is permitted, and services include latrines and running water. Keep in mind that the average annual rainfall is about 3500mm; the best time to go is during the January to April dry season – though it might still rain.

Wildlife-Watching

The site currently protects the last remaining premontane forest in the province of

Cartago, and although mammals are limited to squirrels, armadillos and coatis, there are good birding opportunities here. Particularly noteworthy among the avifauna are the oropendolas, which colonize the monument by building sacklike nests in the trees. Other birds include toucans and brown jays – the latter are unique among jays in that they have a small, inflatable sac in their chest, which causes the popping sound that is heard at the beginning of their loud and raucous calls.

Getting There & Away

The last 3km of the drive to the monument may be passable to normal cars, if it's dry and you're careful, though your life will be made much easier with a 4WD. Buses from Turrialba (US\$0.75, one hour) depart at 11:15am, 3:10pm and 5:20pm, and return at 12:45pm and 4pm. Buses and most taxis (about US\$10 one way from Turrialba) drop you at the turnoff to the park, from where it's a 4km hike.

PARQUE NACIONAL VOLCÁN TURRIALBA

This rarely visited active volcano (3328m) was named Torre Alba (White Tower) by early Spanish settlers, who observed plumes of smoke pouring from its summit. Since 1866, however, Turrialba has slumbered quietly, and today the summit is considered safe enough to explore. For more information on predicting a volcanic eruption, see boxed text *Feelin' Hot, Hot, Hot!*, p243.

Turrialba was declared a national park in 1955, and protects a 2km radius around the volcano. Below the summit, the park consists of mountain rain and cloud forest, dripping with moisture and mosses, full of ferns, bromeliads and even stands of bamboo. Although small, these protected habitats shelter 84 species of birds and 11 species of mammals.

In 2001 the volcano showed its first signs of activity in 135 years, though so far it's been limited to fumaroles and microtremors. While hiking the summit, you can peer into the **Central Crater**, which has minor fumarole activity consisting of bubbling sulfurous mud. The **Main Crater**, which last erupted in 1866, is starting to spew jets of sulfur and steam again, and is thus closed to the public. The smaller **Eastern Crater** lacks fumarole activity, though

moisture is present in the crater during the rainy season.

Although the craters are not nearly as dramatic as Poás or Irazú, the lack of infrastructure (and tourists) gives the summit a wild and natural feeling that is absent from more-touristed volcanoes.

Information

At the time of writing, there was neither a ranger station nor admission fee, though there are frequently rangers at the top of the summit. The average temperature up here is only about 15°C/59°F, so dress accordingly.

Volcán Turrialba Lodge arranges a variety of guided hikes and horseback rides through the park.

Hiking

From the end of the road, there are trails heading to the Eastern Crater and the Central Crater, though they are unmarked (rangers can usually show you in which direction to head). Be advised that the summit is not developed for tourism, so you need to keep your distance from the craters and be especially careful around their edges – they are very brittle and can easily break.

From the rim there are views of Irazú, Poás and Barva volcanoes – weather permitting. Although your hiking options are limited, you can explore the edges of the summit without having to navigate the tourist crowds. The hike up the volcano from Santa Cruz is likely to be a solitary slog through montane forest.

Sleeping

Volcán Turrialba Lodge (☎ 2273 4335; www.volcanturrialbalodge.com; s/d with 3 meals US\$70/140; 📍) About 14km northwest of Santa Cruz (accessible by 4WD only), this mountain lodge and working cattle ranch is perched between the Turrialba and Irazú volcanoes, and recommended for travelers looking for some highland adventure. Cozy rooms with electric heaters, great views and some with wood stoves are augmented by interesting, well-guided hikes and horseback rides to Volcán Turrialba. The rustic hotel has a blazing wood stove in the bar-restaurant and sitting room, with TV and board games.

Getting There & Away

The volcano is only about 15km northwest of Turrialba as the crow flies, but more than twice as far by car than foot. From the village

of Santa Cruz (which is 13km from Turrialba and connected via public buses), an 18km road climbs to the summit. The road is paved for the first 10km, and then becomes increasingly rough – a 4WD is necessary to reach the summit. You can also get a 4WD taxi from Santa Cruz for about US\$20 each way (you can arrange for the taxi to wait or pick you up later). There are signs along the way, and this is the official route into the national park.

Another approach is to take a bus from Cartago to the village of San Gerardo on the southern slopes of Volcán Irazú. From here a rough road continues to Volcán Turrialba – it's further than from Santa Cruz, but San Gerardo, at 2400m, is a higher starting point than Santa Cruz is at 1500m. The rough road goes about 25km, then there are a few kilometers of walking, but this route is unsigned.

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