

Península de Osa & Golfo Dulce



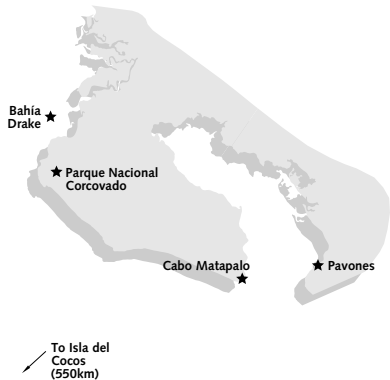
This remote enclave in the extreme southwestern corner of the country is regarded by locals and tourists alike as the most picturesque, the most pristine and the most perfect spot in Costa Rica. Centered on Parque Nacional Corcovado, which contains one of the continent's last remaining patches of Pacific rain forest, and shaped by the serene waters of the wildlife-rich Golfo Dulce, the entire peninsula operates as a vast biological corridor. Not surprisingly, *National Geographic* famously labeled Osa as 'the most biologically intense place on earth.'

Although much of the rain forest in Costa Rica is protected by the national park system, no other region of the country can offer the breadth and extent of wildlife found in Osa. In Corcovado, it's sometimes possible to see all four native species of monkey swinging in the canopy overhead, while rare animals such as Baird's tapir can become commonly spotted finds. Indeed, the Osa peninsula is Costa Rica at its finest, and striking evidence that there is an intrinsic value and beauty of the rain forest that is worth saving.

Beyond Corcovado, the Osa peninsula captivates travelers with its abandoned wilderness beaches, world-class surf and endless opportunities for rugged exploration. In a country where adventure is all too often downgraded and packaged for tourist consumption, Osa is the real deal. Simply put, it's a place for travelers with youthful hearts, intrepid spirits and a yearning for something truly wild. If you've been growing old in a concrete jungle, spend some time in this verdant one – just be sure to bring a good pair of boots, a sturdy tent and some serious quantities of bug spray!

HIGHLIGHTS

- Testing your survival skills by trekking across **Parque Nacional Corcovado** (p416), the country's premiere wilderness experience
- Exploring the dense jungles that fringe the crystalline waters of **Bahía Drake** (p399)
- Catching a ride on the world's longest left break at the undiscovered surfing paradise that is **Pavones** (p439)
- Watching the sun rise over the Golfo Dulce and the sun set over the Pacific from the deserted beaches on **Cabo Matapalo** (p413)
- Diving off the coastlines of the far-flung **Isla del Cocos** (p441), the onscreen location of *Jurassic Park*



History

While the Guaymí were the earliest inhabitants of the Osa (for more information see boxed text, p408), the vast majority of the peninsula was never populated or developed by Ticos. In fact, because of the remoteness of the region, commercial logging was never a threat until the early 1960s.

Although this tumultuous decade saw the destruction of much of Costa Rica's remaining primary forests, Osa was largely spared. By 1975 however, international companies were greedily eyeing the peninsula's natural resources, namely its vast timber and gold reserves. Fortunately, these ill-conceived ambitions were halted when researchers petitioned President Daniel Oduber to establish a national park. Following the creation of Parque Nacional Corcovado, Oduber received the Albert Schweitzer Award from the Animal Welfare Institute for his much applauded actions.

In recent years, the peninsula has attracted the attention of gringos who want to trade in their workaday world for a piece of paradise. Prime real estate is being snatched up, and it's inevitable that things are set to change in Osa as they have in the rest of Costa Rica. However, there is hope that development will be more sustainable in this part of the country, particularly since there is a vested interest in keeping the peninsula green. For a local's perspective on the changes in the region, see p438.

Climate

The Osa peninsula has two drastically different seasons: the rainy season and the dry season. During the rainy season (mid-April to mid-December), the amount of precipitation is astounding, with most months boasting more than 500mm. Even in the dry season, better described as the 'less rainy season,' you can expect a good downfall every now and again, especially while trekking through Corcovado.

Parks & Reserves

As the country's premier ecotourism destination. The Peninsula de Osa is home to a plethora of parks, reserves and wildlife refuges.

Humedal Nacional Terraba-Sierpe (p397) Approximately 33,000 hectares of protected mangrove wetlands that is home to numerous species of aquatic birds.

Parque Nacional Corcovado (p416) This park occupies a great bulk of the peninsula, is Osa's crown jewel and one of Costa Rica's last true wilderness areas.

Parque Nacional Isla del Cocos (p441) The island from *Jurassic Park* is equally as difficult to access as it is visually stunning and utterly pristine.

Parque Nacional Piedras Blancas (p435) Formerly known as Parque Nacional Esquinas, this contains one of the last remaining stretches of lowland rain forest in the country.

Refugio Nacional de Fauna Silvestre Golfito (p432) This tiny 2810-hectare reserve surrounding the town of Golfito is home to rare cycads, or living plant fossils.

Reserva Biológica Isla del Caño (p397) A tiny marine and terrestrial park in Bahía Drake that is a popular destination for snorkelers, divers and biologists.

Reserva Forestal Golfo Dulce (p407) On the northern shore of Golfo Dulce, this is an important biological corridor for migrating wildlife.

Reserve Indígena Guaymí (p407) This reserve is home to the vast majority of the peninsula's indigenous communities, though most of the reserve is not open to tourism.

Dangers & Annoyances

The greatest hazard in the Osa is the difficult environment, particularly in Parque Nacional Corcovado. Trails are generally well marked, but it can be difficult going at times, especially if you're not accustomed to wilderness navigation. Also, the many large rivers that run through the park create their own hazards, especially if they're running swift in the rainy season. Any help at all, much less medical help, is very far away – if you get lost out here, you have a serious problem on your hands.

To minimize these risks, it's recommended that you explore Corcovado either as part of an organized tour or with the help of a local guide. Hiring a knowledgeable guide will also provide up-to-date information on potential hazards, and it provides safety through numbers.

Areas of Corcovado are also prime territory for the deadly fer-de-lance snake. The chance of getting a snakebite is remote, but you should be careful – always wear boots while walking in the forest. Although they don't carry Lyme Disease, ticks are also everywhere in Corcovado. In reality, they're nothing more than nuisance, though you'd be wise to bring a good pair of tweezers and a few books of matches. If you're not traveling with a buddy, a pocket mirror will also help as these little buggers have a habit of turning up in some rather uncomfortable places.



Getting There & Around

The best option for exploring the peninsula in depth is to have your own form of private transportation. However, you will need to bring a spare tire (and plenty of patience); roads in Osa are extremely poor, as most of the peninsula is still off the grid.

Major towns in Osa such as Golfito and Puerto Jiménez are serviced by regular buses, though public transportation can get sporadic once you leave these major hubs. Unpaved roads can also make for a long and jarring bus ride, so it's probably best to bring a rolled-up fleece for your bottom and an MP3 player for your sanity.

If you're planning on hiking through Corcovado or visiting one of the lodges in Bahía Drake, another excellent option is to fly. Both **NatureAir** (www.natureair.com) and **Sansa** (www.sansa.com) service the Osa peninsula, namely Bahía Drake, Puerto Jiménez and Golfito. Prices vary according to season and availability, though you can expect to pay around US\$100 to/from San José.

Alfa Romeo Aero Taxi (☎ 2735 5353) offers charter flights connecting Puerto Jiménez, Drake and Golfito to Carate and Sirena. Flights are best booked at the airport in person, and one-way fares are typically less than US\$100.

TO CORCOVADO VIA BAHÍA DRAKE

The first of two principal overland routes to Parque Nacional Corcovado, the Bahía Drake route starts in the Valle de Diquis at the northern base of the Península de Osa, which is named for the indigenous group of this area. From here, the valley stretches west to the basin of the Río Grande de Térraba and south to Sierpe, from where the Río Sierpe flows out to Bahía Drake. The route also takes in the Humedal Nacional Térraba-Sierpe, a vast reserve that protects an amazing array of jungle swampland and overgrown mangroves.

SIERPE

This sleepy village on the Río Sierpe is the gateway to Bahía Drake, and if you've made a reservation with any of the jungle lodges further down the coast, you will be picked

up here by boat. With that said, there is little reason to spend any more time here than it takes for your captain to arrive, though fortunately you won't have to if you time the connection right.

The **Centro Turístico Las Vegas** (☎ 6am-10pm), next to the boat dock, has become a sort of catch-all place for tourist information, distributing a wide selection of maps and brochures. It also offers internet access and serves a broad range of food to waiting passengers.

If you get stuck for the night, the best option in town is the **Hotel Oleaje Sereno** (☎ 2786 7580; oleajesereno@racsa.co.cr; r from US\$40; P ♿). This surprisingly stylish little motel has a prime dockside location overlooking the Río Sierpe, and is home to 10 spick-and-span rooms with wood floors, sturdy furniture and crisp, mismatched linens. The open-air restaurant is one of the Sierpe's most welcoming, with linen tablecloths and lovely river views. If you make prior arrangements with the manager, you can safely and conveniently leave your car here when you continue on to Drake.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Scheduled flights and charters fly into Palmar Sur (see p384), 14km north of Sierpe.

BOAT

If you are heading to Bahía Drake, your lodge will make arrangements for the boat transfer. If for some reason things go awry, there is no shortage of water taxis milling about, though you will have to negotiate to get a fair price.

BUS & TAXI

Buses to Palmar Norte (US\$0.50, 30 minutes) depart from in front of the Pulpería Fenix at 5:30am, 8:30am, 10:30am, 12:30pm, 3:30pm and 6pm. A taxi to Palmar costs about US\$15.

HUMEDAL NACIONAL TÉRRABA-SIERPE

The Ríos Térraba and Sierpe begin on the southern slopes of the Talamanca mountains and flow toward the Pacific Ocean. Once near the sea, however, they form a network of channels and waterways that weave around the country's largest mangrove swamp. This **river delta** comprises the Humedal Nacional Térraba-Sierpe, which protects approximately 33,000 hectares of wetland and is home to

red, black and tea mangrove species. The reserve also protects a plethora of birdlife, especially water birds such as herons, egrets and cormorants.

Information

The Térraba-Sierpe reserve has no facilities for visitors, though the lodges listed below can organize tours to help you explore the wetlands.

Sleeping & Eating

Eco Manglares Sierpe Lodge (☎ 2786 7414; ecosiepa@racsa.co.cr; 2km north of Sierpe along the road to Palmar; s/d from US\$50/60; 📍 🚽) Owned and managed by a longtime resident Italian family (which explains the excellent pizzas and homemade pastas), this secluded lodge is accessible by a narrow metal suspension bridge – it looks dodgy but it will support your car! Ten spacious, thatch-roof cabins are nicely furnished and have artistic cane and mangrove pieces.

Estero Azul Lodge (☎ 2786 7422; esteroazul@hotmail.com; 2km north of Sierpe along the road to Palmar; r per person incl meals US\$80; 📍 🚽) Named for the peaceful flowing river, the Estero Azul Lodge is set on several hectares of primary forest along the road to Palmar. Safari-style rooms have hardwood floors, screened porches and tile bathrooms, while delectable gourmet meals highlight fresh river fish and local seafood.

Río Sierpe Lodge (☎ 2253 5203, 8384 5595; www.riosierpelodge.com; 4-day package incl meals & tours per person from US\$385) The Río Sierpe's namesake lodge is nestled in this remote spot near where the river meets the sea. Breezy rooms with hardwood floors overlook the waterways that wind through the Sierpe delta, while hiking trails radiate from the lodge into the surrounding primary forest. Transportation from Sierpe is included in the price as the lodge is only accessible by boat.

Sábalo Lodge (☎ 2770 1457; www.sabalolodge.com; s/d US\$65/110, 4-day package incl meals & tours US\$475) Accepting only 12 guests at a time in order to maximize the chance of getting up close and personal with wildlife, this highly personalized wilderness lodge has received rave reviews since new management took over in 2006. Guests are treated to a variety of activities, including guided hikes, horseback riding and ocean kayaking. The lodge is only accessible by boat, and transportation from Sierpe is included in the package price.

Getting There & Away

Eco Manglares Sierpe Lodge and Estero Azul Lodge are 2km north of Sierpe along the road to Palmar, and can easily be reached by car. If you don't have private transportation, ring the lodges and arrange for a pick-up.

FLOATING FOREST

As many as seven different species of mangrove, or *manglar*, thrive in Costa Rica. Comprising the vast majority of tropical coastline, mangroves play a crucial role in protecting it from erosion. Mangroves also serve as a refuge for countless species of animals, especially fish, crab, shrimp and mollusks, and as a sanctuary for roosting birds seeking protection from terrestrial predators.

Mangroves are unique amongst plants in that they have distinct methods for aeration (getting oxygen into the system) and desalination (getting rid of the salt that is absorbed with the water). Red mangroves, which are the most common species in Costa Rica, use their web of above-ground prop roots for aerating the plant's sap system. Other species, such as the black mangrove, have vertical roots that stick out above the mud, while buttonwood mangroves have elaborate buttresses.

The most amazing feature of the mangrove is its tolerance for salt, which enables the plant to thrive in brackish and saltwater habitats. Some species, like the Pacific coast black mangrove, absorb the salinated water, then excrete the salt through their leaves and roots, leaving behind visible crystals. Other species filter the water as it is absorbed – the mangrove root system is so effective as a filter that the water from a cut root is drinkable!

Despite their ecological importance, mangrove habitats the world over are being increasingly threatened by expanding human habitats. Furthermore, mangrove wood is an easily exploitable source of fuel and tannin (used in processing leather), which has also hastened their destruction. Fortunately in the Humedal Nacional Térraba-Sierpe, this fragile yet vitally important ecosystem is receiving the respect and protection that it deserves.

Río Sierpe Lodge and Sábalo Lodge are only accessible by boat; make prior arrangements to be picked up in Sierpe.

BAHÍA DRAKE

Parque Nacional Corcovado aside, the jungle-fringed crystalline waters of Bahía Drake is arguably Osa at its best. As one of the peninsula's (and the country's) most isolated destinations, Bahía Drake is a veritable Lost World of tropical landscapes and abundant wildlife. In the rain-forest canopy, howlers greet the rising sun with their haunting bellows, while pairs of macaw soar between the treetops, filling the air with their cacophonous squawking. Offshore in the bay itself, schools and pods of migrating dolphins flit through turquoise waters.

Of course, one of the reasons why Bahía Drake is brimming with wildlife is that it remains largely cut off from the rest of the country. With little infrastructure beyond dirt roads and the occasional airstrip, most of the area remains off the grid. However, Bahía Drake is home to a number of stunning wilderness lodges, which all serve as ideal bases for exploring this veritable ecological gem. And of course, if you're planning on visiting Sirena ranger station in Corcovado (p416), you can trek south along the coastline and enter the park at San Pedrillo ranger station.

History

The bay is named for Sir Francis Drake himself, who visited this area in March 1579, during his circumnavigation in the *Golden Hind*. History has it that he stopped on the nearby Isla del Caño, but locals speculate that he probably landed on the continent as well. A monument at Punta Agujitas (on the grounds of the Drake Bay Wilderness Resort, p403) states as much.

Orientation

The shores of Bahía Drake are home to two settlements: Agujitas, a tiny town of 300 residents that is spread out along the southern shore of the bay, and Drake, a few kilometers to the north, which is little more than a few houses alongside the airstrip.

Agujitas is a one-road town (and not a very good road, at that). It comes south from Rincon and past the airstrip in Drake. At the T, the right branch dead-ends at the water, where the *pulperia* (grocery store), clinic

and school constitute the heart of Agujitas; the left branch heads out of town southeast to Los Planes. From the eastern end of Agujitas, a path follows the shoreline out of town. A swinging, swaying pedestrian bridge crosses the Río Agujitas to Punta Agujitas. From here, the trail picks up and continues south along the coast, all the way to Parque Nacional Corcovado.

The only way to get around the area is by boat or by foot. Fortunately, both forms of transportation are also recreation, as sightings of macaw, monkey and other wildlife are practically guaranteed

Information

It's not easy to visit Bahía Drake if you're a backpacker since only a few shoestring options exist in Agujitas. Also, supplies, food and just about everything else are shipped in, which is reflected in local prices. However, Bahía Drake is one destination where parting with a bit of cash can greatly improve the quality of your experience.

Activities

HIKING

All of the lodges offer tours to Parque Nacional Corcovado (p416), usually a full-day trip to San Pedrillo ranger station (from US\$75 to US\$100 per person), including boat transportation, lunch and guided hikes. Indeed, if you came all the way to the Península de Osa, it's hard to pass up a visit to the national park that made it famous.

Some travelers, however, come away from these tours disappointed. The trails around San Pedrillo station attract many groups of people, which inhibit animal sightings. Furthermore, most tours arrive at the park well after sunrise, when activity in the rain forest has already quieted down.

Considering their hefty price tag, these tours are not necessarily the most rewarding way to see wildlife. The lodges strongly encourage their guests to take these tours (because they are obviously money-makers), but you have other options.

The easiest and most obvious one is the long, coastal trail that heads south out of Agujitas and continues about 10km to the border of the national park. Indeed, a determined hiker could make it all the way to San Pedrillo station on foot in three to four hours (make sure you reserve a spot

at the ranger station if you intend to spend the night). From here, you can follow the coastal tour south to wildlife-rich Sirena ranger station, which is undoubtedly the highlight of Corcovado.

Of course, if you don't have the time (or the inclination) for this challenging trek, you can take comfort in the fact that most of the same species that inhabit the park are frequently spotted in the surrounding buffer zone. In fact, macaw, monkey and other exotic species travel this trail as often as humans!

In addition to Corcovado, other popular day trips include nearby **Playa San Josecito** (p436), a stunningly remote beach where you can slow down and soak up the beauty of the bay. If you want to head inland, you can also explore the **Punta Río Claro Wildlife Refuge** (also called the Marenco Rain Forest Reserve; p405), which can be accessed from the Río Claro Trail or from Playa San Josecito.

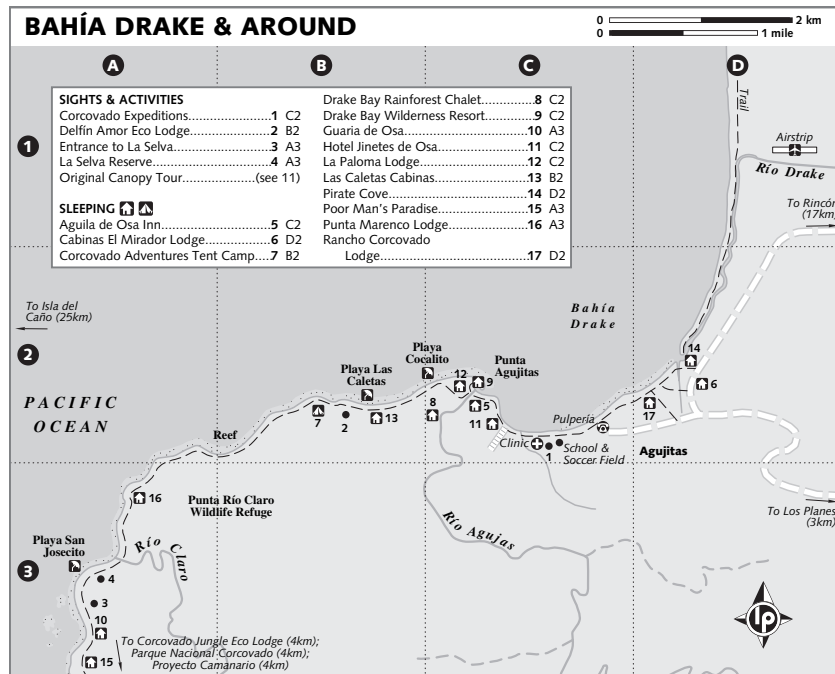
When hiking without a guide, make sure that somebody knows when and where you are going. Should you get lost, try to find a

river or stream, which you can follow to the ocean and then re-establish your bearings.

SWIMMING & SNORKELING

Isla del Caño (p406) is commonly considered the best place for snorkeling in this area. Lodges and tour companies all offer day trips to the island (US\$75 to US\$100 per person), which usually includes the park fee, snorkeling equipment and lunch, as well as a guided island hike in the afternoon. As is the case anywhere, the clarity of the water and the variety of the fish fluctuate according to water and weather conditions: it's worth inquiring before dishing out the cash for a tour.

There are other opportunities for snorkeling on the coast between Agujitas and Corcovado. **Playa San Josecito** attracts scores of colorful species, which hide out among the coral reef and rocks. Another recommended spot is **Playa Las Caletas**, just in front of the Corcovado Adventures Tent Camp, and **Playa Cocalito**, a small, pretty beach that is near Agujitas and is pleasant for swimming and sunbathing.



A DUMMY'S GUIDE TO PARQUE NACIONAL CORCOVADO

If you're confused about the best way to access Parque Nacional Corcovado, don't be. With a little prior planning, and a good idea as to the kind of trip you're interested in, you'll find yourself trekking through the rain forest, fording rivers and (hopefully!) spotting tapirs in no time at all!

For starters, it helps to know that there are two major centers where tourists tend to organize their expeditions: Bahía Drake (p399) and Puerto Jiménez (p410). Both of these areas are home to hotels, lodges and tour operators where you can arrange your onward plans, hire guides and purchase supplies.

Each area has its own unique flair and tourist draws, though for the most part travelers choose Puerto Jiménez since it's closer to the famed Sirena ranger station, where most of the wildlife action happens. However, staying in a remote jungle lodge along the coastline of Bahía Drake is truly one of the highlights of Osa.

If you start the trek from Bahía Drake, your entry into the park will most likely be at San Pedrillo ranger station, from where you easily trek to either Sirena or the more remote Los Planes ranger station. If you start the trek from Puerto Jiménez, your entry into the park will most likely be at either La Leona or Los Patos ranger station, both of which are good bases for accessing Sirena.

A third option for accessing the park is to fly direct to the air strips in either Carate or Sirena, see p431 for details on how to fly from Puerto Jiménez or Drake to Carate or Sirena. This option is certainly more expensive, but it can be a huge time-saver if you're dealing with a time-crunched itinerary.

Be advised that if you're planning on sleeping in Corcovado, you must register in advance with the park headquarters in Puerto Jiménez. This can be done either in person, by phone or often through your tour operator.

For information on the Bahía Drake route, see p404. For information on the Puerto Jiménez route, see p407. For information on the park itself, see p416.

SCUBA DIVING

About 20km west of Agujitas, **Isla del Caño** is one of Costa Rica's top spots for diving, with attractions including intricate rock and coral formations and an amazing array of underwater life, teeming with colorful reef fish and incredible coral formations. Divers report that the schools of fish swimming overhead are often so dense that they block the sunlight from filtering down.

While the bay is rich with dive sites, a local highlight is undoubtedly the **Bajo del Diablo** (Devil's Rock), an astonishing formation of submerged mountains that attracts an incredible variety of fish species, including jack, snapper, barracuda, puffer, parrotfish, moray eel and shark.

A two-tank dive runs from US\$100 to US\$150 depending on the spot, or you can do an open-water course for US\$325 to US\$400. Most of the upscale lodges in the area either have onsite dive centers or can arrange trips and courses through a neighboring lodge.

KAYAKING & CANOEING

A fantastic way to explore the region's biodiversity is to paddle through it. The idyllic **Río**

Agujitas attracts a huge variety of birdlife and lots of scaly reptiles. The river conveniently empties out into the bay, which is surrounded by hidden coves and sandy beaches ideal for exploring in a sea kayak. Paddling at high tide is recommended because it allows you to explore more territory.

Most accommodations in the area have kayaks and canoes for rent. Another option is to arrange a guided tour through Corcovado Expeditions.

HORSE RIDING

The **coastal trail** running between Agujitas and Corcovado is perfect for horse riding, especially if you relish the idea of galloping wildly across deserted beaches while the waves crash below you. **Los Planes** is another popular destination for horse riders, with ample opportunities for wildlife-watching along the way. Again, most of the upscale lodges in the area offer guided rides (from US\$65), or can arrange trips through a neighboring lodge.

SPORTFISHING

Bahía Drake claims more than 40 fishing records, including sailfish, marlin, yellowfin

tuna, wahoo, cubera snapper, mackerel and roosterfish. Fishing is excellent year-round, although the catch may vary according to the season. The peak season for tuna and marlin is from August to December. Sailfish are caught year-round, but experience a slow-down in May and June. Dorado and wahoo peak between May and August. Other species are abundant year-round, so you are virtually assured to reel in something. Many lodges can arrange fishing excursions, but you need to be prepared to pay heavily – half-/full-day excursions cost around US\$550/800.

DOLPHIN- & WHALE-WATCHING

As of 2006, swimming with dolphins and whales is illegal in Costa Rica. These measures are a result of an increase in tourist activity, often led by inexperienced guides who did not respect the best interests of these amazing creatures. However, dolphin- and whale-watching tours still provide opportunities to get up close and personal with these sea creatures – but only from the comfort and safety of the boat.

Bahía Drake is rife with marine life, including more than 25 species of dolphin and whale that pass through on their migrations throughout the year. This area is uniquely suited for whale-watching: humpback whales come from both the northern and the southern hemispheres to calve, resulting in the longest humpback whale season in the world. Humpbacks can be spotted in Bahía Drake year-round (except May), but the best months to see whales are late July through early November.

Several of the lodges are involved with programs that protect and preserve marine life in

Bahía Drake, as well as programs that offer tourists a chance for a close encounter. Tours generally cost about US\$100 per person.

The program at Drake Bay Wilderness Resort (see opposite), is highly recommended. Marine biologist Shawn Larkin has an infectious enthusiasm about marine mammals. He spends his time researching and filming dolphins and whales for his educational organization, the **Costa Cetacea Research Institute** (www.costacetacea.com).

Delfin Amor Eco Lodge (☎ in the USA 831-345 8484; www.divinedolphin.com) specializes in educational marine tours, with an excellent website detailing the species of dolphin and whale and their migratory patterns. Under the auspices of the nonprofit **Fundación Vida Marina** (www.vidamarina.org), staff are involved in collecting data to work towards establishing a protected marine sanctuary in this area. They use an amazing ‘Flying Inflatable Boat’ to track and monitor dolphins, whales and commercial fishing in the area.

Tours

Corcovado Expeditions (☎ 8818 9962, 8833 2384; www.corcovadoexpeditions.net) Competitively priced tours to Corcovado and Caño Island, as well as specialty hikes to look for birds (per person US\$25) and poison-dart frogs (per person US\$25). Corcovado Expeditions also rents mountain bikes (per hour/day US\$10/35) and leads biking tours (half/full day US\$35/50).

Night Tour (☎ 8382 1619; www.thenighttour.com; admission US\$35; ☎ 7:45-10pm) Tracie the ‘Bug Lady’ and her spotting partner, Victor, have created quite a name for themselves with this fascinating nighttime walk in the jungle. Tracie is a walking encyclopedia on bug facts. Participants use night-vision scopes as an added bonus. Make reservations well in advance.

JUNGLE NIGHTS

As night falls in the jungle, an amazing transformation takes place. That is, all the birds that were squawking all day long are suddenly quiet. And a whole new host of noises fills the air. The sounds of crickets, cicadas and other tropical bugs, awakening at dusk, are utterly overwhelming: the buzz emanates from all sides, vibrating throughout the forest. This is also when the aptly named vesper bats come out, seemingly flying circles around your head.

As the darkness engulfs you, your other senses are heightened. That is the only way to explain the amazing otherworldly quality of the exotic night sounds, like the mournful coo of the puaque calling his mate, or the scream of fighting coatis in the distance.

Most of the night tours in Bahía Drake focus on finding nocturnal critters like river shrimps, frogs, spiders and insects. But many mammals are nocturnal: night tours around Sirena station in Corcovado (p416) are the best way to spot Baird’s tapir, kinkajou and skunk, as well as American crocodile. It doesn’t happen often, but if you’re going to see a feline it will likely be at night.

Original Canopy Tour (☎ 8371 1598; admission US\$55; ☎ 8am-4pm) Bahía Drake’s only such facility is located at Hotel Jinetes de Osa. Nine platforms, six cables and one 20m observation deck provide a new perspective on the rain forest. Reservations are recommended.

Sleeping & Eating

This area is off the grid, so many places do not have electricity (pack a flashlight) or hot water. Reservations are recommended in the dry season (mid-November to the end of April). High-season rates are quoted; prices are per person, including three meals, unless otherwise stated.

Note that three daily meals are also included in the price at all midrange and top-end lodges because stand-alone eating options are virtually nonexistent in this part of the peninsula. At budget places, affordably priced food is available onsite at the restaurant/cantina. Most hotels and lodges also have small shops that sell snacks and drinks. If you’re planning on hiking, be sure to stock up on lots of fresh water as well as your favorite form of trail mix – once you’re out on the trail, options are decidedly limited.

All of the midrange and top-end accommodations listed in this section provide transport (sometimes free, sometimes not) from either Agujitas or the airstrip in Drake with prior arrangements.

For other accommodations, check out the stretch of coastline from Bahía Drake to Corcovado (p405).

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Rancho Corcovado Lodge (☎ 2786 7903; camping without meals US\$10, cabins US\$45; ☎) This decidedly low-key family-run lodge is amazingly secluded, considering its location in the middle of the village. Fruit trees and coconut palms shade the grounds, which face a wide stretch of sandy beach, and the two sets of rustic cabins here afford both beach and mountain views.

Cabinas El Mirador Lodge (☎ 88369415; www.mirador-drakebay.com; r US\$42; ☎) High on a hill at the northern end of Agujitas, El Mirador (Lookout Point) lives up to its name, offering spectacular views of the bay from its eight cozy cabins – catch the sunset from the balcony, or climb to the lookout that perches above. The hospitable Vargas family ensure all guests receive a warm welcome, as well as three square meals a day of hearty, home-cooked Costa Rican fare.

Hotel Jinetes de Osa (☎ 8371 1598, 2236 5637, in the USA 800-317 0333; www.costaricadiving.com; r standard/superior from US\$60/80) The affordably priced Jinetes de Osa boasts a choice bayside location that is literally a few steps from the ocean – you can sip your morning coffee (it’s delivered!) from your hotel room while staring out across the bay. Jinetes also has Bahía Drake’s only canopy tour, as well as one of the peninsula’s top PADI dive facilities, which means that guests have plenty of adrenaline-soaked activities on the roster.

TOP END

Pirate Cove (☎ 2234 6154; www.piratecovecostarica.com; r from US\$80) Breezy, tent-like bungalows and spacious hardwood cabins both offer an element of laidback luxury at the appropriately named Pirate Cove (Sir Francis Drake wasn’t exactly the most honorable of captains!). With private terraces that are strung up with hammocks, most guests seem content to just swing the day away, though there are 2km of deserted beach in front of the property to explore.

Corcovado Jungle Eco Lodge (☎ 2770 8209; www.corcovadojungleecolodge.com; 3-/5-night package per person from US\$325/630) Surrounded by miles and miles of primary rain forest, this jungle lodge is inland from Bahía Drake on the northern edge of the Parque Nacional Corcovado. Standard accommodations are clean and comfortable cabins (and one fun tree house), while more upscale ranchos are accessible only by a series of wooden walkways and elevated observation platforms. A network of trails crosses the 100-hectare private reserve, providing ample opportunities for wildlife-watching and hiking.

ourpick Drake Bay Wilderness Resort (☎ 2770 8012; www.drakebay.com; 4-day package from US\$695; ☎) Sitting pretty on Punta Agujitas, this relaxed resort occupies the optimal piece of real estate in all of Bahía Drake. Naturalists will be won over by the lovely landscaping, from flowering trees to the ocean-fed pool, while history buffs will appreciate the memorial to Drake’s landing. Accommodations are in comfortable cabins, which have mural-painted walls and private patios with ocean views, while family-style meals feature ingredients from your congenial host’s organic farm.

Aguila de Osa Inn (☎ 2296 2190; www.aguiladeosa.com; 2-/3-/4-/5-night package from US\$514/769/948/1128) On the east side of the Río Agujitas, this swanky lodge consists of roomy quarters with shining wood floors, cathedral ceilings

and private decks overlooking the ocean. The vast centerpiece of the lodge, however, is the comfortable yet elegant open-air rancho (small house-like building), which serves up signature cocktails and innovative *bocas* (savory bar snacks) throughout the day and into the evening.

La Paloma Lodge (☎ 2239 7502; www.lapalomalodge.com; 3-/4-/5-day package from US\$1100/1245/1390; 🚗) Perched on a lush hillside, this exquisite lodge provides guests with an incredible panorama of ocean and forest, all from the comfort of the sumptuous, stylish quarters. Rooms have shiny hardwood floors and queen-size orthopedic beds, draped in mosquito netting, while shoulder-high walls in all the bathrooms offer rain-forest views while you bathe. Each room has a large balcony (with hammock, of course) that catches the cool breeze off the ocean.

Our pick Drake Bay Rainforest Chalet (☎ 8382 1619; www.drakebayholiday.com; 3-/4-/5-/6-/7-day package from US\$1150/1275/1400/1525/1650) Set on 18 hectares of pristine rain forest, this jungle getaway is a remote, romantic adventure. Huge French windows provide a panoramic view of the surrounding jungle, enjoyed from almost every room in the house. Sleeping quarters have a king-size bed with giant mosquito net, flanked by a luxurious tiled bathroom with a sunken shower and a decadent two-person hot tub. In an innovative twist on luxury, the Moroccan-themed kitchen is fully stocked for self-catering, though chef service is available for the culinary impaired.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Departing from San José, **NatureAir** (www.natureair.com) and **Sansa** (www.sansa.com) have daily flights to the Drake airstrip, which is 2km north of Agujitas. Prices vary according to season and availability, though you can expect to pay around US\$100 to/from San José.

Alfa Romeo Aero Taxi (☎ 2735 5353) offers charter flights connecting Drake to Puerto Jiménez, Golfito, Carate and Sirena. Flights are best booked at the airport in person, and one-way fares are typically less than US\$100.

Most lodges provide transportation to/from the airport, which involves a jeep or a boat or both, but advanced reservation is necessary.

BOAT

All of the hotels offer boat transfers between Sierpe and Bahía Drake with prior arrange-

ments. The trip to Drake is scenic and – at times – exhilarating. Boats travel along the river through the rain forest and the mangrove estuary. Captains then pilot boats through tidal currents and surf the river mouth into the ocean. Most hotels in Drake have beach landings, so wear the appropriate footwear.

If you have not made advanced arrangements with your lodge for a pick-up, you can always grab a private water taxi in Sierpe for a negotiable price.

BUS & CAR

A rough dirt road links Agujitas to Rincón, from where you can head south to Puerto Jiménez or north to the Interamericana. A 4WD is recommended for this route, especially from June to November, as there are several river crossings. The most hazardous crossing is the Río Drake, and locals fish many a water-logged tourist vehicle out of the river – see boxed text, p548 for some tips on not destroying your rental.

Once in Agujitas, you will likely have to abandon your car as most places are accessible only by boat or by foot. As theft or vandalism is always a very real possibility in Costa Rica, you should park your car in a secure place, and pay someone to watch it for a few days. There are several small *pulperías* where the management would be happy to watch over your 4WD for a nice tip.

If you are hiking through Parque Nacional Corcovado, but you want to avoid the arduous San Pedrillo trail, you can hire a 4WD vehicle to La Palma (US\$50) and start the hike there. In theory, a bus also goes to La Palma (US\$5), departing Drake at 4am during the dry season only, but it's best to inquire locally as it's not reliable.

HIKING

From Bahía Drake, it's a four- to six-hour hike along the beachside trail to San Pedrillo ranger station at the north end of Corcovado. If you are heading into the park, make sure you have reservations to camp at the ranger stations – for more information, see p416.

BAHÍA DRAKE TO CORCOVADO

This craggy stretch of coastline is home to sandy inlets that disappear at high tide, leaving only the rocky outposts and luxuriant rain forest. Virtually uninhabited and undeveloped beyond a few tourist lodges, the setting here

is magnificent and wild. If you're looking to spend a bit more time along the shores Bahía Drake before penetrating the depths of Parque Nacional Corcovado, consider a night or two in some of the country's most remote accommodations.

Orientation & Information

A public trail follows the coastline for the entire spectacular stretch. It's easy to follow and wonderful for wildlife. Among the multitude of bird species, you're likely to spot (and hear) squawking scarlet macaw, often traveling in pairs, and the hooting chestnut-mandible toucan. White-faced capuchin and howler monkey inhabit the treetops, while eagle-eyed hikers might also spot a sloth or a kinkajou.

The only way to get around the area is by boat or by foot, which means that travelers are more or less dependent on their lodges.

Sights & Activities

This entire route is punctuated by scenic little inlets, each with a wild, windswept beach. Just west of Punta Agujitas, a short detour off the main trail leads to the picturesque **Playa Cocalito**, a secluded cove perfect for sunning, swimming and body surfing. With no lodges in the immediate vicinity, it's often deserted. **Playa Las Caletas**, in front of the Corcovado Adventures Tent Camp, is excellent for snorkeling.

Further south, the Río Claro empties out into the ocean. Water can be waist deep or higher, and the current swift, so take care when wading across. This is also the start of the Río Claro trail, which leads inland into the 400-hectare **Punta Río Claro Wildlife Refuge** (formerly known as the Marengo Rain Forest Reserve) and passes a picturesque waterfall along the way. Be aware that there are two rivers known as the Río Claro: one is located near Bahía Drake, while the other is inside Corcovado near Sirena station.

South of Río Claro, the **Playa San Josecito** is the longest stretch of white sand beach on this side of the Península de Osa. It is popular with swimmers, snorkelers and sunbathers, though you'll rarely find it crowded.

From here you can access another private reserve, **La Selva**. A short, steep climb leads from the beach to a lookout point, offering a spectacular view over the treetops and out to the ocean. A network of trails continues

inland, and eventually connects La Selva to the Río Claro reserve. Be advised that La Selva does not have any facilities: the trails are not labeled; there is no water or maps; you'll likely meet nobody along the way. If you choose to continue past the lookout point, make sure you have food, water and a compass.

The border of Parque Nacional Corcovado is about 5km south of here (it takes three to four hours to hike the entire distance from Agujitas to Corcovado). The trail is more overgrown as it gets closer to the park, but it's a well traveled route.

Sleeping & Eating

Reservations are recommended in the dry season (mid-November to the end of April). High-season rates are quoted; prices are per person, including three meals, unless otherwise stated. Many places in this area don't have electricity (pack a flashlight) or hot water. Stand-alone eating options are virtually nonexistent in this part of the peninsula.

With prior arrangements, all of the accommodations listed in this section provide transport (free or for a charge) from either Agujitas or the airstrip in Drake.

Las Caletas Cabinas (☎ 8381 4052, 8326 1460; www.caletas.co.cr; r from US\$65; 🚗) This adorable little hotel is set on the picturesque beach of the same name and consists of five cozy wooden cabins that are awash with sweeping views. The Swiss-Tico owners are warm hosts who are passionate about environmental sustainability, which means you can rest easy knowing that solar and hydroelectric power provides electricity around the clock.

Corcovado Adventures Tent Camp (☎ 8384 1679; www.corcovado.com; r US\$70, 4-day package US\$355) Less than an hour's walk from Drake brings you to this fun, family-run spot. It's like camping, but comfy: spacious, walk-in tents are set up on covered platforms and fully equipped with sturdy wood furniture. Twenty hectares of rain forest offer plenty of opportunity for exploration, and the beachfront setting is excellent for water sports.

Poor Man's Paradise (☎ 2771 4582; www.mypoormansparadise.com; 5-day package tent/ranch/cabin US\$426/449/495) Sportfishing can be an expensive prospect, but local fisherman Pincho Amaya aims to make it more accessible. Here at the aptly named Poor Man's Paradise, guests can take advantage of Bahía Drake's most reasonably priced fishing excursions. Accommodation

is in large canvas tents, which are elevated on sturdy wooden platforms to protect you from the cold, wet ground. You can also choose rooms in the rustic ranch houses and cabins, which have private en suite facilities.

Proyecto Campanario (☎ 2258 5778; www.campariano.org; 4-day package US\$427) Run by a former Peace Corps volunteer, this biological reserve is more of an education center than a tourist facility, as evidenced by the dormitory, library and field station. Behind the main facility, five spacious platform tents with 'garden' bathrooms offer a bit more privacy and comfort. Ecology courses and conservation camps are scheduled throughout the year, but individuals are also invited to take advantage of the facilities. The whole place is set on 150 hectares of tropical rain forest, which provides countless opportunities for exploration and wildlife observation.

Punta Marenco Lodge (☎ 2234 1308, 2234 1227; www.puntamarenco.com; 3-day package US\$339) This intimate family-run lodge shares access to the Punta Río Claro Wildlife Refuge, providing excellent opportunities for independent hiking and wildlife-watching. Accommodation is in thatch-roof cabañas in the style of the Boruca indigenous peoples and have private terraces, ocean views and 360 degrees of screened windows, which affords a wonderful cross-breeze.

Guaria de Osa (☎ 2235 4313, in the USA 510-235 4313; www.guariadeosa.com; 3-day package US\$395) Cultivating a new-age ambiance, this Asian-style retreat center offers yoga, tai chi and all kinds of massage, along with the more typical rain forest activities. The lovely grounds include an ethnobotanical garden, which features exotic local species used for medicinal and other purposes. The architecture of this place is unique: the centerpiece is the Lapa Lapa Lounge, a spacious multi-story pagoda, built entirely from reclaimed hardwood.

our pick Casa Corcovado Jungle Lodge (☎ 2256 3181, in the USA 888-896 6097; www.casacorcovado.com, 5-day package from US\$1244; 📍) A spine-tingling boat ride takes you to this luxurious lodge on 175 hectares of rain forest bordering the national park. Each bungalow is tucked away in its own private tropical garden, each with a hammock. Artistic details – such as Mexican tiles and stained glass – make the Casa Corcovado one of this area's classiest accommodation options. On site, the Margarita Sunset Bar lives up to its name,

serving up 25 different 'ritas and great sunset views over the Pacific.

Getting There & Away BOAT

All of the hotels offer boat transfers between Sierpe and Bahía Drake with prior arrangements. If you haven't made advance arrangements with your lodge for a pick-up, grab a private water taxi in Sierpe for a negotiable price.

HIKING

From Bahía Drake, it's a four- to six-hour hike along the beachside trail to San Pedrillo ranger station at the north end of Corcovado. If you're heading into the park, make sure you have reservations to camp at the ranger stations – for more information, see p416.

RESERVA BIOLÓGICA ISLA DEL CAÑO

The centerpiece of this biological reserve is a 326-hectare island that is the tip of numerous underwater rock formations. Along the rocky coastline, towering peaks soar as high as 70m, which provide a dramatic setting for anyone who loves secluded nature.

The submarine rock formations are among the island's main attractions, drawing divers to explore the underwater architecture. Snorkelers can investigate the coral and rock formations along the beach right in front of the ranger station. The water is much clearer here than along the mainland coast, though rough seas can cloud visibility. Fifteen different species of coral have been recorded, as well as threatened animal species that include the Panulirus lobster and the giant conch. The sheer numbers of fish attract dolphins and whales, which are frequently spotted swimming in outer waters. Hammerhead sharks, manta rays and sea turtles also inhabit these waters.

A steep but well-maintained trail leads inland from the ranger station. Once the trail plateaus, it is relatively flat, winding through evergreen forest to a lookout point at about 110m above sea level. These trees are primarily milk trees (also called 'cow trees' after the drinkable white latex they exude), believed to be the remains of an orchard planted by pre-Columbian indigenous inhabitants. Near the top of the ridge, there are several pre-Columbian granite spheres.

Archaeologists speculate that the island may have been a ceremonial or burial site for the same indigenous tribes.

Camping is prohibited, and there are no facilities except a ranger station by the landing beach. Most visitors arrive on tours arranged by the nearby lodges – admission is US\$8 per person, although this fee is usually included in your tour price.

TO CORCOVADO VIA PUERTO JIMÉNEZ

The second of two principal overland routes to Parque Nacional Corcovado, the Puerto Jiménez route on the eastern side of the peninsula is much more 'developed.' Of course, as this is Osa, developed means a single road and a sprinkling of villages along the coast of Golfo Dulce. The landscape is cattle pastures and rice fields, while much of the inland area is protected by the Reserva Forestal Golfo Dulce. The largest settlement in the area is the town of Puerto Jiménez, which has transitioned from a boom town for gold miners to an emerging ecotourism hot spot.

RESERVA FORESTAL GOLFO DULCE

The northern shore of the Golfo Dulce is home to this vast forest reserve, which links Parque Nacional Corcovado to the Parque Nacional Piedras Blancas. This connecting corridor plays an important role in preserving the biodiversity of the peninsula, and allowing the wildlife to migrate to the mainland. Although much of the reserve is not easily accessible, there are several area lodges that are doing their part to preserve this natural resource by protecting their own little pieces of this wildlife wonderland.

Sights & Activities

About 9km southeast of Rincón, the town of **La Palma** is the origin of the rough road that turns into the trail to the Los Patos ranger station. If you're hiking across Corcovado, this will likely be the starting point or ending point of your trek. Before heading out however, don't miss the chance to get some sun at the beautiful sand and coral beach, known as **Playa Blanca**, at the east end of town.

The **Reserva Indígena Guaymí** is southwest of La Palma, on the border of Parque Nacional Corcovado.

About 8km south of La Palma, the Tico-run **Köbö Farm** (☎ 8351 8576; www.kobofarm.com; 3-hr tour in Spanish/English US\$20/30) is a chocolate-lover's dream come true. In fact, *köbö* means 'dream' in Guaymí. The 50-hectare finca is dedicated to organic cultivation of fruits and vegetables and – the product of choice – cacao. Tours give a comprehensive overview of the life cycle of cacao plants and the production of chocolate (with dégustation!). To really experience life on the farm, you can stay in simple, comfortable teak **cabins** (r per person from US\$15, meals from US\$6).

Just before entering Puerto Jiménez, a turnoff in the road leads 16km to the hamlet of **Río Nuevo**, also in the forest reserve. A good trail network leads to spectacular mountain viewpoints, some with views of the gulf. Birding is excellent in this area: you can expect to see the many species that you would find in Corcovado. Most of the following lodges offer daylong excursions in this area.

Sleeping

Danta Corcovado Lodge (☎ 8378 9188, 8819 1860; www.dantacorcovado.net; s/d/tr US\$25/35/40, camping per person US\$6) Conveniently located midway between Los Patos and La Palma, this low-key lodge is set on the finca of the congenial Sanchez family. Rustic wood cabins are painted in warm hues and furnished with handcrafted pieces. The highlight of the lodge, however, is the family's traditional wood stove, which fires up some delicious, home-cooked meals.

Suital Lodge (☎ 8826 0342; www.suital.com; 15km east of Rincón; s/d/tr US\$45/62/70; 📍) Lots of love has gone into the construction of this tiny clutch of cabins on the northern shores of Golfo Dulce. Situated on 30 hectares of hilly, forested property (not a single tree has been felled), guests can take advantage of a network of trails that winds through the property and down to the beach.

Río Nuevo Lodge (☎ 2735 5411, 8365 8982; www.rionuevolodge.com; s/d US\$65/100) Who knew that former gold-miners would be so friendly? The Aguirre family now owns and operates this popular tent lodge set on a forested mountainside 2km west of Río Nuevo. This is camping made easy: guests sleep in comfortable, furnished tents on covered platforms, with access to shared

GUAYMÍ

The earliest inhabitants of Costa Rica's far southern corner were the Guaymí, or Ngöbe, who migrated over generations from neighboring Panama. The Guaymí inhabit indigenous reserves in the Valle de Coto Brus, on the Osa peninsula and in southern Golfo Dulce, though they retain some semi-nomadic ways and are allowed to pass freely over the border into Panama. This occurs frequently during the coffee harvesting season, when many Guaymí travel to work on plantations.

The Guaymí have been able to preserve – to some degree – their customs and culture, and it is not unusual to see women wearing traditional dress. These vibrant, solid-color *pollera* dresses hang to the ankles, often trimmed in contrasting colors and patterns. Unlike other indigenous groups, the Guaymí still speak their native language and teach it in local schools.

The Guaymí traditionally live in wooden huts with palm roofs and dirt floors, although most families have now upgraded to wooden houses on stilts. However, they still live off the land, cultivating corn, rice and tubers, while fruit and palmitos grow in the wild.

The Guaymí reserves are largely inaccessible, which may be one reason why the culture persists. However, as tourism filters into the farthest corners of the country, there is a growing interest in indigenous traditions and handicrafts, and this demand may actually encourage their preservation. But, the reserves are also at a precipitous point – without proper management and community participation, an influx of tourists (and tourist dollars) can also lead to cultural dilution.

The best way to visit the reserve is through the **Tamandu Lodge** (☎ 8821 4525; www.tamandu-lodge.com; r per person US\$45), which is run by the Carreras, a Guaymí family. This unique lodge provides a rare chance to interact directly with an indigenous family and experience firsthand the Guaymí lifestyle. This is hands-on stuff: gather crabs and fish with palm rods; hunt for palmito or harvest yucca; learn how to prepare these specialties over an open fire. Accommodations are in rustic, wooden houses, built on stilts with thatch roofs. Home-cooked meals are included in the price. A member of the Carrera family will meet you in La Palma, from where it is a two-hour journey on horseback to the lodge – getting there is half the fun!

cold-water facilities. Tasty meals (included) are served family style in a traditional thatch-roof rancho.

Bosque del Río Tigre (☎ in Puerto Jiménez 2735 5062, 8824 1372, in the USA 888-875 9453; www.osaadventures.com; Dos Brazos; s/d US\$149/258, 4-day package per person from US\$500; 📍) On the edge of the Reserva Forestal Golfo Dulce, in the midst of a 13-hectare private reserve, this off-the-beaten-track ecolodge is a birder's paradise. Four well-appointed guest rooms and one private, open-air cabaña have huge windows for viewing the feathered friends that come to visit. In case you want to brush up on your taxonomy, the lodge contains a library well stocked with wildlife reference books.

Villa Corcovado (☎ 8817 6969; www.villacorcovado.com; 500m Este Parada, Rincón; s/d incl meals US\$289/376; 📍 📍) Rincón seems an unlikely setting for a brand new top-of-the-line resort, but you'll understand when you glimpse the 30 hectares of exquisite, unspoiled rain forest and the magnificent unobstructed vista of the Golfo Dulce. Eight light-filled, luxurious villas have private porches, wood-beamed

ceilings and hardwood floors, not to mention classy, contemporary decor. Gourmet meals (included) feature organic produce straight from the garden; you can request yours packed in a picnic to enjoy on a nearby deserted beach.

Getting There & Away

The easiest way to travel the eastern coast of the peninsula is by car. Otherwise, frequent buses ply the sole road between La Palma and Puerto Jiménez (US\$0.50, 30 minutes). La Palma can be reached from Neily (US\$3, three hours), San Isidro (US\$5, four hours) and San José (US\$8, nine hours).

PUERTO JIMÉNEZ

Puerto Jiménez is something of a natural wonder in itself. Sliced in half by the swampy, overgrown Quebrada Cacao, and flanked on one side by the emerald waters of the Golfo Dulce, this untamed environment is shared equally by local residents and wildlife. While walking through the dusty streets of Port Jim (as the gringos call

it), it's not unusual to spot scarlet macaw roosting on the soccer field, or white-faced capuchin swinging in the treetops adjacent to the main street.

Then again, it's not too hard to understand why Puerto Jiménez is brimming with wild-life, mainly because the town lies on the edge of Parque Nacional Corcovado (p416). As the preferred jumping-off point for travelers heading to the famed Sirena ranger station, the town is a great place to organize an expedition, stock up on supplies and get a good night's rest before hitting the trails.

History

Although it appears on maps dating to 1914, Puerto Jiménez was little more than a cluster of houses built on a mangrove swamp. With the advent of logging in the 1960s and the subsequent discovery of gold in the local streams, Jiménez became a small boomtown. The logging industry still operates in parts of the peninsula, but the gold rush has quieted down in favor of the tourist rush.

Even so, the town retains a frontier feel. Now, instead of goldminers descending on the town's bars on weekends, it's outdoors and fishing types who come to have a shot of *guaro* (local firewater) and brag about the snakes, sharks and alligators they've allegedly tousel with.

Parts of Puerto Jiménez are currently being threatened by seemingly indiscriminate enforcement of maritime zone laws. As in coastal areas around the country, townsfolk are rallying against the municipality's threats to demolish some 200 odd homes that are built within the zone.

Information

Banco Nacional de Costa Rica (☎ 8:30am-3:45pm Mon-Fri)

Cafenet El Sol (☎ 2735 5719; www.soldeosa.com; per hr US\$3; ☎ 7am-10pm) Internet access is painfully slow (and often nonexistent).

Colectivo Transportation (☎ 2735 5539; Soda Deya, 200m south of the bus station) Will exchange US dollars and euros when the bank is closed.

Oficina de Área de Conservación Osa (☎ 2735 5036, 2735 5580; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) Information about Corcovado, Isla del Caño, Parque Nacional Marino Ballena and Golfito parks and reserves. Make reservations here to camp in Corcovado.

Osa Tropical (☎ 2735 5062, 2735 5722; www.osaviva.com) Doña Isabel is the NatureAir agent and the best and

most reputable source of local travel information. She handles hotel and transportation arrangements of all kinds and has a radio that reaches all the lodges on the peninsula and in the Golfo Dulce areas.

Red Cross (☎ 2735 5109) For medical emergencies.

Sights & Activities

About 5km east of town, the secluded – and often deserted – **Playa Platanares** is excellent for swimming, sunning and recovering from too much adventure. The nearby mangroves of Río Platanares are a paradise for kayaking and bird-watching.

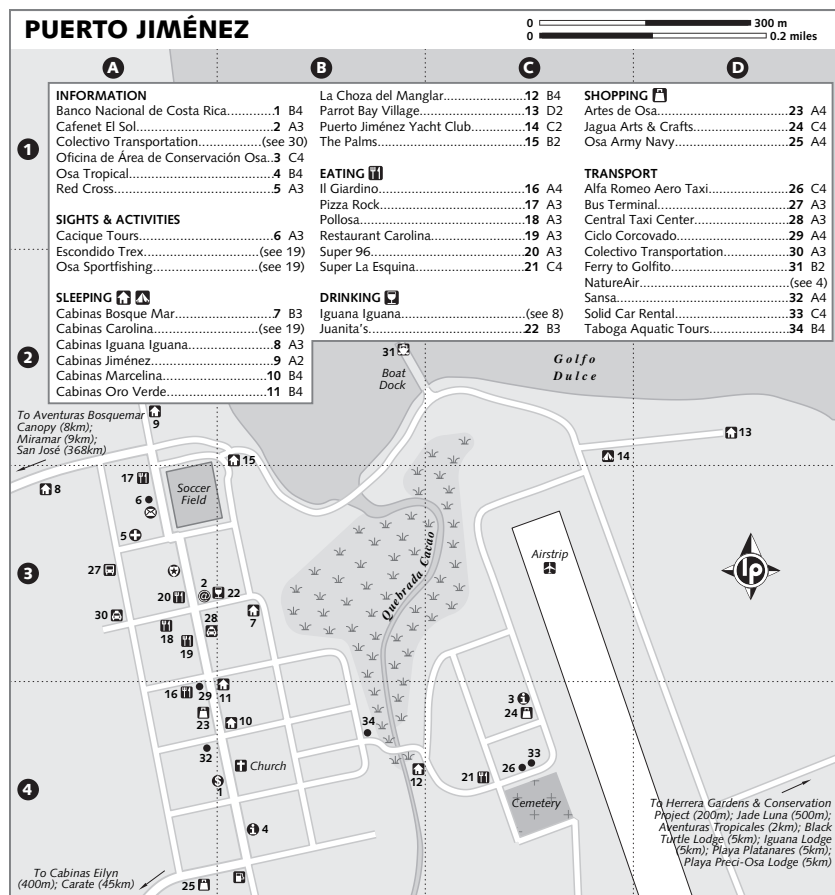
On the east side of the airstrip, **Herrera Gardens & Conservation Project** (☎ 2735 5267; admission US\$4, guided tour US\$15-30; ☎ 6am-5pm) is a 100-hectare reserve with beautiful botanical gardens. This innovative, long-term reforestation project offers an ecologically and economically sustainable alternative to cattle-grazing. Visitors can explore the 5km of garden trails or 15km of well-marked forest trails. Guided tours focus on birding, botany or even tree climbing! Stop by Jagua Arts & Crafts (p412) to buy a map or arrange your tour.

If you prefer to tour the rain forest at high speed, the thrilling **Aventuras Bosquemar Canopy** (☎ 2735 5102; Miramar; admission US\$75) is the first zip-line canopy tour on this side of the peninsula.

DAY TRIPPER

You've got a free day in Port Jim and you don't want to hang around town? Here's what you can do:

- Catch a wave and you're sittin' on top of the world. Check out the point break at Playa Pan Dulce in **Cabo Matapalo** (p413).
- Indulge your sweet tooth. See (and taste) where chocolate comes from at **Köbö Farm** (p407).
- Slow down and get some sun. Have a picnic on the deserted wilderness beach of **Playa Blanca** (p407).
- Get a bird's eye view from the top of a 60m ficus tree. Tree-climbing tours offered by **Everyday Adventures** (p413).
- Experience tropical paradise among the orchids, bromeliads and heliconia at the **Casa de Orquideas** (p436).



Five lines stretch between five platforms, winding 600m through primary forest. It's about 8km from Jiménez near the village of Miramar – prices include transportation from Puerto Jiménez.

Boat tours around the Golfo Dulce are becoming increasingly popular. The all-day outing often includes a mangrove tour, snorkeling excursion and dolphin watch. Remember that it is illegal to swim with the dolphins, despite your tour guide's best intentions.

Tours

Aventuras Tropicales (☎ 2735 5195; www.aventuras-tropicales.com) A Tico-run operation that offers all sorts of tropical adventures.

Cacique Tours (☎ 8815 8919; www.lasosas.org) The affable Oscar Cortés offers a variety of wildlife tours, his specialty being an early-morning bird walk.

Escondido Trex (☎ 2735 5210; www.escondidotrex.com) Specializes in kayak tours, including mangrove paddles, night paddles, sunset tours and kayak-snorkel combos.

Osa Sportfishing (☎ 2735 5675; www.costa-rica-sportfishing.com; Restaurant Carolina) Transplanted Florida fishers who organize sportfishing vacations and dolphin- and whale-watching on the 50ft double-decker *Delfin Blanco*.

Sleeping BUDGET

Puerto Jiménez is one of the few places on the Península de Osa with a good selection of budget accommodations. All rooms have

private cold-water bathrooms and fans, unless otherwise stated.

Cabinas Iguana Iguana (☎ 2735 5158; r per person US\$15; (P) (☎)) Wood cabins are set on quiet and shady grounds here on the northern edge of town. The rooms are slightly dank, and the swimming pool bears a striking resemblance to a frog swamp, but the overall atmosphere is pleasant. The onsite bar is among the town's hottest spots on weekend nights so light sleepers should probably stay elsewhere.

Cabinas Oro Verde (☎ 2735 5241; r per person US\$15) Simple and central: this is what you are looking for in a budget hotel. Rooms are clean, if a little musty, and the bars on the windows are not pretty, but at least you know the place is safe. All in all, this is a good place to stumble back to late at night, but don't be surprised if you're woken up in the morning by early-bird shoppers.

Cabinas Jiménez (☎ 2735 5090; r US\$30-60; (P) (☎)) The efforts of the new American ownership are evident at this long-standing clutch of cabins. All of the rooms have jungle scenes painted on the walls and underwater murals in the hot-water bathrooms. Refrigerators and safes are practical, while details like carved wooden furniture, woven textiles and batik curtains add an elegant flair. The pricier rooms have fantastic views of the lagoon.

Cabinas Marcelina (☎ 2755 5286; d with/without air-con US\$40/30; (P) (☎)) Marcelina's place is a long-standing favorite among budget travelers looking for a peaceful night of sleep. The concrete building is painted salmon pink and surrounded by blooming trees, lending it a homey atmosphere that invites good dreams. Rooms have modern furniture, fluffy towels and tile bathrooms, which are certainly a welcome sight at this price range.

The Palms (☎ 2735 5012; r US\$30-60; (P) (☎) (☎)) Arguably the best-value accommodation in Port Jim, the former Brisas del Mar has been completely renovated by its new American owners. Rooms of varying sizes and shapes have artsy touches – from the hand-painted sinks and murals to the soft lighting and fine linens. There are also hot-water bathrooms. Of course, the biggest draw is what has always made this place special, namely the cooling breezes that sweep through the waterside property.

Campers should head to **Herrera Gardens & Conservation Project** (☎ 2735 5267; camping per

person US\$6-8) or the ironically named **Puerto Jiménez Yacht Club** (☎ 2735 5051; camping per person US\$3).

MIDRANGE

All hotels listed have private bathrooms with hot water.

Cabinas Carolina (☎ 2735 5696; d with air-con US\$35; (☎)) The lack of windows makes this low-priced stalwart feel something like a concrete prison, but at least it's got air-conditioning and a central location. The attached *soda*, Restaurant Carolina, is a Jiménez institution, so even if you're looking for something in a higher price bracket, don't miss the stellar *casados* on offer here.

Cabinas Bosque Mar (☎ 2735 5681; d with air-con US\$40; (P) (☎)) This hot-pink motel-style building is one of the best bargains in Jiménez, especially considering that all the rooms are large and airy. Although the atmosphere is nothing to write home about, there is a decent onsite restaurant for those feeling too lazy to head into town, as well as a helpful onsite tour agency.

Cabinas Eilyn (☎ 2735 5465; r US\$40; (P) (☎)) Hospitality is a family affair at these quiet quarters on the edge of town. High ceilings, tile floors and a comfy porch enhance the decor of the four cozy cabins that are attached to the Tico owners' home. Prices include a home-cooked breakfast of hearty *gallo pinto* (rice and beans) and fresh fruit.

La Chozza del Manglar (☎ 2735 5002; www.manglares.com; r US\$40-90; (P) (☎) (☎)) Set on the edge of the mangrove swamp, this tropical inn is – as it claims – 'a very natural place.' Wildlife sightings are de rigueur on these beautifully landscaped grounds – from crocodiles to kinkajous, monkeys to macaws. Bright and airy rooms have hand-carved furniture and mural-painted walls, as well as large windows overlooking the lush surroundings.

Playa Preci-Osa Lodge (☎ 8818 2959; www.playa-preciosa-lodge.de; r US\$68-100; (P)) All of the options at this romantic beach lodge on nearby Playa Platanares offer excellent value: four spacious thatch-roof bungalows have a sleeping loft and plenty of living space (great for families), while eight screened platform tents are set in the secluded garden. The grounds are filled with fruit trees and flowering plants that attract loads of birdlife, monkeys and iguanas, while the ocean is literally a few feet from your doorstep.

TOP END

Black Turtle Lodge (☎ 2735 5005; www.blackturtlelodge.com; Playa Platanares; cabinetas US\$85-110, d US\$140-170; 📍) A peaceful retreat along Playa Platanares, this ecolodge offers the choice of two-story cabinetas, which have magnificent views over the treetops to the Golfo Dulce, and the less spacious *cabinettas* (small cabins) which are nestled into the tropical garden below. All have bamboo furniture and hardwood floors, but the *cabinettas* share hot-water bathrooms. Gourmet meals (included) receive rave reviews from readers.

Parrot Bay Village (☎ 2735 5180, 2735 5748; r US\$125; 📍) With the beach on one side and the mangrove swamp on the other, Parrot Bay Village enjoys a prime locale and a laidback beach-bum atmosphere. Eight spacious, screened cabins are clustered loosely around an open-air restaurant. Each is exquisitely decorated with ceramic tile floors, uniquely carved doors and polished hardwood detailing.

Iguana Lodge (☎ 2735 5205; www.iguanalodge.com; Playa Platanares; casitas/villas US\$155/450; 📍) This luxurious lodge fronting Playa Platanares has the most architecturally alluring cabins in the area: four two-story bungalows have huge breezy decks, bamboo furniture, orthopedic beds draped in mosquito netting and lovely stone bathrooms with garden showers. Rates include three delectable meals a day: the creative cuisine is a highlight. If you're traveling in a large group, consider renting the three-room Villa Villa Kula, a charming tropical colonial house with a fully stocked kitchen.

Eating & Drinking

Stock up on food items, bug repellent and other necessities at the Super La Esquina or the smaller Super 96.

Restaurant Carolina (dishes US\$3-8) This is the hub in Puerto Jiménez. Expats, nature guides, tourists and locals all gather here for food, drinks and plenty of carousing. The food is famous locally and the fresh-fruit drinks and cold beers go down pretty easily on a hot day.

Pollosa (☎ 2735 5667; meals US\$4-8; 📍) noon-9pm Sun-Fri) Pollosa is renowned among locals for juicy, delectable rotisserie chicken, but it also has a good selection of salads, sandwiches and spaghetti. Carry-out is available, so this is an excellent option for picnicking.

Pizza Rock (pizzas US\$5-8; 📍) 6-10pm) Sizzling pizzas come straight out of the wood-burning

oven and onto your plate at this informal, open-air diner. If you're heading to, or coming back from, Corcovado, a cheesy slice is exactly the kind of indulgence you're looking for.

Il Giardino (☎ 2735 5129; meals US\$10-12; 📍) 10am-2pm & 5-10pm) The specialties of the house at Il Giardino are homemade pasta and fresh seafood. Considering that you're on the edge of the wilderness in a far-flung corner of Costa Rica, there is a fair measure of Italian authenticity here.

our pick Jade Luna (☎ 2735 5735; meals US\$15-25; 📍) 6-9pm Mon-Sat) A delectable dining experience, starting with the linen napkins and candlelit tables, and ending with tropical-flavored homemade ice cream. Not to gloss over what comes in between: the menu varies, but always features fresh Cajun-style fish and garlicky jumbo shrimp straight from the gulf, plus a host of appetizers and salads prepared with the freshest organic produce.

Drinking

You can get greasy Mexican food at **Juanita's** (📍) 5pm-2am), but it's better to stick to the beer and passable margaritas (happy hour is 4pm to 6pm). **Iguana Iguana** (📍) 4pm-midnight), at the cabins of the same name, is a popular watering hole, especially on weekends when the locals join in the action.

Shopping

Artes de Osa (☎ 2735 5429) This cutesy souvenir shop has the usual tourist knick-knacks in addition to some attractive handcrafted furniture and hand-painted pottery.

Jagua Arts & Crafts (☎ 2735 5267; 📍) 6:30am-5pm) A great collection of art and jewelry by local and expat craftspeople, including some amazing painted masks.

Osa Army Navy (📍) 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun) Your one-stop shop for sportswear, boogie boards, fishing gear, bug nets, knives, backpacks and other outdoor gear.

Getting There & Around**AIR**

NatureAir (www.natureair.com) and **Sansa** (www.sansa.com) have daily flights to/from San José; one-way flights are approximately US\$100.

Alfa Romeo Aero Taxi (☎ 2775 5353) has light aircraft (three and five passengers) for charter flights to Golfito, Carate, Drake, Sirena, Palmar Sur, Quepos and Limón. Prices are dependant on the number of passengers, so

it's best to try to organize a larger group if you're considering this option.

BICYCLE

Rent a bike at **Ciclo Corcovado** (☎ 2735 5429; per hr US\$1; 📍) 8am-5pm).

BOAT

Two passenger ferries travel to Golfito (US\$2, 1½ hours), departing at 6am and 10am daily. Note that these times are subject to change; in this part of the country, schedules often fall prey to the whims of the captain.

A better option than chugging away on the ferries is to hire a private water taxi to shuttle you across the bay. You will have to negotiate, but prices are generally reasonable considering that you'll be free of having to rely on the ferry. Fortunately, waters in the Golfo Dulce are sheltered and generally calm, though it's still good to have a reasonable degree of faith in the seaworthiness of both your captain and their ship before you set out.

Taboga Aquatic Tours (☎ 2735 5265) runs water taxis to Zancudo for US\$35.

BUS

Most buses arrive at the new peach-color terminal on the west side of town. All of these pass La Palma (23km away) for the eastern entry into Corcovado. Buy tickets to San José in advance.

Neily US\$3.50, three hours, 5:30am and 2pm.

San Isidro US\$4.50, four hours, 1pm.

San José, via San Isidro (Autotransportes Blanco Lobo) US\$6.50, eight hours, 5am and 11am.

CAR & TAXI

Colectivo Transportation (☎ 8837 3120, 8832 8680; Soda Deya) runs a collective jeep-taxi service to Matapalo (US\$3) and Carate (US\$6) on the southern tip of the national park. Departures are from the Soda Deya at 6am and 1:30pm, returning at 8:30am and 4pm.

Otherwise, you can call and hire a 4WD taxi from **Taxi 348** (☎ 8849 5228; taxicorcovado@racsa.co.cr) or from the **Central Taxi Center** (☎ 2735 5481). Taxis usually charge US\$60 for the ride to Carate, US\$25 for the ride to Matapalo and US\$100 for the overland trek to Drake.

You can also rent a vehicle from **Solid Car Rental** (☎ 2735 5777; per day US\$75).

CABO MATAPALO

The tip of the Osa peninsula and the entrance to Golfo Dulce lies just 17km south of Puerto Jiménez, but this heavily forested and beach-fringed cape is a vastly different world. A network of trails traverses the foothills, which are uninhabited except for migrating wildlife from the Reserva Forestal Golfo Dulce. Along the coastline, miles upon miles of beaches of pristine wilderness are virtually abandoned, except for handfuls of surfers in the know.

Although facilities in this remote corner are extremely limited, Cabo Matapalo is home to a number of luxurious lodges that cater to travelers searching for peace and seclusion. Of course, it's hard to feel lonely out here given the breadth of animals about: scarlet macaw, brown pelican and all breeds of heron are frequently sighted on the beaches, while four species of monkey, sloth, coati, agouti and anteater roam the woods.

Sights & Activities

Cabo Matapalo is an attractive destination for adventurers who wish to go it alone. All of the lodges have easy access to miles of trails which you can explore without a guide. Indeed, you are likely to spot a good selection of wildlife just walking along the Cabo's tree-lined dirt road. A fantastic and easy hiking destination is **King Louis**, a magnificent, 28m waterfall which can be accessed by trail from **Playa Matapalo**. For ocean adventures, most of the lodges also offer **kayaks**; and the wild, beautiful beach – surrounding on three sides – is never more than a short walk away.

These pristine beaches around Cabo Matapalo offer three breaks that are putting this little peninsula on the surfing map. **Playa Pan Dulce** is a double point break. The inside break is a small wave that is ideal for beginners; experts can find the point on the outside break and ride it all the way into shore. **Backwash Bay** offers a nice beach break at low tide. The steep beach makes it excellent for long-boarding. **Playa Matapalo** also has an A-plus right break, with the biggest and best waves in the area. Conditions are usually good with a west swell; surfing season coincides with the rainy season, which is April to October.

Tours

Naturalist Andy Pruter runs **Everyday Adventures** (☎ 8353 8619; www.everydaycostarica.com),

which offers all kind of adventures in Cabo Matapalo. His signature tour is tree-climbing (US\$55 per person): scaling a 60m ficus tree, aptly named 'Cathedral'. Also popular (and definitely adrenaline inducing) is waterfall-rappelling (US\$75) down cascades ranging from 15m to 30m.

Sleeping

This area is off the grid, so many places do not have electricity around the clock or hot water. Reservations are recommended in the dry season (mid-November to the end of April). High-season rates are quoted; prices are per person, including three meals, unless otherwise stated.

Ojo del Mar (☎ 2735 5531; www.ojodelmar.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$55/90; P) Tucked in amid the windswept beach and the lush jungle, this is a little plot of paradise. The four beautifully handcrafted bamboo bungalows are entirely open-air, allowing for all the natural sounds and scents to seep in (thatch roofs and mosquito nets provide protection from the elements). Solar power provides electricity in the *casa grande* (main house). Hammocks swing from the palms, while howler monkeys swing above. Rates include breakfast, but Niko – co-owner and cook – also serves an excellent, all-organic dinner (US\$15). Look for this gem on the road to Carate, just before the Buena Esperanza Bar.

Ranchos Almendros (Kapu's Place; ☎ 2735 5531; http://home.earthlink.net/~kapu; Cabo Matapalo; 2-/3-/4-person cabañas US\$90/160/225; P) This is the end of the line on the Cabo Matapalo, where the road stops pretending and turns into a sandy beach path. The property includes three cozy cabañas that are equipped with solar power, large, screened windows, full kitchens and garden showers. As per the name, 'Almond Tree Ranch' is part of an ongoing project dedicated to the reforestation of Indian almond trees to create habitat for the endangered scarlet macaw.

El Remanso Rain Forest Beach Lodge (☎ 2735 5569; www.elremanso.com; road to Carate, 18km; cabins per person US\$95-155; P) Set on 56 hectares of rain forest, El Remanso is another tropical paradise. Constructed entirely from fallen tropical hardwoods, the secluded, spacious and sumptuous cabins have shiny wood floors and beautifully finished fixtures. Several units have folding French doors that

open to unimpeded vistas of the foliage and the ocean in the distance.

Casa Bambú (www.casabambu.addr.com; Cabo Matapalo; 2-/3-/4-person cottages without meals US\$195/205/215; P) This property on the pristine Playa Pan Dulce has three secluded *casas*. All have solar power, bamboo-and-hardwood construction and screen-free half-walls, allowing nothing to come between you and the ocean breezes (except maybe a mosquito net). Fully equipped kitchens and twice-weekly maid service make this an excellent option for longer-term guests who want to get back to nature (weekly rates available). Meals are not included; kayaks, boogie boards and other beach toys are.

Bosque del Cabo (☎ 8381 4847, in Puerto Jiménez 2735 5206; www.bosquedelcabo.com; road to Carate, 18km; s US\$195-205, d US\$300-330; P) Nine quaint cabins are perched on a bluff here overlooking the ocean. Modern bathrooms, garden showers and personal hammocks in lush surroundings are the norm; deluxe cabins have added perks like king-size beds, dressing rooms and wraparound porches. Explore the surrounding 200 hectares of rain forest at canopy level (by zip line or by suspension bridge) or at ground level (on miles of marked trails).

Lapa Ríos (☎ 2735 5130; www.laparios.com; road to Carate, 17km; s/d US\$425/590; P) A few hundred meters beyond El Portón Blanco along the road to Carate, this top-notch all-inclusive wilderness resort combines the right amount of luxury with a rustic, tropical ambience. Scattered over the site are 16 spacious, thatch bungalows, all decked out with queen-sized beds, bamboo furniture, garden showers and private decks with panoramic views. An extensive trail system allows exploration of the 400-hectare reserve, while swimming, snorkeling and surfing are at your doorstep.

Eating & Drinking

About 1km before El Portón Blanco, you'll find the trendy, tropical **Buena Esperanza Bar** (☎ 2735 5531; road to Carate, Conbonera; meals US\$5-10; ☎ 9am-midnight), a festive, open-air tropical bar on the east side of the road. The limited menu includes lots of sandwiches and vegetarian items, plus a full bar. It's Cabo Matapalo's only place to eat or drink, and so often attracts a decent crowd of locals, resident expats and tourists.

Most hotels and lodges also have small shops that sell snacks and drinks. If you're

planning on hiking, be sure to stock up on lots of fresh water as well as your favorite form of trail mix – once you're out in the woods or on the beach, options are decidedly limited.

Getting There & Away

From the Puerto Jiménez–Carate road, the turnoff for the Cabo Matapalo is on the left-hand side, through a white cement gate (called 'El Portón Blanco'). If you are driving, a 4WD is highly recommended – even in the dry season – as roads frequently get washed out. Otherwise, the transport colectivo will drop you here; it passes by at about 6:30am and 2pm heading to Carate, and 10am and 5:30pm heading back to Jiménez. A taxi will come here from Port Jim for about US\$30.

CARATE

About 45km south of Puerto Jiménez, the dirt road that rounds the peninsula comes to an abrupt dead end in the village of Carate, which is literally nothing more than an airstrip and a *pulpería*. Needless to say, Carate doesn't exactly rate high on the list of Osa's top tourist destinations, but it does serve as the southwestern gateway for anyone hiking into Sirena ranger station (p416) in Parque Nacional Corcovado.

With that said, there are a handful of recommended wilderness lodges in the area, any of which can provide a good night's rest for travelers heading to/from Corcovado. The ride from Puerto Jiménez to Carate is also an adventure in itself as the narrow, bumpy dirt road winds its way around dense rain forest, through gushing rivers and across windswept beaches. Birdlife and other wildlife are prolific along this stretch: keep your eyes peeled and hang on tight.

Sleeping & Eating

Many places in Carate don't have 24-hour electricity or hot water. Reservations are recommended in the dry season – communication is often through Puerto Jiménez, so messages may not be retrieved every day. High-season rates are quoted; prices are per person, including three meals, unless otherwise stated.

West of Carate is the national park, so if you're planning on hiking into Corcovado, you must be self-sufficient from here on out. The *pulpería* is the last chance you have to stock up on food and water.

Corcovado Lodge Tent Camp (☎ in San José 2272 0766, 2222 0333; www.corcovadolodge.com; tent with/without meals US\$70/20) On the beach south of Parque Nacional Corcovado, 1.7km west of the *pulpería*, this long-established lodge is owned and operated by Costa Rica Expeditions. Twenty platform tents have two single beds, clean linens and access to shared bathrooms (but no electricity). The grounds are sort of stark, but a steep trail leads into a 160-hectare private reserve, which is ripe for exploration. A highlight of the reserve is the canopy platform – high up in a 45m guapinol tree – where you can spend the day bird- and wildlife-watching (US\$70) or the night under the stars (US\$125).

Lookout Inn (☎ 2735 5431; www.lookout-inn.com; r from US\$125; P) Another isolated wilderness retreat, the Lookout has comfortable quarters with mural-painted walls, hardwood floors, beautifully carved doors and – you guessed it – unbeatable views. Accommodation is in 'tiki huts,' which are open-air, A-frame huts that are accessible only by a wooden walkway winding through the giant Joba trees (prime birding territory). Behind the inn, 360 steps – known as the 'stairway to heaven' – lead straight up the side of the mountain to four observation platforms and a waterfall trail.

La Leona Eco-Lodge & Tent Camp (☎ 2735 5704; www.laleonalodge.com; s/d with shared bathroom US\$80/140, with private bathroom US\$106/180; P) On the edge of Parque Nacional Corcovado 2km west of the *pulpería*, this friendly, family-run lodge offers all of the thrills of camping, without the hassles. Sixteen comfy forest-green tents are nestled between the palm trees, with decks facing the beach. All are fully screened and comfortably furnished; solar power provides electricity in the restaurant. Behind the accommodations, 30 hectares of virgin rain-forest property offer opportunities for waterfall hiking, horseback riding and wildlife-watching.

Laguna Vista (☎ 2735 5062; www.lagunavistavillas.com; s/d US\$100/170; P) As the name suggests, this isolated lodge is perched up on a hillside, overlooking the picturesque Laguna Pejeperrito, 2.5km east of the Carate airstrip. Three uniquely designed villas are built in a Mediterranean style, with stucco walls, red-tile roofs and European design accents. Thanks to carefully planned construction, all units have both sunrise and sunset views from the comfort of your king-size beds.

Luna Lodge (☎ 8380 5036, in the USA 888-409 8448; www.lunalodge.com; s/d tents US\$105/170, haciendas US\$155/250, bungalows US\$235/330; 📍) A steep road goes through the Río Carate and up the valley to this enchanting mountain retreat, located about 2km north of the *pulpería*. Taking full advantage of the vista, the high-roofed, open-air restaurant is a marvelous place to indulge in the delights of the gardens and orchards on the grounds. Seven spacious, thatch-roof bungalows each have a huge garden shower and private patio. The open-air meditation studio is nothing less than inspirational.

Getting There & Away

Transportation Colectivo (US\$6, 2½ hours) departs Puerto Jiménez for Carate at 6am and 1:30pm, returning at 8:30am and 4pm. Note that the colectivo often fills up on its return trip to Puerto Jiménez, especially during the dry season. Arrive at least 30 minutes ahead of time or you might find yourself stranded.

Alternatively, catch a taxi from Puerto Jiménez (US\$60). If you are driving, you'll need a 4WD – even in the dry season as there are a couple of river crossings. Assuming you don't have valuables in sight, you can leave your car at the *pulpería* (per night US\$5), and hike to La Leona station (1½ hours) or either of the tented camps listed above.

PARQUE NACIONAL CORCOVADO

This **national park** is the last great tract of tropical rain forest in Pacific Central America. The bastion of biological diversity is home to Costa Rica's largest population of scarlet macaw, as well as countless other endangered species, including Baird's tapir, the giant anteater and the world's largest bird of prey, the rare harpy eagle. Its amazing biodiversity has long attracted the attention of tropical ecologists, as well as a devoted stream of visitors who come from Bahía Drake and Puerto Jiménez to explore the remote location and spy on a wide array of rare and enchanting wildlife.

HISTORY

Because of its remoteness, Corcovado remained undisturbed until loggers invaded in the 1960s. The destruction was halted in '75 when the area was established as government-administered

parklands. The early years were a challenge, as park authorities, with limited personnel and resources, sought to deal with illegal clear-cutting, poaching and gold-mining, the latter of which was causing severe erosion in the park's rivers and streams. By 1986, the number of gold miners had exceeded 1000, which promptly caused the government to evict them and their families entirely from the park.

Unfortunately, poaching remains a severe problem in Corcovado to this day. The highest-profile victims are the highly endangered Central American jaguar and its main food source, the white-lipped peccary. Heavily armed hunters gun down peccaries en masse and sell their meat, resulting in a drastic decline in their populations in the last five years. Jaguars, suffering from a diminishing food supply, prey on domestic animals in the area, making them a target of local residents (not to mention the fact that jaguar pelts and bones fetch hefty sums, as well). Minae has stepped up its police patrols, but has been unable to curb the poaching.

On the bright side, illegal logging has all but subsided, primarily since increased tourism has led to an increased human presence in the park. Furthermore, in an effort to control hunting, agencies such as Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy and the World Wildlife Fund, as well as various other NGOs and charities, have banded together to help organize and fund the park's anti-poaching units.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The 42,469-hectare park is nestled in the southwestern corner of the Península de Osa, and protects at least eight distinct habitats, ranging from mangrove swamps to primary and secondary rain forest to low altitude cloud forest. The most accessible and visible habitat is the 46km of sandy coastline.

Information and maps are available at the **Oficina de Área de Conservación Osa** (☎ 2735 5036, 2735 5580; park fee per person per day US\$10; 🕒 8am–4pm) in Puerto Jiménez. Contact this office to make reservations for lodging and meals at all of the ranger stations and to pay your park fee. Be sure to make these arrangements a few days in advance as facilities are limited, and they do fill up on occasion in the dry season.

Park headquarters are at **Sirena ranger station** on the coast in the middle of the park.

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Other ranger stations are located on the park boundaries: **San Pedrillo station** in the northwest corner on the coast; the new **Los Planes station** on the northern boundary (near the village of the same name); **La Leona station** in the southeast corner on the coast (near the village of Carate); and **Los Patos ranger station** in the northeast corner (near the village of La Palma). Always check with rangers before setting out about trail conditions and possible closures (especially during the wettest months, from June to November).

ACTIVITIES Wildlife-Watching

The best wildlife-watching in Corcovado is at Sirena, but the coastal trails have two advantages: they are more open, and the constant crashing of waves covers the sound of noisy walkers. White-faced capuchin, red-tailed squirrel, collared peccary, white-nosed coati and northern tamandua are regularly seen on both trails.

On the less traveled San Pedrillo trail, Playa Llorona is a popular nesting spot for marine turtles, including leatherback, olive ridley and green turtles. Nesting turtles attract ocelot, jaguar and other predators, though they are hard to spot.

Both coastal trails produce an endless pagant of birds. Pairs of scarlet macaws are guaranteed, as the tropical almond trees lining the coast are a favorite food. The sections along the beach shelter mangrove black hawk by the dozens and numerous waterbird species. The

little rock island opposite Salsipuedes serves as a roost for hundreds of birds, including the magnificent frigate bird and brown booby.

The Los Patos trail attracts lowland rain forest birds such as great curassow, chestnut-mandibled toucan, fiery-billed aracari, turquoise cotinga and rufous piha; trogon, hummingbird and wood creeper are plentiful. Encounters with mixed flocks are common. Mammals are similar to those sighted on the coastal trails, but Los Patos is better for primates and white-lipped peccary.

For wildlife-watchers frustrated at the difficulty of seeing rain forest mammals, a stay at Sirena ranger station is a must. Topping the list, Baird's tapir are practically assured – that is a statement that can be made at few other places in the world. This endangered and distant relative of the rhinoceros is frequently spotted grazing along the airstrip after dusk. Sirena is excellent for other herbivores, particularly red brocket (especially on Sirena trail) and both species of peccary. Agouti and tayra are also common.

The profusion of meat on the hoof means there are predators aplenty, but they are not nearly as confiding. Jaguar are occasionally sighted near the airstrip in the very early morning (midnight to 4am). While spotlighting at night you are more likely to see kinkajou and crab-eating skunk (especially at the mouth of the Río Sirena). Ocelot represents your best chance for observing a cat, but again, it's difficult.

Corcovado is the only national park in Costa Rica with all four of the country's

GREEN GRASSROOTS

The impressive **Fundación Corcovado** (☎ 2297 3013; www.corcovadofoundation.org) is a network of local businesspeople – mostly hoteliers – who have teamed up to raise both money and awareness to support their most valuable resource: the biodiversity of the national park. Through their own fund-raising efforts, they have hired additional rangers to crack down on poaching, implemented various community education programs and worked toward establishing a sustainable-tourism code for local businesses.

Fundación Corcovado has also been spearheading an increasingly high-profile campaign to designate Parque Nacional Corcovado as a Unesco World Heritage Site. However, due to ongoing reports of uncontrolled poaching, the process has been frustratingly slow.

The Fundación Corcovado invites volunteers to work in the community and in the park. Tasks might include teaching about waste management and conservation at local schools, maintaining trails and bridges in the park, patrolling beaches and collecting data during turtle season, and providing assistance and expertise to visiting tourists. The daily fee of approximately US\$25 for volunteers includes transportation from San José as well as room and board with a local family. Note that there is a two-week minimum commitment for all service projects.

POISON DARTS & HARMLESS ROCKETS

Traversed by many streams and rivers, Corcovado is a hot spot for exquisitely beautiful poison-dart frogs. Two species here, the granular poison-dart frog and the Golfo Dulce poison-dart frog, are Costa Rican endemics – indeed, the latter only occurs in and around Corcovado. A search of the leaf litter near Sirena ranger station readily turns up both species, as well as the more widespread green and black poison-dart frog.

You might also find some other members of the family that have one important difference: they're not poisonous! Called rocket frogs because of their habit of launching themselves into streams when disturbed, they are essentially poison-dart frogs without the poisonous punch.

Why the difference? It probably arises from their diets. Poison-dart frogs have a diet dominated by ants, which are very rich in alkaloids, and are thought to give rise to their very formidable defenses. Rocket frogs also eat ants, but in far lower quantities, and rely instead on their astounding leaps to escape predation. They also lack the dazzling warning colors of their toxic cousins, but it's safer (and kinder to the frog) to observe, rather than handle, any species you might encounter.

primate species. Spider monkey, mantled howler and white-faced capuchin can be encountered anywhere, while Sirena trail is best for the fourth and most endangered species, the Central American squirrel monkey. Sirena also has fair chances for the extremely hard-to-find silky anteater, a nocturnal animal that frequents the beachside forests between the Río Claro and the station.

The Río Sirena is a popular spot for all kinds of heron, as well as waders like ruddy turnstone and western sandpiper. You may be more excited to spot the other riverside regulars, which include the American crocodile, three-toed sloth and bull shark.

Here's a good tip: the abundant banana trees along the coastal trails are not indigenous to Costa Rica (bananas are Asian in origin), but they serve as huge magnets for wildlife. In addition to the more obvious visitors, namely monkeys, there are a few other interesting species to be on the lookout for. For instance, hermit crab dine on the fallen fruit, while rufous-tailed hummingbird build their nest under banana leaves. Thomas' fruit-eating bat also snip the supporting veins of the leaves to create their awning-like tents.

Hiking

Paths are primitive and the hiking is hot, humid and insect-ridden; but the challenge of the trek and the interaction with wildlife at Corcovado are thrilling. Hiring a local guide is highly recommended. Obviously, your guide will know the trails well, thus avoiding the unmitigated disaster of getting lost; furthermore, he or she will have a keen eye for spotting and identifying wildlife.

Otherwise, travel in a small group. Bring a compass, as it is impossible to navigate using the sun or stars underneath the rain forest canopy. Carry plenty of food, water and insect repellent. And always verify your route with the rangers before you depart.

The most popular route traverses the park from Los Patos to Sirena, then exits the park at La Leona (or vice versa). This allows hikers to begin and end their journey in or near Puerto Jiménez, offering easy access to La Leona and Los Patos. The trek between Sirena and San Pedrillo is more difficult, both physically and logistically. The travel times listed are conservative: fit hikers with light packs can move faster, unless you spend a lot of time birding or taking photos.

Hiking is best in the dry season (from December to April), when there is still regular rain but all of the trails are open. It's still muddy, but you won't sink quite as deep.

SIRENA TO SAN PEDRILLO

The route between Sirena and San Pedrillo is the longest trail in Corcovado, covering 23km in 10 to 15 hours. The first 18km of this hike are along the beach, which means loose sand and little shade – grueling, especially with a heavy pack. One local guide recommends doing this portion of the hike at night to avoid the hot sun.

Another tricky factor is the three river crossings, which become very difficult or impossible at high tide. As a result, the time of departure from Sirena station depends on the tides; the recommended departure time is about two hours before low tide.

The first river crossing – Río Sirena – is about 1km north of Sirena. The largest river on the hike, it is the neighborhood hangout for sharks and crocodiles, so cross with caution. The final river, the cascading Río Llorona, also marks the end of the beach trail.

This trail is only open from December through April, since heavy rains can make the Río Sirena impassable. Due to the complexity of this route, taking a guide is strongly recommended.

SIRENA TO LA LEONA

The 16km hike from Sirena to La Leona is another sizzler, following the shoreline through coastal forest and along deserted

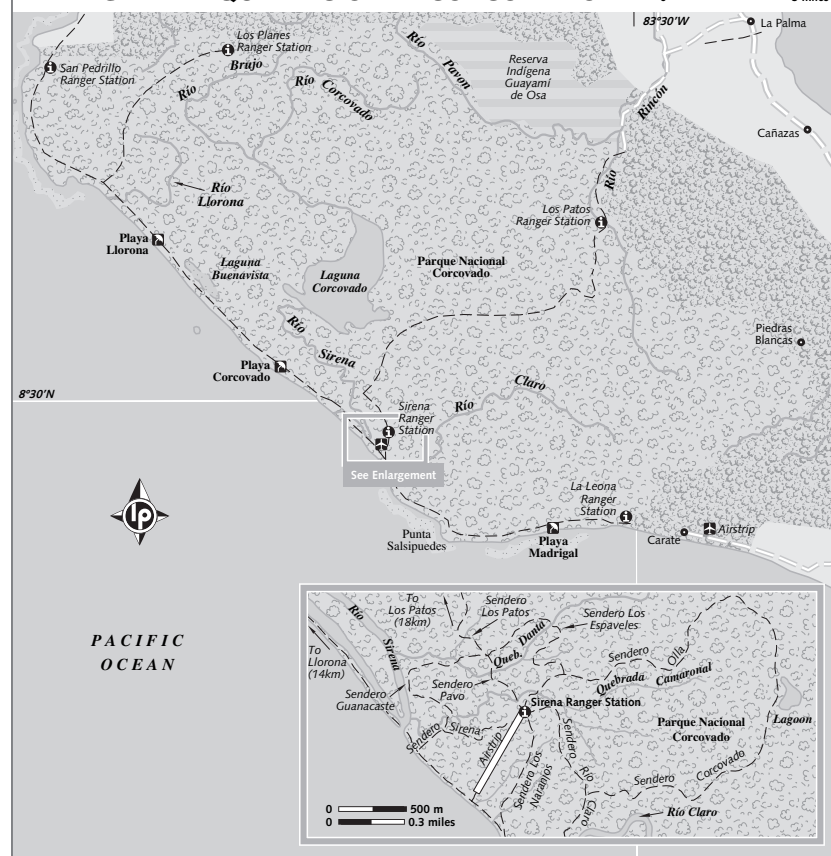
beaches. It involves one major river crossing at Río Claro, just south of Sirena station.

The journey between Sirena and La Leona takes six or seven hours. You can camp at La Leona; otherwise, it takes another hour to hike the additional 3.5km to Carate, where you can stay in a local lodge or catch the collective taxi to Puerto Jiménez.

SIRENA TO LOS PATOS

The route to Los Patos goes 18km through the heart of Corcovado, affording the hiker an opportunity to pass through plenty of primary and secondary forest. The trail is relatively flat for the first 12km. You will hike through secondary forest and wade through two river tributaries before reaching the Laguna

HIKING IN PARQUE NACIONAL CORCOVADO



BAIRD'S TAPIR PROJECT

The Baird's Tapir Project has been studying the populations of Baird's tapir around Sirena station since 1994 in the hope of enhancing conservation efforts. Scientists use radio telemetry (that's radio collars to us) to collect data about where the tapirs live, how far they wander, whom they associate with and how often they reproduce. So far, 28 tapirs around Sirena are wearing collars, which allows scientists to collect the data without disrupting the animals.

Sirena station is an ideal place to do such research, because there is no pressure from deforestation or hunting, which gives researchers the chance to observe a healthy, thriving population. The animals' longevity and slow rate of reproduction mean that many years of observation are required before drawing conclusions.

So, what have we learned about these river rhinos so far? The nocturnal animals spend their nights foraging – oddly, they prefer to forage in 'disturbed habitats' (like along the airstrip), not in the dense rain forest. They spend their days in the cool waters of the swamp, out of the hot sun. Tapirs are not very social, but a male-female pair often shares the same 'home range,' living together for years at a time. Scientists speculate that tapirs may in fact be monogamous – who knew these ungainly creatures would be so romantic!

Corcovado. From this point, the route undulates steeply (mostly uphill!) for the remaining 6km. One guide recommends doing this hike in the opposite direction – from Los Patos to Sirena – to avoid this exhausting, uphill ending. Near Los Patos, a lovely waterfall provides a much-needed shower at the end of a long trek.

The largest herds of peccary are reportedly on this trail. Local guides advise that peccary sense fear, but they will back off if you act aggressively. Alternatively, if you climb about 2m off the ground you'll avoid being bitten in the unlikely event of running into a surly bunch. Hint – peccary herds emit a strong smell of onions, so you usually have a bit of head's up before they come crashing through the bush.

You can camp at Los Patos, or continue an additional 14km to the village of La Palma. This four-hour journey is a shady and muddy descent down the valley of the Río Rincón. If you are traveling from La Palma to Los Patos, be prepared for a steep climb.

If you don't plan on traversing the park, a 6km day hike from Los Patos to the Laguna Corcovado is feasible. (This requires spending two nights at Los Patos.)

TOURS

The main routes across Parque Nacional Corcovado are well marked and well traveled, making this journey easy enough to complete independently. However, hiring a guide can greatly enhance this experience, not only because you will not have to worry about taking a wrong turn. Besides

their intimate knowledge of the trail, local guides are amazingly knowledgeable about flora and fauna, including the best places to spot various species. Many guides also carry telescopes, allowing for up-close inspection of the various creatures.

Guides are most often hired through the park office in Puerto Jiménez, at any of the ranger stations heading into the park, or near the airstrip in either Carate or Sirena. You can also inquire with tour operators and hotels in Puerto Jiménez and Bahía Drake. As you'd imagine, prices vary considerably depending on the season, availability, the size of your party and the type of expedition you want to arrange. In all cases, you want to negotiate a price that is inclusive of park fees, meals and transportation to the park.

Generally speaking, it is difficult to recommend a particular agency or guide as things change quickly in this part of the country. On top of that, we constantly receive mixed reports from travelers detailing life-changing and life-threatening experiences in Corcovado, which means that this is one destination where it pays to put the book down and do things yourself.

Although there is no hard and fast rule for sizing up the quality of a guide, the three things you want to measure is their a) communicative ability, b) professionalism and c) park knowledge. Perhaps most important of all is their English ability, especially if you don't have a strong command of Spanish. Trekking through the rain forest can be a dangerous activity, though it doesn't have

to be if both you and your guide stay in constant communication.

Professionalism is best assessed by using your common sense – simply put, ask yourself whether or not this is the kind of person you would trust your life with. Professional guides are also usually outfitted with modern and well-maintained gear, and are quick to reassure travelers of the length and breadth of their experience.

On that note, the final factor in choosing a guide is park knowledge. No matter how many guidebooks you've read or maps you've studied, Corcovado can be a tricky place to access. Before choosing your guide, talk to them about your intended route, and be sure that they are knowledgeable about the trek ahead.

Finally, don't stress – Corcovado is truly a world-class trekking destination, and so long as you're comfortable with your guide,

you're guaranteed to have an amazing experience here.

SLEEPING & EATING

Camping costs US\$5 per person per day at any station; facilities include potable water and latrines. Sirena station has a covered platform, but other stations have no such luxuries. Remember to bring a flashlight or a kerosene lamp, as the campsites are pitch black at night. Camping is not permitted in areas other than the ranger stations.

Simple dormitory lodging (US\$10) and meals (breakfast US\$8, lunch or dinner US\$11) are available at Sirena station only. Food and cooking fuel have to be packed in, so reserve at least 15 to 30 days in advance through the **Oficina de Área de Conservación Osa** (☎ 2735 5036) in Puerto Jiménez. Scientists and researchers working at the Sirena biological station get preference over travelers for

CORCOVADO WILDLIFE

As one of the most biologically intense places on Earth, Parque Nacional Corcovado is absolutely teeming with wildlife. Just to get you excited for the trek ahead, we've prepared a few top picks for the best (and worst) of Corcovado wildlife.

Wish List

- **Jaguar** These elusive felines sit at the top of nearly everybody's rain forest wish list, though you're going to need an incredible amount of luck to spot one in the wild.
- **Ocelot** Of Corcovado's feline predators, these medium-sized cats are the most spotted – they're largely ground-lovers, and tend to stick to the trails.
- **Tapir** You don't have to wish very hard to spot these lumbering giants at Sirena station, though their commonness in Corcovado isn't a true reflection general population figure.

No-Wish List

- **Fer-de-Lance** Known as a *terciopelo* in Costa Rica, the true bushmaster of Corcovado is not to be toyed with.
- **Bullet ant** Sitting alongside the tarantula hawk wasp as one of most pain-inducing biting insects, these enormous ants are best given a wide berth and a lot of respect.
- **Ticks** Approaching megalithic sizes in Corcovado, it's inevitable that you're going to pick up a few dozen, but hopefully they'll stick to where the sun does shine.

Maybe-Yes, Maybe-No Wish List

- **Crocodile** One of nature's oldest and most efficient predators, the crocodile is an amazing sight to behold, given that you're on the land and they're in the water.
- **Peccary** Something akin to a tropical boar, these surly swine are best observed from the lofty heights of a tree, allowing you to view their antics from a safe distance.
- **Army ant** The infamous insect army can be heard crunching its way through the forest, so you'd be wise to give them the right of way.

accommodations and meals, but if you secure a reservation you will be taken care of.

Otherwise, campers must bring all of their own food. Note that ranger stations face a challenge with trash disposal, so all visitors are required to pack out all of their trash.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Bahía Drake

From Bahía Drake, you can walk the coastal trail that leads to San Pedrillo station (about four hours from Agujitas), or any lodge can drop you here as a part of their regular tours to Corcovado. Alternatively, you can charter a boat to San Pedrillo (US\$80) or Sirena (US\$120). If you have a car, most hotels and lodges along Bahía Drake can watch over it for you for a few dollars a day.

From La Palma

From the north, the closest point of access is the town of La Palma, from where you can

catch a bus or taxi south to Puerto Jiménez or north to San José.

Heading to Los Patos, you might be able to find a taxi to take you partway; however, the road is only passable to 4WD vehicles (and not always), so be prepared to hike the 14km to the ranger station. The road crosses the river about 20 times in the last 6km. It's easy to miss the right turn shortly before the ranger station, so keep your eyes peeled.

If you have a car, it's best to leave it with a hotel or lodge in La Palma instead of traversing the route to Los Patos, though it certainly is an adventure. Furthermore, once in Los Patos, there is no reliable place to park your car while trekking in the park.

From Carate

In the southeast, the closest point of access is Carate, from where La Leona station is a one-hour, 3.5km hike west along the beach.

IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

The birds are brilliant, the animals are enchanting and the forest is fantastic. But Parque Nacional Corcovado is the real deal, 100% wilderness, and the dangers should not be underestimated. Every season, travelers to Corcovado become injured, sick or even dead; take some precautions to make sure this is not you:

- The number one danger for hikers is heat exhaustion and dehydration. This is the rain forest: it is hot and humid and you are going to sweat more than you realize. Make sure you carry enough water: a 1L or 1.5L bottle (which you can refill at each ranger station) is the bare minimum per person.
- Do not drink untreated water from any stream – this is a surefire way to get a nasty case of giardia. However, prior to setting out for Costa Rica, you should consider investing in a water treatment device, such as a filter and pump system, a UV wand or even a bottle of old-fashioned iodine tablets.
- Wear sunblock and insect repellent. The number two danger for hikers is sunburn and subsequently sunstroke, especially while traveling on the exposed coastal trails. Although malaria and dengue are relatively minor risks in Costa Rica, mosquitoes are a huge nuisance in Corcovado so take precautions and cover up.
- Travel light, as the pleasure of the hike is inversely proportionate to the weight of your pack. Although it's tempting to carry gear for every conceivable type of situation, overloading your pack is a surefire way to succumb to all of the risks we've previously mentioned.
- Always check with the rangers about trail conditions and tide charts before setting out. This is extremely valuable, so that not only are you up-to-date on this information, but also the rangers know the route you are planning to follow and your time of departure. Pay attention to their recommendations as river crossings can be very dangerous.
- If you're hiking without a guide, bring a compass and know how to use it! Also recommended is a topography map or a modern GPS navigation system. If you have limited wilderness experience, hire a guide – you will get your money back many times over in peace of mind.

Carate is accessible from Puerto Jiménez via a poorly maintained, 45km dirt road. This journey is an adventure in itself, and often allows for some good wildlife-spotting along the way. A collective 4WD jeep taxi travels this route twice daily, prices depend on the size of your party, the season (prices increase in the rainy months) and your bargaining skills.

If you have your own car, the *pulpería* in Carate is a safe place to park for a few days, though you'll have some extra piece of mind if you tip the manager before setting out.

By Air

Alfa Romeo Aero Taxi (☎ 2735 5353) offers charter flights connecting Puerto Jiménez, Drake and Golfito to Carate and Sirena. Flights are best booked at the airport in person, and one-way fares are typically less than US\$100. Note that long-term parking is not available, so it's best to make prior arrangements if you need to leave your car somewhere.

GOLFO DULCE

While Golfo Dulce is certainly less celebrated than the Península de Osa, an increasing number of travelers are making this arduous journey in search of the world's longest left-hand break at Pavones. The region is also home to Parque Nacional Piedras Blancas, a stunning tract of rain forest that used to be part of Corcovado and still protects the same amazing biodiversity. This far corner of Costa Rica is also home to a significant indigenous population, who live in the Reserva Indígena Guaymí de Conte Burica near Pavones.

GOLFITO

A historic banana port that is slowly fading into obscurity, Golfito is a rough-and-ready town that is struggling to find a purpose beyond yellow gold. Although Golfito has temporarily postponed its demise by implementing duty-free shopping for domestic tourists, the town is slowly being reclaimed by the jungle behind it, and local residents hardly seem concerned. Tellingly, this surreal atmosphere was enough to convince Warner Brothers to choose Golfito as the site to film *Chico Mendes*, the true story of a

Brazilian rubber-tapper's efforts to preserve the rain forest.

As the largest town in Golfo Dulce, Golfito is a major transportation hub for hikers heading to Corcovado, surfers heading to Pavones and sportfishers docking for the night. Although it's unlikely that you'll want to stick around for any longer than you have to, there is a certain charm to Golfito that isn't lost on everyone. Indeed, the town is surrounded by the verdant slopes of the Refugio Nacional de Fauna Silvestre Golfito, which provides a picturesque backdrop to the crumbling buildings.

History

From 1938 to 1985, bustling Golfito was the headquarters of United Fruit's operations in the southern part of Costa Rica. In the 1980s, however, declining markets, rising taxes, worker unrest and banana diseases forced its departure. Although some of the plantations now produce oil from the African Oil Palm, the collapse of the banana industry has not alleviated the economic hardship caused by United Fruit's departure.

In an attempt to boost the region's economy, the federal government built a duty-free facility (*déposito libre*) in the northern part of Golfito. This surreal shopping center attracts Ticos from around the country, who descend on the otherwise dying town for 24-hour shopping sprees. The duty-free shopping is for Costa Rica residents only, so you can put away your credit card. Indeed, the primary impact on foreign tourists is that tax-free shoppers are required to spend the night in Golfito, so hotel rooms can be in short supply on weekends and during holiday periods.

Orientation

Golfito is named after a tiny gulf that forms an inlet into the eastern shore of the much larger Golfo Dulce. The town is strung out along a dusty coastal road with a backdrop of steep, thickly forested hills. The southern part of town is where you find most of the bars and businesses, including a seedy red-light district. Nearby is the so-called Muellecito (Small Dock), from where the daily ferry to Puerto Jiménez departs.

The northern part of town was the old United Fruit Company headquarters, and it

retains a languid, tropical air, with its large, veranda-decked homes. Now, the so-called *Zona Americana* is home to the airport and the duty-free zone.

Information

Banco Coopealianza (☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) Has a 24-hour ATM on the Cirrus network and a Western Union office.

Golfito On-line (☎ 2775 2424; Hotel Golfito; per hr US\$1.20; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, noon-6pm Sun) Speedy Internet connections and delicious air-con.

Hospital de Golfito (☎ 2775 0011) Emergency medical attention.

Land Sea Tours (☎ 2775 1614; www.realestate-costarica.info; Km 2) Books airline tickets, makes hotel reservations and organizes tours.

Migración (☎ 2775 0423; ☎ 8am-4pm) Situated away from the dock, in a 2nd-floor office above the Soda Pavas.

Port captain (☎ 2775 0487; opposite the large Muelle de Golfito; ☎ 7:30-11am & 12:30-4pm Mon-Fri)

Sights

REFUGIO NACIONAL DE FAUNA SILVESTRE GOLFITO

The small, 2810-hectare reserve encompasses most of the steep hills surrounding the Golfito. It was originally created to protect the town's watershed, though it has also had the wonderful side effect of conserving a number of rare and interesting plant species. For example, the reserve is home to several cycads, which are 'living fossils,' and are regarded as the most primitive of plants. The reserve also attracts a

variety of tropical birds, four species of monkey and several small mammals.

There are no facilities for visitors, save a gravel access road and a few poorly maintained trails. About 2km south of the center of Golfito, a gravel road heads inland, past a soccer field, and winds 7km up to some radio towers (Las Torres) 486m above sea level. This access road is an excellent option for hiking, as it has very little traffic. In any case, you'll probably see more from the cleared road than from the overgrown trails.

A very steep hiking trail leaves from Golfito, almost opposite the Samoa del Sur hotel. A somewhat strenuous hike (allow about two hours) will bring you out on the road to the radio towers. The trail is easier to find in Golfito than at the top.

Another option is to walk along the poor dirt road heading toward Gamba. This road begins a couple of kilometers northwest of the refuge. The local bus stops at the beginning of this dirt road, from where it is about 10km to Gamba.

Finally, there are several trails off the road to Playa Cacao. Hikers on these routes will be rewarded by waterfalls and views of the gulf. However, the trails are often obscured, so it's worth asking locally about maps and trail conditions before setting off.

As always, be sure that somebody knows when and where you are going before you set off on an independent hike.

PLAYA CACAO

Just a hop, skip and a jump across the bay, this small beach offers a prime view of Golfito stretched out along the coast, with the rain forest as a backdrop. If you're stuck in Golfito for the day, Playa Cacao is perhaps the most appealing spot from which to enjoy the old port. To reach the beach, catch a water taxi from Golfito for about US\$2 per person. You can also get to Playa Cacao by walking or driving about 6km along a dirt road west and then south from the airport – a 4WD is recommended.

Activities

CATARATAS Y SENDEROS AVELLÁN

This Tico family-run **reserve and adventure camp** (☎ 8378 7895; admission US\$2.50; ☎ 10am-4pm) is an excellent option for adventurers who like a little guidance. Guided hikes (US\$18)

and horseback riding tours (US\$8 per hour) explore the extensive, rain forest-covered grounds, including three impressive waterfalls. Camping (US\$5) and meals (US\$2 to US\$4) are also available.

SPORTFISHING & BOATING

Golfito is home to several full-service marinas that attract coastal-cruising yachters. If you didn't bring your own boat, you can hire local sailors for tours of the gulf at any of the docks. You can fish year-round, but the best season for the sought-after Pacific sailfish is from November to May.

Banana Bay Marina (☎ 2775 0838; www.bananabaymarina.com) Charters can be arranged, and a full day of all-inclusive fishing on a 6m or 17m boat starts at US\$750.

C-Tales (☎ in the USA 772-335 9425; www.c-tales.com) Operating out of Las Gaviotas Hotel, this company offers a three-day package per person from US\$1200.

King & Bartlett (☎ 2775 1624; www.kingandbartlett.sportfishing.com) This slick new operation offers all-inclusive three-day fishing packages starting at US\$1800.

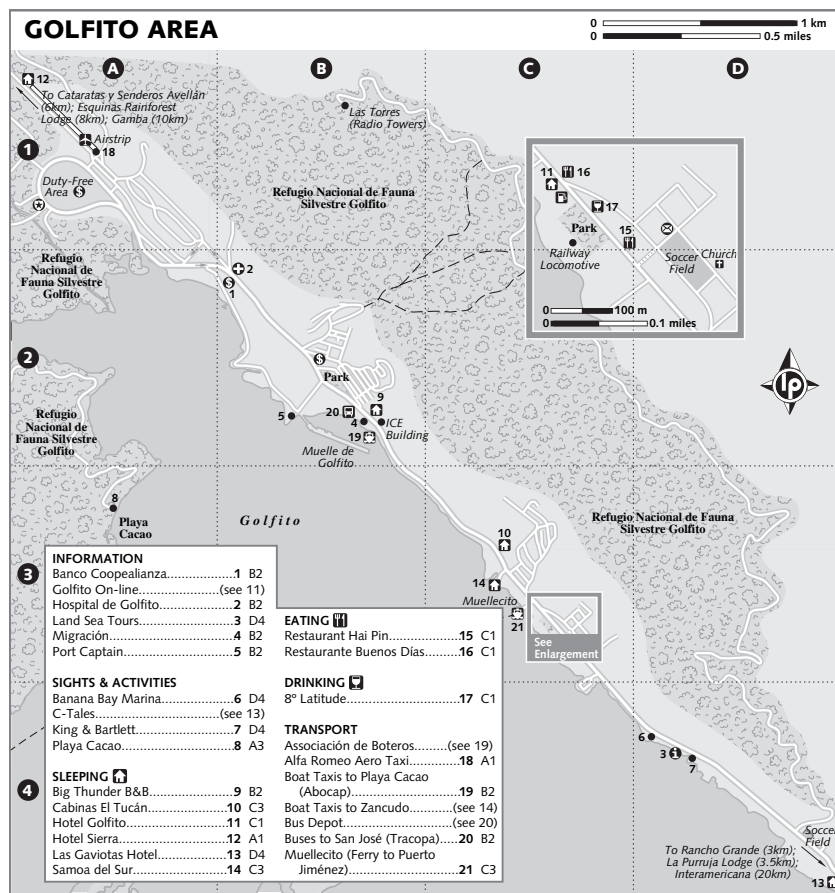
Sleeping

Note that the area around the soccer field in town is Golfito's red-light district, so you'd be best to spend a few more dollars and stay elsewhere.

Cabinas El Tucán (☎ 2775 0553; r per person without air-con US\$15/10; (P) ☎) This friendly, family-run hotel is a wonderfully welcoming place to stay, with kids playing in the courtyard and mothers cooking in the kitchen nearby. Clean spacious rooms of varying sizes and shapes are clustered around the shady, tiled courtyard.

Hotel Golfito (☎ 2775 0047; r per person from US\$15; (P) ☎) This bright yellow building overlooking the gulf is convenient to the Muellecito, and provides one of the best deals in town. Despite the waterside location, the modern rooms do not enjoy water views, though you can sit out back on the shared balcony and watch the sunset.

La Purruja Lodge (☎ 2775 1054; www.purruja.com; 4.5km south of Golfito; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$30/40/50; (P) ☎) A delightful Swiss-Tica couple run this secluded lodge, which is home to five simple but sparkling cabins that have all of the necessary comforts. The tranquil and tree-filled grounds are renowned for bird sightings, and the personable owners can organize several unique tours throughout the area.



Las Gaviotas Hotel (☎ 2775 0062; www.resortlasgaviotas.com; s/d/tr/q US\$50/60/70/80; (P) (♿) (♿) (♿)) The classiest place to stay in Golfito proper is this mini-resort, complete with stucco cabins set amid a lovely tropical garden. Here, you can pass the time in Golfito by sipping rum on your private porch or doing a few laps in the inviting pool.

Samoa del Sur (☎ 2775 0233, 2775 0264; www.samoa.delsur.com; r from US\$60, RV US\$10; (P) (♿) (♿) (♿)) This French-run facility offers handsome lodgings in 14 spacious rooms that are outfitted with tiled floors and stylish wood furniture. The bar is a popular spot in the evenings, when guests congregate to play pool or darts. The kiddies, meanwhile, seem content to pass the time in the swimming pool, play area and (on rainy days) the onsite shell museum.

Hotel Sierra (☎ 2775 0666, 2775 0336; www.hotel.sierra.com; s/d US\$60/70; (P) (♿) (♿) (♿)) Appropriate to its location in the *Zona Americana*, this place feels like an American-style motor lodge, though its efficiency and sterility shouldn't deter you from staying here. Far removed from the grit and grime of Golfito, the Hotel Sierra is a mini-island where you can pass the night in relative ease, especially since there is a good restaurant and a small casino on site.

Big Thunder B&B (☎ 2775 9191; www.bigthunder.bedandbreakfast.com; opposite Muelle de Golfito; d from US\$75; (P) (♿) (♿) (♿)) Colorful depictions of marlin and sailfish adorn the walls of this upscale B&B, which is a pleasant alternative to the more anonymous resorts in town. Backed by the forested hills of the reserve, the property was formerly the home of a banana manager. Six very spacious rooms are equipped with two double beds, a fridge and coffeemaker, and a huge hot-water bathroom.

Eating & Drinking

Most of the midrange hotels have restaurants and bars onsite.

Restaurant Hai Pin (dishes US\$3-7) When you tire of *gallo pinto*, you can change it up with some Chinese food. This popular open-air restaurant enjoys views of the main drag, which certainly offers up some interesting people-watching given the nature of the town.

Restaurante Buenos Días (opposite the Muellecito; meals US\$5-7; ☎ 6am-10pm) Rare is the visitor who passes through Golfito without stopping at this cheerful spot opposite the Muellecito. Brightly colored booths, bilingual menus and super convenient location ensure a con-

stant stream of guests – whether for an early breakfast, a typical Tico *casado* or a good old-fashioned burger.

Rancho Grande (dishes US\$5-12) About 3km south of Golfito, this rustic, thatch-roof place serves country-style Tico food cooked over a wood stove. Margarita, the Tica owner, is famous for her *patacones* (fried plantain chips). Her hours are erratic, so stop in during the day to let her know you're coming for dinner.

8° Latitude (dishes US\$9-15) Northwest of the soccer field, this popular expat bar is frequented by Americans seriously into their sportfishing. Its laidback and friendly atmosphere makes it the perfect place to tinkle a few and listen to fish tales.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport is 4km north of the town center near the duty-free zone. **NatureAir** (www.natureair.com) and **Sansa** (www.sansa.com) have daily flights to/from San José (one-way tickets are approximately US\$100).

Alfa Romeo Aero Taxi (☎ 2775 1515) has light aircraft (three and five passengers) for charter flights to Puerto Jiménez, Carate, Drake, Sirena, Palmar Sur, Quepos and Limón. Prices are dependant on the number of passengers, so it's best to try to organize a larger group if you're considering this option.

BOAT

There are two main boat docks for passenger service: the Muellecito is the main dock in the southern part of town. There is a smaller dock north of the Muelle Bananero (opposite the ICE building) where you'll find the **Asociación de Boteros** (Abocap; ☎ 2775 0357), an association of water taxis that can provide service anywhere in the Golfo Dulce area.

Two passenger ferries travel to Puerto Jiménez from the Muellecito (US\$2, 1½ hours), departing at 11:30am and 1:30pm daily. The boat taxi for Zancudo (US\$4, 45 minutes) departs from the dock at Samoa del Sur at noon, Monday through Saturday. The return trip is at 7:30am the next day (except Sunday). Water taxis to Playa Cacao depart from the Abocap dock (though you can get boatmen to take you from the Muellecito as well) for US\$2 per person.

Note that the times listed above may change.

A better option than chugging away on the ferries to Puerto Jiménez is to hire a private water taxi to shuttle you across the bay. You'll have to negotiate, but prices are generally reasonable given that you won't have to rely on the ferry. Waters in the Golfo Dulce are sheltered and generally calm, but it's still best if you feel comfortable with both your captain and ship.

If you're staying at any of the coastal lodges north of Golfito and you've made prior arrangements for transportation, the lodge will send a boat to pick you up at the docks. In the event that your boat doesn't arrive, simply give the name of the lodge to any of the boat captains, and they should be able to get you where you're going.

BUS

Most buses stop at the depot in front of the Muellecito.

Paso Canoas, Panamanian border US\$1.50, 2½ hours, departs hourly.

Neily US\$1.25, 1½ hours, departs hourly from 6am to 7pm.

Pavones US\$2, three hours, 10am and 3pm. This service may be affected by road and weather conditions, especially in the rainy season.

San José, via San Isidro (Tracopa) US\$8.50, seven hours, departs from the terminal near Muelle Bananero at 5am and 1:30pm.

Zancudo US\$2, three hours, departs 1:30pm.

Getting Around

City buses and collective taxis travel up and down the main road of Golfito. Although the payment system seems incomprehensible to anyone else but the locals, it shouldn't cost you more than a few coins.

PARQUE NACIONAL PIEDRAS BLANCAS

Formerly known as Parque Nacional Esquinas, this national park was established in 1992 as an extension of Corcovado. Currently, Piedras Blancas or 'White Rocks' covers an area of 12,000 hectares of undisturbed tropical primary rain forest, as well as 2000 hectares of secondary forests, pasture land and coastal cliffs and beaches.

As one of the last remaining stretches of lowland rain forest on the Pacific, Piedras Blancas is also home to a vast array of flora and fauna. According to a study conducted at the biological station at Gamba, the biodiversity of trees in Piedras Blancas is the densest in all of Costa Rica, even surpassing Corcovado.

Orientation & Information

Parque Nacional Piedras Blancas borders the Refugio Nacional Fauna Silvestre Golfito in the east. In the west, the Reserva Forestal de Golfo Dulce connects Piedras Blancas with Corcovado, forming an important biological corridor for resident wildlife, especially large mammals and predators that cover vast areas. Unfortunately, the forests around Rincón are threatened by illegal logging, jeopardizing this route.

Parque Nacional Piedras Blancas does not yet have facilities for visitors. However, it is possible to access the park from the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge in Gamba, as well as any of the coastal lodges north of Golfito (see p436).

Wildlife-Watching

Because Piedras Blancas is so remote and so little visited, it is the site for several ongoing animal projects, including the re-introduction of scarlet macaws with the hopes of establishing a self-sustaining population, as well as the re-integration of wild cats like ocelot and margay, which were confiscated from private homes. Look for all of the wildlife that you might see in Corcovado: all five big cats and all four species of monkeys, herds of collared and white-lipped peccary, crocodiles, various species of poison-dart frogs (including the endemic Golfo Dulce dart frog) and more than 330 species of bird.

Sleeping

The **Esquinas Rainforest Lodge** (☎ 2775 0140, 2775 0901; www.esquinaslodge.com; Gamba; s/d/tr incl meals US\$135/210/255; (P) (♿) (♿)) was founded by the nonprofit Rainforest for the Austrians, which was also vital in the establishment of Piedras Blancas as a national park. Now, surrounded by the primary and secondary rain forest of the park, Esquinas is integrally connected with the community of Gamba, employing local workers and reinvesting profits in community projects. Accommodations at Esquinas Lodge are in spacious, high-ceilinged cabins with ceiling fans and private porches. The lodge's extensive grounds comprise a network of well-marked trails and a welcoming stream-fed pool. Gamba is 8km north of Golfito and 6km south of the Interamericana.

Getting There & Away

Piedras Blancas is best accessed from the Equinas Rainforest Lodge, which has an extensive trail network onsite and can easily arrange guided hikes deeper into the park. If you don't have your own transportation, any bus heading north from Golfito can drop you off at the lodge.

If you're staying at any of the coastal lodges north of Golfito (see right), you can inquire about transportation to/from the park as well as guided hikes into the interior.

PLAYAS SAN JOSECITO, NICUESA & CATIVO

The northeastern shore of the Golfo Dulce is defined by idyllic deserted beaches, backed by the pristine rain forest of Parque Nacional Piedras Blancas. The appeal of this area is only enhanced by its inaccessibility: part of the charm is that very few people make it to this untouched corner of Costa Rica. If you're looking for a romantic retreat or a secluded getaway, all of the lodges along this stretch of coastline are completely isolated and serve as perfect spots for quiet reflection.

Sights

CASA DE ORQUÍDEAS

This private **botanical garden** (Playa San Josecito; admission & tour US\$5; ☎ tours 8:30am Sat-Thu), surrounded on three sides by primary rain forest, is a veritable Eden. The garden's plants have been lovingly collected and tended by Ron and Trudy MacAllister, who have lived in this remote region since the 1970s. Self-taught botanists, they've amassed a wonderful collection of tropical fruit trees, bromeliads, cycads, palms, heliconias, ornamental plants and more than 100 varieties of orchid, after which their garden is named.

The two-hour guided tours stimulate all of the senses: chew on a 'magic' seed that makes lemons taste sweet; smell vanilla beans; see insects trapped in bromeliad pools; or touch ginger in its flower. Casa de Orquídeas is at the west end of Playa San Josecito and can be reached from the lodges on that beach by foot. Otherwise, it's accessible only by boat; **Land Sea Tours** (☎ 2775 1614; www.realestate-costarica.info) in Golfito can make these arrangements.

Activities

The beaches along this stretch are excellent for swimming, snorkeling and sunning.

Lodges also provide kayaks for maritime exploration. Hiking and wildlife-watching opportunities are virtually unlimited, as the lodges provide direct access to the wilds of Piedras Blancas. Miles of trails lead to secluded beaches, cascading waterfalls and other undiscovered attractions.

Sleeping

If you're planning on staying at any of the lodges listed here, advanced reservations via the internet are strongly recommended, especially since it can be difficult to contact them by phone.

All of these lodges are extremely isolated and are all accessible only by boat – you can expect a beach landing, so make sure you're wearing the right kind of shoes! Prices include three meals per day and transportation to/from either Golfito or Puerto Jiménez.

All of the lodges here are also self-sufficient and environmentally sustainable, so you can get a good night's rest while feeling good about the planet.

Dolphin Quest (☎ 2775 8630, 2775 0373; www.dolphinquestcostarica.com; Playa San Josecito; s/d camping US\$30/55, cabins US\$60/100, houses US\$70/120) This jungle lodge offers as much privacy as a mile of beach and 280 hectares of mountainous rain forest can offer. Three round, thatch-roof cabins and one large house are spread out around two hectares of landscaped grounds. Meals – featuring many organic ingredients from the garden – are served communally in an open-air pavilion near the shore. Access to many miles of trails is free after an introductory tour outlining the beauties (and dangers) of the forest.

Golfo Dulce Lodge (☎ 8821 5398; www.golfodulce.lodge.com; Playa San Josecito; standard/deluxe 4-day package per person from US\$285/315; ☎) Set back from the rocky beach, this Swiss-owned place is on the edge of a 275-hectare property, much of which is primary rain forest. The owners are clued in about local flora and fauna, dedicating their efforts to a nearby wildcat rehabilitation project. The five deluxe units are individual wooden cabins, each with a large veranda containing a rocking chair and hammock; three standard adjoining rooms with smaller verandas surround the spring-fed pool.

Playa Nicuesa Rain Forest Lodge (☎ 2735 5237, in the USA 866-348 7610; www.nicuesalodge.com; Playa Nicuesa; guesthouses/cabins per person US\$170/190) Nestled into a 65-hectare private rain forest reserve north

of Casa de Orquídeas, this lodge is barely visible from the water (though its dock gives it away). The rustic, natural accommodations are beautifully decorated with canopied beds and indigenous textile spreads; private hot-water bathrooms have garden showers. Meals are served in a thatched rancho, featuring a sparkling, polished wood bar. Electricity is provided by solar power, but the lodge usually uses candlelight to conserve energy and enhance the romantic atmosphere.

Rainbow Adventures Lodge (☎ in the US 503-297 2682; www.rainbowcostarica.com; Playa Cativo; s/d from US\$235/355; ☎) The rustic appearance of the wide wood balconies adorning this lodge belies the elegance within: handmade furniture, silk rugs, early-20th-century antiques and fresh flowers make this a special place. In the 1st-floor library, guests are welcome to relax and peruse one of thousands of natural history publications. Upstairs, the rooms are partially exposed to the elements (but protected by mosquito nets) to allow unimpeded views of the rain forest, beach and gulf.

Getting There & Away

All of the lodges offer boat transportation from Puerto Jiménez and/or Golfito with prior arrangements, though you can always grab a water taxi if plans go awry.

ZANCUDO

Occupying a slender finger of land that juts into the Golfo Dulce, the tiny village of Zancudo is about as laidback of a beach destination as you'll find in Costa Rica. On the west side of town, gentle, warm Pacific waters lap up onto black sands, and seeing another person on the beach means it's crowded. On the east side, a tangle of mangrove swamps attracts birds, crocodiles and plenty of fish, which in turn attract fishers hoping to reel them in. Unlike nearby Pavones, which is slowly developing as a surfing destination, Zancudo is content to remain a far-flung village in a far-flung corner of Costa Rica.

Orientation & Information

Zancudo consists of one dirt road, which leads from the boat dock in the north, past the lodges that are strung along the shore, and out of town south toward Pavones.

The largest shop in town is the **Super Bellavista** (opposite Cabinas Tío Froylan), where there is also a public phone. **Oceano** (☎ 2776 0921;

www.oceanacabinas.com) offers internet access. There is no bank in town and very few places accept credit cards, so bring your cash from Golfito.

Zancudo is a popular destination for Ticos, especially during the annual **Fishing & Blues Festival** held in early February.

Activities

The main activities at Zancudo are undoubtedly swinging on hammocks, strolling on the beach and swimming in the aqua blue waters of the Golfo Dulce. Here, the surf is gentle, and at night the water sometimes sparkles with bioluminescence – tiny phosphorescent marine plants and plankton that light up if you sweep a hand through the water. The effect is like underwater fireflies.

The **mangrove swamps** offer plenty of opportunities for exploration: birdlife is prolific, while other animals such as crocodile, caiman, monkey and sloth are also frequently spotted. The boat ride from Golfito gives a glimpse of these waters, but you also paddle them yourself: rent kayaks from any of the accommodation listings following.

Zancudo is a base for inshore and offshore fishing, river fishing (mangrove snapper, snook and corbina) and fly fishing. The best **sportfishing** is from December to May for sailfish and May to September for snook, though many species bite year-round. Trips are best organized through either outfitters in Golfito (see p433) or Roy's Zancudo Lodge (p438).

Sleeping & Eating

Cabinas Tío Froylan (☎ 2776 0128; r per person from US\$9; ☎) Plain and cheap whitewashed rooms with fans and private cold showers attract a loyal Tico following, especially since they're the cheapest accommodation in town. There's a shady patio, beach access and an attached restaurant and disco with a pool table. Don't expect any quiet nights here, especially when the disco is pounding.

Cabinas Sol y Mar (☎ 2776 0014; www.zancudo.com; cabins US\$20-50; ☎) This popular place offers lodging options for all budgets: smallish economy dwellings that are further from the water, larger standard units with a shared terrace overlooking the beach, and private, deluxe units with fancy tile showers and unobstructed ocean views. Even if you're not staying here, the open-air restaurant and thatched bar is a Zancudo favorite.

MARSHALL & ANGELA MCCARTHY ON THE FUTURE OF GOLFO DULCE

Marshall and Angela McCarthy, the owners and managers of Cabinas La Ponderosa in Pavones (see p440), have respectively spent 19 and 11 years living in Golfo Dulce. Over a hearty breakfast of eggs and potatoes, Marshall and Angela shared their thoughts on the past, present and future of their adopted home.

What was it about this remote corner of the country that made you both want to settle here?

Marshall: Having grown up in the cities throughout North and South America, I immediately fell in love with the nature here. There is so much open space here, and instead of clutter and congestion, you have empty beaches and thick jungles. When I first arrived, Costa Rica was off the tourist map, and I could have easily chosen any part of the country to settle in. However, I chose Golfo Dulce because it was, and still is, the most virgin corner of the country.

Angela: I've traveled throughout all of Central America, but I chose Costa Rica specifically because everything here is so accessible. Even in a place as remote as Golfo Dulce, you literally have the beach, the mountains and the rain forest on your doorstep. Also, I just love the way this place smells! After the rains have fallen, the air here is heavy with the scent of the jungle. It's difficult to describe, but once you spend time here, it's impossible to forget.

Why do you think it is that Golfo Dulce has been spared from hasty development?

Angela: People have always been attracted to Golfo Dulce because of its nature, and fortunately the local government is well attuned to this reality. In fact, tourism officials are actually marketing the pristine beauty of the region, which is attracting the right types of foreign investment. Here in Golfo Dulce, the product is the environment, so the impetus is for developers is to keep everything green.

Cabinas Los Cocos (☎ 2776 0012; www.loscocos.com; cabins from US\$50; 📍) This unique beach-front lodge is home to two historic cabins that used to be banana company homes in Palmar but were transported to Zancudo, reassembled and completely refurbished. The other two more spacious cabins are also charming, with loft sleeping areas under palm frond roofs.

Oceano (☎ 2776 0921; www.oceanocabinas.com; s/d US\$60/70; 📍) With its back to the beach, this friendly little Canadian-run inn has just two rooms, both spacious and airy with wood-beamed ceilings, tile bathrooms and quaint details like throw pillows and folk art. The open-air restaurant is also inviting for dinner or drinks, especially if the sea has been kind to the local fishers.

Roy's Zancudo Lodge (☎ 2776 0008; www.royszancudolodge.com; 4- to 7-day packages per person from US\$2395; 📍 🚗 🚚 🚚) North of the dock you'll find the most established lodge in Zancudo, which caters to a faithful clientele of anglers. The highlight of staying here is clearly the world-class fishing in Golfo Dulce, though the huge pool overlooking the ocean and the luxurious hot tub nearby certainly add a nice touch to this sophisticated lodge.

Getting There & Away BOAT

The boat dock is near the north end of the beach on the inland, estuary side. A water taxi to Golfito (US\$4) departs from this dock at 7am, returning at noon, Monday through Saturday. Inquire locally, however, as times are subject to change, though you can always find a local boat captain willing to take you for a negotiable price.

BUS

A bus to Neily leaves from the *pulperia* near the dock at 5:30am (US\$2, three hours). The bus for Golfito (US\$2) leaves at 5am for the three-hour trip, with a ferry transfer at the Río Coto Colorado. Service is erratic in the wet season, so inquire before setting out.

CAR

It's possible to drive to Golfito by taking the road south of Río Claro for about 10km. Turn left at the Rodeo Bar and go another 10km to the Río Coto Colorado ferry, which carries three vehicles (US\$1.25 per car) and runs all day except during the lowest tides. From there, 30km of dirt road gets you to Golfito. To get to Pavones, take a right at

Marshall: Because the local government has a strict regulatory and development plan, this municipality is growing a lot slower than others. As a direct result, wealthy foreigners who want to come down here and build an enormous condo project or a sprawling resort hotel face intense scrutiny, and eventually decide to invest elsewhere.

Do you think that Golfo Dulce attracts a certain type of person?

Marshall: Simply put, Golfo Dulce is old Costa Rica. The beauty of this area is that it's overgrown and sparsely populated, which tends to attract more educated people who are aware of the broader environmental picture. For the most part, tourists and concerned locals such as ourselves are extremely conscientious about the saving the forest, and are passionate about preserving the natural beauty of the gulf.

Angela: People are attracted to the region by big wildlife and even bigger trees. Although much of Costa Rica is packaged for tourist consumption, the rain forest in Golfo Dulce is as real as it gets. The kind of people who come down here are the kind of people who want to be in the jungle. Almost everyone down here is extremely sensitive to development, and the last thing we want is for the peninsula to develop along the same lines as Cancún.

Are you optimistic about the future of Golfo Dulce?

Angela: Development may be inevitable, but I am optimistic because the market is demanding sustainability. People are coming to the region because they want to see green, and in the end, I believe that developers must always keep this market force in mind.

Marshall: This region is home to one of the last rain forests on the planet, and it is just something that we need to protect. It is a special place, and its value is too much to destroy, though fortunately people are finally starting to catch on to this fact.

the first major intersection, instead of a left. A 4WD is necessary in the rainy season.

PAVONES

Home to what is reportedly the longest left-hand break on the planet, Pavones is a legendary destination for surfers the world over. Although the village remains relatively off the beaten path, both foreigners and Ticos are transforming Pavones from a relative backwater into a hip and happening hot spot. Fortunately, however, development is progressing slowly and sustainably, which means that the palm-lined streets are still not paved, the pace of life is slow and the overall atmosphere remains tranquil.

As this is Costa Rica's southernmost point, you'll need to work hard to get down here. However, the journey is an adventure in its own right, especially since the best months for surfing coincide with the rainy season (think river crossings!).

Orientation & Information

The name Pavones is used to refer to both Playa Río Claro de Pavones and Punta Banco, which is 6km south.

The road into Pavones comes south and dead-ends at the Río Claro, which is where you'll find a small soccer field. About 200m to the east, a parallel road crosses the Río Claro and continues the 6km to Punta Banco.

Pavones has no bank or gas station, so make sure you have plenty of money and gas.

Sights

Set on a verdant hillside between Pavones and Punta Banco, the **Tiskita Jungle Lodge** (☎ in San José 2296 8125; www.tiskita-lodge.co.cr; guided hike US\$15) consists of 100 hectares of virgin forest and a huge orchard, which produces more than 100 varieties of tropical fruit from all over the world. Fourteen trails wind through surrounding rain forest, which contains waterfalls and freshwater pools suitable for swimming.

The combination of rain forest, fruit farm and coastline attracts a long list of birds. About 300 species have been recorded here. The fruit farm is particularly attractive to fruit-eating birds such as parrot and toucan. The forest is home to more reticent species such as yellow-billed cotinga, fiery-billed aracari, green honeycreeper and lattice-tailed trogon. Hikes are usually guided by the owners – personable conservationists and conversationalists

Peter and Elizabeth Aspinall – or their son. Reservations are recommended.

Activities

SURFING

Pavones is one of Costa Rica's most famous surf breaks: when the surf's up, this tiny beach town attracts hordes of international wave riders and Tico surfer dudes. Conditions are best with a southern swell, usually between April and October. However, because Pavones is inside Golfo Dulce, it is protected from many swells so surfers can go for weeks without seeing any waves.

Pavones has become legendary among surfers for its wicked long left. Some claim it is among the world's longest, offering a two- or three-minute ride on a good day. Legend has it that the wave passes so close to the Esquina del Mar Cantina that you can toss beers to surfers as they zip by. Be warned: when the wave is big, it can deposit surfers on the sharp rocks at the far end of the bay.

Locals know that when Pavones has nothing (or when it's too crowded), they can head south to **Punta Banco**, a reef break with decent rights and lefts. The best conditions are at mid or high tide, especially with swells from the south or west.

YOGA

Yoga Farm (www.yogafarmcostarica.org; dm per night US\$35, per week US\$175) This yoga retreat center, conservation project and working farm is a unique and welcome addition to Pavones. The price includes accommodation in simple and clean rooms with wood bunk beds; three vegetarian meals, prepared primarily with ingredients from the organic garden; and daily yoga classes, which take place in a fabulous open-air studio overlooking the ocean. This place is a 15-minute walk from Rancho Burica in Punta Banco: take the road going up the hill to the left, go through the first gate on the left and keep walking up the hill. Inquire about volunteer opportunities.

Sleeping

PLAYA RIO CLARO DE PAVONES

Cabinas Casa Olas (☎ 8826 3693; r per person from US\$10; Ⓟ) About 100m east of the soccer field, five cabins of varying sizes have wide-plank wood floors, brightly painted walls and an attractive unfinished feel that is appealing if you're one of the laidback surfer set. All

the rooms share access to outdoor kitchen facilities and a covered hammock lounge – an excellent chill-out zone.

Cabinas Mira Olas (☎ 8393 7742; www.miraolas.com; s/d from US\$25/45; Ⓟ) This 4.5-hectare farm is full of wildlife and fruit trees and cabins to suit all tastes. The 'rustic' cabin, incidentally, boasted the first flush toilet in Pavones, though it's quite different from the 'jungle deluxe', a beautiful, open-air lodging with a huge balcony and elegant cathedral ceiling. To find Mira Olas, turn off at the fishing boats and follow the signs up the steep hill: it's worth the climb!

Casa Siempre Domingo (☎ 8820 4709; d/tr US\$80/120; www.casa-domingo.com; Ⓟ) The most unbelievable views of the gulf are from this luxurious bed and breakfast, high in the hills above Pavones. Lodging at the 'Always Sunday House' is elegant and simple, with cathedral ceilings and a wonderful sense of openness. You'll need a car to get here: take the left fork at the Río Claro crossing.

Riviera (☎ 8823 5874; www.pavonesriviera.com; d US\$80, additional person US\$15; Ⓟ) The slickest option in Pavones proper is this clutch of exclusive villas, which have fully equipped kitchens, cool tile floors and attractive hardwood ceilings. Big shady porches overlook the landscaped gardens, which offer a degree of intimacy and privacy found at few other places in town.

PUNTA BANCO

Rancho Burica (www.ranchoburica.com; r per person US\$8-22; Ⓟ) Backpackers can't stop raving about this friendly and youthful Dutch-run outpost, which is literally the end of the road in Punta Banco. All rooms have bathrooms and fans, while the pricier ones have mosquito-netted beds and attractive wood furniture. Hammocks interspersed around the property offer ample opportunity for chilling out. Reservations are not accepted: 'just show up...like everyone else does.'

Cabinas La Ponderosa (☎ 8824 4145, in the USA 954-771 9166; www.cabinaslaponderosa.com; r per person with/without air-con US\$55/50; Ⓟ) Set on 6 lovely landscaped hectares, these cozy cabins are tenderly cared for by Marshall and Angela McCarthy, who have spent years living in their adopted home of Pavones (see p438). The common lounge offers all kinds of entertainment, including a ping-pong table and a massive video library, but the real appeal

of staying here is the warm hospitality of the McCarthys.

Sotavento (☎ 8391 3468; www.sotaventoplantana.com; houses US\$60-80; Ⓟ) These two tropical hardwood, furnished houses are set on a picturesque pepper and cacao plantation perched above Punta Banco. Casa Poinsetta and the larger Casa Vista Grande both have rustic, open-air architecture that takes advantage of the breeze and the views. The houses sleep six to eight people, so they are a great deal if you can get a pack of friends together to split costs. The place is managed by the personable American surfer Harry, who makes his own boards.

our pick Tiskita Jungle Lodge (☎ in San José 2296 8125; www.tiskita-lodge.co.cr; 2-/5-/7-night packages per person US\$735/1020/1120; Ⓟ Ⓢ Ⓣ) Set amidst extensive gardens and orchards, this lodge is arguably the most beautiful and intimate in all of Golfo Dulce. Accommodation is in a clutch of stunning wooden cabins accented by stone garden showers that allow you to freshen up while you go birding. Daily rates include fresh home-cooked meals and guided walks. Reservations must be made in advance as the lodge fills up quickly. Even if you're not spending the night here, stop by for a guided tour of the property (see p439).

Eating & Drinking

Esquina del Mar Cantina (dishes US\$3-6) A Pavones institution that has great views of the left break, this is where you should grab a drink after your last ride.

Café de la Suerte (dishes US\$4-8) Animal lovers and the health-conscious will appreciate this open-air vegetarian joint, which serves tropical-fruit smoothies and heart-healthy fare.

La Manta (dishes US\$4-15) The best dining in Pavones is at this airy rancho, which catches the breezes off the bay and offers an impressive variety of Mediterranean food.

Restaurante La Piña (dishes US\$5-10) Located in Punta Banco, this authentic Italian-run spot has authentic pastas and pizzas from the peninsula (Italy, not Osa).

Getting There & Away

Two daily buses go to Golfito (US\$2, three hours): the first leaves at 5:30am and departs from the end of the road at Rancho Burica (but you can pick it up at the bus stop opposite the Riviera); the second leaves at 12:30pm from the Esquina del Mar Cantina. Buses

from Golfito depart at 10am (to Pavones) and 3pm (to Punta Banco via Pavones) from the stop at the Muellecito.

A 4WD taxi will charge about US\$50 from Golfito, though you can also take a water taxi for about the same price. If you're driving, follow the directions to Zancudo and look for the signs to Pavones.

PARQUE NACIONAL ISLA DEL COCOS

In the opening minutes of the film *Jurassic Park*, a small helicopter swoops over and around a lushly forested island with dramatic tropical peaks descending straight into clear blue waters. That island is Isla del Cocos, and that scene turned Costa Rica's most remote national park into more than a figment of our collective imaginations.

Isla del Cocos is more than 500km southwest of the mainland in the eastern Pacific and is often referred to as the 'Costa Rican Galapagos.' Because of its remote nature, a unique ecosystem has evolved, earning the island the protective status of national park. More than 70 animal species (mainly insects) and 70 plant species are endemic, and more remain to be discovered. Birders also come here to see the colonies of seabirds, many of which only nest on Cocos.

The island's marine life is varied, with sea turtles, more than 18 species of coral, 57 types of crustacean, three types of dolphin, and tropical fish in abundance. Needless to say, the diving is excellent and is the main attraction of the island. Isla del Cocos also has more than a dozen dive sites and is famous for its huge schools of hundreds of scalloped hammerhead shark.

As it's the most far-flung corner of Costa Rica, you will certainly have to work to get out here, though few other destinations in the country are as exotic and visually stunning as Isla del Cocos. The island is also arguably the most pristine national park in the country and truly one of Costa Rica's great frontier destinations.

History

In 1526, Isla del Cocos was 'discovered' by Spanish explorer Joan Cabezas, though it wasn't noted on maps until its second 'discovery' by French cartographer Nicolas Desliens in 1541. In the centuries that followed, heavy rainfall attracted the attention of sailors, pirates and whalers, who frequently

NEW NATURAL WONDERS OF THE WORLD CANDIDATE: ISLA DEL COCOS

Although you may or may not have agreed with their choices, the **New 7 Wonders** (www.new7wonders.com) campaign made international headlines in 2007. From the statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro to the Taj Mahal in Agra, the New 7 Wonders campaign sought to modernize the list of departed ancient wonders – with the sole exception of the Great Pyramids at Giza of course!

Following the extraordinary success of its campaign, the Swiss foundation recently nominated 300 natural wonders of the world, which will be honed down to seven by popular vote in 2009. As this book went to press, Costa Rica's very own Isla del Cocos was proud to stand at number seven in the provisional ranking, just two behind Mount Everest!

Tourism officials in Costa Rica are ecstatic that this little known ecological wonder was given international recognition. Despite the fact that the island has been a Unesco World Heritage Site since 1967, few people know anything about Isla del Cocos – except for the fact that it was the location of the film *Jurassic Park*.

According to a published interview with Danny Gonzalez, the spokesperson for MarViva, the organization that protects the island: 'The island houses great nature and cultural riches. It's home to many endemic species and is, along with the islands of Coiba, Malpelo and the Galapagos, part of the East Pacific Tropical Marine Corridor, which allows the movement of many migratory marine species from North and South America.'

He continues: 'This nomination will also help people learn about serious problems that affect Isla del Cocos' marine ecosystems, such as illegal fishing, shark finning and other human activities that put pressure on natural resources. Protecting these resources is a big challenge, and that's why this year we will do our best to tell people about the importance of knowing about and contributing to the safeguarding of this heritage site.'

stopped by for fresh water, coconuts and fresh seafood.

Between the late 17th and early 19th century, Isla del Cocos became something of a way station for a band of pirates who supposedly hid countless treasures here. The most famous was the storied Treasure of Lima, which consisted of gold and silver ingots, gold laminae scavenged from church domes and a solid-gold, life-size sculpture of the Virgin Mary. Isla del Cocos is so renowned for its hidden treasures that authors have speculated it was the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Nonetheless, more than 500 treasure-hunting expeditions have found only failure.

In fact, in 1869 the government of Costa Rica organized its own official treasure hunt. No gold or jewels were discovered, but this expedition did result in Costa Rica's unfurling its flag and taking possession of the island, a treasure in itself.

Settlers arrived on the island in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, though their stay on Isla del Cocos was short-lived. However, they did leave behind domestic animals that have since converted into feral populations of pigs, goats, cats and rats.

Today it's the pigs that are the greatest threat to the unique species native to the island: they uproot vegetation, cause soil erosion and contribute to sedimentation around the island's coasts, which damages coral reefs.

Unregulated fishing also poses further, more ominous, threats, especially to populations of shark, tuna and billfish that get caught in logline sets. The Servicio de Parques Nacionales (Sinac) is aware of the problem, but sadly a lack of funding has made regulation of these illegal activities difficult, if not impossible.

Information

In order to protect the conservation status of the island, all visitors must apply for a permit at the **Área de Conservación de la Isla del Cocos** (☎ 2258 7350) in San José. However, unless you're sailing to the island in a private boat, most tour operators will make all of the necessary arrangements for you.

Park fees are US\$35 per person per day. On the island, there is also a ranger station, with staff surveillance stations at Wafer Bay and Chatham Bay. Drinking water is available, but there is no camping – visitors must spend the night on their boats.

Sights & Activities

Isla del Cocos is rugged and heavily forested, with the highest point at **Cerro Iglesias** (634m); a network of trails leads to a spectacular viewpoint. The island has two large bays with safe anchorages and sandy beaches: **Chatham** is located on the northeast side and **Wafer Bay** is on the northwest. Just off Cocos are a series of smaller basaltic rocks and islets, which constitute some of the best dive sites. **Isla Manuelita** is a prime spot, home to a wide array of fish, ray and eel. Shark also inhabit these waters, including huge schools of white tip shark and scalloped hammerhead, which are best spotted at night. **Dirty Rock** is another main attraction – a spectacular rock formation that harbors all kinds of sea creatures.

Tours

Even if you're normally a fiercely independent traveler, Cocos is one destination where you will have to join up with an organized tour. Although you may be tempted to visit

here on a private sailing vessel, you'll have an easier time getting the government to grant you access to the island's interior if you go with an operator.

The island is serviced by two boats, both of which operate from the Los Sueños Marina near the Marriott Beach & Golf Resort in Playa Herradura. On both tours you are permitted to hike around the island and go on wildlife tours, though you must return to the boat at night to sleep. Diving is the main thrust of any tour as the island is regarded as one of the world's premier dive destinations. Diving and food are included in the tour prices listed below, but daily park fees are not.

Okeanos Aggressor (☎ in the USA 866-653 2667, ext 196; www.okeanoscocosisland.com) Offers eight-day and 10-day land and sea expeditions with room for 21 from US\$2695 per person.

Undersea Hunter (☎ 2228 6613, in the USA 800-203 2120; www.underseahunter.com) Offers 10-day and 12-day land and sea expeditions using either their 14- or 18-passenger boat from US\$3640.

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