

Southern Costa Rica



In southern Costa Rica, the Cordillera de Talamanca descends dramatically into agricultural lowlands that are carpeted with sprawling plantations of coffee beans, bananas and African palms. Here, *campesinos* (farmers) work their familial lands, maintaining an agricultural tradition that has been passed on through the generations. While the rest of Costa Rica adapts to the recent onslaught of package tourism and soaring foreign investment, life in the southern zone remains constant, much as it has for centuries.

In a country where little pre-Columbian influence remains, southern Costa Rica is where you'll find the most pronounced indigenous presence. Largely confined to private reservations, the region is home to large populations of Bribri, Cabécar and Boruca, who are largely succeeding in maintaining their traditions while the rest of the country races toward globalization.

Costa Rica's well-trodden gringo trail seems to have bypassed the southern zone, though this isn't to say that the region doesn't have any tourist appeal. On the contrary, southern Costa Rica is home to the country's single largest swath of protected land, namely Parque Internacional La Amistad. Virtually unexplored, this national park extends across the border into Panama and is one of Central America's last true wilderness areas.

And while Monteverde is the country's most iconic cloud forest, southern Costa Rica offers many equally enticing opportunities to explore this mystical habitat. If you harbor any hope of spotting the elusive resplendent quetzal, you can start by looking in the cloud forest in Parque Nacional Los Quetzales. Or, if you want to stand on top of the Cordillera Central, you can climb the cloudcapped heights of Cerro Chirripó (3820m), Costa Rica's highest peak.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wondering why you're the only one around in the pristine but under-touristed **Parque Internacional La Amistad** (p389)
- Catching a glimpse of the Maya bird of paradise in **Parque Nacional Los Quetzales** (p372)
- Trekking to the top of Costa Rica's highest summit at **Cerro Chirripó** (p378)
- Getting a history lesson at the vibrant Fiesta de los Diablitos at the **Reserva Indígena Boruca** (p382)
- Following the footsteps of one of Costa Rica's greatest ornithologists at **Los Cusingos Bird Sanctuary** (p376)



History

Upon arriving in Costa Rica, the Spanish *conquistadores* (conquerors) began to level tribal society, plunder its meager wealth and enslave indigenous survivors. The few outposts that did survive were later subjugated by Catholic missionaries, who wiped out traditional beliefs in an attempt to bring 'civilization' to the region.

Even as late as the 20th century, indigenous groups were kept on the fringes and were actively excluded from the Spanish-dominated society. In fact, citizenship was not granted to the indigenous population until 1949 and reservations were not organized until 1977.

In the last three decades, indigenous groups have been allowed to engage in their traditional languages and customs. However, an increasing number of indigenous youths are finding themselves unable to subsist on their ancestral lands, and are instead choosing to shed their native ways in favor of employment in the agricultural sector.

Climate

Given its geographic diversity, the climate varies considerably throughout the southern zone. In the lowlands, it remains hot and humid year-round, with marked rainfall from mid-April through mid-December. In the highlands however, you can expect much cooler temperatures year-round (getting as low as 40°F at times).

Parks & Reserves

The parks and reserves of southern Costa Rica offer great opportunities for wildlife-watching and hiking.

Cloudbridge Nature Preserve (p377) A tiny private reserve on the slopes of Cerro Chirripó that is operated by two New Yorkers, and is the site of an ongoing reforestation project.

Parque Internacional La Amistad (p389) This enormous bi-national park is shared with Panama and protects a biological corridor of incredible ecological significance.

Parque Nacional Chirripó (p378) Home to Costa Rica's highest and most famous peak, which offers views of both the Pacific and the Caribbean on a clear day.

Parque Nacional Los Quetzales (p372) Costa Rica's newest national park is extremely rich in birdlife and offers a good chance of spotting the quetzal in all of its resplendent glory.

Reserva Biológica Dúrika (p382) This private reserve within Parque Internacional La Amistad is home to an

independent, sustainable community that is committed to conservation.

Getting There & Around

The best way to explore the peninsula in depth is with your own form of private transportation, though you will have to leave your wheels behind if you plan on trekking through La Amistad or scaling Chirripó. Note that this chapter refers to the numbered posts along the Interamericana, which count the kilometers from San José.

Major towns in the southern zone are serviced by regular buses, though public transportation can get sporadic once you leave these major hubs.

Both **NatureAir** (www.natureair.com) and **Sansa** (www.sansa.com) service Palmar, which is a jumping off point for the Osa peninsula. Prices vary according to season and availability, but usually you can expect to pay a little less than US\$75 for a flight from San José or Liberia.

THE ROAD TO CHIRRIPO

Scaling the lofty heights of Chirripó is undoubtedly the highlight of any trip into the southern zone, though the road to the mountain passes through stunning countryside of redolent coffee plantations and cool cloud forests. The first major area of interest is the Zona Santa or 'Saint's Zone,' a collection of highland villages that famously bear sainted names: San Pablo de León Cortés, Santa María de Dota, San Marcos de Tarrazú, San Cristóbal Sur and San Gerardo de Dota. Further south in the Valle de El General, family-run fincas dot the fertile valley, though the action tends to centre on San Isidro de El General, southern Costa Rica's largest town and major transportation hub.

SANTA MARÍA & VALLE DE DOTA

Centered on a green, grassy soccer field and surrounded by lavish plantations, Santa María de Dota is a charming Tico (Costa Rican) town that merits at least a quick stop. As you'd imagine, coffee production is the economic lifeblood of Santa María, especially since the Coopodota processing facility employs much of the town.

Coopodota (☎ 2541 2828; www.coopodota.com) can give you the complete picture of where

your caffeine fix comes from: the Coffee Experience is a half-day tour (US\$12) that takes guests to an organic coffee farm, visits the production facility and – most importantly – offers tastings of several different kinds of coffee. The co-founder and manager of the café previously won third place in a national barista competition and is locally famous for her signature coffee drinks.

A true tree-hugger's paradise, **Actividades Arboreales** (☎ 8352 0597; www.treewalking.com; Providencia de Dota; 6hr tour for 2 people US\$60) offers all sorts of adventures in the treetops. The farm, La Cabana, is rigged with treetop platforms, linked by suspension bridges and slack lines, creating a 'canopy maze.' For the purist, this place is also great for good old-fashioned tree climbing (or not so old-fashioned, like climbing up the *inside* of a 30m strangler fig). The price includes transportation from Copey de Dota or Ojo del Agua. Otherwise, if you have your own vehicle, drive east from Santa María and continue 12km past El Toucanet Lodge. Coming from the south, turn off the Interamericana at Ojo del Agua; drive about 10km south and west.

A great place to spend the night is at **El Toucanet Lodge** (☎ 2541 3131; www.eltoucanet.com; Copey de Dota; s/d incl breakfast US\$50/65; (P)) a lovely country lodge that is perched at 1850m and offers seven rustic hardwood cabins with wonderful views of Valle de Dota. The valley and the surrounding cloud forest are excellent for birding and co-owner Gary leads daily tours – fruit birds are commonly sighted, as well as the resplendent quetzal and the namesake toucanet. The Flintstones-style hot tub is an excellent place to recover from the day's activities. To reach the lodge, drive east from Santa María or turn off the Interamericana at Km 58.

Located in the center of Santa María, **Artesanías Café Amanecer** (☎ 2541 1616; ☹ sporadic) has homemade ice cream and specialty coffee drinks, as well as some handicrafts made by the local women's association. It's a treat if you happen to be here when it's open.

If you are traveling south on the Interamericana, **Los Santos Café** (Interamericana Km 52; ☹ 10:30am-5:30pm), is a convenient place to stop and sample the fruits of the region, including fancy espresso drinks. Incidentally, the gas station at this intersection is the last place to fill your tank before San Isidro de El General.

Getting There & Away

Most drivers take the Interamericana south to Empalme, almost 30km from Cartago. Just south of the station a signed turnoff leads west on a paved road and turns to Santa María de Dota (10km away), San Marcos de Tarrazú (7km beyond) and San Pablo (4km further). Six daily buses (US\$2, 2½ hours) connect these towns to San José.

SAN GERARDO DE DOTA

Birders flock to this small town, no pun intended – the area surrounding San Gerardo de Dota is famed for attracting high-altitude species. In fact, the elusive quetzal is such a celebrity in these parts that the government recently named a national park after him, Parque Nacional Los Quetzales. Indeed, San Gerardo is the easiest access point to Costa Rica's newest national park – for more information, see p372.

History

The banks of the Río Savegre were long protected by the steep flanks of the Talamanca mountains, prohibiting settlement in this area. It was not until 1952 that Efraín Chacón and his brothers – driven by drought – made their way south from Copey de Dota and established a farm on the western slopes of Cerro de la Muerte – which would become the village of San Gerardo.

In the early days, they planted *cubano* beans, a typical subsistence crop in this region. That's as far as the Chacón family followed the typical trend, however. Eschewing coffee (which would not thrive at these high altitudes) and beef cattle (which would destroy the surrounding cloud forest), the Chacón family instead raised dairy cattle.

Later, they supplemented dairy-farm activity by stocking their streams with trout and planting apple orchards and other fruit trees. The former had the effect of attracting anglers from San José, while the latter (along with the abundant wild avocado trees) attracted the resplendent quetzal, in turn attracting birders.

As tourism in Costa Rica flourished, so did San Gerardo. Today, this little farming village has become famous for highland birding. Quetzals are spotted frequently every April and May (during breeding season) and are fairly common throughout the rest of the year.

SOUTHERN COSTA RICA



Activities

SPORTFISHING

The trout fishing in the Río Savegre is excellent: May and June is the time for fly-fishing and December to March for lure-fishing (see boxed text, p372 for more information). And the Chacón family, now several generations deep, operates the well-established Savegre Hotel de Montaña (see below) on the grounds of their productive farm, while other facilities have sprung up around the village.

BIRD-WATCHING & HIKING

The best place to go birding and hiking in the area is Parque Nacional Los Quetzales. Unfortunately there are no information facilities for tourists in the park, so inquire at the lodges in San Gerardo before you set out. For information on the park, see p372.

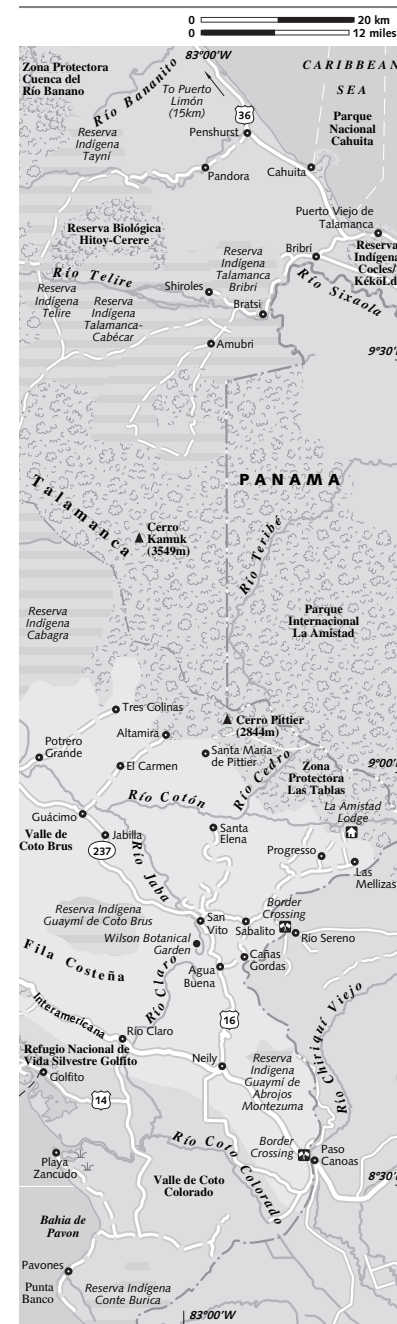
Sleeping & Eating

All of the following places offer access to the Parque Nacional Los Quetzales and are along the road from the Interamericana.

Ranchos La Isla & Restaurant Los Lagos (☎ 2740 1038; camping per person US\$4; **P**) If you're heading to Chirripó then you're probably prepared to do a little bit of camping, which is a good thing as this attractive property offers a handful of shady campsites alongside a small river. The accommodating Chinchilla family also go all out to make sure their guests are entertained by guiding hikes to nearby waterfalls in the hope of spotting the elusive quetzal. If you're looking for a hot meal (US\$3 to US\$5), the onsite restaurant is a modest affair serving up wholesome, country-style casados, or set meals.

our pick Dantica Cloud Forest Lodge (☎ 8352 2761; www.dantica.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$132/146; **P**) Definitely the slickest place in San Gerardo, if not the whole southern zone, this upscale lodge consists of beautiful natural wood and stone cabins that are bedecked with artwork from the owner's native Colombia. The kicker though is the wall of picture windows that provides extraordinary vistas over the cloud forest. A romantic breakfast is served each morning on your private terrace, which will most likely be frequented by countless species of tropical birds.

our pick Savegre Hotel de Montaña (☎ 2740 1028; www.savegre.co.cr; d/ste incl 3 meals US\$161/217; **P**) Set on a 160-hectare orchard and reserve, this justifiably famous lodge has been owned and



TALAMANCA TROUT FISHING

While most sportfishers flock to the coast for the thrill of the big catch, the mountain rivers of the Cordillera de Talamanca offer a different kind of fishing experience. The crystal-clear waters and the cool air of the cloud forest are a delightfully tranquil setting, and the fish – here, rainbow trout – are no less tasty.

Interestingly, the trout that populate these rivers are not endemic. Supposedly, they were first introduced to Central American rivers by the US military in Panama and the healthy fish made their way north into Costa Rican waters. The most popular spot for trout fishing is the Río Savegre, although the nearby Río Blanca and Río Dota also attract local anglers.

In order to maintain healthy populations, fishers are strongly encouraged to limit stream fishing to catch and release. If you want to take home your trout for dinner, fish in one of the local spring-fed ponds, which are well stocked with 30cm to 50cm trout. Success is guaranteed and you just pay for what you take home (about US\$4 per kilo). This is a great option for kids and folk with poor fishing karma.

Finca Madre Selva (☎ 2224 6388; Copey de Dota) A popular local fishing spot that is home to a well-stocked trout pond as well as hiking trails – good for a full day of fun.

Pesca Deportiva Río Blanca (☎ 2541 1818, 2541 1816; Copey de Dota) Near Santa María de Dota, this is another local spot that is popular among Tico families.

Ranchos La Isla (☎ 2740 1038; San Gerardo de Dota) Borrow equipment to fish in the river and ponds, then bring your catch back and have the staff fry it up for dinner.

Savegre Hotel de Montaña (☎ 2740 1028; San Gerardo de Dota) This lodge provides equipment and guides for fly-fishing in Río Savegre, or you can fish in the picturesque pond and pay for what you catch. See p371 for more info.

operated by the Chacón family since 1957. It's now something of a Costa Rican institution, especially among birders keen to catch a glimpse of the quetzal. Of course, this isn't a difficult proposition in these parts, especially since the edges of the grounds are lined with avocado trees, the favorite perch of the bird of paradise. If you have the cash to burn, the Savegre suites are gorgeous: wrought-iron chandeliers hang from the high wooden ceilings, while rich wooden furniture surrounds a stone fireplace.

La Comida Tipica Miriam (meals US\$3-6; 📍) One of the first places you will pass in San Gerardo (about 6km from the Interamericana) is the cozy house advertising *comida típica*, or 'typical meals.' Eating is almost like receiving a personal invitation to dine in a Tico home: the food is delicious and abundant and the hospitality even more so. Miriam also rents a few cabins (US\$30) in the woods behind the restaurant, which are a modest but comfortable place to spend a night or two.

Getting There & Away

The turnoff to San Gerardo de Dota is near Km 80 on the Interamericana. From here, the dirt road descends 8km to the village. The road is very steep: be careful if you're in an ordinary car. Buses between San José and

San Isidro de El General can drop you off at the turnoff.

PARQUE NACIONAL LOS QUETZALES

The park, formerly known as the Reserva Los Santos, was made official in 2005 in honor of the Maya bird of paradise that first put this region of Costa Rica on the tourist map. Spread along both banks of the Río Savegre, at an altitude of 2000m to 3000m, the park covers 5000 hectares of rain and cloud forest that lie along the slopes of the Cordillera de Talamanca.

The Río Savegre, which starts high up on the Cerro de la Muerte, feeds several mountain streams and glacial lakes at a range of altitudes before pouring into the Pacific near the coastal town of Savegre. Although it covers a relatively small area, this region is remarkably biodiverse – the Savegre watershed contains approximately 20% of all the registered bird species in Costa Rica.

As the park's new name implies, this area is extremely rich in birdlife – indeed the quetzal is only one of the many species that call this park home. Trogon, hummingbird, great tinamou and sooty robin are some bird favorites. In addition to the rare quetzal, the park is home to several other endangered species, including the jaguar, Baird's tapir, black guan and squirrel monkey.

While hiking through the higher altitudes, take notice of the fact that the flora is very different from what you will see in the low-land forests. The park, which is classified as montane and premontane forests (the latter being the second-most endangered life zone in Costa Rica), is home to massive oak trees and alpine plants.

The park does not have any facilities for tourists, although all of the lodges around San Gerardo de Dota offer hiking and birding tours. If you wish to explore on your own, follow the road to San Gerardo to its end, from where a trail will lead you through lush forest to a spectacular waterfall. With that said, it's worth inquiring locally for more specific directions before you set out as the going can get difficult in these parts.

CERRO DE LA MUERTE

Along the stretch between Empalme and San Isidro de El General, the highway passes the highest point along the Interamericana, the famed **Cerro de la Muerte** (3491m). The so-called 'Mountain of Death' received this moniker before the road was built, though the steep, fog-shrouded highway, which climbs into the clouds, is still considered one of the most dangerous in Costa Rica. When the fog clears however, this area offers exquisite panoramic views of the Cordillera de Talamanca – but only for a moment, as the fog undoubtedly rolls back in almost immediately.

Cerro de la Muerte also marks the northernmost extent of the *páramo*, a highland shrub and tussock grass habitat typical of the southern zone. This Andean-style landscape is extremely rich in wildlife and is home to many of the same species found in nearby Parque Nacional Chirripó (p378).

Orientation

The road itself is paved and smooth, but it twists and turns around the mountain, which can make overtaking treacherous and potentially life-ending. During the rainy season, landslides may partially or completely block the road. As in most places in rural Costa Rica, it's best to avoid driving at night.

This area is actually part of the Parque Nacional Tapantí-Macizo Cerro de la Muerte, which is easily accessible when traveling from the Central Valley. For more information, see p155.

Sleeping & Eating

All the lodges in this area offer access to hiking trails and opportunities for birding.

Iyök Ami (☎ 8387 2238, 2772 0222; www.ecotourism.co.cr/iyokami/index.htm; Interamericana Km 71; r per person US\$30-40; 📍) Meaning 'Mother Earth' in the Bribri language, Iyök Ami is a remote cloud-forest reserve (admission US\$5), rustic lodge and quaint coffee shop, all in one. Considering that everything is run by one Tica woman, this is an extremely impressive operation that is certainly worthy of your support. Guests also have access to 6km of trails that lead to a picturesque lake, as well as delicious homemade Tico-style meals (US\$10 for three meals a day).

Mirador Vista del Valle (☎ 8384 4685, 8836 6193; www.ecotourism.co.cr/vistadelvalle; Interamericana Km 119; s/d US\$41/47, extra person US\$12; 📍) Aptly named, the 'View of the Valley Lookout' boasts a windowed-restaurant (meals US\$3 to US\$6) that offers panoramic views that perfectly complement local specialties like fried trout fillet, and fresh-brewed coffee. Below the restaurant, ecofriendly cabins built entirely from cultivated wood are brightened by colorful indigenous tapestries. Guests can take advantage of nearly 11km of onsite trails that allow for excellent bird-watching.

Bosque del Tolomuco (☎ 8847 7207; www.bosquedeltolomuco.com; Interamericana Km 118; d incl breakfast US\$70; 📍 📍) Named for the sly tayra (tree otter) spotted on the grounds, this relative newcomer is run by a lovely, loquacious Canadian couple. There are four spacious, light-filled cabins, the most charming of which is the secluded 'Hummingbird Cabin.' The grounds offer 5km of hiking trails, ample opportunities to indulge in bird-watching and some magnificent views of Los Cruces. A made-to-order gourmet dinner is also available with advance notice.

Mirador de Quetzales (☎ 2771 8456; www.exploringcostarica.com/mirador/quetzales.html; Interamericana Km 70; cabin per person incl 2 meals US\$45; 📍) Commonly known as Eddie Serrano's farm, this excellent-value lodging option is located about 1km west of the Interamericana. Painted wood walls and colorful curtains brighten up the eight cozy cabins that line the farm's ridge (and electric heaters warm them up). Prices also include an early-morning 'quetzal walk' – these bright beauties reside in these forested hills year-round, but sightings are virtually guaranteed between November and April.

Getting There & Away

Frequent buses running between San José and San Isidro de El General can drop you off at any of the lodges listed p373.

SAN ISIDRO DE EL GENERAL

Considering that most settlements in the southern zone are mere mountain villages, it doesn't take much in these parts to be called a 'big city.' Indeed, with a population of only 45,000, San Isidro de El General is little more than a large town, though it does boast a western supermarket, a McDonald's and a surprising concentration of gas stations. As you'd imagine, there is little here to draw in the tourists, though residents of the southern zone can't help but flock to the bright city lights.

With that said, 'El General' is the region's largest population center and major transport hub, so it's likely that you'll pass through here at some point in your travels. If you do happen to get stuck here for longer than you intended, fret not as there are some interesting attractions in the surrounding area (see boxed text, p376). And, if it's any consolation, the women of San Isidro de El General are widely regarded as Costa Rica's finest – must be all that mountain air and fresh coffee!

Orientation

The heart of San Isidro is the network of narrow streets that are clustered around the recently renovated Parque Central. An uncharacteristic but impressive cathedral lords over the eastern end of this square.

Note that locals sometimes refer to San Isidro as Pérez – the surrounding county is Pérez Zeledón. Though labeled on the map, streets are poorly signed and everyone uses landmarks to orient themselves (see boxed text What's That Address?, p537).

Information

Banco Coopealianza Avenida 2 (btwn Calles Central & 1); Avenida 4 (btwn Calles 2 & 4) Both branches have 24-hour ATMs on the Cirrus network.

Brun@Net Café (☎ 2771 3235; Av Central btwn Calles Central & 1; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun)

BTC Internet (☎ 2771 3993; Av 2 btwn Calles Central & 1; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8:30am-9pm Mon-Fri, to 8pm Sat, 10am-4pm Sun)

Ciprotur (☎ 2770 9393; www.ecotourism.co.cr; Calle 4 btwn Avs 1 & 3; ☎ 7:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon

Sat) Tourist office with information about the southern Pacific region.

Clínica El Labrador (☎ 2771 7115, 2771 5354; Calle 1 btwn Avs 8 & 10) This medical service has private doctors in a variety of specialties.

Minae park service office (Sinac; ☎ 2771 3155; aclap@sinac.go.cr; Calle 2 btwn Avs 2 & 4; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) Dispenses a minimal amount of information about Parque Nacional Chirripó. Here is where you can make reservations for the mountaintop hostel at Chirripó – see p381 for details.

Post office (Calle 1 btwn Avs 6 & 8)

Selva Mar (☎ 2771 4582, 2771 4579; www.exploringcostarica.com; Calle 1 btwn Avs 2 & 4; ☎ 8am-noon & 1:30-6pm) Useful for booking area hotels and buying plane tickets. Also houses offices for Costa Rica Trekking Adventures.

Tours

Pieter Westra runs **Aratinga Tours** (☎ 2770 6324; www.aratinga-tours.com) and specializes in bird tours in his native Dutch, but he is fluent in English, Spanish and many dialects of bird. His website provides an excellent introduction to birding in Costa Rica. It is based at Talari Mountain Lodge (opposite).

Sleeping IN TOWN

Hotel Chirripó (☎ 2771 0529; Av 2 btwn Calles Central & 1; s/d/tr/q from US\$15/20/25/30; (P)) Popular with discerning budget travelers, here you'll find bare, whitewashed rooms that are utterly barren but surprisingly dirt- and grime-free. A few flowering plants and a festive mural in the lobby brighten otherwise stark surroundings, though you'll sleep easy at night knowing that you can pinch a few pennies and keep on traveling for a little while longer.

Hotel Los Crestones (☎ 2770 1200, 2770 1500; Calle Central at Av 14; s/d US\$30/40, with air-con US\$40/45, extra person US\$10; (P) (☎)) This sharp motor court is decked with blooming flowerboxes and climbing vines outside, which is indeed a welcome sight to the road-weary traveler. Inside, functional rooms feature modern furnishings and fixtures, which are made all the better by the attentive staff that keep this place running efficiently.

Hotel Diamante Real (☎ 2770 6230; cnr Av 3 & Calle 4; d/tr/q/ste US\$35/55/60/75; (P) (☎) (♿)) 'Executive Elegance' is the boast of this upscale business hotel, which is surprisingly swish considering that San Isidro is fairly understated as far as business destinations go. Indeed, all

the expected amenities are here, including telephones with voice mail and wi-fi access, which makes staying in touch easy even in this far flung corner of Costa Rica. The classy quarters are painted bright yellow and fitted with shiny black lacquer furniture to complete the executive package.

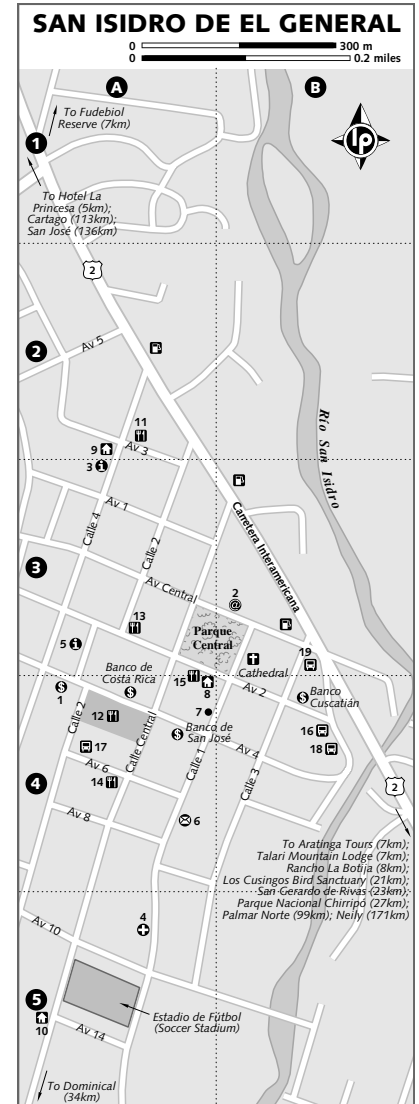
AROUND SAN ISIDRO

Hotel La Princesa (☎ 2772 0324; www.laprincesahotel.com; San Rafael; d/q US\$35/45; (P)) If sitting in the hot tub watching the sun drop behind the Talamanca sounds appealing, La Princesa is for you, especially if you're looking for affordable luxury and quieter surrounds than downtown San Isidro. Eight sparkling rooms are decorated with wood furniture and bright linens, while lovely gardens are filled with blooms and birds. To reach the property, turn off the Interamericana 5km north of San Isidro in the barrio (district) of San Rafael.

Talari Mountain Lodge (☎ 2771 0341; www.talari.co.cr; Rivas; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$39/59/79; (P) (☎)) This secluded mountain lodge exudes an incredible amount of charm, as does the Dutch-Tica couple who run the place. They are ever-accommodating, also offering arrangements for treks to Chirripó and customized bird tours – Pieter Westra of Aratinga Tours in San Isidro is their son. Accommodations are in simple wooden cabins on the edge of the forest, though the real attraction here is the prolific birdlife on the grounds, as well as the 2km of trails that wind through the forest. To get here, drive 7km south of San Isidro on the road from San Gerardo de Rivas.

Eating & Drinking

Taquería México Lindo (☎ 2771 8222; Av 2 btwn Calles Central & 1; dishes US\$3-5; ☎ 10am-8:30pm) For a welcome change of pace, stop by this *taquería* (taco shop) for tasty tacos as well as burritos, nachos and fajitas, not to mention homemade guacamole and several kinds of salsa. Photos of Mexico and festive *piñatas* will send you south – er, north – of the border.



INFORMATION		SLEEPING (P)		Supermercado	
Banco Coopealianza.....	1 A4	Hotel Chirripó.....	8 A4	Central.....	14 A4
Banco Coopealianza.....	(see 8)	Hotel Diamante Real.....	9 A2	Taquería México	
Brun@ Net Café.....	2 B3	Hotel Los Crestones.....	10 A5	Lindo.....	15 A4
BTC Internet.....	(see 15)				
Ciprotur.....	3 A3	EATING (P)		TRANSPORT	
Clínica El Labrador.....	4 A5	Kafe de la Casa.....	11 A2	Buses to Buenos Aires.....	16 B4
Minae Park Service Office.....	5 A3	Mercado Central.....	12 A4	Local Bus Terminal.....	17 A4
Post Office.....	6 A4	Restaurant/Bar La		Terminal Quepos.....	18 B4
Selva Mar.....	7 A4	Cascada.....	13 A3	Tracopa Bus Terminal.....	19 B3

DAY TRIPS AROUND SAN ISIDRO DE EL GENERAL

Not to disparage El General, but there's no point in hanging around town if you don't have to. The following day trips are great ways to fill a free day in the area.

- **Fudebiol Reserve** (☎ 2771 4131; admission US\$2; 🕒 8am-4pm Tue-Sun) North of El General, Fudebiol is a community reserve along the Río Quebradas. Its 750-hectare grounds include extensive hiking trails, some with rewarding lookout spots, a cooling pond and a butterfly farm (always a treat for kids). Fudebiol offers volunteer opportunities for travelers who want to live with a local family and work at the reserve; this educational facility also has lodging for visiting groups. For information, contact Ciprotur (p374).
- **Los Cusingos Bird Sanctuary** (☎ 2200 5472; www.cct.or.cr; Quizarrá; adult/child US\$10/5; 🕒 7am-4pm Tue-Sun) This sanctuary and museum are on the grounds of the farm that was once home to the great ornithologist Dr Alexander Skutch. Author of the birder's bible, *A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica*, Dr Skutch enjoyed a long and fruitful career studying the birds of the tropics. Much of his work took place at this 78-hectare reserve, which is now open to the public. The grounds are wonderful for watching wildlife, wandering the trails and meditating on the mysteries of nature, as Dr Skutch often did. The great scientist's home is due to open as a museum dedicated to his life and work. To get to Los Cusingos, drive 8km north on the road to San Gerardo de Rivas. Turn right at Rivas and continue 5km through General Viejo, then turn east to Quizarrá. Aratinga Tours leads birding walks here (p374).
- **Rancho La Botija** (☎ 2770 2146, 2770 2147; www.rancholabotija.com; Rivas; admission US\$5; 🕒 8:30am-5pm Tue-Sun) A great option for families with kids, this is a working coffee and sugar farm. Trails traverse the grounds, and a daily guided hike departs at 9am and leads to the famous 'Indian Rock,' an ancient stone carved with pre-Columbian petroglyphs. There is entertainment for all ages, whether you paddle a kayak around the lake or a raft around the swimming pool. A restaurant and a few cabins (double including breakfast US\$61; wheelchair accessible) are onsite. The rancho is 7km from the Interamericana along the road to San Gerardo de Rivas.

Restaurant/Bar La Cascada (☎ 2771 6479; cnr Calle 2 & Av 2; dishes US\$4-8; 🕒 11pm-late) Pleasant restaurant by day, trendy bar by night. The well-stocked bar, massive TV screens showing music videos, and an extensive menu of pub grub attract plenty of local youth, who spend quality time getting to know the beer, the burgers and each other.

our pick **Kafe de la Casa** (Av 3 btwn Calles 2 & 4; meals US\$4-10; 🕒 7am-8pm) Set in an old Tico house, this bohemian café features brightly painted rooms decorated with eclectic artwork, an open kitchen and shady garden seating. With a menu featuring excellent breakfasts, light lunches, gourmet dinners and plenty of coffee drinks, this funky place receives a stream of regulars.

Travelers watching their colones should head for the inexpensive *sodas* (lunch counters) in the **Mercado Central** (Av 4 btwn Calles Central & 2), while self-caterers can shop at the **Supermercado Central** (Ave 6 btwn Calles Central & 2; 🕒 7am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun), one block south.

Getting There & Away BUS

In San Isidro the local bus terminal is on Avenida 6 and serves nearby villages. Long-distance buses leave from various points near the Interamericana and are frequently packed, so buy tickets early.

From Tracopa Terminal

You will find **Tracopa bus terminal** (☎ 2771 0468) on the Interamericana, just southwest of Avenida Central.

Neily US\$5, six hours, depart 4:45am, 7:30am, 12:30pm and 3pm.

Palmar Norte US\$2.75, three hours, depart 4:45am, 7:30am, 12:30pm and 3pm.

Paso Canoas US\$4.50, five hours, depart 8:30am, 10:30am, 2:30pm, 4pm, 7:30pm and 9pm.

San José US\$2.75, three hours, depart 7:30am, 8am, 9:30am, 10:30am, 11am, 1:30pm, 4pm, 5:45pm and 7:30pm.

San Vito US\$2.75, three hours, depart 5:30am and 2pm.

From Terminal Quepos

Terminal Quepos (☎ 2771 2550) is on the side street south of the Tracopa terminal.

Domical US\$2.50, 2½ hours, depart 7am, 8am, 1:30pm and 4pm.

Palmar Norte US\$2.75, three hours, depart 6:30am and 3pm.

Palmar Norte/Puerto Jiménez US\$4.50, five hours, depart 6:30am and 3pm.

Quepos US\$3, three hours, depart 7am and 1:30pm.

Uvita US\$1.50, 1½ hours, depart 8:30am and 4pm.

From Other Bus Stops

The following buses all originate in San Isidro.

Buenos Aires (Gafeso) US\$1.50, one hour, depart hourly 5am to 5pm from north of Terminal Quepos.

San Gerardo de Rivas, for Parque Nacional Chirripó US\$2.50, 2½ hours, depart from Parque Central at 5am and from the local terminal on Avenida 6 at 2pm.

TAXI

A 4WD taxi to San Gerardo de Rivas will cost between US\$20 and US\$25 depending on your final destination.

SAN GERARDO DE RIVAS

If you have plans to climb to the summit of Chirripó, then fear not – the tiny but tranquil town of San Gerardo de Rivas marks the entrance to the national park. Here, you can make reservations for accommodations within the park, pick up a few last minutes supplies and (perhaps most importantly) get a good night's rest and/or a hot meal before the trek.

Although hikers are understandably keen to press on to the park as quickly as possible, San Gerardo has its own merits. The backdrop to this village scene is the rushing Río Chirripó and the rocky peak of the same name, which is characterized by breathtaking alpine scenery and bountiful birdlife. And of course, you don't have to climb the mountain to be able to walk around with your head in the clouds – Cloudbridge Nature Preserve (right) is a perfect alternative for those who don't have the time (or energy) to go all the way to the summit.

Orientation & Information

The road to San Gerardo de Rivas winds its way 22km up the valley of the Río Chirripó. The road is paved for the first 10km or so; after the town of Rivas however, it is a gravel road that is bumpy, narrow and steep. The

'center' of San Gerardo – as it is – consists merely of the soccer field and the *pulperia* (corner grocery store) opposite. Otherwise, there's not much to this village – just the family-run farms and cabinas that are strung along this road.

The **Chirripó ranger station** (Sinac; ☎ 2200 5348; 🕒 6:30am-noon & 1-4:30pm) is located about 1km below the soccer field on the road from San Isidro. Stop by here (the earlier the better) to check for space and availability at Los Crestones mountaintop hostel (p381), and to confirm and pay your fee before setting out.

Sights & Activities

About 2km past the trailhead to Cerro Chirripó you will find the entrance to the mystical, magical **Cloudbridge Nature Preserve** (☎ in the USA 212-362 9391; www.cloudbridge.org; admission by donation; 🕒 sunrise-sunset). Covering 182 hectares on the side of Cerro Chirripó, this private reserve is an ongoing reforestation and preservation project, spearheaded by New Yorkers Ian and Genevieve Giddy. A network of trails traverses part of the property, which is easy to explore independently; maps are available. Hike to two waterfalls, including the magnificent **Catarata Pacifica**, which is close to the entrance. You are bound to see some amazing birdlife, including the vibrant emerald toucanet, the endangered black guan and many other cloud-forest species. Also, be sure to inquire if you are interested in volunteering on the reforestation program at Cloudbridge. You can drive up here if you have a 4WD; otherwise it's a steep but rewarding hike.

If you can't stand the thought of going for another hike, you will undoubtedly appreciate a soak in the **thermal hot springs** (☎ 8391 8107; Herradura; admission US\$3; 🕒 7am-6pm) that are about 2km north of San Gerardo. Just above the ranger station the road forks; take the left fork and walk for about 1km on a paved road. Turn right and take the rickety suspension bridge over the river. A switchback trail will lead you another 1km to a house with a *soda*, which is the entrance to the springs.

Sleeping & Eating

our pick **Hotel y Restaurant Roca Dura Café** (☎ 2262 7218; camping per person US\$5, r from US\$25-40; 📍) Conveniently located in the center of town just opposite the soccer field, this hip hostelry is built right into the side of a giant boulder, lending a Flintstones ambience to

the quarters. Wall murals brighten the smallest stone rooms, while pricier rooms have tree-trunk furniture and fixtures and views of forested hillsides. Even if you're not staying here, the upstairs restaurant is a popular pit stop for locals looking for a night out on the town, er, village.

Albergue Urán (☎ 8388 2333, 2771 1669; dm/d from US\$10/25; 📍) Just 50m below the trailhead, this no-nonsense youth hotel is something of an institution for hikers heading to/from Chirripó. Budget-friendly rooms of varying shapes and sizes are perfect for a restful snooze, while the onsite restaurant, grocery store and laundry facility all cater to the backpacker set. The affable and accommodating owner loves sending hikers off on their way to Chirripó, so feel free to pick his brain before hitting the slope.

Hotel El Pelicano (☎ 8382 3000; d/tr with bathroom US\$30/60, r per person without bathroom US\$10; 📍) About 300m below the ranger station, this simple but functional budget lodge has a collection of spartan but spotless rooms that overlook the river valley. The highlight of the property however is the gallery of the owner, a late-blooming artist who sculpts whimsical wood pieces. If you're looking for a modest meal, there is a small bar and restaurant onsite that whips up fairly tasty casados for US\$4 to US\$8.

Talamanca Reserve (☎ 2772 1715; d from US\$85; 📍) This sprawling 1600-hectare private reserve caters to guests who want their creature comforts, even at 2500m. Ominous Talamanca Indian sculptures pose among the spacious stone cabins, which are furnished with lacquered wood, American-style bathrooms and picture windows. This full-service lodge also lures in nonguests with its decidedly modern restaurant that is surprisingly gourmet, as well as its impressive network of hiking trails. The entrance is about 1km south of the trailhead for Chirripó.

Getting There & Away

Buses to San Isidro depart from the soccer field at 7am and 4pm (US\$1, two hours). Any of the hotels can call a taxi for you.

Driving from San Isidro, head south on the Interamericana and cross the Río San Isidro at the southern end of town. About 500m further cross the unsigned Río Jilguero

and take the first, steep turn up to the left, about 300m beyond the Jilguero. Note that this turnoff is not marked.

The ranger station is about 18km up this road from the Interamericana. The road is paved as far as Rivas but beyond that it is steep and graveled. It is passable to ordinary cars in the dry season, but a 4WD is recommended. If you are driving past the village of San Gerardo de Rivas, to Albergue Urán or to Cloudbridge Nature Preserve, you will need a 4WD.

PARQUE NACIONAL CHIRRIPIÓ

Costa Rica's mountainous spine runs the length of the country in four distinct *cordilleras* (ranges) of which the Cordillera de Talamanca is the highest, longest and most remote. While most of the Talamanca highlands are difficult to access, Costa Rica's highest peak, Cerro Chirripó, at 3820m above sea level, is the focus of this popular **national park**. Of course, while Chirripó is the highest and most famous summit in Costa Rica, it is not unique: two other peaks inside the park top 3800m and most of its 502 sq km lie above 2000m.

Like a tiny chunk of the Andes, Chirripó National Park is an entirely unexpected respite from the heat and humidity of the rain forest. Above 3400m, the landscape is *páramo*, which is mostly scrubby trees and grasslands, and supports a unique spectrum of highland wildlife. Rocky outposts, such as the unmistakable facade of Los Crestones, punctuate the otherwise barren hills and feed a series of glacial lakes that earned the park its iconic name (Chirripó means 'eternal waters').

The bare *páramo* contrasts vividly with the lushness of the cloud forest, which dominates the hillsides between 2500m and 3400m. Oak trees (some more than 50m high) tower over the canopy, which also consists of evergreens, laurels and lots of undergrowth. Epiphytes – the scraggy plants that grow up the trunks of larger trees – thrive in this climate. However, the low-altitude cloud forest is being encroached by agricultural fields and coffee plantations in the areas near San Gerardo de Rivas.

The only way up to Chirripó is by foot. Although the trekking routes are long and challenging, watching the sun rise over the Caribbean from such lofty heights is an undeniable highlight of Costa Rica. You will have to be prepared for the cold and at times wet slog to the top, though your efforts will be rewarded with some of the most sweeping vistas that Costa Rica can offer.

ORIENTATION

The dry season (from late December to April) is the most popular time to visit Chirripó. February and March are the driest months, though it may still rain. On weekends, and especially during holidays, the park is crowded with Tico hiking groups and the mountaintop hostel is often full. The park is closed in May, but the early months of the rainy season are still good for climbing as it usually doesn't rain in the morning. In any season, temperatures can drop below freezing at night, so warm clothes (including hat and gloves), rainwear and a three-season sleeping bag are necessary. In exposed areas, high winds make it seem even colder. The ranger station in San Gerardo de Rivas is a good place to check on the weather conditions.

The maps available at the ranger station are fine for the main trails. However, more detailed topographical maps are available from the Instituto Geográfico Nacional in San José (p534). Frustratingly, Chirripó lies at the corner of four separate 1:50,000-scale maps, so you need maps 3444 II *San Isidro* and 3544 III *Dúrika* to cover the area from the ranger station to the summit of Chirripó, and maps 3544 IV *Fila Norte* and 3444 I *Cuerici* to cover other peaks in the massif.

INFORMATION

It is essential that you stop at the **Chirripó ranger station** (Sinac; ☎ 2200 5348; 🕒 6:30am-noon & 1-4:30pm) at least one day before you intend to climb Chirripó so that you can check availability at the mountaintop hostel and pay your entry fee (US\$15 for two days, plus US\$10 for each additional day). Space at the hostel is limited, so it's best to arrive early – first thing in the morning – to inquire about space on the following day. Even if you have a reservation, you must stop here the day before to confirm (bring your reservation and payment confirmation). You can also

make arrangements here to hire a porter (about US\$25 for 14kg) or to store your luggage while you hike.

WILDLIFE-WATCHING

The varying altitude means an amazing diversity of fauna in Parque Nacional Chirripó. Particularly famous for its extensive birdlife, the national park is home to several endangered species, including the harpy eagle and the resplendent quetzal (especially visible between March and May). Even besides these highlights, you might see highland birds including the three-wattled bellbird, black guan and tinamou. The Andean-like *páramo* guarantees volcano junco, sooty robin, slaty finch, large-footed finch and the endemic volcano hummingbird, which is found only in Costa Rica's highlands.

In addition to the prolific birdlife, the park is also home to some unusual high-altitude reptiles, such as the green spiny lizard and the highland alligator lizard. Mammals include puma, Baird's tapir, spider monkey, capuchin and – at higher elevations – Dice's rabbit and the coyotes that feed on them.

Although spotting rarer animals is never a guaranteed proposition, here are few tips to maximize your chances: pumas stick to the savannah areas and use the trails at dawn and dusk to move about; Baird's tapir gravitate to various highland lagoons, mainly in the rainy season, so stake out the muddy edges at dawn or dusk if you see recent tracks; at nighttime, coyote can be seen feeding at the rubbish bins near Crestones Base Lodge.

HIKING Climbing Chirripó

The park entrance is at San Gerardo de Rivas, which lies 1350m above sea level; from here the summit is 2.5km straight up! An easy-to-follow 16km trail leads all the way to the top and no technical climbing is required.

Allow seven to 14 hours to cover the 10km from the trailhead to the hostel, depending on how fit you are: the recommended departure time is 5am or 6am. The trailhead lies 50m beyond Albergue Urán in San Gerardo de Rivas (about 4km from the ranger station). The main gate is open from 4am to 10am to allow climbers to enter; no one is allowed to begin the ascent after 10am. Inside the park the trail is clearly signed at every kilometer.

CHIRRIPO CHECKLIST

Costa Rica might be in the tropics, but Chirripó lies at some chilly altitudes. Don't get caught without the necessities when hiking Costa Rica's highest mountain. Check the Chirripó checklist before you head off:

- water bottle (there is one water stop between the trailhead and the base camp)
- food (including snacks for the hike)
- warm jacket, gloves and hat (temperatures can dip below freezing)
- good sleeping bag (also available to rent at the lodge)
- rain gear (even when it's not raining, the summit is misty)
- plastic bags (to protect your clothing and personal items from the rain)
- sunblock (it may be chilly but the sun is powerful, and much of the route is not shaded)
- flashlight (there's no electricity for much of the evening at the mountaintop hostel)
- compass and map (especially if you are planning to hike one of the lesser-used trails)
- camera (photographic evidence that you reached the top!).

The open-sided hut at **Llano Bonito**, half-way up, is a good place for a lunch break. There is shelter and water, but it is intended for emergency use, not overnight stays.

About 6km from the trailhead, the **Monte Sin Fe** (which translates as 'Mountain without Faith'; this climb is not for the faint of heart) is a preliminary crest that reaches 3200m. You then enjoy 2km with gravity in your favor, before making the 2km ascent to the Crestones Base Lodge at 3400m.

Reaching the hostel is the hardest part. From there the hike to the summit is about 6km on relatively flatter terrain (although the last 100m is very steep): allow at least two hours if you are fit, but carry a warm jacket, rain gear, water, snacks and a flashlight just in case. From the summit on a clear day, the vista stretches to both the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. The deep-blue lakes and the lush-green hills carpet the Valle de las Morenas in the foreground. Readers recommend leaving the base camp at 3am to arrive in time to watch the sunrise from the summit.

A minimum of two days is needed to climb from the ranger station in San Gerardo to the summit and back, leaving no time for recuperation or exploration. It is definitely worthwhile to spend at least one extra day exploring the trails around the summit and/or the base lodge.

Other Trails

Most trekkers follow the main trail to Chirripó and return the same way, but there are several

other attractive destinations that are accessible by trails from the base camp. An alternative, longer route between the base lodge and the summit goes via **Cerro Terbi** (3760m), as well as **Los Crestones**, the moonlike rock formations that adorn many postcards. If you are hanging around for a few days, the glorious, grassy **Sabana de los Leones** is a popular destination that offers a stark contrast to the otherwise alpine scenery. Peak-baggers will want to visit **Cerro Ventisqueros** (3812m), which is also within a day's walk of Crestones. These trails are fairly well-maintained, but it's worth inquiring about conditions before setting out.

For hardcore adventurers, an alternative route is to take a guided three- or four-day loop trek that begins in Herradura and spends a day or two traversing cloud forest and *páramo* on the slopes of Filá Urán. Hikers ascend **Cerro Urán** (3600m) before the final ascent of Chirripó and then descend through San Gerardo. This trip requires bush camping and you must be accompanied by a local guide at all times. Costa Rica Trekking Adventures (see below) can make arrangements for this tour. Alternatively, contact the **guides' association** (☎ 2771 1199) in Herradura, which is run through the local *pulpería*.

TOURS

Most travelers prefer to access the park either independently or by hiring a local guide, though **Costa Rica Trekking Adventures** (☎ 2771 4582; www.chirripo.com) is highly recommended if you prefer organized adventure. This well-

established company offers several different guided excursions around Chirripó, ranging from a one-day trek to Llano Bonito to a four-day trek around the Urán loop. Note that prices are negotiable, and ultimately dependant on the size of the party and the time of year.

SLEEPING & EATING

The only accommodation in Parque Nacional Chirripó is at **Crestones Base Lodge** (dm US\$10), housing up to 60 people in dorm-style bunks. The basic stone building has a solar panel that provides electric light from 6pm to 8pm and sporadic heat for showers. The lodge rents a variety of gear including sleeping bags, blankets, cooking equipment and gas canisters for a few dollars per day.

Reservations are absolutely necessary at Crestones Base Lodge. Your tour company will likely make reservations for you; but for those traveling independently, it is virtually impossible to make reservations before your arrival in Costa Rica. Once in Costa Rica however, it is necessary to contact the **Minae office** (☎ 2771 3155; fax 2771 3297; adlap@sinac.go.cr) in San Isidro. If space is available, you will be required to pay by credit card in order to confirm the reservation. You must present your reservation and payment confirmation at the ranger station in San Gerardo de Rivas on the day before you set out.

Fortunately, the lodge reserves 10 spaces per night for travelers who show up in San Gerardo and are ready to hike on the following day. This is the more practical option for most travelers, although there is no guarantee that there will be space available on the days you wish to hike. Space is at a premium during holiday periods and on weekends during the dry season. The ranger station opens at 6:30am – the earlier you arrive, the more likely you will be able to hike the following day.

Crestones Base Lodge provides drinking water, but no food. Hikers must bring all of their own provisions. Camping is allowed only at a special designated area near Cerro Urán – not at Crestones or anywhere else in the park.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

See details under San Gerardo de Rivas (p377) for directions on how to get here. From opposite the ranger station, in front of Cabinas El Bosque, there is free transpor-

tation to the trailhead at 5am. Also, several hotels offer early-morning trailhead transportation for their guests.

THE ROAD TO LA AMISTAD

From San Isidro, the Interamericana winds its way southeast through some glorious geography of rolling hills and coffee plantations backed by striking mountain facades, towering as much as 3350m above. Along this stretch, a series of narrow, steep, dirt roads lead to some of the country's most remote areas – some nearly inaccessible due to the prohibitive presence of the Cordillera de Talamanca. Of course, it's worth enduring the thrilling road for the chance to visit Parque Internacional La Amistad, a true wilderness of epic scale.

BUENOS AIRES

All it takes is a quick glance at the town's Del Monte processing plant to realize that pineapples are big business in Buenos Aires. Of course, unless you're interested in getting a good price on a truckload of sweetened pineapple rings, there is little reason to give the town more than a passing glance, though Buenos Aires does serve as an administrative center for the Ujarrás, Salitre and Cabagra indigenous groups.

If you're planning on visiting any of the reserves, a good starting point is the **Asociación Regional Aborigen del Dikes** (Aradikes; ☎ 2730 0289; www.aradikes.org), a local organization that works to increase the capacity of indigenous communities in the Buenos Aires region. Efforts range from reforestation to cultural tourism to activism against the Boruca hydroelectric project (p383). Another good place to stop is the **Fundación Dúrika Office** (☎ 2730 0657; www.durika.org), which helps travelers make reservations to stay at the Reserva Biológica Dúrika (see p382).

If you get stuck for the night, you can always grab a room at **Aradikes** (☎ 2730 0289; r from US\$15; ☎ ☒), which also serves as something of a makeshift-business hotel comprised of several whitewashed cabins surrounding a thatch-roof rancho. Cheap and hearty meals are also available on the premises, as are cold beers to help beat the tropical heat.

Buses that travel between Palmar Norte, San Vito, San Isidro and San José pass by without stopping in Buenos Aires, though you can flag them down on the Interamericana. However, there is no marked bus shelter, so be sure that you are visible otherwise the bus driver won't stop for you.

If you have your own transportation, Buenos Aires can be reached by turning off the Interamericana just south of the Del Monte plant – a paved road leads 3km north to Buenos Aires. This main road into town forks about 1km south of town: the left fork passes the Fundación Dúrika Office and heads into the center of town, near the Parque Central; the right fork bypasses the center and heads to Aradikes.

RESERVA BIOLÓGICA DÚRIKA

A perfect example of sustainable tourism in action, this 7500-hectare biological reserve is home to a small but thriving community of Ticos and resident foreigners who are committed to local conservation, natural medicine and the preservation of indigenous culture. Since 1992, Dúrika has opened its arms to any travelers interested in partaking in their inspiring social experiment.

Tours of the working farm demonstrate the principles and processes of organic agriculture that Dúrika employs, such as fertilizer made from chili peppers. Guests can also arrange short hikes into the reserve, daylong forays to the Cabécar indigenous village of Ujarrás, and/or multiday treks. Travelers with a strong interest in indigenous cultures or medicinal plants should inquire about the **Shaman Tour**, a week-long journey that visits several communities, and focuses on traditional healing methods.

Visitors are also welcome to stay closer to home, participating in the life of the farm, checking out local waterfalls (which fuel the community's hydroelectric power) and otherwise exploring the grounds. Accommodation (from US\$35 per person) is also available in cabins of various sizes sleeping two to eight people. As an added bonus, rates include organic vegetarian meals made from locally grown foods. Note that discounted rates are available for large groups and students, and volunteer opportunities are available.

Reservations and information are available from the **Fundación Dúrika office** (☎ 2730 0657; www.durika.org) in Buenos Aires. If possible, it is

advised that you make reservations as early as possible since accommodation fills up quickly in the high season. Although it is possible to drive to Dúrika in a 4WD, the office can easily arrange transport to the reserve (US\$30 for up to five passengers) and watch over your car while you're staying at the reserve.

RESERVA INDÍGENA BORUCA

The picturesque valley of the Río Grande de Térraba is the setting for the indigenous reserve of Brunka (Boruca) peoples. Historians believe that the present-day Brunka have evolved out of several different indigenous groups, including the Coto, Quepos, Turrucaca, Burucac and Abubaes, whose territories stretched all the way to the Península de Osa in pre-Columbian times. Today however, the entire Brunka population is largely confined to the small villages of Rey Curré, which is bisected by the Carretera Interamericana, and Boruca, 8km north.

At first glance, it is difficult to differentiate these towns from a typical Tico village, aside from a few artisans selling their handiwork. In fact, these towns hardly cater to the tourist trade, which is one of the main reasons why traditional Boruca life is continuing on without much distraction. In any case, please be particularly sensitive when visiting indigenous communities – always dress modestly and avoid taking photographs of people without asking permission. Although they can be incredibly interesting places to visit, indigenous villages are not human zoos, but rather living communities struggling to maintain their culture amidst a changing world.

Orientation & Information

Rey Curré (usually just 'Curré' on maps) is about 30km south of Buenos Aires, right on the Interamericana. Drivers can stop to visit a small **cooperative** (☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 2-5pm Sat) that sells handicrafts. In Boruca, local artisans post signs outside their homes advertising their handmade balsa masks and woven bags. Exhibits are sometimes on display in the **museo**, a thatch-roof rancho 100m west of the *pulperia*.

Asociación Regional Aborigen del Dikes (Aradikes; ☎ 2730 0289; www.aradikes.org; Buenos Aires) Inquire about homestays and local tour guides.

Galería Namu (☎ 2256 3412; www.galerianamu.com; Av 7 btwn Calles 5 & 7, San José; per person per day

THE BORUCA DAM

Rey Curré is the proposed site of a huge hydroelectric project, specifically, a 220m dam across the Río Grande de Térraba that if completed, would reportedly be the largest dam in Central America. Needless to say, the proposal for the Boruca dam has caused quite the controversy, especially since it would flood 25,000 hectares of land as well as displace thousands of residents, the majority of which are members of the Brunka indigenous group.

The Brunka have strong ties to their land, not only due to their subsistence from agriculture and dependence on plants for medicinal use, but also due to the presence of ancestral burial grounds. Furthermore, the Brunka recognize that relocation would inevitably result in the physical division of their community, something they have already experienced – to a smaller degree – with the construction of the Interamericana.

In theory, the hydroelectric project cannot go forward without the consent of the residents, but many of the Brunka feel helpless and hopeless in the face of the ICE: a government-owned electricity company that has an incredible amount of weight and capital behind them. As a result, organizations like the **Asociación Regional Aborigen del Dikes** (Aradikes; see p381) have been actively campaigning against the ICE's initiative, though the odds are clearly stacked against them.

At the time of research, it was difficult to say which side was winning. According to the official spokesperson of the ICE, the project was steadily moving forward, with plans to have the dam functional by 2015. On the other hand, there is little evidence that construction is even close to commencing and the ICE has acknowledged that it can't proceed without making a concrete proposal to the Brunka.

Like all issues centered on the fine line between economic development and environmental conservation, there is no cut-and-dry answer that will appease both parties. Hopefully this politically and emotionally charged issue will be handled with both competence and dignity.

US\$45) This San José gallery – which specializes in indigenous art – can arrange tours to Boruca, which include homestay, hiking to waterfalls, handicraft demonstrations and storytelling. Transportation to Boruca is not included. For more information, see p107.

Festivals & Events

The **Fiesta de los Diablitos** is a three-day Brunka event that symbolizes the struggle between the Spanish and the indigenous population. Sometimes called the Danza de los Diablitos, or 'dance of the little devils,' the culmination of the festival is a choreographed battle between the opposing sides. Villagers wearing wooden devil masks and burlap costumes play the role of the natives in their fight against the Spanish conquerors. The Spaniards, represented by a man in a bull costume, lose the battle. This festival is held in Boruca from December 31 to January 2 and in Curré from February 5 to 8.

Many outsiders descend on Boruca and Curré during these events. While the Brunka welcome visitors, they request that guests respect their traditions. Tourists are generally required to pay a fee for the right to take

photographs or video. No flash photography or artificial lighting is allowed, and tourists are not allowed to interfere with the program.

The lesser-known **Fiesta de los Negritos**, held during the second week of December, celebrates the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. Traditional indigenous music (mainly drumming and bamboo flutes) accompanies dancing and costumes.

Sleeping & Eating

The only regular place to stay in the area is at the Tico-owned **Bar Restaurante Boruca** (☎ 2730 2454; d from US\$10) in Boruca, which consists of five basic rooms with private cold-water bathrooms.

However, for a more in-depth understanding of the Brunka culture and lifestyle, it's recommended that you arrange a home-stay through **Pedro Rojas Morales** (☎ 506-362-2545; saribu@yahoo.com; prices negotiable). A soft-spoken Brunka artist who is certainly a local expert, Señor Morales can help you arrange a wide range of activities on the reservation.

Shopping

The Brunka are celebrated craftspeople and their traditional art plays a leading role in the survival of their culture. While most people make their living from agriculture, some indigenous people have begun producing fine handicrafts for tourists. The tribe is most famous for its ornate masks, carved from balsa or cedar, and sometimes colored with natural dyes and acrylics. Brunka women also use pre-Columbian backstrap looms to weave colorful, natural cotton bags, placemats and other textiles.

Getting There & Away

Buses (US\$1.75, 1½ hours) leave the central market in Buenos Aires at noon and 3:30pm daily, traveling to Boruca via a very poor dirt road. The bus returns the following morning, which makes Boruca difficult for a day trip relying on public transportation. A taxi from Buenos Aires to Boruca is about US\$20.

Drivers will find a better road that leaves the Interamericana about 3km south of Curré – look for the sign. In total, it’s about 8km to Boruca from Curré, though the going is slow, and a 4WD is recommended.

PALMAR

At the intersection of the country’s two major highways, the unremarkable village of Palmar is a transportation hub that serves as a gateway to the Osa peninsula and Golfo Dulce (for more information, see p394). Although the town also serves as an important banana-growing center, for the average traveler, there is little reason to spend any more time here than it takes to get off the plane or change buses.

Palmar is actually split in two – to get from Palmar Norte to Palmar Sur, take the Interamericana southbound over the Río Grande de Térraba bridge, then take the first right beyond the bridge. Most facilities are in Palmar Norte, clustered around the intersection of the Carretera Interamericana and the Costanera Sur (Pacific Coast Hwy), while Palmar Sur is the locale of the airstrip. In Palmar Norte you can grab some cash at the **Banco Coopelianza** (☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) or **Banco Popular** (☎ 2786 7033), both on the Interamericana.

Lack of charm aside, Palmar is one of the best sites in the country to see the **granite spheres**, or *esferas de piedra*, a legacy of pre-

Columbian cultures – some of which exceed 2m in diameter. They are scattered all over town, including at the airstrip – some of the largest and most impressive are in front of the peach-colored *el colegio* (school) on the Interamericana.

You’ll not want to linger in Palmar, but if you miss a connection, a good option is the **Brunka Lodge** (☎ 2786 7944; brunkalodge@costarricense.cr; s/d/tr US\$25/30/35; ♿ ♿). Accommodation is in sun-filled, clean swept bungalows that are clustered around a swimming pool and a pleasant open-air restaurant. The **Panadería Palenquito** (Transportes Térraba bus stop) is a useful breakfast spot if you are catching an early morning bus.

Getting There & Away

AIR

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

Taxis meet incoming flights and charge about US\$3 to Palmar Norte and US\$15 to Sierpe. Otherwise, the infrequent Palmar Norte–Sierpe bus goes through Palmar Sur – you can board it if there’s space available.

BUS

Buses to San José and San Isidro stop on the east side of the Interamericana. Other buses leave from in front of Panadería Palenquito or Supermercado Térraba a block apart on the town’s main street. The bus ticket office is inside the Palenquito.

Neily (Transportes Térraba) US\$1.25, 1½ hours, depart 5am, 6am, 7am, 9:30am, noon, 1pm, 2:20pm & 4:50pm.

San Isidro (Tracopa) US\$2.75, three hours, depart 8:30am, 11:30am, 2:30pm and 4:30pm.

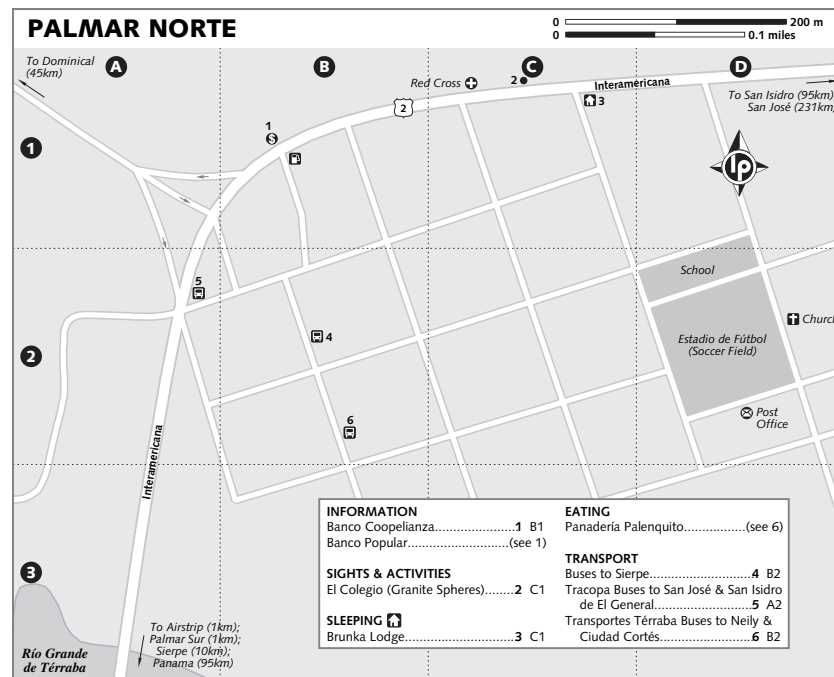
San José (Tracopa) US\$5, five hours, 5:25am, 6:15am, 7:45am, 10am, 1pm, 3pm and 4:45pm.

Sierpe US\$1, one hour, depart 4:30am, 7am, 9:30am, 11:30am, 2:30pm and 5:30pm.

NEILY

Although it is southern Costa Rica’s second-largest ‘city,’ Neily has retained the friendly atmosphere of a rural town. Much like Palmar, Neily is a major transport hub and agricultural center that is decidedly lacking in tourist appeal.

Neily sits on the west bank of the Río Corredor, on the north side of the



Interamericana. From here the Interamericana continues 17km to Panama, while Rte 16 makes a beeline north to the attractive mountain village of San Vito.

About 15km north of Neily on the road to San Vito, **Las Cavernas de Corredores** are a network of little-explored caverns on a private banana plantation. Besides the huge, impressive stalactites, several species of bats are also in the caves. It’s not geared toward tourists, but it is usually possible to visit.

William Hidalgo is a **local guide** (☎ 2770 8225) who leads travelers through the cavern. If you have a 4WD, turn off about 15km north of Neily, just before the school. The small *pulpería* (look for the ‘telefono publico’ sign) has more information. Otherwise, you can hire a 4WD taxi from Neily for about US\$10.

In Neily there is a **Banco Coopelianza**, southwest of the *mercado* (market), that has a 24-hour ATM on the Cirrus network. Alternatively, **Banco de Costa Rica** (☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) changes traveler’s checks. If you need to check your email try **Technoplanet Internet** (☎ 2783 4744; per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm).

Few people have reason to stick around town, though you can always grab a clean room and a hot meal at **Centro Turístico Neily** (☎ 2783 3031; r from US\$30; ♿ ♿ ♿), a low-key resort in a quiet residential part of town. The faux-colonial decorations create a relaxed ambiance, as does the tranquil open-air restaurant overlooking the grounds.

Getting There & Away

AIR

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

BUS

The following buses leave from the main terminal on the east side of town:
Airport US\$0.50, 30 minutes, depart 7:30am, 9:15am, 11:30am, 1:15pm, 3:15pm, 5:30pm and 6pm.
Golfito US\$0.50, 1½ hours, depart hourly from 6am to 7:30pm.
Palmar US\$1.25, 1½ hours, depart 4:45am, 9:15am, noon, 12:30pm, 2:30pm, 4:30pm and 5:45pm.



Paso Canoas US\$0.50, 30 minutes, depart every half hour from 6am to 6pm.
Puerto Jiménez US\$3.50, three hours, depart 7am and 2pm.
San Isidro (Tracopa) US\$5, six hours, depart 7am, 10am, 1pm and 3pm.
San José (Tracopa) US\$9, eight hours, depart 4:30am, 5am, 8:30am, 11:30am and 3:30pm.
San Vito US\$0.50, 30 minutes, depart 6am, 7:30am, 9am, noon, 1pm, 4pm and 5:30pm.
Zancudo US\$1.50, three hours, depart 9:30am and 2:15pm.

TAXI
 Taxis with 4WD wait at the taxi stand south-east of the park. The fare from Neily to Paso Canoas is about US\$6.

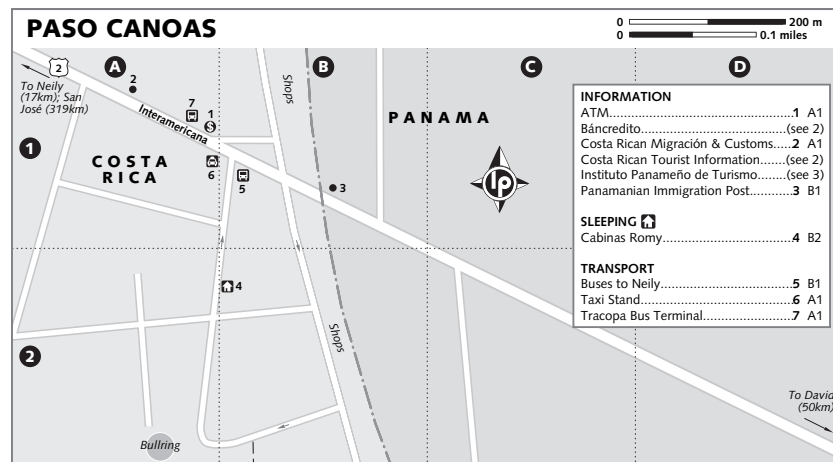
PASO CANOAS
 The main port of entry between Costa Rica and Panama is like most border outposts the world over – hectic, slightly seedy and completely devoid of charm. With that said, most travelers check-in and check-out of Paso Canoas with little more than a passing glance at their passport stamp.

Báncredito (☎ 8am-4:30pm), near the **Costa Rican Migración & Customs** (☎ 6am-11pm), changes traveler’s checks and there is an ATM on the Visa Plus system near the border. Rates for converting excess colones into dollars are not good, but they will do in a pinch. Colones are accepted at the border, but are difficult to get rid of further into Panama.

The **Instituto Panameño de Turismo** (☎ 2727 6524; ☎ 6am-11pm), in the Panamanian immigration post, has information on travel to Panama. If you are arriving in Costa Rica, you’ll find sparse tourist information at the Costa Rican Tourist Information office in Costa Rican Migración and Customs.

The hotels in Paso Canoas aren’t particularly inviting, but **Cabinas Romy** (☎ 2732 2873; rfrom US\$10; 📍) will do if necessary. Set around a pleasant courtyard, shiny rooms are decked with pastel-colored walls, wooden doors and floral bedspreads, which add a surprising bit of warmth to an otherwise drab town.

Tracopa buses leave for San José (US\$9, six hours) at 4am, 7:30am, 9am and 3pm. The **Tracopa bus terminal** (☎ 2732 2201), or window really, is north of the border post, on the east side of the main road. Sunday-afternoon buses are full of weekend shoppers, so buy tickets as early as possible. Buses for Neily (US\$0.50, 30



minutes) leave from in front of the post office at least once an hour from 6am to 6pm. Taxis to Neily cost about US\$6 and to the airport about US\$8.

For more information on border crossing specifics, see boxed text, p390.

WILSON BOTANICAL GARDEN
 About 6km south of San Vito is this world-class **botanical garden** (☎ 2773 4004; www.esintro.co.cr; Las Cruces Biological Station; admission US\$6, guided tours US\$15; ☎ 8am-4pm). Covering 12 hectares and surrounded by 254 hectares of natural forest, the garden was established by Robert and Catherine Wilson in 1963 and thereafter became internationally known for its collection.

In 1973 the area came under the auspices of the Organization for Tropical Studies (OTS) and today the well-maintained garden – part of Las Cruces Biological Station – holds more than 1000 genera of plants from about 200 families. As part of the OTS, the garden plays a scientific role as a research center. Species threatened with extinction are preserved here for possible reforestation in the future.

The gardens are well laid out, many of the plants are labeled and a trail map is available for self-guided walks, featuring exotic species like orchids, bromeliads, palms and medicinal plants. The many ornamental varieties are beautiful, but the tours explain that they are useful too (such as the delicate cycad, used by Cabécar and Bribri indigenous people as a treatment for snakebites). The gardens are

especially popular among bird-watchers, who may see scarlet-thighed dacni, silver-throated tanager, violaceous trogon, blue-headed parrot, violet sabre-wing hummingbird and turquoise cotinga.

If you want to stay overnight at the botanical gardens, make your reservations well in advance: facilities are often filled with researchers and students. Accommodation is in comfortable cabins (single/double including meals US\$88/164) in the midst of the gorgeous grounds. The rooms are simple, but they each have a balcony with an amazing view of the surrounding flora. Rates include entry to the gardens.

Buses between San Vito and Neily pass the entrance to the gardens. Make sure you take the bus that goes through Agua Buena as buses that go through Cañas Gordas do not stop here. A taxi from San Vito to the gardens costs US\$3.

SAN VITO
 Founded by Italian immigrants in the 1950s, San Vito is home to a large Italian community that has retained their language and culture (not to mention their cuisine!). Of course, this is no small feat considering that this remote mountain town is located on the edge of Parque Internacional La Amistad, one of Central America’s last great wilderness areas.

In addition to the descendants of the original Italian founders, San Vito is also home to a large population of Guaymí people.

The proximity of the town to the Reserva Indígena Guaymí de Coto Brus means that indigenous peoples pass through this region (Guaymí enclaves move back and forth undisturbed across the border with Panama). You might spot women in traditional clothing – long, solid-colored *pollera* dresses trimmed in contrasting hues – riding the bus or strolling the streets.

If you're planning on heading to La Amistad, San Vito is home to the **Minae parks office** (☎ 2773 3955; ☎ 9am-4pm), which can help you get your bearings before heading to the national park. Also of interest is the **Centro Cultural Dante Alighieri** (☎ 2773 4934; ☎ 1-7pm Mon-Fri), which provides historical information on Italian immigration and arranges Italian lessons.

About 3km south of town, **Finca Cántaros** (☎ 2773 3760; admission US\$1; ☎ 9:30am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a recreation center and reforestation project. The 10 hectares of grounds – which used to be coffee plantations and pasture land – are now a lovely park with garden trails, picnic areas and a dramatic lookout over the city. The reception is housed in a pretty, well-maintained cabin that contains a small but carefully chosen selection of local and national crafts.

The best option in town is the **Hotel El Ceibo** (☎ 2773 3025; s/d/tr US\$25/35/45; P), conveniently located about 100m west of the main intersection. Here, you can sleep easy in simple but functional rooms (some with forest views) and dig into some truly authentic Italian pastas and wines.

Another great spot for Italian fare is the **Pizzeria Restaurant Lilliana** (pizzas US\$3-5; ☎ 10:30am-10pm), which boasts 15 different kinds of pizza, all of which are made from scratch. The lovely mountain views and the friendly, familiar service make this a pleasant place to while away an afternoon.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Alfo Romeo Aero Taxi offers charter flights to San Vito from Puerto Jiménez and Golfito – prices vary according to the number of people and season. The airstrip is 1km east of town. Otherwise, the nearest airports with scheduled services are at Neily and Golfito.

BUS

The main **Tracopa bus terminal** (☎ 2773 3410) is located on the northern end of the main street.

San Isidro US\$2.75, three hours, depart 6:45am and 1:30pm.

San José US\$7.50, seven hours, depart 5am, 7:30am, 10am and 3pm.

A local bus terminal on the northwest end of town runs buses to Neily and other destinations.

Neily US\$1.25; two hours; depart 5:30am, 7am, 7:30am, 9am, 11am, noon, 2pm and 5pm.

Río Sereno US\$1; 1½ hours; depart 7am, 10am, 1pm and 4pm.

RAIN-FOREST MEDICINE

Indigenous groups use tropical flowers, herbs and plants to treat all kinds of illnesses, from diabetes to a slipped disk. Here are a few of our favorites, courtesy of Paradise Tropical Garden (see below):

- Most doctors treat stomach ulcers with antibiotics, but natural-medicine connoisseurs recommend the seeds from the spiny red annatto pod. Remove the seeds from the pod and wash away the red paste. You can eat the seeds straight from the pod, or dry them and grind them into your food.
- The leaves of the avocado tree are said to cure high blood pressure. Just boil them for three minutes and let them steep for another three. Strain the murky drink and store it in the fridge. Apparently you should drink three cups a day, but beware: this brew is a diuretic.
- If you suffer from a slipped disk, you might try this natural remedy, made from the bracts of the beautiful red plume ginger (*Alpinia purpurata*), which is bountiful in the rain forest. The bracts are the small leaves at the base of the bloom. Pull them off the stem of the ginger and stuff as many as you can fit into a small bottle, then fill the bottle with rubbing alcohol. Let it sit for three days, before rubbing this tincture onto your sore back. This remedy should ease your pain within a few days.

If you would like to learn more, pay a visit to the **Paradise Tropical Garden** (☎ 2789 8746; <http://paradis-garden.tripod.com>; Río Claro; admission by donation; ☎ 6am-5pm) where Robert and Ella Beatham have created a wonderfully sensual introduction to tropical fruits and rain-forest remedies that they call the 'Tropical Fruit See, Smell, Taste & Touch Experience.' Besides this interactive display, visitors also learn about the production of African palm oil and how it came to be the dominant crop of this region following the collapse of the banana industry. Robert and Ella are wonderful hosts, but you should call a day in advance if you want their full attention. The gardens are located just west of the town of Río Claro – follow the Interamericana for 1km, cross the Río Largarto and turn right at the end of the bridge. From here, the garden is just 200m beyond.

CAR

The drive north from Neily is a scenic one, with superb views of the lowlands dropping away as the road winds up the hillside. The paved road is steep, narrow and full of hairpin turns. You can also get to San Vito from San Isidro via the Valle de Coto Brus – an incredibly scenic and less-used route with fantastic views of the Cordillera de Talamanca to the north and the lower Fila Costeña to the south.

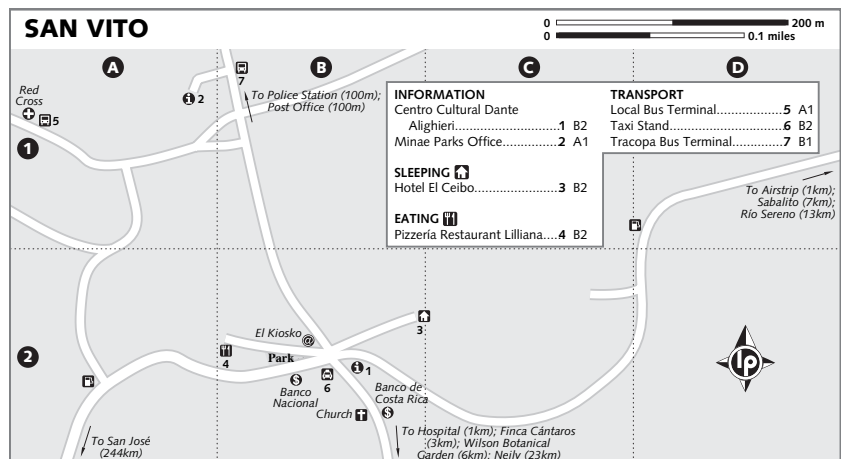
PARQUE INTERNACIONAL LA AMISTAD

This 407,000-hectare international park was established jointly in 1988 by Panama and Costa Rica – hence its name, La Amistad (Friendship). It is by far the largest protected area in Costa Rica, and stands as a testament to the possibilities of international cooperation in the name of environmental conser-

vation. In 1990, La Amistad was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site and later became part of the greater Mesoamerican Biological corridor, which protects a great variety of endangered habitats.

The backbone of this park is the Cordillera de Talamanca, which not only includes the peaks of the Chirripó massif, but also numerous other mountains higher than 3000m. At this altitude, the landscape is characterized by the shrubby, stunted vegetation of the páramo, while slightly lower altitudes yield impressive oaks and the thick vegetation of the cloud forest. The lowlands of the Talamanca valley are fertile rain forest – a canopy of cedar, cypress and oak trees, with a thick undergrowth of palms, ferns and epiphytes. This diversity of altitude and habitat creates unprecedented biological diversity, thus attracting the attention of ecologists and conservationists worldwide.

Although most of the park's area is high up in the Talamanca mountains and remains virtually inaccessible, there is no shortage of



GETTING TO PANAMA

To David

On the Carretera Interamericana, Paso Canoas is the major border crossing with Panama. Although it is conveniently open 24 hours, it is crowded and confusing, especially during holiday periods, when hordes of Ticos arrive for shopping sprees. Note that it's very easy to walk across the border without realizing it. No harm done, but don't go too far without getting the proper stamps in your passport.

Costa Rican *migración* (immigration) is on the eastern side of the highway, north of the Tracopa bus terminal. After securing an exit visa, walk 300m east to the Panamanian immigration post, in the huge new yellow cement block. Here you can purchase the necessary tourist card (US\$5 for US citizens) to enter Panama. You might be asked for an onward ticket and evidence of financial solvency (presenting a credit card does the trick). From here dozens of minivans go to the city of David (US\$2, 1½ hours).

If you are in a private vehicle, you must have your car fumigated (US\$4). Keep a copy of the fumigation ticket as roadside checkpoints often request it. Note that you cannot cross the border in a rental vehicle.

To Río Sereno

East of San Vito a little-transited road leads to the border crossing at Río Sereno, from where you can continue on to the village of Volcán near Parque Nacional Volcán Barú in Panama. Río Sereno is a tranquil, pleasant place – atypical of border towns. The crossing here is hassle-free.

Migración (☎ 8am–6pm) is beside the police station. Panamanian immigration officials may require an onward ticket, plus US\$500 (or bank and credit cards) to show solvency. The latter isn't usually demanded if you have a passport from a first-world country and look reasonably affluent.

US passport holders will need to purchase a tourist card (US\$5), which is sold at the bank, about 100m past the *migración* office. Officials can direct you there. Note that the bank is closed on Sundays and Saturday afternoons.

There are no facilities on the Costa Rican side, but Río Sereno in Panama has a decent hotel, a good pizza place and internet access. Note that the banking facilities at the border do not handle foreign exchange, so it's best to bring US dollars, which function as the Panamanian currency (known as *balboas*). Once across the border, buses depart Río Sereno hourly to David via Volcán.

hiking and camping opportunities available for intrepid travelers. However, tourist infrastructure within the park is almost non-existent, which means trekkers are limited to specific areas and/or the services of guides.

While tourists flock to Costa Rica's more well-known parks in the hopes of having an 'eco-adventure,' La Amistad exists as one of the country's last true wilderness areas. Tackling this pristine yet potentially treacherous environment is no easy task, though La Amistad is brimming with possibilities for rugged exploration – if you're afraid of growing old in an urban jungle, spend some time in this verdant one.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Limited information is available at local **Minae offices** (Buenos Aires ☎ 2730 0846; San Isidro ☎ 2771 3155,

2771 4836, 2771 5116; Calle 2 btwn Aves 4 & 6; San Vito ☎ 2773 4090). They are all minimally helpful.

To make reservations to camp or to stay in a refuge, it's better to call directly to park headquarters at **Altamira** (☎ 2200 5355; park fee per person per day US\$5). This is the best-developed area of the park, with a camping area, showers and drinking water, electric light and a lookout tower. A group of parataxonomists studying insects in this area has created a small display of butterflies and moths.

The thickly forested northern Caribbean slopes and southern Pacific slopes of the Talamanca are protected in the park, but it is only on the Pacific side that ranger stations are found. Besides the headquarters at Altamira, there are additional, little-used ranger stations at **Potrero Grande** (☎ 2742 8090), north of Paso Real, and Santa María de Pittier on the slopes

of Cerro Pittier (2844m). While there is an extremely basic hostel with toilets and fresh water at Santa María, these stations are not really set up to accommodate tourists.

ACTIVITIES

Wildlife-Watching

Although most of Parque Internacional Amistad is inaccessible terrain high up in the Talamanca, the park is home to a recorded 90 mammal species and more than 400 bird species. The park has the nation's largest population of Baird's tapirs (see boxed text, p428), as well as giant anteaters, all six species of neotropical cats – jaguar, puma (mountain lion), margay, ocelot, oncilla (tiger cat) and jaguarundi – and many more-common mammals.

In excess of 500 bird species (49 unique) have been sighted – more than half of the total in Costa Rica – including the majestic but extremely rare harpy eagle (see p392). In addition, the park protects 115 species of fish, 215 different reptiles and amphibians, as well as innumerable insect species.

Visiting Indigenous Groups

Besides the countless animal species, La Amistad is also home to five different indigenous reservations for the Cabécar and Bribri groups. These tribes originally inhabited lands on the Caribbean coast (and many still do), but over the past century, they have migrated west into the mountains and as far as the Pacific coast. It is possible to visit the Cabécar via the Reserva Biológica Dúrika (p382) and the Bribri via ATEC (p481) in Puerto Viejo de Talamanca.

With that said, the reserves see few foreign visitors and it's unlikely that the cruise ship circuit will swing this way anytime soon. As a result, the Cabécar and Bribri tend to view tourists with equal parts respect and awe, and at times you will be amazed at the hospitality of your hosts. Although they are tough people that have made a life for themselves in an unforgiving habitat, the Cabécar and Bribri have smiles that could melt gold.

Of course, you should still make an effort to respect the sensibilities of your hosts. Although some men and women still walk around topless in the village, these are still fairly conservative societies, and it's recommended that you cover up as a sign of respect. In regards to photography, most villagers will be happy to pose for a photo, but you should

always ask before sticking your camera where it doesn't belong. Generally speaking, you will not be asked to pay for a photo, though it's best to ask your guide what is expected from you.

Tourism has a long way to develop in the region, which is one reason why a visit to a Cabécar or Bribri village is so refreshing. Inquire locally about proper conduct in La Amistad.

Hiking

Behind Altamira station, **Los Gigantes del Bosque** is a short 3km circuit that is named for the 40m trees along the way. Signposts in Spanish provide simple explanations of some of the flora, although they are clearly designed for kids. Nonetheless, the trail is an easy means of seeing some ancient rain forest. It passes two lookout points, one on the edge of the primary forest, and the other overlooking the rural landscape outside the park. Note that this trail is marked, but it is not well maintained. Be prepared to climb over fallen branches and wade through high grass. More importantly, make sure you bring plenty of water and snacks and pay close attention to the markers. Normally the loop takes two hours, but it can be much longer if you lose the trail.

The longest trail (approximately 20km) – known as the **Valle del Silencio** – departs from the Estación Altamira and winds its way through pristine and hilly primary forest before ending up at a camping area and refuge at the base of **Cerro Kamuk** (3549m). The walk takes anywhere from eight to 12 hours, provided you are in very good physical condition. It is reportedly spectacular and traverses one of the most isolated areas in all of Costa Rica.

A local guide is required to make the journey. Contact the association of guides **Asoprola** (☎ 2743 1184) in Altamira to inquire about these arrangements. Asoprola can also provide food and lodging in the village of Altamira, just below the park headquarters.

Hardy adventurers can also hike to the summit of Cerro Kamuk from the village of Potrero Grande or Tres Colinas. This journey requires three days to ascend and two days to descend and – again – the services of a guide. Lodging is in tents and hikers must transport all of their own supplies and provisions. Contact the **Tres Colinas guides' association** (☎ 8814 0889) for more information.

THE MOTHER OF ALL EAGLES

The harpy eagle, Central America's most striking raptor, is considered by many to be the most powerful bird of prey in the world. Unfortunately, opportunities to see the bird in the wild are limited as they are rare throughout most of their range and are hard to spot in the canopy even when they are present. Fortunately, you're in La Amistad, which is home to a healthy nesting population. Although the chances of spotting one are still low, your chances are better here than anywhere else in Costa Rica.

Harpy eagles are enormous birds with a wingspan of 2m and a height of 1.5m – they are immediately recognizable. Adults tend to have white breasts with a broad black chest band and faint leg barring as well as gray upperparts. They also have piercing yellow eyes that can be seen from the forest floor, as well as powerful yellow talons and a hooked bill.

Anyone who has had the privilege to watch a harpy eagle hunt will tell you that it is simply awesome. For instance, a harpy seen with a large male howler writhing in her grip will shift her talons with a resounding 'pop' in order to crush the monkey's skull and carry it back to the nest unhindered. With massive claws as big as a grizzly bear's and legs as big as man's wrist, the harpy is an undeniable killing machine.

A female harpy can weigh up to nine kilograms, and such a large predator obviously has high energy requirements. As a result, harpies hunt all but the largest forest mammals, as well as other large birds and a whole slew of snakes and lizards. As an apex predator (like the jaguar), the harpy eagle probably never occurred in high densities, though deforestation has removed much of its prey base and its habitat. Furthermore, its habit of perching for long spells, even when people approach, makes it vulnerable to poachers.

Harpies rarely soar above the treetops and usually hunt by rapidly attacking prey through the canopy. Monkeys are plucked from the foliage, unwary birds are taken from limbs and snakes are swept off the forest floor. However, the majority of the harpy's diet consists of sloths, which are extremely vulnerable in the morning when they are basking in the sun. A harpy will sit nearby – sometimes for days – until it is hungry, and then snatch the sloth at its leisure.

SLEEPING & EATING

Besides the options listed here, see also the Reserva Biológica Dúrika (p382), which is contained within the borders of the park.

All of the ranger stations, such as Altamira, have **camping facilities** (per person US\$5). There are **basic hostels** (per person US\$6) at Santa María de Pittier and at the base of Cerro Kamuk. These camps and hostels offer drinking water and toilets, and – in the case of Altamira – electricity. All food and supplies must be packed in and out.

Asoprola (☎ 2743 1184) can make arrangements for lodging in local homes in the village of Altamira. For an intimate look at the lives of people living on the fringes of the rain forest, there is no better way than to arrange a homestay.

West of Santa María de Pittier, in the village of El Carmen, **Soda La Amistad** (El Carmen; r per person US\$6) has simple cabins with cold-water showers. The cabins are useful if you want one last night's rest before heading in or out of the park.

Situated about 3km by poor dirt road from the village of Las Mellizas, **La Amistad Lodge** (☎ 2200 5037, in San José 2289 7667; www.laamistad.com; s/d/tr US\$96/168/240; 📍) sits on 100 sq km of wilderness and organic farmland that constitutes Costa Rica's third-largest reserve. Since 1940, the congenial Montero family has operated this organic coffee farm, and has long worked to balance the needs of development with protecting the environment. The main lodge has tropical hardwood cabins with hot water and electricity provided by a low-impact hydroelectric plant. Four additional jungle camps have been built at different altitudes and habitats, allowing visitors to do a multiday trek around the area without leaving the comforts of a solid bed and good cooking. The staff will transport your belongings from one site to another and provide meals at each camp, which have full-sized walk-in tents, toilets and running water. The extensive network of trails (40km) is excellent for birding and horseback riding. Guests are also invited to participate in the harvesting and processing (and drinking) of the homegrown coffee.

Rates include three meals a day (and lots of fresh-brewed coffee), as well as the entry fee into the park. Buses to Las Mellizas can get you close to the lodge, but the owners will come get you if you call ahead.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To reach Altamira, you can take any bus that runs between San Isidro and San Vito and get off in the town of Guácimo (often called Las Tablas). From Guácimo buses depart at noon and 5pm daily and travel the 16km to the town of El Carmen; and if the road conditions permit, they continue 4km to the village

of Altamira. From the village of Altamira, follow the Minae sign (near the church) leading to the steep 2km hike to the ranger station. To return to Guácimo, buses depart from Altamira at 5am and 2:30pm daily.

Vehicles with 4WD go all the way to Altamira station. In theory, it is possible to hire a 4WD taxi to bring you here, either from San Vito or from Buenos Aires. Keep in mind, however, that the roads are grueling, and bad conditions can make it pretty tough for anyone to get there. If you are driving here, inquire about road conditions prior to your departure.

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