

Northern Lowlands



It's getting harder and harder to get away from it all in Costa Rica – it's only natural for a country this richly blessed with varied gifts to be such a desirable destination. So the saturation point of popular *playas* (beaches) means spillover to the next not-so-secret sliver of coast, and zip lines continue to proliferate over the canopies from Monteverde to Manzanillo. But travelers who stray to the wild rivers and tropical jungle of the northern lowlands, find that in these places, the getting-away is still good.

Tourism has certainly touched the lowlands, creating added revenue for a local economy whose living has historically been made from agriculture. Plantations of banana, sugar cane and pineapple roll across the humid plains from the Cordillera Central to the Nicaraguan border; these plantations are fringed by tropical forest out of which arable soil has been slashed. But green is the color of budding tourism around these parts. Conservationists team with landowners and local governments to make ecotourism work for all parties involved – whether it's the family farmer, the naturalist or the endangered great green macaw.

Birders, hoping to spot this macaw in the wild, flock to remote lodges in the verdant rain forests of the San Juan–La Selva Biological Corridor, while paddlers who are in the know show up to run the fun rapids of the Río Sarapiquí. Wildlife-watchers and fisherfolk alike head to the lagoons of Caño Negro, and travelers of all stripes are hopping launches up the Río Frio for the languid, fauna-rich river crossing to Nicaragua. This is real-life Costa Rica, where the balance of agricultural commerce and ecological conservation converge to create a contemporary work in green progress.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Slip-sliding through swampy jungle to spot poison-dart frog and rare green macaw at **Laguna del Lagarto Lodge** (p501)
- Rafting the wildlife-rife **Río Sarapiquí** (p512) near La Virgen
- Keeping your eyes peeled for crocs and sloths as you float to the **Río San Juan** (p515) at the Nicaraguan border
- Motoring via tractor to the luscious rain-forest isolation of **Rara Avis** (p520)
- Exploring the lagoons of **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Caño Negro** (p507) to take a gander at spoonbills or a stab at tarpon
- Traipsing the suspension bridges of **Tirimbina Rainforest Center** (p515)



Several other waterfalls may also be seen, particularly on the right-hand side (if you are heading north) in the La Paz Valley, which soon joins up with the Sarapiquí Valley.

SAN MIGUEL TO LOS CHILES

The route from San Miguel to Muelle de San Carlos is trimmed by papaya plantations and jungles and winds through the mountains in a series of hairpin turns. But just as the patchwork of fincas and wildflowers gives way entirely to sugar cane, the road opens to a long, straight and usually steaming-hot stretch across the lowlands to Caño Negro and hot, dusty Los Chiles. This is the principal route to the border crossing with Nicaragua, which is a straightforward trip via river boat from Los Chiles.

If, instead of heading northwest, you travel north through the small town of Pital, you'll find yourself bumping along the backroads of one of the least-touristed parts of Costa Rica. This northern zone makes up part of the San Juan–La Selva Biological

Corridor, an ongoing collaborative project involving nonprofit conservation organizations and local communities to create a wildlife refuge, with the Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Mixto Maquenque (opposite) at its heart.

VENECIA & AROUND

The westbound road traces the northern limits of the Cordillera Central as flowering vines scramble down the mountains and threaten to overtake the road. In the distance, the northern lowlands appear as a patchwork quilt of cane fields and rice paddies. The road momentarily straightens out as it enters the rural town of Venecia, 14km west of San Miguel, though the town passes by in a heartbeat as the road continues its dizzying wind toward Muelle de San Carlos.

If you're looking to break up the driving, what better place to spend the night than Venecia's famous 'Medieval castle' of **Torre Fuerte Cabinas** (☎ 2472 2424; s/d US\$21/29; 📍 🚽), about 2.5km west of town. Though it looks like it would feel more at home on the Las Vegas Strip, rooms are clean and have a private bathroom with hot water. Plus, if you stay there you can tell all your friends and

family that you spent the night in a Costa Rican castle.

A great place to relax and rejuvenate your body after a long drive is **Recreo Verde** (☎ 2472 1020; www.recreoverde.com; camping US\$15, s/d incl breakfast US\$35/55; 📍 🚽), which has a number of rustic cabins near a river bend, all with private bathrooms. Guests have access to four mineral baths featuring a variety of different colored mud, as well as three cold-water pools fed by mountain-spring water. There's also a soccer pitch for a quick pick-up game, and a number of rain-forest trails that you can hike and explore. You can also go spelunking in the Cueva de la Muerte (Cave of Death), though the only real danger is the risk of catching a cold.

Halfway between San Miguel and Venecia is the hamlet of Río Cuarto, from where an unpaved road heads southeast past the beautiful **waterfall** near Bajos del Toro, through Parque Nacional Juan Castro Blanco, and on to Zarcero.

BOCA TAPADA AREA

Don't bother venturing out here if Tico time ticks you off; the rocky roads and lack of signage (even less than usual!) could mean

a few unintended detours. On the roads that pass pineapple fields and packing plants, your fellow travelers will be commuting *caballeros* (cowboys) and *campesinos* going about their day-to-day business. And at the end of the road, you'll be rewarded with a luxuriant bit of rain forest replete with frog songs, rare avian residents and an inkling of the symbiosis that can happen when humans make the effort. Local ecolodges offer rain-forest tours into the Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Mixto Maquenque; for more information, see the boxed text A Green-Green Situation (opposite).

Sleeping & Eating

Laguna del Lagarto Lodge (☎ 2289 8163; www.lagarto-lodge-costa-rica.com; s/d/tr US\$52/69/79; 📍 🚽) This environmentally sensitive, German-run lodge is surrounded by 1300 hectares of virgin rain forest and is something of a legend among birders. Simple but pleasant screened rooms have private bathrooms, fans and share a large, hammock-strung verandas. Package tours include transportation from San José, all meals and guided tours. Otherwise, breakfast is US\$6, lunch US\$7.50 and dinner US\$14. Room rates include an afternoon guided

A GREEN-GREEN SITUATION

The gorgeous green plumage, electric-blue wingtips and red forehead of the great green macaw (*Ara ambiguus*) have long attracted collectors of exotic birds. The illegal sale of just one great green macaw can fetch several thousand dollars, despite the fact that the species' nervous personality causes them to fare poorly in captivity. International trade has depleted the population, though fortunately, the great green macaw is protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

In addition to illegal poaching, deforestation also threatens the great green macaw. The northern lowlands have suffered from heavy deforestation in recent years due to the demand for increased agricultural and pasture land. Furthermore, the almendro tree (*Dipteryx panamensis*), whose nut provides 90% of the macaw's diet and whose high hollows are far and away the preferred nesting tree for breeding pairs, is highly sought after as a luxury hardwood. Extensive logging of the almendro has severely cut back potential nesting sites, and as a result, the great green macaw has made it onto the endangered species list. It's estimated that Costa Rica's population of great green macaws is as low as 200 individuals, with as few as 30 breeding pairs left.

But all is not lost! A coterie of nonprofit organizations and government agencies formed a committee to establish the **San Juan–La Selva Biological Corridor** (www.lapaverde.or.cr), which aims to protect existing green macaw populations as well as other species in the area. The proposed corridor would bridge the gap between the Central Volcanic Mountain Range, Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Barra del Colorado, Parque Nacional Tortuguero and the Indio-Maiz, Punta Gorda and Cerro Silva Reserves in Nicaragua. Eventually, the hope is that all of these protected areas will form a part of a Mesoamerican Biological Corridor that will stretch from Mexico through Central America.

In 2005, the **Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Mixto Maquenque** was officially declared by then-President Abel Pacheco. Owing to this victory, Maquenque now protects an estimated 6000 species of vascular plants, 139 mammals, 515 birds, 135 reptiles and 80 amphibians. And as a 'mixed-use' wildlife refuge, the first of its kind in Costa Rica, allows human residents to continue living and working within the boundaries of the refuge. However, most of the refuge's 50,000-odd hectares, which are privately owned, are now bound to certain regulations, such as the drastic reduction of activities like logging. So where does this leave the residents, who depend on forestry and agriculture for subsistence?

Enter the **Costa Rican Bird Route**, a project initiated by the nonprofit Rainforest Biodiversity Group in partnership with several other nonprofit organizations. The Costa Rican Bird Route has been working with and educating communities within these protected areas to help create viable and sustainable ecotourism opportunities, as economic alternatives to habitat-destructive agriculture and logging. While promoting existing locally-owned lodges throughout the region, the Costa Rican Bird Route is also helping to establish new, community-based ecolodges from Río San Juan to Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo. The hope is that green tourism – a field in which Costa Rica shines – will not only be more financially beneficial to these poor communities, but will also be salvation for the great green macaw.

The great news for travelers is that this blossoming birding route offers a rare chance for a wilder birding experience in one of the least-developed regions of Costa Rica. Not only do you get to interact in a real way with the local people and contribute directly to their communities, but traveling way out here may lead you right into the path of a beautiful great green macaw.

We've listed some lodges participating in the Costa Rican Bird Route, in the Boca Tapada area (above) and around Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí (p514). Check the website (www.costaricanbirdroute.com) for specific lodges, as well as for current volunteer opportunities.

hike through the jungle and a nighttime caiman-feeding walk.

Most of the 500-hectare 'grounds' of the lodge is rain forest, some of which is swamp – as a result the area's 10km of trails can get quite mucky. Canoes are available to explore the surrounding lagoons, where caimans dwell and Jesus Christ lizards make tracks across the water's surface. Horseback trips and boat tours down along the Nicaraguan border can be arranged.

The lodge is about 9km from Boca Tapada, and the staff can also arrange round-trip transportation from San José for US\$120 per person (two-person minimum).

Tico-run lodges near Boca Tapada include **Mi Pedacito de Cielo** (☎ 8308 9595; www.pedacitodecielo.net; s/d/tr US\$60/70/80; (P)), whose name charmingly means 'my little piece of heaven.' The lodge has several rustic wooden bungalows built into the semi-wild forest. There is also **Maquenque Eco-Lodge** (☎ 479-8200; www.costaricanbirdroute.com/sites/maquenque.htm; (P)), which was under construction at press time. Both lodges offer birding, boating and horseback tours in the Maquenque wildlife refuge.

Getting There & Away

If you're driving, getting to Boca Tapada is an adventure in itself. The nearest town of note is Pital, north of Aguas Zarcas. After passing through Pital, turn right after the church on the right and soccer field on the left and continue through the village of Veracruz. At the Del Huerto pineapple packing plant, hang a left and continue along the paved road. About 10km later where the pavement ends, turn right at the intersection. When you come to the gas station, turn right at the intersection and follow the signs for Mi Pedacito del Cielo to Boca Tapada.

Buses from San José (US\$4.30, six hours) depart from the Atlántico Norte terminal at 5:30am and 12:30pm daily, with a connection to Boca Tapada, where most lodges can pick you up by prior request.

MUELLE DE SAN CARLOS

This small crossroads village is locally called Muelle, which means 'dock,' seemingly because 'Cañas' was already taken – this is sugar cane country. Breaks in the sweet scenery include huge sugar cane-processing facilities, always interesting to ponder over a soda, and very slow sugar cane-hauling trucks, so drive

carefully. This was, actually, an important dock (hence the shipping infrastructure still here) as it's the most inland spot from which the Río San Carlos is navigable.

The main tourist activity in Muelle is pulling over to have a look at the map. A 24-hour gas station lies at the intersection of Hwy 4 (which connects Ciudad Quesada and Upala) and Hwy 35 (running from San José to Los Chiles). From Hwy 4 you can easily catch Hwy 32, the main artery serving the Caribbean coast. Can't decide? A range of accommodations will let you sleep on it, and they're convenient to just about everything.

Sleeping & Eating

Cabinas Beitzky (☎ 2469 9100; camping US\$4, d US\$10; (P) (E)) The cheapest accommodation in town is on the road to Los Chiles. It's perfectly acceptable if you need a place to crash, and the pool is surprisingly well-maintained. Rooms are (not surprisingly) bare and share cold showers. If you're counting every dollar, you can also pitch a tent here and save yourself a few bucks.

La Quinta Lodge (☎ 2475 5260; fax 2475 5921; s/d US\$30/35, cabinas per person US\$10; (P) (E)) About 5km south of Muelle in the tiny community of Platanar, this friendly Tico-run inn has a pool with a small waterslide and sauna. Birds have adopted the grounds, and there's a small river behind the inn where fish and caiman can be seen. This is a popular option with Tico families as the atmosphere is warm and inviting.

Hotel La Garza (☎ 2475 5222; www.hotellagarza.com; d/tr incl breakfast US\$75/90, additional person US\$15; (P) (X) (E)) Also near Platanar, this attractive, upscale lodge sits on a 700-hectare working dairy ranch and citrus plantation with views of the Río Platanar and far-off Volcán Arenal. Visitors enter the landscaped reception and restaurant area via a graceful suspension footbridge, and the 12 polished wooden bungalows with big porch, ceiling fan, telephone and good-size private bathroom have a touch of class. Tennis, basketball and volleyball courts are available, as are 4km of private trails, a swimming pool and Jacuzzi. Tours are available, including horseback rides through primary and secondary tropical forest land (US\$25/40 for two/four hours).

Tilajari Resort Hotel (☎ 2469 9091; www.tilajari.com; s/d incl breakfast from US\$86/96, additional person US\$15; (P) (X) (E) (E)) This former country club turned luxury resort has well-landscaped

SUGAR IN THE RAW

The origins of the sugar industry lie in the European colonization of the Americas, particularly on the Caribbean islands. Although it was possible for Europeans to import sugar from the colonies in Asia, the advent of slavery in the New World meant that sugar cane could be grown for a fraction of the cost. This in turn led to lower prices for the European consumer, which took precedent over the lives of the slaves forced to work in the fields.

During the 18th century, European diets started to change dramatically as sugar increased in popularity. Coffee, tea and cocoa were consumed in greater frequency, and processed foods such as candies and jams became commonplace items. The demand for increased production fueled the slave trade, though the actual process of refining sugar became increasingly mechanized.

Today, sugar is one of the most heavily subsidized agricultural products in industrial countries. Sugar prices in the USA, the EU and Japan are on average three times the international market cost as governments maintain elevated price floors by subsidizing domestic production and imposing high tariffs on imports. As a result, sugar-exporting countries are excluded from these markets, and thus receive lower prices than they would under a system of free trade. Brazil, which exports more than a quarter of the world's supply of refined sugar and heads a coalition of sugar-exporting nations, has repeatedly lobbied the World Trade Organization to reform the market.

For countries like Costa Rica, sugar production is mainly a domestic industry because it's not profitable to export sugar to countries that levy a high tariff on imports – true even with the ratification of Cafta (US-Central American Free Trade Agreement), or TLC (Tratado de Libre Comercio), as the US is loathe to open its sugar market to lower-priced imports.

Harvesting sugar cane manually is exhausting work as the stalks can grow to a height of 4m and they are thick, fibrous and difficult to cut down. It's becoming increasingly common in Costa Rica for sugar cane to be harvested using self-propelled harvesting machines, which has made it difficult for rural Ticos to find employment.

The next time you're driving through cane country, support the local industry and look for signs advertising *jugo de caña* – there's nothing quite like a cool glass of fresh sugar-cane juice.

grounds overlooking the Río San Carlos, and it offers an impressive number of tours and activities. Comfortable, well-appointed rooms are accented with wood details and have private hot shower, cable TV, refrigerator and private terrace. A few of the rooms and private trails are wheelchair accessible. Other amenities include a lovely pool area, racquetball and tennis courts, a restaurant, sauna, spa and butterfly garden (admission US\$3), plus access to the neighboring 400-hectare private rain-forest reserve with several trails. The resort is 800m west of the intersection at Muelle, on the road to Ciudad Quesada.

There are a number of *sodas* (inexpensive eateries) and a small supermarket on the road toward Los Chiles that will do just fine if you're looking for your casado fix. However, one recommended spot is **Restaurant/Bar La Subasta** (☎ 2467 8087; mains US\$3-7; ☎ 11am-11pm), which overlooks a bullpen and is bustling with hungry *campesinos*. It has an expansive menu of local dishes, and it's a great spot for a cold beer. If you speak Spanish, strike up a conversa-

tion here as you're bound to meet some interesting characters.

SAN RAFAEL DE GUATUSO AREA

The small town of Guatuso (shown on some maps as San Rafael) is 19km northeast of Nuevo Arenal and 40km east of Fortuna (not to be confused with the town of La Fortuna), and is the main population center of this predominantly agricultural area. Although the town itself is rather unremarkable, it's a good base for exploring the fantastic Venado Caves and Parque Nacional Volcán Tenorio (p205). The area is also home to the few remaining Maleku, one of Costa Rica's indigenous populations, and Guatuso makes a good base for visiting the nearby *palenques* (indigenous settlements); see the boxed text A Brief History of the Maleku, p504.

Venado Caves

Four kilometers south of Venado (Spanish for 'deer') along a good dirt road, the **caves** (☎ 2478 8071; admission US\$10; ☎ 7am-4pm) are a popular rainy-day attraction that can be organized

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MALEKU

The Maleku (colloquially referred to as the Guatuso) are one of the few remaining indigenous groups in Costa Rica. Unlike other pre-Columbian populations, the Maleku are closer in stature to Europeans, and their skin tone is comparatively lighter than other groups in Central America. Historically, the Maleku were organized into 12 communities that were scattered around the Tilarán-Guanacaste Range and the San Carlos Plains.

Although their numbers dwindled following the arrival of Spanish colonists, the population survived relatively intact until the early 20th century. With the invention of the automobile, the US rubber industry started searching for new reserves to meet the increasing demand for tires. With the aid of Nicaraguan mercenaries, industry representatives scoured Central America for stable reserves, which were found on Maleku-inhabited land. The resulting rubber war virtually wiped out the population, and confined the survivors to a handful of communities. Today, the Maleku number around 400, and live in the three *palenques* of Sol, Margarita and Tonjibe.

As is the situation with most indigenous groups in Costa Rica, the Maleku are one of the poorest communities in the country, and survive by adhering to a subsistence lifestyle. Their diet revolves around corn and the *tipuisqui* root, a traditional food source that grows wild in the region. Fortunately, since the Maleku have a rich, artisan tradition, they are able to earn a small income by selling traditional crafts to tourists. Although their modern crafts primarily consist of pottery, jewelry, musical instruments and other small trinkets that are desirable to tourists, historically they were renowned for their impressive jade work and arrow craftsmanship.

The Maleku are also famous for their unique style of clothing known as *tana*. Although it's rare to see modern Maleku wearing anything other than Western-style clothing, *tana* articles are often offered to tourists for purchase. *Tana* is actually tree bark that has been stripped of its outer layer, soaked in water and then pounded thin on wooden blocks. After it has been dried and bleached in the sun, it can be stitched together like leather, and has a soft texture similar to suede.

Despite being small in number, the Maleku have held on to their cultural heritage, perhaps more than any other indigenous group in Costa Rica. This is especially evident in their language, which is one of the oldest in the Americas and linguistically unique from the Amazonian and Maya dialects. Today, the Maleku still speak their language to one another, and a local radio station, Radio Sistema Cultural Maleku, airs daily programs in the Maleku language. The Maleku have also maintained their ceremonial traditions, such as the trimonthly custom of crying out to Mother Nature for forgiveness through ritualistic song and dance.

As with all indigenous reservations in Costa Rica, the Maleku welcome tourists as craft sales are vital to their survival. You can access the *palenques* via Rte 143, though it's best to inquire locally for directions as the roads are poorly maintained and unsigned. While you're at the *palénque*, please be sensitive to their situation and buy a few small crafts. If you can, you might also consider bringing some small, useful gifts such as pencils, pens and paper. And of course, avoid giving handouts such as money and candy as this will only create a culture of begging.

as a day trip from La Fortuna, San José and many other cities for US\$45 to US\$65 per person (including transportation and lunch). It's cheaper to visit by yourself, though bus service is inconvenient.

The caves were discovered by chance in 1945 when a farmer fell through a hole in the ground and found himself in an underground chamber surrounded by stalactites (hanging tight to the ceiling) and stalagmites (that might reach the ceiling...get it?). The exploration that followed uncovered an eight-chamber limestone labyrinth that extends for almost 3km. The cavern system, composed of soft,

malleable limestone, was carved over the millennia by a series of underground rivers.

The caverns get rave reviews from folks fond of giant spiders, swarms of bats and eyeless fish. A guide takes you through the caves, including a few tight squeezes, pointing out various rock formations and philosophizing about what they sort of look like.

Drop-ins are welcome, but it's best to make reservations so you don't need to wait around for a group. You're provided with a guide (some speak English), lights, helmets and showers afterward. You'll definitely want to bring a change of clothes. There's a small *soda*

on site, and a few nicer spots for a snack in Venado, but no lodging.

A 1pm bus from Ciudad Quesada drops you off at a steep 4km slog to the cavern entrance at about 2pm, with pick-up at 4pm – hurry! A taxi from Guatuso will cost from US\$15 to US\$20. If you're driving, the caves are well-signed.

Sleeping & Eating

There are several clean, basic *cabinas* in San Rafael de Guatuso, sometimes used on a long-term basis by farm workers, as well as a good selection of *sodas* and stores.

Cabinas Milagro (☎ 2464 0037; s/d US\$6/10; 📶) This quiet, family-run place on the edge of town is a tranquil budget option. From the center, go past the church toward the Río Frio bridge and turn right just past the soccer field. Rooms have cold showers and fan.

Cabinas El Bosque (☎ 2464 0335; s/d with fan US\$7/11, with air-con US\$10/15; 📶) Just a bit north of town on the road toward Upala, this 10-room hotel is a bit impersonal, though it has clean, simple rooms with private, cold-water showers and optional air-con.

Cabinas Tío Henry (☎ 2464 0344; r per person US\$9; 📶) Big, clean, air-conditioned rooms here are relatively plush, with cable TV and private hot shower. The *cabinas* are centrally located in town, though the reception is at the vet and feed store next door.

Soda La Macha (☎ 2464 0393; mains US\$3; 🍷 break-fast, lunch & dinner) You don't exactly get a menu at this fine *soda*, on the main road across from the bus stop. Everything here is cooked using a wood-fired oven. Just request your *casado* or *gallo* (tortilla sandwich) preferences and they'll be made on the spot.

Getting There & Away

Guatuso lies on Hwy 4, about 40km from both Upala, to the northwest, and Muelle, to the southeast. Buses leave about every two hours for either Tilarán or Ciudad Quesada, some of which continue to San José. Ciudad Quesada is the most frequent destination.

UPALA

Just 9km south of the Nicaraguan border in the northwestern corner of the northern lowlands, Upala is a small but thriving town that serves a widespread community of some 15,000 people. A center for the area's cattle and rice industries, Upala enjoys some

apparent affluence. Most visitors are Costa Rican businesspeople, who arrive in town to negotiate for a few dozen calves or a truckload of grain, but travelers who need to stop for the night between Caño Negro and the northwestern coast will find it nice enough.

Sleeping

Rooms fill up quicker than you'd expect, though there are plenty of options in town.

Hotel Buena Vista (☎ 2470 0186; r US\$9; 📶) This cute yellow compound is a steal, with clean but unremarkable rooms that come with private hot-water bathroom and TV. There's a shaded courtyard and secure parking at this family-run spot. Find it 150m south of the metal bridge.

Hotel Upala (☎ 2470 0169; s/d US\$12/18; 📶) The most established hotel in town is always a good choice as all the rooms are spotless and bright, and you can watch the soccer games from your private porch. Rooms have a private cold shower and cable TV.

Cabinas Maleku (☎ 2470 0142; s/d with fan US\$12/20, with air-con US\$18/24; 📶) Though it's a few dollars more, this is the best option in town. Big, high-ceilinged rooms with colorful cartoon murals have folksy furniture, including cheery Sarchí-style wooden chairs in front of the rooms. All rooms have a private bathroom and a large TV with cable.

Eating

The busy market, just behind the bus terminal, opens early with several nice *sodas* dishing up good *gallos*, *empanadas* (corn turnovers filled with meat, cheese or fruit) and just about everything else. There are also a few Chinese restaurants and produce vendors.

Soda Norma (☎ 8819 7048; mains US\$4-6; 🍷 6:30am-9pm) With outdoor tables overlooking the park, this is a seriously top-notch *soda*, serving some of the most beautiful *casados*, with all the trimmings, you've ever seen.

Restaurant Buena Vista (☎ 2470 0063; mains US\$4-6; 🍷 11am-9pm) This breezy spot serves a good mix of typical Chinese food. It's also aptly named (Good View) as the river views are wonderful.

Rancho Don Horacio (☎ 2470 0905; mains US\$6-9; 🍷 11am-10pm) Right off the plaza and far more atmospheric is this romantic restaurant with red tablecloths, mood lighting and a nice bar. The specialty is steak, and chances are it

was born, raised and slaughtered right here in Upala.

Getting There & Away

Upala is connected to the Interamericana north of Cañas by Hwy 6, an excellent paved road, and also to La Fortuna and Laguna de Arenal by the somewhat more potholed Hwy 4. A rough, unpaved road, usually passable to all cars, skirts the Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Caño Negro on the way to Los Chiles, the official border crossing with Nicaragua.

Other dirt roads cross the Nicaraguan border, 9km away, but these are not official entry points into either Costa Rica or Nicaragua.

The bus terminal is right off the park; a **ticket booth** (☎ 4:30-5:15am, 7:30am-1pm & 6:45-8pm Mon-Sat) has information and can store bags for US\$1. Taxis congregate just outside the Upala bus terminal, by the park. The following buses depart from Upala.

Caño Negro US\$1, one hour, 11am.

Los Chiles US\$2.50, two hours, 5am, 11am and 4pm.

San José, via Cañas US\$6, five hours, 10:15am, 3pm and 5:15pm.

San José, via Ciudad Quesada/San Carlos US\$6, five hours, 3:45pm.

REFUGIO NACIONAL DE VIDA SILVESTRE CAÑO NEGRO

Because of the region's relative remoteness (although this has changed in recent years with the improvement of roads), this 102-sq-km refuge has long been frequented primarily by two sorts of specialists. Anglers come in search of that elusive 18kg snook, though they abandon ship April through July, when the park is closed to fishing (a good time to get a bargain price on accommodations). Birders alight on the refuge each year from January through March to spot an unequalled assortment of waterfowl. During the dry season water levels drop, with the effect of concentrating the birds (and fish) in photogenically (or tasty) close quarters. From January to March, when migratory birds land in large numbers, avian density is most definitely world class.

The Río Frío defines the landscape – a table-flat, swampy expanse of marsh that is similar in appearance to other famous wetlands such as the Florida Everglades or the Mekong Delta. During the wet season, the river breaks its banks to form an 800-hectare lake, and then contracts during the dry months from January through April,

when water levels drop to the point where the river is barely navigable. By April it has almost completely disappeared – until the May rains begin. This cycle has proceeded without fail for millennia, and the small fishing communities that live around the edges of the reserve have adapted to each seasonal nuance of their environment.

Thanks to improved roads, dozens of tour operators are now able to offer relatively inexpensive trips to Caño Negro from all over the country. However, it's advisable to book your trip through a reputable tour company as it's fairly common practice for operators to save on park fees by taking tourists on a boat ride through swampy private property that is by all accounts lovely, though not Caño Negro. If you're more independently minded, you'll save yourself a little money (and have a much better experience) by heading directly to the park without a tour operator, and hiring a local guide in town. This practice is recommended as it puts money directly in the hands of locals, and encourages communities in the area to protect the wildlife.

Orientation & Information

Caño Negro refuge is part of the Area de Conservación Arenal-Huetar Norte and is accessible primarily by boat. Close to the park entrance (that'd be the dock) is the tiny community of Caño Negro, which has no grocery stores, banks or gas stations, though there is a **Minae office** (☎ 2471 1309; ☎ 8am-4pm), where you pay your entrance fees (US\$6).

You can get all other information and arrange guided tours at the **ranger station** (☎ 2471 1309; ☎ 8am-5pm), located about 400m from the dock. In addition to administering the refuge, rangers are contact points for local guides and a few community projects, including a butterfly garden put together by a local women's association (Asomucan). You can camp (US\$2 per person) by the river, or stay in the rangers' house for US\$6 with advance reservations. There are cold showers and meals can be arranged.

Local guides for fishing and ecological tours can also be arranged at most hotels and restaurants in town. You can usually find a guide (US\$10 to US\$20 per hour) on short notice, but they can get booked up during peak fishing and birding seasons.

THE WEeping FOREST

Extensive deforestation of the Caño Negro area began in the 1970s in response to an increase in population density and the subsequent need for more farmland. Although logging was allowed to proceed in the area for almost 20 years, the government took action in 1991 with the creation of the Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Caño Negro. Since its creation, Caño Negro has served as a safe habitat for the region's aquatic and terrestrial birds, and has acted as a refuge for numerous migratory birds.

However, illegal logging and poaching have continued around the perimeter of the park, and the wildlife has accordingly suffered. In the last two decades, one-time residents of the park including ocelot, manatee, shark and macaw have vanished. Tarpon and caiman populations are decreasing, and fewer migratory birds are returning to the park each year. Additionally, anglers are reporting record lows in both the size and number of their catches.

Satellite images show that the lake is shrinking each year, and that water levels in the Río Frío are dropping rapidly. It's difficult to say with certainty what is causing these changes, though the farms surrounding Caño Negro require extensive irrigation, and sugar cane is nearly 10 times as water intensive as wheat.

Locals are extremely worried about the stability of the park as entire communities are dependent on fishing and tourism for their survival. In response to the growing need to regulate development in the region, area residents have formed a number of organizations aimed at controlling development in the northern lowlands. If you want to support the Caño Negro community, avoid booking your tour in another town and spend your tourist dollar locally.

Wildlife-Watching

Caño Negro is regarded among birders as one of the premier destinations in Central America. During the dry season, the sheer density of birds in the park is astounding, and you'll be impressed with the number and variety of different species that inhabit the park. In the winter months, migratory duck congregations can be enormous, and very well represented groups include kingfisher, heron, egret, ibis, rail, anhinga, roseate spoonbill and stork. The refuge is also the only reliable site in Costa Rica for olivaceous cormorant, Nicaraguan grackle and lesser yellow-headed vulture.

Reptiles are easily seen in the park, especially spectacled caiman, green iguana and striped basilisk. Commonly sighted mammals in Caño Negro include howler monkey, white-faced capuchin and two-toed sloth. Despite increasing incursions from poachers, puma, jaguar and tapir have also been recorded here in surprising numbers.

Caño Negro also possesses an abundant number of river turtle, which historically were an important part of the Maleku diet (see the boxed text *A Brief History of the Maleku*, p504). Prior to a hunt, the Maleku would appease the turtle god Javara by fasting and abstaining from sex. If the hunt was successful, the Maleku would later celebrate by feasting on smoked turtle meat and consuming

large quantities of *chicha*, an alcohol derived from maize.

Mosquitoes in Caño Negro are huge, abundant and most definitely classifiable as wildlife. Bring bug spray, or suffer the consequences.

Tours

If you don't have your own car or you're not a fan of public transportation, then it's easiest to organize a day trip to Caño Negro from La Fortuna, San José or any hotel within a 150km radius. Tours are geared toward wildlife-watching, though travelers report that a boatload of noisy tourists tends to scare away most animals. If you're looking to do a little sportfishing, it's best to organize your trips through one of the lodges in the park. Fishing licenses, valid for two months, can be arranged through the lodges or at the ranger station for US\$30; you will need a photocopy of your passport and a small photo.

Caño Negro is not as difficult to access as it once was, and you'll have a much better experience if you avoid the tour operators and head directly to the park. Hiring a local guide is quick, easy and full of advantages – you'll be supporting the local economy, you'll have more privacy when you're out on the water and, of course, there's the satisfaction of doing things independently. You can

TOP WATERWAYS FOR WILDLIFE-WATCHERS

Head to some of the following waterways for an up-close glimpse of the local wildlife.

- Whether you're resting between rapids or traveling up to Trinidad, keep your eyes peeled for somnolent sloth or mud-covered caiman as you float up the **Río Sarapiquí** (p512).
- Wake early to savor a quiet view of breakfasting birds on the lagoons of **Caño Negro** (p507).
- Not only is the **Río Frío** (p510) the kinder, gentler border crossing into Nicaragua, but you'll see trees filled with howler and caiman on the riverbanks along the way.
- Lodges in the Boca Tapada area can get you on the **Río San Carlos** (p501), where the slow flow near the Río San Juan affords good opportunities for birding.
- Float on the **Río Medio Queso** (opposite), which is off the well-trafficked tributaries and where wildlife abounds.

usually find indie guides hanging out around the dock during the day.

Either way, the key to Caño Negro is to get there as early in the morning as possible when wildlife is still active, and it's worth paying extra for an overnight adventure that puts you in the water by 7am. Folks staying in town basically have the refuge to themselves at day-break, with boat-trippers from Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí and Los Chiles arriving by 9am.

Sleeping & Eating

There are a few budget lodging options in town, plus a handful of nicer accommodations down the road, most of which are geared toward fishing.

Albergue Caño Negro (☎ 2471 2029; r per person US\$12; 🍷) There's no sign indicating the cheapest accommodation in the area, a family-run venture of small cabinas overlooking the lagoon. Rooms are simple and share cold-water bathrooms, but the proprietors, Manuel and Isabel, are relaxed and friendly. Look for the stilt cabinas past the bend in the road after the Caño Negro Natural Lodge.

Cabinas Martín Pescador (☎ 2471 1116, 2471 1369; s/d from US\$20/45; 🍷) These rustic cabinas are about 100m from the town center and there are a variety of rooms to accommodate travelers of all budgets. They're owned and operated by the Sequera brothers, who are recommended refuge guides and boat captains. Two-hour fishing or naturalist trips for up to five people cost US\$50, and you can also arrange horseback riding here. Stop by the pink house with the sign advertising the cabinas to have a look.

Caño Negro Natural Lodge (☎ 2471 1000, 2471 1426; www.canonegrolodge.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$65/75;

📶 📶 📶) Perched on land that becomes a virtual island in the Río Frío during the rainy season, this lodge is surprisingly upscale considering its remote location. Well-appointed rooms have hot showers, air-con and satellite TV. The friendly staff can arrange all your trips while you relax in the pleasant pool, Jacuzzi or game room. The onsite restaurant, Jabirú, is open to the public and a great place for breakfast if you're weary of *gallo pinto* (rice and beans).

Hotel de Campo Caño Negro (☎ 2471 1012; www.hoteldecampo.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$75/85; 🍷 📶 📶) Set in an orchard of mango and citrus trees next to one of Caño Negro's lagoons, this Italian-run hotel is a fisherman's paradise. You can rent any combination of boats, guides, kayaks and fishing equipment here at the well-stocked tackle shop. And after angling for gargantuan tarpon all day, relax in comfortable, high-ceilinged rooms with air-con and private hot showers, or soak in the grotto-like Jacuzzi. There's also a restaurant (mains US\$7 to US\$12, open 7:30am to 9:30pm) specializing in, yep, fish.

Soda La Palmera (☎ 8816 3382; mains US\$3-10; 🍷 6am-9pm) Right at the entrance to the refuge, this pleasant *soda* serves Tico standards and fresh fish, including your personal catch of the day. The staff can also arrange local guides for fishing and naturalist trips (US\$40, two hours, up to three people). Advance reservations are recommended in the high season.

El Caiman Bar & Restaurante (☎ 8399 4164; US\$4-10; 🍷 10am-10pm Tue-Sun) At the bridge over the Río Frío just outside the village is this pleasant riverside eatery run by Canoa Aventura, a tour operator based in La Fortuna. Sit among the bamboo groves and feast on fresh sea

bass or tilapia while you watch the caimans drift idly by, or rent a canoe and paddle into their territory.

Getting There & Away

The village of Caño Negro and the entrance to the park lie on the rough road connecting Upala and Los Chiles, which is passable to all cars during the dry season. However, this road is frequently washed out during the rainy season, when a 4WD is usually required. Two buses daily run past the park entrance from both Upala and Los Chiles.

During the rainy season and much of the dry season, you can also catch a boat here from Los Chiles. This is becoming increasingly popular, especially as more travelers are crossing into and out of Nicaragua on the Río Frío (see the boxed text Getting to San Carlos, Nicaragua, p510).

LOS CHILES

Seventy kilometers north of Muelle on a smooth, paved road through the sugar cane, and just three dusty, red and heavily rutted kilometers south of the Nicaraguan border, lies the sweltering farming and fishing town of Los Chiles. The humid lowland village, arranged with dilapidated grace around a grassy soccer field and along the unmanicured banks of the leisurely Río Frío, is pleasant enough – almost charming by border-town standards. It was originally settled by merchants and fisherfolk who worked on the nearby Río San Juan, much of which forms the Nicaragua–Costa Rica border. In recent history, Los Chiles served as an important supply route for the Contras in Nicaragua, and was home to a strong US military presence throughout the 1980s.

Gringo traffic is on the rise in Los Chiles as it's a great base for enjoying the scenic water route to Caño Negro, and an early-morning excursion by small motorized boat is an adventure in itself. The second big draw is the scenic route to Nicaragua, a one-hour boat ride across the border that is becoming increasingly popular among foreign tourists. Crossing the border via the river is a relaxing, hassle-free way to go.

Although the road continues past Los Chiles to Nicaragua, this border post is closed to pretty much everyone. The police patrolling this line in the sand are heavily armed and extremely bored, so don't

waste your time and energy trying your luck there.

Information & Orientation

The last stretch of paved road along Hwy 35 is home to a few restaurants, the post office and a gas station. If you continue north past Los Chiles on the rutted dirt road, you'll find yourself in the dusty no-man's-land en route to a border crossing you won't be allowed to use.

Drivers will want to hang a left (west) off the highway to reach the town center and the docks of the Río Frío. **Banco Nacional** (☎ 2212 2000), close to the central park and soccer field, changes cash and travelers cheques and has a 24-hour ATM. Just down the road, around the side of the pink boutique, is an **Internet café** (☎ 2471 1636; per hr US\$1.20; 🕒 8:30am-noon & 2-8pm Mon-Fri). There's a **Cruz Roja** (Red Cross; ☎ 2471 1037, 2471 2025) on the west side of the plaza if you need some basic medical assistance or supplies.

Before hopping the boat to Nicaragua, you must stop at **migración** (immigration; ☎ 2471 1223; 🕒 8am-noon & 1:30-4pm), about 100m east of the park that faces the dock. See the boxed text Getting to San Carlos, Nicaragua, p510 for details on crossing into Nicaragua.

Tours

Los Chiles is a convenient base to organize your tours to Caño Negro. You'll be able to get on the river early, which means you'll probably see more wildlife than folks being shuttled in from La Fortuna and San José. The port is also a good jumping-off point for exploring the islands of Lago de Nicaragua (Lake Nicaragua), and if you miss the early boat, the local tour companies can sometimes arrange private transportation to San Carlos, Nicaragua.

You can arrange tours with Oscar Rojas at **Heliconia Tours & Restaurant** (☎ 2471 2096, 8307 8585), on the road between *migración* and the dock, or at **Rancho Tulipán** (☎ 2471 1414; www.ranchotulipan.com). **Viajes y Excursiones Cabo Rey** (☎ 2471 1251, 8839 7458) provides a boat service to the refuge (from US\$45) as well as to El Castillo and the Solentiname Islands in Nicaragua. Cabo himself can usually be found by the dock.

At the boat dock you can also hire individual boat captains to take you up the Río Frío during the dry season and all the way into Lago Caño Negro during the rainy season, as well as to San Carlos, Nicaragua (see the boxed text Getting to San Carlos, Nicaragua,

GETTING TO SAN CARLOS, NICARAGUA

Although there's a 14km dirt road between Los Chiles and San Carlos, Nicaragua, using this crossing requires special permission generally reserved for federal employees. Most regular folk go across by boat on the Río Frio, which is easily arranged in Los Chiles. You must first get an exit stamp in your passport at **migración** (☎ 2471 1223; ☹ 8am-noon & 1:30-4pm), about 100m east of the park that faces the dock, which is also your first stop when entering from Nicaragua.

Regular boats (US\$10, 45 minutes) leave Los Chiles at 12:30pm and 3:30pm daily, with extra boats at 11am and 2:30pm if demand is high. Boats leave San Carlos for Los Chiles at 10:30am and 4pm, with extra boats scheduled as needed. Of course, the Nicaragua-Costa Rica border is not known for its reliability, so confirm these times before setting out. Nicaragua charges a US\$7 entry fee and US\$2 exit fee, which can be paid in Nicaraguan córdobas or US dollars. Costa Rica is more gracious (so long as you're not Nicaraguan) as exit and entry are free. Your boat will make a stop at the actual border post about halfway through the trip; note the psychedelic 'camouflage' paint job on the building where your friendly, gun-wielding Nicaraguan border personnel are based.

When you hit the confluence of the Río San Juan, consider keeping your fingers and toes in the boat as there are river sharks (seriously!). Sharks are one of several euryhaline species that are able to survive in both fresh- and salt-water conditions. Every year, sharks that have been tagged by scientists in the Caribbean Sea are later found swimming in Lake Nicaragua. Although the rapids of the Río San Juan are a deterrent for most species of marine fish, sharks are apparently able to negotiate the river without problems, and presumably head for fresh water in search of food.

From San Carlos, which has a similar range of services to Los Chiles, you can arrange bus, boat and plane transportation to Managua, Granada and other destinations in Nicaragua. If you're looking to experience the Nica side of life, here's a quick list of the country's nearby highlights:

- Float down to **El Castillo**, one of Nicaragua's historical fortresses, accessible only by boat and one of the most chill spots.
- Explore the twin volcanoes of **Isla Ometepe**, a strong contender for the world's most beautiful island.
- Visit with the local artists on the **Solentiname Islands**, where art is truly the heartbeat of the community.

See the boxed text *Heading North of the Border*, p224 for more information on southwestern Nicaragua.

above). Three- to four-hour trips cost about US\$45 to US\$80 for a small group, depending on the size and type of boat.

Festivals & Events

This sleepy little town bursts to life during the October 4 **Feast of San Francisco**. Occasionally, festivities are held in Los Chiles during the irregularly scheduled **Bi-national Green Macaw Festival**, so look out for information.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodations in town are surprisingly limited, though most people aren't too keen on sticking around anyhow.

No Frills Hotel, Bar & Restaurant (☎ 2471 1200, 2471 1410; r US\$20; ☎ ☹) This hotel, about 1km south of Los Chiles just past the gas station, is not, in fact, completely frill-free. Though basic, rooms here are clean and quiet (except for the honking of resident geese) with air-con and TV; some even have a full-size fridge. The restaurant/bar is open for lunch and dinner, and the proprietors can also arrange fishing and boat tours.

Cabinas Jabirú (☎ 2471 1496, 8898 6357; r with/out air-con US\$30/25; ☎ ☹) Named for the rare, large jabirú stork (*Jabiru myxeria*) that can sometimes be seen at Caño Negro, this popular spot near the bus terminal has bare rooms and private hot-water bathrooms.

Rancho Tulipán (☎ 2471 1414; www.ranchotulipan.com; s/d US\$25/40; ☎ ☹ ☹) Rancho Tulipán is the most respectable accommodation in town, though it's also the most expensive and home to a very popular (translation: noisy!) bar. All the rooms have air-con, private hot-water bathrooms and cable TV, and it's conveniently located right across from *migración*. The onsite restaurant (mains US\$3 to US\$7, open 7am to 10pm) will start your day off right with a good breakfast, and the pan-fried sea bass is not to be missed.

Soda Juanita (☎ 2471 1607; mains US\$2-5; ☹ 6am-6pm) Right next to the dock, this cheery, bright-green *soda* serves up tasty casados, the usual deep-fried fast foods, *batidos* (fruit shakes) and coffee. Seating at the counter or at one of the thatch-shaded tables makes a sweet spot to watch the world go by and await your boat to Nicaragua.

Restaurant El Parque (☎ 2471 1373, 2471 1090; mains US\$3-5; ☹ 6am-9pm) This popular spot has some of the best eats in town, and it's open early if you're looking to get your coffee fix before setting out on the river.

There's a **Pali** two blocks north of the bus stop, and the local **Almacen de Los Chiles** on the west side of the soccer field to meet all of your grocery and bakery needs.

Getting There & Away

Drivers usually get here via Hwy 35 from Muelle, about 70 paved, straight kilometers where you're likely to get passed by big-rig drivers with lead feet. Skid marks and road-kill iguanas do break up the monotony of endless sugar-cane plantations. More scenic, if a little harder on your chassis, is the decent dirt road running for 50km from Upala, through Caño Negro, passable for normal cars throughout the dry season.

Regular boat transport is limited to quick shuttles across the Nicaraguan border (US\$10) and various day trips throughout the region.

All buses arrive and leave from the stop on the main street across from the park. Timetables are flexible, so play it safe and inquire locally.

Ciudad Quesada US\$3, two hours, depart 12 times daily from 5am to 7:15pm.

San José US\$5, five hours, depart 5:30am & 3:30pm.

Upala via Caño Negro US\$2.50, 2½ hours, depart 5am & 2pm.

SAN MIGUEL TO PUERTO VIEJO DE SARAPIQUÍ

This flat, steaming stretch of finca-dotted lowlands was once part of the United Fruit Company's cash-cow of banana holdings. Harvests were carried from the plantations to Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí where they were packaged and shipped down the river on boats destined for the lucrative North American market. However, with the advent of the railway in 1880 that connected most of the country to the new shipping port in Puerto Limón, Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí became a sleepy backwater.

Banana harvesting continued in the area through most of the 20th century, though in recent years farmers have switched to a more lucrative cash crop – sugar cane. Although Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí has never managed to recover its faded glory, the area around the town is still one of the premier destinations in Costa Rica for kayakers and rafters. There are also a number of stellar ecodges in the region that are open to nonguests, and feature everything from rain-forest hiking and suspension bridges to pre-Columbian ruins and chocolate tours.

The road north from San Miguel drops for 12km to the village of La Virgen and then flattens out as it bisects agricultural country for an additional 13km to Bajos de Chilamate. The old port town of Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí lies 6km further along this road. Buses linking either San José or Ciudad Quesada with Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí are the primary means of public transportation along this route.

LA VIRGEN

Tucked into the densely jungled shores of the wild and scenic Río Sarapiquí, La Virgen was one of a number of small towns that grew and prospered during the heyday of the banana trade. Although United Fruit has long since packed up and shipped out, the town is still dependent on the river, though most people today earn a living by either mongering fish or guiding gringos through the rapids.

Welcome to one of the premier kayaking and rafting destinations in Costa Rica. Surprisingly, most travelers have never

even heard about La Virgen, and those who have would be hard-pressed to find it on a map. But, to the dedicated groups of hardcore rafters and kayakers that spend days running the Río Sarapiquí, La Virgen is a relatively off-the-beaten-path paradise. As an added bonus, the three luxurious lodges east of town feature a number of interesting attractions including museums, private trails and a Maleku archaeological site – so there's plenty to do in the area even on a rest day.

Information

Most of La Virgen's businesses are strung out along the highway, including a gas station, a **Banco Nacional** (☎ 2212 2000) with 24-hour ATM, a couple of small supermarkets and many bars. **Internet Cafe** (☎ 2761 1107; per hr US\$1.25; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 2-9pm Sun) has fairly fast connection.

Sights & Activities

WHITE-WATER RAFTING

The Río Sarapiquí isn't as wild as the white water on the Río Pacuare near Turrialba, though it will still get your heart racing, and the dense jungle that hugs the riverbank is lush and primitive. You can run the Sarapiquí year-round, but July through December are considered peak months. Although it's possible to get a rafting trip on short notice, it's far better to make reservations at least two days in advance. Several tour operators in La Fortuna and San José organize trips. You can also call directly to the companies listed in this section.

There are three basic runs offered by several companies, and all have a minimum age of nine or 10; prices and times vary a bit, but the following are average. The Class I-II Chilamate put-in (US\$45 per person, three hours) is a gentle float more suited to younger kids and wildlife-watching. The Class III-IV Lower Sarapiquí (US\$45 to US\$65, three hours) puts in close to La Virgen and is a scenic and challenging trip that's a good choice for healthy people without white-water experience. The Class IV-V Upper Sarapiquí (US\$80, five hours) is seven screaming miles of serious white water – perfect for thrill-seekers.

Located just 75m north of the church, **Sarapiquí Outdoor Center** (☎ 2761 1123; sarapaquioutdoor@hotmail.com) is an established, family-run operation that offers top-quality rafting trips, as well as camping and decent budget

accommodations. This should be your first stop if you're an experienced DIY paddler.

In addition to offering rafting trips from La Virgen, San José and La Fortuna, **Aguas Bravas** (☎ 2292 2072; www.aguas-bravas.co.cr) is a safety-oriented, Tico-run outfit that can also arrange horseback rides and bike tours.

Aventuras del Sarapiquí (☎ 2766 6768; www.sarapiqui.com) near Chilamate, and **Hacienda Pozo Azul Adventures** (☎ 2761 1360; www.pozoazul.com) are also reputable local professionals who organize rafting trips.

HIKING

For truly rugged do-it-yourself adventurers, it's possible to hike from La Virgen to the southernmost ranger stations in Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo. For more information on hiking in Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo, see p147.

KAYAKING

If you're a kayaker, several accommodations in town are directly on the river, which means that you can roll out of bed, brush your teeth and have a quick paddle before breakfast. **Rancho Leona** (☎ 2761 1019; www.rancholeona.com) is something of a meeting spot for kayakers, which isn't surprising as its prime riverside location allows for easy launches and free kayak storage, see opposite for more information. Both here and at **Sarapiquí Outdoor Center** (☎ 2761 1123; sarapaquioutdoor@hotmail.com), staff can provide information regarding launches in the area before you set out on the river.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Hacienda Pozo Azul Adventures (☎ 2761 1360; www.pozoazul.com) specializes in adventure activities, including horseback riding tours starting from two-hour jaunts (US\$35) to multi-day treks. It also runs a canopy tour (US\$45) over the lush jungle and river, can take you rappelling (US\$28) and lead mountain-bike tours (US\$60, one day) and guided hikes (US\$15).

SERPENTARIO

A great, locally run attraction is La Virgen's famous **snake garden** (☎ 2761 1059; adult/student US\$5/3; ☎ 9am-6:30pm), where you can get face-to-face with more than 60 different species of reptiles and amphibians, including poison-dart frog, anaconda and the star-attraction, an 80kg Burmese python. The owner of the *serpentario*, Lydia, gives impromptu tours and

ONE LIFE ON THE RÍO SARAPIQUÍ

Miguel Angel Castillo Espinoza is 21 years old. He works at Rancho Leona (below) during the day and studies at night in this river paradise.

What is it like to live and work on the Río Sarapiquí? The Sarapiquí is one of the most beautiful rivers in all of Costa Rica, with rapids from Class I to Class V. The water is very clean and in all this vegetation it's possible to see animals and many kinds of birds. It's very peaceful here, and those who live here are good people.

I was born in Sarapiquí and I've been here my whole life. I have only my mother; my father died on August 2, 2007. That was a really strong blow that I haven't been able to get over, since before coming to Rancho Leona I lived only with him for the three years that he was ill. I have five brothers who work at a pineapple plantation, and three sisters who are married. My mother lives with four of my brothers. She's a beautiful woman to whom I owe a great deal, and I love her very much.

How would you describe yourself? I'm a chill person; I appreciate natural, unpretentious people and I like to spend time observing everything around me. I'm one of those people who doesn't say much, but I sense when others are feeling bad. I hate seeing people who believe they're better than others, or when I see them fighting about things that aren't worth the trouble. What I enjoy most is listening to music, playing soccer, kayaking and sometimes singing. I want to study physical education, tourism and especially teaching, since I love kids. I'd love to visit the US and to learn new things about the world and all its different cultures.

How did you come to work at Rancho Leona? I used to stay here at the rancho because Frey [former manager] always invited me. We were friends at school, and we hung out all the time, sparring, boxing – a lot of times I wound up pretty beaten up, and him too. That was really fun. [Frey's mother] Leona was an English teacher at my school, and soon she offered to let me stay here, and Frey taught me how to kayak. After that, I started working as a guide, and it's a wonderful experience I wouldn't trade for the world. I've been a kayak guide for a year and a half and it's been great – I love it.

takes certain snakes out of their cages for big hugs and memorable photo ops. The mural outside is most definitely tattoo-worthy.

CENTRO BIOLÓGICO SANTUARIO DE MARIPOSAS AGUAS SILVESTRES

You'll need your own wheels, or make arrangements through Rancho Leona (right), to visit this **butterfly sanctuary** (☎ 2761 1095) in the mountains, run by the energetic Edgar Corrales. Guided hikes (in Spanish; US\$10) take you through the rain forest along a waterfall trail and include a tour of the butterfly garden. You can also stay overnight in the rustic **bunkhouse** (US\$35 per person); the rate includes dinner, breakfast, a half-day tour of the local rain forest with a swim in the lagoon, and lunch on your return. However long your stay, be sure to bring bug repellent, as butterflies are not the only insects living up there.

To get there on your own, turn onto the Pozo Azul road and follow the brown

wood signs to the sanctuary, which is about 10km up the mountain, near the village of San Ramon.

Sleeping & Eating

Our pick **Rancho Leona** (☎ 2761 1019; www.rancholeona.com; r per person US\$12; ☎ ☎) This shady, riverside spot is a gem – kayakers congregate here to swap tales of white-water adventure, birders linger over huge breakfasts (US\$6) as the local color of avian life flits by, and artistically minded travelers admire the lodge's incredible stained glass, which was handmade by the owners. The handful of simple, spotless rooms in the wood-plank lodge share hot-water bathrooms, and there's a small bathing pool for taking a cool dip; spa services are also available. The super-friendly staff sometimes prepares family-style dinners in the evenings, and they can take you out on inflatable 'ducky' or kayak trips, as well as arrange rafting tours for you.

Bar & Cabañas El Río (☎ 2761 0138; r with fan/air-con US\$10/15; 📍 🚻) About 1km from Pozo Azul at the southern edge of town, these seven A-frame bungalows have tile floors, clean hot-water bathrooms and TV – they’re cute as heck and bordered with hedges and flowers. About 100m further down the steep hill is the lovely open-air Bar El Río, on rough-hewn stilts high above the river. Though this large treehouse bar has a romantic ambience when it’s not karaoke night, beware of the toilet (which doesn’t actually contain a toilet but simply is a drain in the corner of the tilted floor).

Sarapiquí Outdoor Center (☎ 2761 1123; sara paquioutdoor@hotmail.com; camping/r US\$5/25; 📍) Riverside campsites here have access to showers and bathrooms. Private rooms are simple and have river views, though they’re a bit overpriced for what they are. There’s also a communal kitchen and a covered terrace in case of rain. In addition to rafting and kayaking trips, the friendly owners can also arrange horseback rides and guided hikes to a nearby waterfall.

Hacienda Pozo Azul Adventure (☎ 2438 2616, in the USA/Canada 877-810 6903; www.pozoazul.com; s/d/tr luxury tent US\$58/93/154; 📍 🚻 📍) Beside the bridge over the Río Sarapiquí is, if you’ve been paying attention, one of the most heavily advertised lodges in the entire region. Accommodation here is in a number of luxury tents scattered on the edge of the treeline, all on raised, polished-wood platforms and outfitted with air mattresses and mosquito nets. For those looking to really get away from it all, there’s also the Magsasay Jungle Lodge (single/double/triple luxury tents US\$70/112/132) deep in the jungle, perched at the edge of Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo. All showers at both locations have hot water. Aside from the tent-camping and adventure tours, Pozo Azul also boasts the best restaurant/bar (mains US\$5 to US\$9) in town, with an outdoor veranda alongside the river.

Restaurante y Cabañas Tía Rosita (☎ 2761 1032, 2761 1125; meals US\$3-6; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📍) Tía Rosita is the most highly recommended *soda* in La Virgen, with excellent casados, Costa Rican-style *chiles relenos* (stuffed fried peppers) and *horchata* (sweet rice shake) and service without a smile. The family also rents several clean, cute cabañas (single/double/triple rooms US\$10/15/20)

with private hot shower, TV, fan and plenty of breathing space.

Restaurant La Costa (☎ 2761 1117; mains US\$3-7; 🍳 11am-9pm) On the eastern edge of town, La Costa is run by a trio of young Chinese siblings whose specialty is, hey, Chinese-style seafood. The portions are generous, so you know where to go if you’re hankering for noodles.

Restaurant Mary Tierra (☎ 2761 1603; mains US\$4-9) La Virgen’s favorite fine-dining (but still very relaxed) option is this comfortable seafood and steak restaurant that’s popular with both locals and travelers. The specialty here is shrimp, and it’s damn good.

Getting There & Away

La Virgen lies on Hwy 126, about 8km from San Miguel, to the south, and 17km from Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí, to the northeast. Buses originating in either San José, San Miguel or Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí make regular stops in La Virgen. If you’re driving, the curvy road is paved between San José and Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí, though irregular maintenance can make for a bumpy ride.

LA VIRGEN TO PUERTO VIEJO DE SARAPIQUÍ

This scenic stretch of Hwy 4 is home to a few lovely ecolodges that are extremely popular among well-heeled tourists. However, if you’re the kind of traveler that scraps together a few hundred colones every morning to buy a loaf of bread from Pali supermarket, then fear not as these places do allow nonguests to see their unusual attractions and private trails for a small fee. Any bus between La Virgen and Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí can drop you at the entrances, while a taxi from La Virgen (or Puerto Viejo for Selva Verde) will cost from US\$4 to US\$6.

Centro Neotrópico Sarapiquí & Tirimbina Rainforest Center

About 2km north of La Virgen is **Centro Neotrópico Sarapiquí** (☎ 2761 1004; www.sarapiqui.org; d/tr US\$99/124; 📍 🚻 📍 📍), a unique ecolodge that aims to foster sustainable tourism by educating its guests about environmental conservation and pre-Columbian history and culture. The entire complex consists of *palenque*-style, thatch-roofed buildings modeled after a 15th-century pre-Columbian village, and contains a clutch of luxuriously appointed hardwood rooms with huge, solar-heated bathrooms

BOATING TO NICARAGUA *Rob Rachowiecki*

Sailing down the Río Sarapiquí to the Río San Juan is a memorable trip. If the water is low, dozens of crocodiles can be seen sunning themselves on the banks. If the water is high, river turtles climb out of the river to sun themselves on logs. Birds are everywhere. North of Puerto Viejo much of the land is cattle pasture with few trees, but as you approach the Nicaraguan border more stands of forest are seen. In trees on the banks you may see monkey, iguana or maybe a snake draped over a branch.

On my trip the boat captain suddenly cut the engine, so I turned around to see what the matter was. He grinned and yelled and it was not until the dugout had gently nosed into the bank beneath the tree that I saw a sloth raise a languid head to see what was going on. How he managed to make out that the greenish-brown blob on a branch (the color is caused by the algae that grows in the fur of this lethargic animal) was a sloth is one of the mysteries of traveling with a sharp-eyed *campesino*.

We continued on down to the confluence of the Sarapiquí with the San Juan, where we stopped to visit an old Miskito Indian fisher named Leandro. He claimed to be 80 years old, but his wizened frame had the vitality of a man half his age. From the bulging woven-grass bag in the bottom of his fragile dugout, Leandro sold us fresh river lobster to accompany that evening’s supper.

The official border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica is the south bank of the San Juan, not the middle of the river, so you are technically traveling into Nicaragua when on the San Juan. This river system is a historically important gateway from the Caribbean into the heart of Central America. Today it remains off the beaten tourist track and allows the traveler to see a combination of rain forest and ranches, wildlife and old war zones, deforested areas and protected areas.

and private terraces. However, the main reason guests rave about this ecolodge is the variety of exhibits and attractions located on the grounds.

Even if you’re not staying at the lodge, it’s worth stopping by just to visit the lodge’s real claims to fame, namely the **Alma Ata Archaeological Park, Rainforest Museum of Indigenous Cultures and Sarapiquí Gardens** (adult/child under 8 US\$19/free; 🍳 9am-5pm). Admission includes entry to all three places, though alternatively, you can purchase admission for the individual attractions. The archaeological site is estimated to be around 600 years old, and is attributed to the Maleku (see boxed text *A Brief History of the Maleku*, p504). Currently, about 70 small stone sculptures marking a burial field are being excavated by Costa Rican archaeologists who have revealed a number of petroglyphs and pieces of pottery. Although the site is modest, and is definitely not comparable in size or scope to other Central American archaeological sites, it’s one of the few places in Costa Rica where you can get a sense of its pre-Columbian history.

The museum chronicles the history of the rain forest (and of human interactions with it) through a mixture of displays and videos, and also displays hundreds of Costa Rican

indigenous artifacts including some superbly crafted musical instruments. Finally, the gardens boast the largest scientific collection of medicinal plants in Costa Rica.

An onsite **restaurant** (mains US\$7-20; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) serves meals incorporating fruits, vegetables, spices and edible flowers used in indigenous cuisine, many of which are grown on the premises.

As if this wasn’t spectacular enough, following the museum tour visitors are invited to enter the **Tirimbina Rainforest Center** (☎ 2761 1579; www.tirimbina.org; r incl breakfast US\$55), which is a 300-hectare private reserve that is reached by crossing two suspension bridges, 267m and 111m long, that span the Río Sarapiquí. Halfway across, a spiral staircase drops down to a large island in the river. The reserve has more than 6km of trails, some of which are paved or wood-blocked. There are also a number of different guided tours on offer (US\$14 to US\$20) including birding, ‘bat-ing’ and a recommended guided chocolate tour, which lets you explore a working cacao plantation and learn about the harvesting, fermenting and drying processes. Student discounts are available. Tirimbina is also directly accessed from the road about 7km north of La Virgen.

La Quinta de Sarapiquí Lodge

About 5km north of La Virgen, this pleasant family-run lodge (☎ 2761 1052; www.laquinatasarapiqui.com; r with fan/air-con US\$87/93; ♿ (P) ♿) is on the banks of the Río Sardinal, which branches off of the Sarapiquí in the north and runs to the west of it. The lodge has covered paths through the landscaped garden connecting thatch-roofed, hammock-strung rooms. All the rooms have a terrace, ceiling fan and private hot shower.

Owner Beatriz Gámez is active in local environmental issues and helps administer the Cámara de Turismo de Sarapiquí (Cantusa), which works to balance conservation and tourism in the area. Activities at the lodge include swimming in the pretty pool or river (there's a good swimming hole nearby), horseback riding, fishing, boat trips, mountain-biking and birding, and you can spend time in the large **butterfly garden** or hike the 'frog land' trail where poison-dart frogs are commonly seen. Fishing and horseback riding are free for lodge guests. You can also get meals in the open-air restaurant (mains US\$8 to US\$13).

On the hotel grounds, **La Galería** (admission US\$8.50, free for lodge guests) features an eclectic collection of regional ephemera, including an extensive collection of insect specimens such as *la machaca*, a bizarre-looking insect, about 7.5cm long, also known as the lantern bug.

Even more interesting are the unusual exhibits on Costa Rican history. Indigenous artifacts, including some worthwhile copies of the area's more important archaeological finds, are a treat. The collection of Spanish-colonial relics is even more impressive, featuring not only antiques collected by the owners, but interesting family heirlooms as well – Gámez' great-grandmother was pen pals with famed Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío. The fee also includes access to the lodge's private trails and gardens.

Selva Verde Lodge

In Chilamate, about 7km west of Puerto Viejo, this former finca is now an elegant lodge (☎ 2766 6800, in the USA/Canada 800-451 7111; www.selvaverde.com; s/d incl meals US\$81/98; ♿ (P) ♿) that protects over 200 hectares of rain forest. Guests can choose to stay in the river lodge, which is elevated above the rain-forest floor on wooden platforms, or in a private bungalow, quietly tucked away in the nearby rain forest. Wood-floored rooms have private hot

shower, screened windows, in-room safes and of course, your very own hammock.

The lodge works closely with a tour company for over-55s called **Elderhostel** (www.elderhostel.org) and offers educational opportunities, guided tours and other interesting diversions, many of which nonguests can enjoy for a fee.

There are several kilometers of walking trails through the grounds and into the pre-montane tropical wet forest; you can either get a trail map or can hire a bilingual guide from the lodge (US\$15 per person, three hours). There's also a garden of medicinal plants, as well as a **butterfly garden** (admission US\$5, free for lodge guests). Various boat tours on the Río Sarapiquí are also available, from rafting trips to guided canoe tours; locally guided horseback rides (US\$25 for two to three hours) can also be arranged.

The Holbrook family, who own the lodge, funds the nonprofit **Sarapiquí Conservation Learning Center** (www.learningcentercostarica.org), through which guests can participate in cultural exchange activities such as a *charla* (chat) over coffee, homestays or salsa dancing lessons with locals. The center also partners with student groups to serve as a base for conservation and environmental education.

PUERTO VIEJO DE SARAPIQUÍ & AROUND

At the scenic confluence of Río Puerto Viejo and Río Sarapiquí, Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí was once the most important port in Costa Rica. Boats laden with bananas, coffee and other commercial exports plied the Sarapiquí as far as the Nicaraguan border, then turned east on the Río San Juan to the sea. Today, Puerto Viejo (the full name distinguishes it from Puerto Viejo de Talamanca on the Caribbean coast) is simply a jungle border town – slightly seedy in a film-noir sort of way. There are, however, numerous opportunities in the surrounding area for birding, rafting, boating and jungle exploration.

Migración is near the small wooden dock, sometimes avoided by visiting Nicaraguans who share the river with local fishers and visiting birders. Adventure seekers can still travel down the Sarapiquí in motorized dugout canoes.

There is no dry season, but from late January to early May is the 'less wet' season.

On the upside, when it rains here there are fewer mosquitoes.

Banco Popular (☎ 2766 6815) has an ATM and changes money. **Internet Sarapiquí** (☎ 2766 6223; per hr US\$2; ☹ 8am-10pm) is at the west end of town. **Souvenir Río Sarapiquí** (☎ 2766 6727), on the main street, has tour information on birding, kayaking, white-water rafting and zip lining.

Activities

Grassroots environmental activity is strong in this area. Local guide Alex Martínez, owner of the Posada Andrea Cristina B&B, maintains an **ecotourism center** (☎ 2766 6265; ☹ 8am-3pm), which focuses on conservation activities and wilderness tours – **birding** trips in particular. You can also arrange transportation and make other reservations here, as well as learn about worthwhile volunteer opportunities in the region.

If you're looking to organize a rafting or kayaking trip, a branch of **Aguas Bravas** (☎ 2292 2072; www.aguas-bravas.co.cr) is across the road from the bank. You can also try **Costa Rica Fun Adventures** (☎ 2290 6015; www.crfunadventures.com), which is 2km north of town and offers a good variety of guided hiking and horseback trips.

Taking the launch trip from Puerto Viejo to the Trinidad Lodge (below), at the confluence of the Río Sarapiquí and the Río San Juan, provides a rich opportunity to see crocodile, sloth, bird, monkey and iguana sunning themselves on the muddy riverbanks and gathering in the trees. This river system is a historically important gateway from the Caribbean into the heart of Central America, and it's still off the beaten tourist track, giving a glimpse of rain forest and ranches, wildlife and old war zones, deforested pastureland and protected areas.

Sleeping

This stretch of jungle boasts quite a range of accommodations, from budget bunks in town, designed for local long-term plantation workers, to several extraordinary lodges on the outskirts, the most exclusive of which are on the road to La Virgen. Lodges in the area north of Puerto Viejo are also listed, including one in the river town of Trinidad, on the Nicaraguan border.

BUDGET

Trinidad Lodge (☎ 2213 0661, 8381 0621; r per person US\$10) Situated on the Río San Juan in the com-

munity of Trinidad, this budget lodge is right across from the Nicaraguan border crossing and is pretty much the only gig in town. Though on the rustic side, the bamboo-walled bungalows are charming and very clean, with private cold-water bathrooms. Candle power provides light when the generator shuts off at the end of the night, and meals are available (US\$4 to US\$8) at the rancho, with a pool table besides. The lodge is accessible only by boat (US\$10), which departs once daily at 2pm from the main dock of Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí (35km away). The motorized launches leave Trinidad daily at (yawn) 5am. Due to the launch schedules, consider staying two nights to fully appreciate a hike, horseback tour or boat trip through this lush, remote sector of jungle.

Mi Lindo Sarapiquí (☎ 2766 6281; s/d US\$18/30; ♿ (P) ♿) On the south side of the soccer field, this is the best budget option in the town center. Rooms here are simple but spacious and clean, and have a private hot shower and fan. The onsite restaurant (mains US\$3 to US\$10, open 10am to 10pm) is slightly pricey, though it offers some of the freshest seafood in town.

MIDRANGE

Los Cuajipales (☎ 2283 9797, 2766 6608; camping per person US\$10, r per person US\$20-30; (P) ♿) About 3km north of town on a good gravel road, this rustic complex is geared toward Tico tourists. Comfortable thatch-roofed cabinas sleeping up to five were designed according to Huetar Indian techniques that keep them naturally cool (cable TV and private cold showers are, however, less authentic). All rates include meals at the casually elegant restaurant and access to the rather extravagant pool, table-tennis and billiard tables, 4km of private trails and tilapia pond.

Posada Andrea Cristina B&B (☎ 2766 6265; www.andreacristina.com; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$25/45/55/65; (P) ♿) About 1km west of the center, this recommended B&B has eight quiet, immaculate cabins in its garden, each with fan, private hot-water bathroom, hammock and outdoor table and chairs. It's also situated on the edge of the rain forest, so there are plenty of opportunities for birding while you sit outside and eat breakfast. The owner, Alex Martínez, is an excellent, amiable guide as well as a passionate front-line conservationist. He arrived here 30 years ago as a tough young hunter exploring what was virgin forest, and saw the jungle's rapid destruction at the hands of humankind. He

changed his philosophy and is now a volunteer game warden – who will abandon a Saturday-night soccer match to chase down poachers on the river. He helped found Asociación para el Bienestar Ambiental de Sarapiquí (ABAS), a local environmental-protection and education agency. Alex, who speaks excellent English, runs an onsite ecotourism center (see p517), and can tell you as much as you want to know about environmental issues in the area. One of Alex's latest projects involves identifying nesting sites of breeding great green macaw, and purchasing living almendro trees from property owners, who are then honor-bound to protect the trees.

Hotel Ara Ambigua (☎ 2766 7101; www.hotelaraambigua.com; s/d/tr incl breakfast from US\$45/55/75; 🏠 📶 🚶) About 1km west of Puerto Viejo near La Guaira, this countryside retreat offers cozy rooms that are well equipped with private hot-water showers and cable TV. It's worth upgrading about US\$10 for the bungalows, which feature log-style furniture and flagstone floors. The real draw is the varied opportunities for wildlife-watching – you can see poison-dart frogs in the *ranario* (frog pond), caiman in the small lake and the birds that come to feed near the onsite Restaurante La Casona, which is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Hotel El Bambú (☎ 2766 6005; www.elbambu.com; standard/deluxe r incl breakfast US\$58/76; 🏠 📶 🚶) You really can't miss the sign for downtown Puerto Viejo's finest lodging, which caters mostly to package tourists looking for a clean and comfortable base when they're not out on 'adventure tours.' Rooms are all equipped with air-con and hot water, and there's a big, inviting pool and popular restaurant open to the main road. Spring for one of the quieter deluxe rooms out back, whose raised platform paths take you through the trees.

El Gavilán (☎ 2766 6743; www.gavilanlodge.com; d with/without breakfast US\$58/64; 🏠 📶 🚶) Sitting on a 100-hectare reserve about 4km northeast of Puerto Viejo, this former cattle hacienda is cozy, quaint and a birding haven. All of the spacious rooms have a big hot-water shower and fan; all have porches, some with river views. The grounds feature 5km of private trails and a good restaurant, plus a nice outdoor Jacuzzi to relax in after a long hike. Though the accommodations don't quite live up to the price, the birding and boat trips are the draw here. Trips range from short jaunts down the Río Sarapiquí to overnights

in Tortuguero. Multi-day package deals are available that include meals, tours and transportation from San José.

A taxi or boat from Puerto Viejo costs US\$5. There's a signed turnoff from Hwy 4 about 2km from town.

Eating

Most of the lodgings in and around Puerto Viejo have onsite restaurants or provide meals.

There are several *sodas* in Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí, including the excellent **Soda Judith** (mains US\$2-4; ☎ 6am-7pm), one block off the main road, where early risers grab brewed coffee and big breakfasts or an *empanada* to start their day. **Restaurante La Casona** (meals US\$4-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) at the Hotel Ara Ambigua is particularly recommended for its homemade, typical cuisine served in an open-air rancho.

There's also a **Palí supermarket** (☎ 8am-9pm) at the west end of town, and the local Super Sarapiquí on the way to the port.

Getting There & Away

Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí has been a transport center longer than Costa Rica has been a country, and is easily accessed by paved major roads from San José, the Caribbean coast and other population centers. There is a taxi stop across from the bus terminal, and taxis will take you to the nearby lodges and Estación Biológica La Selva for US\$4 to US\$7.

BOAT

The small port has a regular service to the Trinidad Lodge in Trinidad, and you are able to arrange transportation anywhere along the river (seasonal conditions permitting) through independent boat captains. Short trips cost about US\$10 per hour per person for a group of four, or US\$20 per hour for a single person. Serious voyages to Tortuguero or Barra del Colorado and back cost about US\$350 for a boat holding five.

BUS

Right across from the park, the **bus terminal** (☎ 2233 4242; ☎ 5am-7pm) sells tickets and stores backpacks (US\$1.50).

Ciudad Quesada/San Carlos via La Virgen (Empresarios Guapileños) US\$1.75, three hours, depart daily at

5:30am, 8:30am, 10:30am, 12:15pm, 2:30pm, 4pm, 6pm and 7:10pm.

Guápiles (Empresarios Guapileños) US\$1.40, one hour, 5:30am, 6:45am, 7:10am, 9:40am, 10:30am, 12:10pm, 2:30pm, 3:45pm, 4:45pm and 7pm.

San José (Autotransportes Sarapiquí) US\$2.90, two hours, 6:30am, 7:30am, 10am, 11:30am, 1:30pm, 2:30pm, 3:30pm, 4:30pm and 6pm.

SOUTH OF PUERTO VIEJO DE SARAPIQUÍ

South of Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí, fincas and banana plantations line Hwy 4 and sprawl all the way to the marshes and mangroves of the Caribbean coast. To the west, the rugged hills of the Cordillera Central mark the northeastern boundary of Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo. Most travelers on this scenic stretch of highway are either heading to the Caribbean coast or to the Central Valley. However, some are pulling off the road to visit the working research center Estación Biológica La Selva, the world-class botanical garden called Heliconia Island, or Rara Avis, one of the most isolated lodges in Costa Rica.

About 12 smoothly paved kilometers from Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí is the village of Horquetas, around which you'll find the turnoffs for Heliconia Island and Rara Avis. From Horquetas it's another 15km to Hwy 32, which connects San José to the Caribbean coast and bisects Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo on the way to San José.

ESTACIÓN BIOLÓGICA LA SELVA

Not to be confused with Selva Verde Lodge in Chilamate, **Estación Biológica La Selva** (☎ 2524 0629, 2766 6565; www.ots.ac.cr; s/d US\$88/164; 🏠 📶) is a working biological research station that is well equipped with laboratories, experimental plots, a herbarium and an extensive library. On any given day, the station is usually teeming with scientists and students, who use the station as a headquarters for researching the nearby private reserve. Although most guests are affiliated with an institution of higher learning, La Selva does welcome drop-ins, though it's best to phone ahead and reserve your accommodation. Rooms are simple but comfortable, and rates include all meals and guided hikes.

La Selva is operated by the **Organization for Tropical Studies** (OTS; ☎ 2524 0607; www.ots.ac.cr), a consortium founded in 1963 to provide leadership in the education, research and wise use of tropical natural resources. In fact, many well-known tropical ecologists have trained at La Selva. Twice a year OTS offers a grueling eight-week course open mainly to graduate students of ecology, along with various other courses and field trips that you can apply for.

The area protected by La Selva is 1614 hectares of pre-montane wet-tropical rain forest, much of which is undisturbed. It's bordered to the south by the 476-sq-km **Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo** (p146), creating a protected area large enough to support a great diversity of life. More than 445 bird species have been recorded at La Selva, as well as 120 mammal species, 1850 species of vascular plants (especially from the orchid, philodendron, coffee and legume families) and thousands of insect species.

Hiking

Reservations are required for guided hikes (US\$36/26 adult/child for a full-day hike, US\$28/20 adult/child for half-day; 8am and 1:30pm daily) with a bilingual naturalist guide. You'll head across the hanging bridge and into 57km of well-developed jungle trails, some of which are wheelchair accessible. Unguided hiking is forbidden, although you'll be allowed to wander a bit after your guided tour. Make reservations for the popular guided birding hikes, led at 5:45am and 7pm, depending on demand. Profits from these walks help to fund the research station.

No matter when you visit La Selva, it will probably be raining. Bring rain gear and footwear that's suitable for muddy trails. Insect repellent and a water bottle are also essential.

For the truly rugged do-it-yourself adventurers, it's possible to hike from La Selva to the southernmost ranger stations in Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo. For more information in hiking in Braulio Carrillo, see p147.

Getting There & Away

Public buses between Puerto Viejo and Río Frío/Horquetas can drop you off 1km from the entrance to La Selva. It's about 4km from Puerto Viejo, where you can catch a taxi for around US\$4 to US\$6.

OTS runs buses (US\$10) from San José on Monday. Make reservations when you

arrange your visit, and note that researchers and students have priority.

SUEÑO AZUL RESORT

Yoga retreat groups make up the majority of guests at **Sueño Azul** (☎ 2764 1000; www.suenoazulresort.com; s/d/tr US\$94/114/135; 📍 🚶 🚰), a higher-end resort upon a hill. Independent travelers interested in honing their yoga practice will appreciate the appeal of this peaceful place, especially at the secluded bamboo yoga platform if no groups have scheduled a stay. Spacious, airy rooms have hot-water showers and bamboo furnishings, and are nestled on the grounds of this private jungle reserve. Hiking trails offer jungle walks to waterfalls, and the reserve can also be explored on horseback.

HELICONIA ISLAND

This self-proclaimed ‘oasis of serenity’ is arguably the most beautiful garden in all of Costa Rica. **Heliconia Island** (☎ 2764 5220; www.heliconiaisland.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$55/70, d with air-con US\$80; 📍 🚶 🚰) is a masterpiece of landscape architecture that was started in 1992 by New York City native Tim Ryan, a former professor of art and design. Today, this 2-hectare island is owned by Dutch couple Henk and Carolien, and is home to more than 80 varieties of heliconia, tropical flowers, plants and trees. The grounds are a refuge for 228 species of birds (hummingbirds are the sole pollinators of heliconias). There are also four resident howler monkeys, three species of river otter and a few friendly dogs that will greet you upon arrival.

Henk and Carolien will guide you through the property, showing off a number of memorable plants including the Madagascar traveling palm, rare hybrids of heliconia found only on the island, and the *Phenakospermum guyanense* (Phenomenal sperm), a unique flowering plant native to Guyana. The admission fee (self-guided/guided tours US\$10/15) is waived for overnight guests. You can stay in this oasis in immaculate raised cabins, which have stone floors, hot-water showers and breezy balconies.

Heliconia Island is about 5km north of Horquetas, and there are signs along the highway pointing to the entrance. When you arrive at the entrance, park your car, walk across the metal bridge and turn left on the island to reach the gardens.

RARA AVIS

When they say remote, they mean remote: this **private reserve** (☎ 2764 3131; www.rara-avis.com; 📍 🚶 🚰), which is comprised of 1335 hectares of high-altitude tropical rain forest, is accessible only to overnight guests willing to make the three-hour tractor ride (seriously!) up a steep, muddy hill to get there.

Rara Avis was founded by Amos Bien, an American who came to Costa Rica as a biology student in 1977. Amos is dedicated to environmental conservation, and has been involved in a number of ongoing sustainability projects since his arrival. The private reserve borders the eastern edge of Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo and has no real dry season. **Birding** here is excellent, with more than 350 species sighted so far, while mammals including monkeys, coatis, anteaters and pacas are often seen. Visitors can use the trail system alone, or on guided hikes included in the cost of lodging. A popular jaunt is the short trail leading from the lodge to **La Catarata**, a 55m-high waterfall that cuts an impressive swath through the forest.

The accommodations, although lovely, are rustic – most don’t have electricity, though the kerosene lamps and starry skies are unforgettable. Room prices, which include all meals, transportation and a guided hike, seem high, but it’s because of the remote location – you, the groceries and the guides all have to be hauled up that mountain from Horquetas.

Very basic **cabins** (r per person US\$50) in the woods sleep four and have shared cold-water bathrooms, while nicer rooms in the **Waterfall Lodge** (s/d/tr US\$85/150/195) have private hot-water shower and a balcony overlooking the rain forest. Even when it’s pouring outside you can watch birds from your private balcony. The **River-Edge Cabin** (s/d/tr US\$95/170/225) is the nicest spot, with solar-powered electricity, hot water and separate rooms. It’s a dark (or romantic, depending on the company) 10-minute hike from the rest of the lodge.

Because access is time consuming and difficult, a two-night stay is recommended. The bus to Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí leaves San José (US\$2, 1½ hours) from the Guápiles-Limón terminal at 6:30am, and you’ll need to get off at Horquetas. Here, you’ll embark on the famed tractor ride. You can also arrange to be taken by jeep or on horseback, both of which require hiking the last 3km yourself.

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