

Coclé Province



Coclé – land of sugar, salt and presidents. More sugar has been refined in this province, more salt has been produced here, and more Panamanian presidents have been born in Coclé than in any other province. These are facts in which the people of Coclé take great pride, but the province isn't just about political legacies and table condiments.

Coclé boasts a medley of landscapes from abandoned coastlines to towering cloud forests, with vast agricultural and pastoral land in between. Edging along the Pacific Ocean, the province is home to a couple of attractive beaches that see their fair share of weekend warriors from Panama City. Edging along the highlands is the mountain town of El Valle, a popular rural retreat. Away from the coast but not quite into the foothills is Penonomé, Coclé's bustling provincial capital and the best place in the country to shop for authentic Panama hats.

Often overlooked by travelers, Coclé lacks the stellar beaches of Bocas del Toro, the pristine national parks of Chiriquí and the cultural heritage of the Península de Azuero. Furthermore, since it's criss-crossed by the Interamericana, Coclé is unfortunately often thought of as drive-through country on the way to more far-flung locales. However, although you certainly shouldn't miss out on Panama's top-attractions, a visit to Coclé will provide you with an authentic off-the-beaten-path trip that is experienced by few travelers.

As not to disappoint those of you whose breath quickened at the earlier mention of salt and sugar, it *is* possible to tour a huge sugar refinery here, and you *can* look out upon salt flats all day. And of course, both can be enjoyed at mealtime, either as sweetener for a cup of Panama's finest or to bring out the flavors of a plate of hearty rice and beans.

HIGHLIGHTS

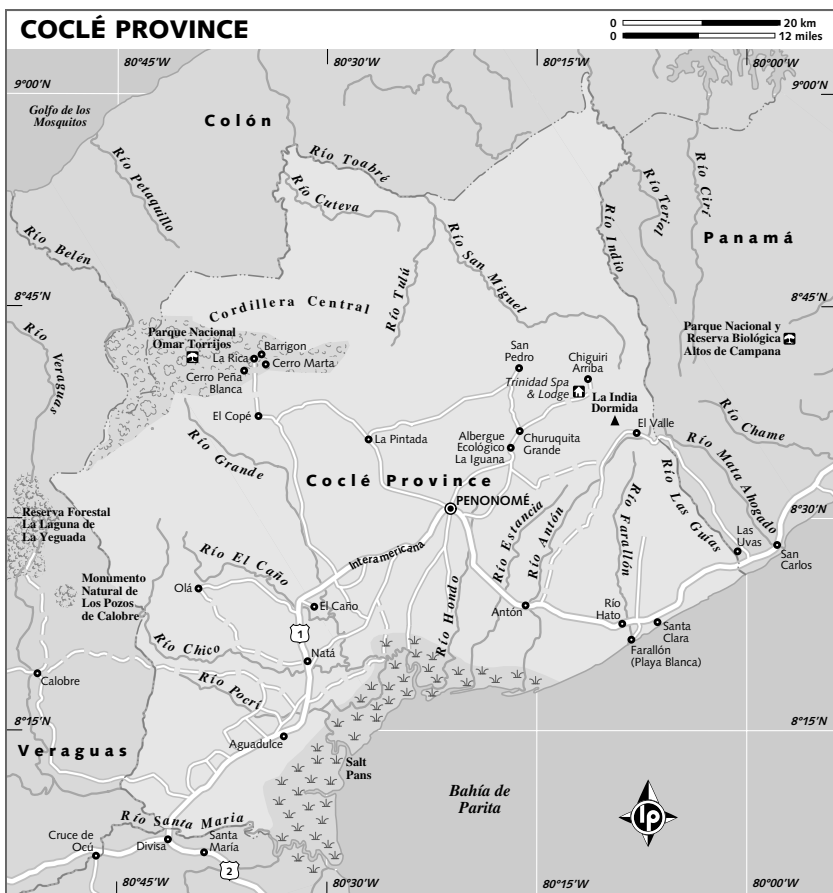
- Stopping to breathe in the mountain air in the highland retreat of **El Valle** (p130)
- Taking long walks along empty stretches of beach around **Santa Clara** (p136)
- Shopping for an authentic Panama hat in the regional capital of **Penonomé** (p139)
- Hiking through dense rainforest in the under-touristed **Parque Nacional Omar Torrijos** (p142)



■ POPULATION: 214,000

■ AREA: 6075 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: 1626M



EL VALLE

pop 6900

Officially known as El Valle de Antón, this picturesque town is nestled in the crater of a giant extinct volcano, and ringed by verdant forests and jagged peaks. Like the town of Boquete in Chiriquí (see p201), El Valle is a popular weekend getaway for urbanites in need of a little fresh air and scenery. It's a superb place for walking, hiking or horseback riding, especially since there is an extensive network of trails leading from the town into the hills and around the valley. Nature lovers, and bird-watchers in particular, won't be disappointed – the nearby forests offer excellent bird-watching, and the valleys of El Valle are home to an

impressive set of waterfalls as well as some rare golden frogs.

History

Three million years ago, this volcano erupted with such force that it blew off its top, creating a crater 5km across – one of the largest in the Americas. In the eons that followed, the crater gradually filled with rainwater to create a large lake. However, through erosion or collapse, a breach opened at the present site of Chorro de Las Mozas and the entire lake drained. The resulting flood created an extensive network of waterways, which attracted indigenous populations to the valley. Today, their early petroglyphs can still be seen throughout the valley.

Orientation

The road that heads north to El Valle from the Interamericana becomes Av Central once it hits the eastern edge of the valley. Av Central is El Valle's main street, along which are numerous hotels and restaurants and most of the town's businesses. Many of the roads branching off Av Central lead to yet more hotels and restaurants.

Av Central ends west of the center of town. Here you can turn right and proceed 100m or so until the road forks. The branch to the left – Calle La Reforma – reaches the Cabañas Potosí after about 800m. The branch to the right – Calle del Macho – leads to the canopy tour, a waterfall and to some petroglyphs.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

An **internet café** (Av Central; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-6:30pm Mon-Sat, 10:30am-2pm Sun) is on the main road near Motel-Restaurante Niña Delia.

MEDICAL SERVICES

For your health needs, turn to the **Centro de Salud de El Valle** (☎ 983 6112; ☎ 24hr) near the western end of Av Central.

MONEY

Just east of Restaurante Santa Librada is a Banco Nacional de Panama **ATM** (Av Central).

POST

There's a **post office** (Calle del Mercado; ☎ 8am-4pm) behind the handicrafts market.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Instituto Panameño de Turismo (IPAT) operates a small **information booth** (☎ 983 6474) at the center of town next to the handicrafts market, though it is rarely staffed.

Sights

WATERFALLS

Some of the biggest attractions of El Valle are the handful of waterfalls that cascade down the surrounding hillsides into the valley floor. The most accessible of these is the **Chorro de las Mozas** (Young Women's Falls), which is located about 1km outside the southwest corner of town. This is the original site where the prehistoric lake breached, forming the scenic cascades you see today. This is a popular local spot for taking a dip

and lounging about, especially since there's near perfect spring weather in El Valle virtually year round.

The most famous waterfall in the El Valle area is the 85m-high **Chorro El Macho** (Manly Falls; admission US\$2; ☎ dawn-dusk), which is located a few kilometers north of town near the entrance to the canopy tour. As its somewhat humorous name implies, this towering waterfall is more dramatic than its dainty counterpart, and makes for some excellent photographs. If the summer sun is beating down more than usual, you can take a refreshing bath at the base of the falls. Here below the falls, you'll find a large swimming pool made of rocks, surrounded by rainforest and fed by river water. There are also a series of short hiking trails here that wind into the surrounding forest.

For an unforgettable aerial view of El Macho, El Valle's famed canopy tour is a truly hair-raising experience – for more information, see p134.

ROCK PAINTINGS

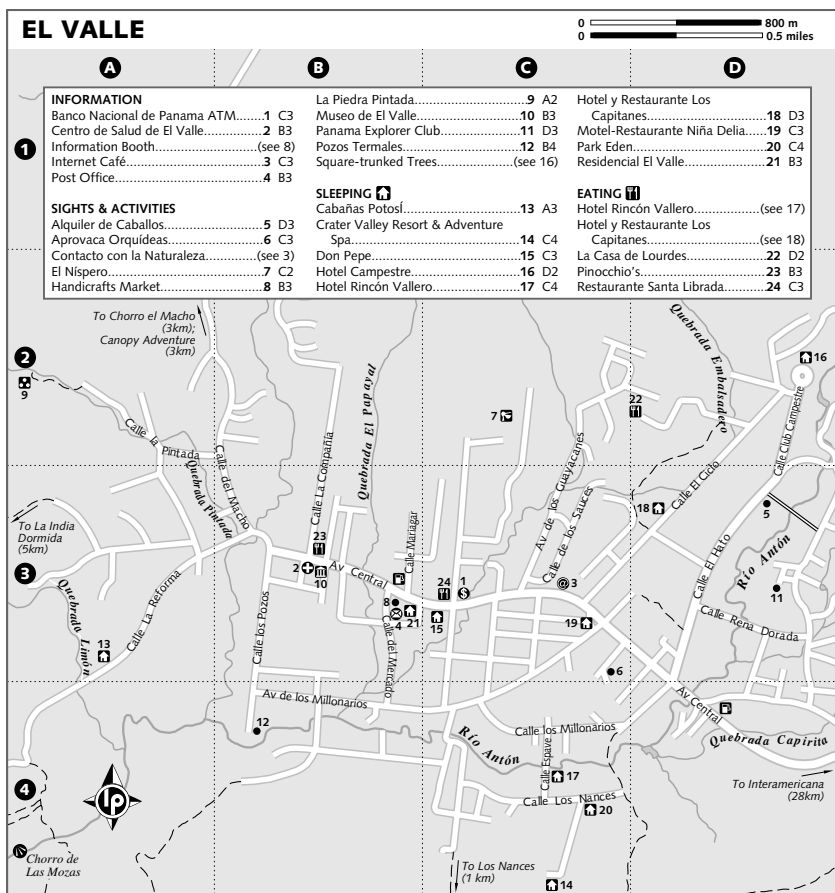
Located in the northwestern corner of the valley, **La Piedra Pintada** (Colored Stone) is a huge boulder adorned with pre-Columbian carvings. Locals often fill in the grooves of the petroglyphs with chalk to facilitate their viewing, but their meaning isn't clearer. That doesn't prevent children from giving their interpretation of the petroglyphs for US\$2 (in Spanish only).

One of these interpreters, Seneida Milena Rivera, says she learned the 'story of the rock' at school. Amid a 10-minute explanation of the graffiti-like carvings, she takes her bamboo pointing stick and identifies an x carved into the rock. It represents the burial site of a powerful chief who died many centuries ago, she says. 'The site moos like a cow every time it rains,' she adds.

Due to one report of theft from a vehicle near the entrance of the trail leading to the petroglyphs, it's best to come by bus even if you've got your own wheels. The site can be reached by a yellow school bus with 'Pintada' above the windshield. It passes along Av Central every 30 minutes, from 6am to 7pm (US\$0.25 one way).

HANDICRAFTS MARKET

El Valle is home to one of Panama's largest **handicrafts market** (Av Central; ☎ 8am-6pm).



Mostly Ngöbe Buglé, but also some Emberá and Wounaan, bring a variety of handicrafts to sell to tourists (most of whom are Panamanians from the capital). If you're self-catering, the market also stocks a good selection of fresh produce from around the country. Although the market runs every day, stop by on Sunday for the full-on affair.

One of the most popular items up for sale in the markets are *bateas*, which are large trays carved from a local hardwood and used by the Ngöbe Buglé for tossing rice and corn. You can also find figurines, colorful baskets made from palms, gourds painted in brilliant colors, clay flowerpots, Panama hats, and birdcages made of sticks.

ZOO

About 1km north of Av Central is a zoo named **El Nispero** (☎ 983 6142; adult/child US\$2/1; 📧 7am-5pm). Most Latin American zoos are sad, cruel places, and unfortunately this is such a place. Here, for example, there are numerous eagles and hawks in a cage smaller than a walk-in closet, and the margays and ocelots on display look listless and depressed.

If you're sensitive to cage animals, you should probably skip this one. With that said, El Nispero is one of the best places for seeing Panama's golden frogs (*ranas doradas*). These endangered amphibians are unbelievably striking in color, and extremely photogenic. They are also one of Panama's most important cultural symbols, and have

LOCAL LORE: LA INDIA DORMIDA

The locals of El Valle are fond of pointing out features in the peaks surrounding their valley. However, no image is as popular or as storied as that of La India Dormida or the 'Sleeping Indian.' According to local lore, there was once a beautiful native princess that lived in the valley. When the Spanish arrived, the princess fell deeply in love with one of the conquistadores. After a brief but intense romance, she petitioned her father to marry the Spaniard. However, since she was destined to marry someone of royal blood, and the conquistador was busy claiming their native lands for the Spanish crown, her father promptly refused.

Upon having her heart broken, the princess immediately took her own life. After being buried in the hills, earth and dust gradually covered her body, giving shape to the mountain that rises over the valley. However, the legend insists that the princess is merely sleeping, and awaiting the day when her forbidden love can be pursued. Today, locals have popularized the story to serve as a parable for never denying someone's love.

long been revered by the indigenous peoples of the country. Unfortunately, they are extremely sensitive to human intrusion and climate change, so as their numbers continue to deplete, it's increasingly unlikely that you'll see them in the wild.

HOT SPRINGS

Located on the west side of town (follow the signs), **Pozos Termales** (Thermal Baths; Calle los Pozos; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-5pm) is the perfect place to soak the afternoon away. The forested complex is remote and rustic, and home to a series of pools with varying temperatures and supposed curative properties. After your bath, there is an area (a bucket, to be more precise) for applying healing mud to your skin. The next step is to take the requisite photo or two, and then head to the showers to rinse off. If you're looking to detox or simply scrub down, this is the perfect place to head.

MUSEO DE EL VALLE

On the eastern side of El Valle's conspicuous church is the very modest **Museo de El Valle** (Av Central; admission US\$0.25; ☎ 10am-2pm Sun), which contains exhibits of petroglyphs and ceramics left by the indigenous peoples who lived in the area hundreds of years ago. There is also some religious art (the museum is owned by the church next door), mostly statues of Christ and the Virgin, as well as some historical and geological information on El Valle's volcano.

SQUARE-TRUNKED TREES

People who stand to gain from increased tourism to the area like to mention El Valle's *arboles cuadrados* (square-trunked trees), which can be found directly behind the Hotel Camp-

estre. After a short 10-minute hike through the forest, you'll come across a thicket of trees that aren't exactly round, but they're not exactly square, either. You might want to see them for yourself and then ponder, 'What's the big deal even if they are square?'

GARDENS

For the best selection of *orquídeas* (orchids) in the area, visit the pleasant **Aprovaca Orquídeas** (admission free; ☎ 9am-4pm). Some 32 volunteers work to maintain the lovely flowers inside the greenhouse and the grounds, and they welcome visitors to show off the 96 varieties of orchids cultivated – it's well worth a visit. Look for the 'Orquídeas' sign on the way into town.

Activities

HIKING

Ringed by 1000m-tall mountains, and surrounded by humid cloud forest, El Valle is a hiker's paradise. From the town center, an extensive network of trails radiates out into the valley and up into the hills, and there are possibilities for anything from short day hikes to overnight excursions.

Serious trekkers should consider excursions to the tops of Cerro Cara Coral, Cerro Gaital and Cerro Pajita to the north, Cerro Gaital and Cerro Guacamayo to the south, and Cerro Tagua to the east. It also possible to make an ascent to the top of La India Dormida (see above). For the most part, the valley floor has been cleared for agricultural and pastoral land, though the peaks remain covered in dense forest.

Although it is possible to hike independently, trails are not always clearly marked,

PANAMA'S NATIONAL FLOWER

While hiking through the forests around El Valle, be sure to look for Panama's national flower, a terrestrial orchid known as the *flor del espíritu santo* or the 'holy ghost orchid.' This stunning flower, which was given its unforgettable name by Spanish missionaries during the colonial era, is perfectly shaped like a red-spotted dove emerging from ivory petals.

The flower is most commonly found along the forest floor beside a trail, but it can also be found growing on the branches of large trees. The orchid blooms from July to October, and has an unforgettable aroma. Please do not pick the flowers or dig up the bulbs as the holy ghost orchid is threatened by overharvesting throughout its range due to its aesthetic and cultural value.

and it is recommended that you seek out local advice before hitting the trails. If you're interested in hiring a guide, **Contacto con la Naturaleza** (Contact with Nature; ☎ 623 4122, 629 3722; elvalledeanton@hotmail.com; Av Central), next door to the internet café, provides bilingual guides for US\$5 per hour.

CANOPY TOURS

Although canopy tours are about as prevalent as rice and beans in Costa Rica, they're still quite new to the Panama tourist scene. For the uninitiated, a canopy tour consists of a series of platforms anchored into the forest canopy that are connected by zip lines. Although they were originally used by biologists to study the rainforest canopy, today they function primarily as a way for gringos to get their eco-kicks.

The **Canopy Adventure** (El Valle ☎ 983 6547; Panama City ☎ 612 9176; canopy ride US\$40, swim US\$2, admission to falls US\$2; ☎ 8am-4pm) is a suspended ride that uses cables, pulleys and a harness to allow you to view a rainforest from dozens of meters above the jungle floor. You'll be in a harness dangling among jungle trees as you ride from one platform to another (there are six in all), at times gliding over Chorro El Macho.

Although its ecological merit is somewhat questionable, there's no denying the rush you'll get as you soar through the air with your legs flailing to and fro. Of course, unless you like to expose your private parts to strangers, don't do this in a dress or short shorts.

BIRD-WATCHING

The forests around El Valle offer numerous opportunities for bird-watching, especially if you're looking for hummingbirds – commonly spotted species include the green hermit, the violet-headed hummingbird and the white-tailed emerald.

Those planning a bird-watching trip should contact **Mario Bernal Greco** (☎ 693 8213), who is a member of a prominent local conservation group, and is one of the country's top nature guides. If he can't be reached on his cell phone, you can stop by Cabañas Potosí – his mother runs the joint.

HORSEBACK RIDING

Near the Hotel Campestre you'll see a sign for **Alquiler de Caballos** (☎ 646 5813; horse rental per hr US\$5, with guide per hr US\$10), with a horse mural painted on the side of a building. The stable here has over 30 horses, which make for some fine transportation to explore the nearby mountains. Guides speak Spanish only.

Tours

Based at Crater Valley Hotel, the **Panama Explorer Club** (☎ 983 6939; www.pexclub.com) is an adventure tourism outfit that offers a wide range of activities. Available tours include hiking La India Dormida (US\$20 per person, three to four hours), climbing and rappelling (US\$20 per person, three to four hours), river kayaking (US\$45 per person) and mountain-biking tours (US\$10 to US\$15 per person).

Sleeping

Although reservations are generally not necessary, be advised that El Valle can get busy on weekends and on national holidays as urban dwellers flee the capital and head for the hills.

Due to the chilly climate, all of the rooms in El Valle have hot water showers.

BUDGET

Motel-Restaurante Niña Delia (☎ 983 6110; Av Central; s/d/tr/q US\$12/15/20/25; ☎) The town's cheapest accommodation has benefited from a recent renovation, though it's still a bare-bones motel beneath the fresh coat of paint. With that said, the six spartan rooms at the Niña Delia are perfectly acceptable if you don't need much more than a bed and bathroom. If you're on a budget, stop by the attached restaurant for all of your favorite Panamanian staples.

Residencial El Valle (☎ 983 6536; residencialelvalle@hotmail.com; Av Central; s/d US\$25/30; 📍) This long-standing budget hotel has earned its deserved popularity through a simple formula. Over the years, the Residencial El Valle has continued to offer clean no-fuss rooms with private hot showers and a personalized level of service. Throw in a few extras like bike rentals, a guide service, an attached handicraft shop and a popular restaurant and you've got yourself a successful hotel.

Don Pepe (☎ 983 6425; hoteldonpepe@hotmail.com; Av Central; s/d US\$25/30; 📍) Located next door to Residencial El Valle, Don Pepe follows the same formula as its somewhat more popular neighbor. Fairly basic rooms are sparsely furnished, though they're well cared for by the proficient staff. On a clear night, be sure to check out the starry skies and panoramic view from the roof.

Cabañas Potosí (☎ 983 6181; Calle La Reforma; campsites US\$10, d cabin US\$40; 📍) Situated about 1.5km west of the town center on peaceful, park-like grounds with lovely views of the craggy ridges ringing the valley. The four stand-alone wooden cabins have two beds apiece with en-suites, and there's level ground here for setting up camp (two-person tent provided). This is a great option if you want a peaceful night's sleep amidst a tranquil forest setting.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hotel y Restaurante Los Capitanes (☎ 983 6080; Calle El Gido; d/ste US\$45/85; 📍) Owned and managed by a former captain in the German merchant marine, this spic-and-span hotel and restaurant runs like a well-oiled ship. On offer are a number of handsome rooms with fine details, firm beds and spacious hot-water bathrooms, as well as a few palatial suites for anyone looking for a little more stretching room. Amenities include an excellent European-inspired restaurant, an open-air café and even a kiddie pool for the little ones.

Los Nances (☎ 983 6126; Calle El Nance; d with breakfast US\$50; 📍) This secluded private residence sits high above the valley floor and offers lovely views of the surrounding hillsides. The friendly English-speaking retired couple rents four of their bedrooms, each of which has an intimate personal touch that is evident from the moment you walk in. Since the house is lived in year-round, it's best to phone ahead to let them know you're coming, and it's not a

bad idea to ask for directions since the house can be a bit tricky to find.

Park Eden (☎ 938 6167; www.parkedn.com; Calle El Nance; d US\$60-120, house from US\$195; 📍 📺) Park Eden, overflowing with country charm, is a beautiful retreat – the owner is an American-trained designer, and it shows (his wife is from Ecuador). This gorgeous home offers three very tastefully appointed rooms, plus a separate two-story house, a cottage and a little room behind the cottage. Regardless of which room you choose, staying with the friendly couple is simply a delight, and the house itself is bound to sooth your travel-worn spirits.

Hotel Rincón Valleró (☎ 983 6175; www.rinconvalleró.com; Calle Espave; cabin d US\$75, ste US\$95-125; 📍 📺) Located in a peaceful residential neighborhood, the Rincón Valleró is a contemporary hotel consisting of several cabins scattered around a flower-ringed pond. Although the tranquil ambience of the rustic setting is the main appeal for choosing this spot, guests looking to mingle with one another can congregate in the main building. Here, you'll find a relaxed restaurant (see p136) serving an eclectic mix of food as well as several sitting areas overlooking the gardens.

Crater Valley Resort & Adventure Spa (☎ 215 2330; www.crater-valley.com; per person from US\$80; 📍 📺 🚿) As its lengthy moniker implies, this resort and spa various offers pursuits ranging from climbing on the rock wall and guided rainforest hikes to soaking in the pool and pampering yourself in the spa. The entire complex sits on beautifully tended grounds that are covered with water features, and the rooms themselves are expertly decorated with tall ceilings, colorfully painted walls and patios with hammocks. Prices vary significantly depending on the time of year, the day of the week and the size of the room, so it's best to book ahead and try to save a bit of cash.

Hotel Campestre (☎ 983 6146; www.hotelcampestre.com; Calle Club Campestre; d US\$92; 📍 📺) The oldest hotel in town is a rustic affair with soaring wood beams, vaulted ceilings and a large fireplace, and is located on manicured grounds near the square-trunked tree grove. Unfortunately, the Campestre has seen better days since its opening in the 1920s, and most of the rooms here are starting to show their age. All in all, it's not a bad option if you're looking for a relaxed setting and a certain historic grace, though don't be surprised if the rooms don't meet your expectations.

Eating

Restaurante Santa Librada (Av Central; mains US\$2-4.50) This cheap and cheerful restaurant serves hearty portions of Panamanian staples such as *lomo de arroz* (roast beef with rice) and *bistec picado* (spicy shredded beef). If you're in search of lighter fare, most sandwiches and breakfasts are under US\$2, and the restaurant's *sancocho de gallina* (a stew-like chicken soup) is locally famous.

Pinocchio's (☎ 983 6975; Av Central; pizzas US\$3-8; ☎ 11am-9pm Thu-Sun) This much-loved pizzeria is your best (and only) spot in El Valle for tasty and cheap pizzas with a range of toppings. Also available here is rotisserie-cooked chicken, meaty burgers and tacos, though locals and tourists alike swear that the pizzas here are to die for.

Hotel Rincón Vallero (mains US\$6-10) Located beside a koi pond, this cozy restaurant serves up plates of fresh seafood including jump shrimp, sea bass ceviche and grilled corvina. It also has an extensive wine and cocktail list, which makes this a great choice if you're wining and dining your better half.

Hotel y Restaurante Los Capitanes (Calle El Cido; mains US\$8-12) The menu at this fine restaurant features European cuisine – specials change daily but always include tasty German staples like *jager schnitzel* (breaded and fried meat). Don't miss the freshly baked cakes and pies or the *batidos* (fruit shakes), as well as the long list of imported beers including dark and dreamy *Warsteiner*.

La Casa de Lourdes (mains US\$11-15) El Valle's most beautiful restaurant has the look and feel of a Tuscan villa. Situated on the back terrace with stunning views, Lourdes offers an eclectic menu of dishes like lobster and sweet corn risotto, pork chop with a port wine and guava sauce, and blackened corvina with tamarind.

Getting There & Away

To leave El Valle you can hop aboard a bus traveling along Av Central; on average, they depart every 30 minutes. The final destinations are painted on windshields of the bus. If your next destination isn't posted, catch a bus going in the same direction and transfer when appropriate. To reach El Valle from the Interamericana, disembark any bus at Las Uvas (marked by both a sign for El Valle and a pedestrian overpass), about 5km west of San Carlos. Minibuses pick up passengers at this

turnoff and travel to El Valle (US\$1, one hour, every 30 minutes).

Getting Around

Despite El Valle's small size, taxis ply Av Central all day long. You can go anywhere in town for US\$2.

SANTA CLARA

Although the beach at Santa Clara consists of sparkling white sand and towering coconut palms, somehow the tourist crowds seemed to have passed on by. Needless to say, this is a great destination if you want to lounge about for days on end without having to worry about someone stealing your stretch of sand.

Santa Clara itself is little more than a sparsely populated fishing village that edges between patches of dry tropical rainforest and the vast blue expanse of the Pacific. However, there's plenty of local flavor here to soak up in between your beach-lying sessions, and the high proportion of locals to tourists is a nice change from some of the country's more popular destinations.

Orientation

The tiny community of Santa Clara is located 11km southwest of the Interamericana turnoff for El Valle. There are two Santa Clara turnoffs from the Interamericana; one is posted for the town and the other is posted for the beach (Playa Santa Clara). The first turnoff you'll see as you come from the east is the turnoff for town.

Activities

A few years ago, the owners of XS Memories (see opposite) launched **Kayak Panama** (☎ 993 3096; tours per person from US\$60) with canoeing guide **Sven Schiffer** (☎/fax 993 3620; vsschiffer@cwpa.net.pa). Now the foremost kayaking agency in the country, it offers a wide range of excursions, including trips on the Río Chame and the Río Santa María, salt marsh paddling tours and kayak trips from the top of the Continental Divide to the Caribbean. Tours have a three-person minimum. Kayak Panama operates only during the rainy season (April to November). English, German and Spanish are spoken.

Sleeping & Eating

If you go down the first turnoff for Santa Clara from the Interamericana for about 1km, you'll see signs for Balneario Santa Clara, Las Veraneras and Las Sirenas.

GHOSTS OF AN INVASION

About 1km past the Playa Santa Clara turnoff, you'll notice an open area where a wide, paved path stretches straight out from both sides of the Interamericana. This was once a key runway used by Noriega's forces, and it has some interesting history.

(Please note that although there are weeds growing from small cracks in the runway, the runway is occasionally used for private charter flights. As one unsuspecting reader found out, it's not advisable to actually walk down it.)

During the days of the Panama Defense Forces (PDF) there was a major army base here, known as Río Hato, to which the runway belonged. There were many barracks, an armory, a clinic and near the end of a 3km road that runs from the Interamericana to the coast, paralleling the runway, was Noriega's vacation home, near the hamlet of Farallón.

At 1am on December 20, 1989, the 'H-hour' of the US invasion of Panama, two F-117A stealth fighters swooped undetected out of the night sky and dropped two 2000lb bombs near the Río Hato PDF barracks. The bombing marked the first time that the USA's most sophisticated fighter plane was used in combat.

The US Secretary of Defense said at the time that the planes performed their missions flawlessly, precisely hitting their intended targets after flying all night from their base in Nevada. Later, the Pentagon admitted that the pilots had confused their targets, hitting one out of sequence and badly missing the second.

Río Hato was also where the US Army suffered its highest concentration of casualties during the invasion, but most were not the result of combat. Moments after the bombs exploded, an 850-man contingent of army rangers parachuted onto the runway. However, because they jumped from an altitude of only 150m and landed on pavement, many of them sustained serious injuries. More than two dozen members of the elite force were incapacitated by broken legs, torn knee ligaments and other injuries.

One of the most interesting things about all this is not the army's errors in planning the jump, but that the US military acted with great humanity in its bombing. Strange as that may sound, the targets the stealths were ordered to hit were empty fields near barracks filled with young Panamanian soldiers, not the barracks themselves. By dropping bombs near the barracks, the US military hoped to scare the soldiers into surrendering and thus avoid unnecessary bloodshed. In fact, hundreds of Panamanian soldiers at Río Hato did surrender immediately. For all the criticism leveled at the USA during and after the invasion, there were many such instances of restraint that went unmentioned.

Although the building itself is no longer standing, there is an interesting story attached to the former residence of Noriega. One of the main reasons former US President George Bush ordered the invasion was to arrest Noriega and bring him to trial on drug-trafficking charges. A big story on the third day of the invasion was US General Maxwell Thurman's announcement that US soldiers had found more than 50kg of cocaine in Noriega's vacation house. It wasn't until a month later, after persistent questioning from reporters, that the Pentagon admitted that the suspicious substance was actually corn flour used to make tamales.

Restaurante y Balneario Santa Clara (☎ 993 2123; campsites per person US\$2; meals US\$4-8; (P)) This popular campsite is a steal – for only a few bucks per night, you can get a private rancho on the beach as well as access to clean toilet and shower facilities. Even if you're not camping here, this is one of the few restaurants in the area, and the catch of the day – whatever it is – tastes fantastic when served in front a Pacific sunset. You can also arrange horseback riding and snorkeling trips here for a few dollars an hour.

XS Memories (☎ 993 3096; www.xsmemories.com; campsite per person US\$3, motor home hookup without/with air-con US\$8/12, d from US\$55; (P) (♿) (♿)) Just north of the turnoff for Playa Santa Clara, 100m from the Interamericana, is this American-owned and -run outfit. The property contains three spacious guestrooms with air-con, private hot-water bathrooms and tiled floors, more than 20 water, sewer and electrical hookups for motor homes, an area to pitch tents, an inviting swimming pool and a sports bar with DirecTV that has offers all the latest sporting

matches. There's also an excellent restaurant that serves American staples such as juicy cheeseburgers, grilled steaks and pork chops – breakfasts are equally good and filling.

Restaurante y Cabañas Las Veranera (☎ 993 3313; cabins from US\$60; 📍 🚽 🚿) These beachside cabañas offer a variety of different sized cabins with en-suite hot-water bathrooms to meet the needs of you and your traveling companions. The loveliest accommodations here are the split-level thatch-cabins, which are built on stilts and overlook the crashing waves. There is also a small restaurant and bar on the beach here, which is perfect for some fresh ceviche, topped off with a sundowner.

Las Sirenas (☎ 993 3235; traduca@cwpanama.net; d US\$90; 📍 🚽) A veritable gem hidden amidst a scenic stretch of coastline, Las Sirenas is a peaceful and secluded spot consisting of several cottages with modern accents and vaulted ceilings. Each cottage is brimming with amenities including air-con, palatial hot-water bathrooms, kitchenettes and dining areas – there is no restaurant on the premises, so you should be prepared to self-cater. The entire complex is set on a lush hillside just 150m from the crashing surf.

Getting There & Away

To get to Santa Clara, just take any bus that would pass through Santa Clara and tell the bus driver to drop you in town. When it's time to leave Santa Clara, just stand at any of the bus stops in town and hail a bus going in the direction you want to go. From Santa Clara, you can catch onward buses west to Antón (US\$1, 30 minutes, every 30 minutes) or Penonomé (US\$1.75, one hour, every 30 minutes). It's also easy to catch a ride on buses heading as far as David (US\$10, 5½ hours, every hour) and points along the way. Heading east, you can find buses to San Carlos (US\$1, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes), Chame (US\$1.25, 45 minutes, every 20 minutes) and Panama City (US\$2.50, 1¾ hours, every 20 minutes).

Getting Around

Except late at night, there are always taxis parked beside the turnoff on the Interamericana for Santa Clara (the town, not the beach). You can take one for US\$2 to get to any of the places mentioned previously. The beach is 1.8km from the Interamericana.

FARRALLÓN (PLAYA BLANCA)

About 3km west of the Santa Clara turn-off is the former village of Farallón, which nowadays is starting to slowly adopt its alternative name, Playa Blanca. Prior to 2000, Farrallón was just like any other fishing village along the Pacific coast, except of course for the ruins of the Panamanian military base here that was destroyed during the US invasion to oust Noriega. However, when the Colombian-owned Decameron hotel chain opened a resort here at the turn of the millennium, suddenly 'Playa Blanca' was cast as the hottest beach destination in all of Panama.

In 2003, the Spanish-owned Barceló hotel chain opened up a second resort here, which has injected a healthy amount of competition into the local economy. Of course, these days it seems like everyone in Farallón is cashing in, especially since apartments, condos, gated communities and shopping malls are popping up all around town. Needless to say, locals are divided about whether or not this sudden spate of development is exactly what the town needs, though it's unlikely that the boom is going to stop anytime soon. And, it's no small wonder that Farallón survived as long as it did, especially considering that Playa Blanca is one of the most beautiful beaches along the Pacific coast.

The more pretentious the name, the more pretentious the resort, which is why the **Royal Decameron Beach Resort & Casino** (☎ 993 2255; www.decameron.com; all-inclusive per person from US\$150; 📍 🚽 🚿 🛏 🍷) refers to itself as the Panama's top beach resort. And with more than 600 luxury rooms set on a picture-perfect stretch of powder white sand, and enough pools, bars and restaurants to count on both hands, it may have a point. If you're planning on staying at the 'Decameron' (its proper name is too much of a mouthful for us), it's worth going online as discounted all-inclusive packages are sometimes available if you book in advance.

Of course, the Decameron isn't the only player on the block now, at least not since the **Barceló Playa Blanca** (☎ 264 6444; www.barcelo.com; all-inclusive per person from US\$150; 📍 🚽 🚿 🛏 🍷) rolled into town. Although it's not nearly as grand in scope as the Decameron, the 200-room Mediterranean-inspired Barceló is worthy competition, especially since it brings to the table a world-class spa, a putting green, an outdoor theater and a marina chock-full of water craft. As with the Decameron, go online to save yourself a few dollars before arriving.

If you're just visiting for the day, and you don't have the cash to blow on a night of hedonistic luxury, both hotels offer day-passes that give you full access to their facilities. Of course, beaches are public land in Panama, so as long as you don't get into trouble, no one is going to stop you from laying out in front of either hotel and working on your tan.

ANTÓN

pop 9000

Antón, 15km west of Farallón, is in the center of a lush valley that's sprinkled with rice fields and cattle ranches. Although it has little to offer the tourist, except of course its natural beauty, its annual **patron saint festival** (January 13 to 16) and its folkloric festival **Toro Guapo** (October 13 to 15) are the best in the province. The people of Antón seemingly live for these events, and it's worth stopping by to partake in the festivities if you find yourself in the area.

As you drive into Antón along the Interamericana, you'll notice several hotels and restaurants as well as a bank and a couple of gas stations. Also along this stretch is the **Hotel Rivera** (☎ 987 2245; d with fan/air-con US\$20/30; P ♻️ 🚰), which is a decent place to rest for the night. Cinderblock rooms with sparse furnishings are anything but special, though the air-con works and the hot water is occasionally turned on. Of course, it's hard to complain at this price, and the inviting pool is a nice amenity, especially when the summer sun is beating down.

Westbound buses including those heading to Penonomé can stop in Antón if you ask the driver in advance.

PENONOMÉ

pop 17,000

The provincial capital of Coclé Province is a bustling cross-roads city with a rich history. Founded in 1581, Penonomé blossomed so quickly that it served as the temporary capital of the isthmus in 1671 after the destruction of the first Panama City (now known as Panamá Viejo) and until Nueva Panamá (now known as Casco Viejo) was founded a few years later.

Today, the lifeline of the city is the Interamericana, which bisects Penonomé and ensures a steady stream of goods flowing in and out. If you're heading west, it's likely that you will pass through here at some

point, though it's worth hopping off the bus for the city's two principal attractions, namely its annual festivals and its traditional Panama hats. Penonomé also serves as good jumping off point for the nearby artisan town of La Pintada (p141).

Orientation

Penonomé straddles the Interamericana 144km west of Panama City and 16km northwest of Antón. On the eastern side of town, the highway forks around an Esso gas station. One branch, Av Juan Demostenes Arosemena, goes to the right, and the other, the Interamericana, goes to the left.

Av Juan Demostenes Arosemena is the city's main street. Along it are two banks, a post office and the town church. The avenue actually ends at the church, which faces the central plaza. During Carnaval, the plaza and every street for three blocks around it are packed with people.

Information

For banking, try BBVA (Interamericana) or Banco Nacional de Panamá and Banistmo, both along Av Juan Demostenes Arosemena. All have ATMs.

The **post office** (Av Juan Demostenes Arosemena) is in the Palacio Municipal behind the church. There's a **mercado público** (public market; ☎ 4:30am-3:30pm) that's fun to browse near the central plaza. There is no tourist office in town.

The city's principal **hospital** (Interamericana) is at the eastern end of town.

Festivals & Events

Carnaval, held during the four days preceding Ash Wednesday, is a huge happening in Penonomé. In addition to the traditional festivities (the dancing, the masks, the costumes, the queen's coronation), floats here are literally *floated* down a tributary of the Río Zaratí.

Less popular but still a big crowd pleaser is Penonomé's **patron saint festival**. This festival is generally held on December 8 and 9 (or the following Saturday if both these dates fall on weekdays). Following a special Mass, Penonomé's Catholics carry a statue of the saint through the city's streets. The Mass and procession seem incidental to the celebration that takes place outside the church for two days.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Dos Continentes (☎ 997 9326; fax 997 9390; Interamericana; d from US\$20; **P**) Near the point where the Interamericana forks, Hotel Dos Continentes is the largest hotel in town, and arguably one of the best deals. There are definitely cheaper places to lay your head, though you'll sleep well at night in this secure location with well-lit and spacious rooms, complete with modern hot-water bathrooms and comfortable beds. Ask for a room in the newly renovated section, which will set you back a few extra dollars, but is much, much friendlier on the eyes.

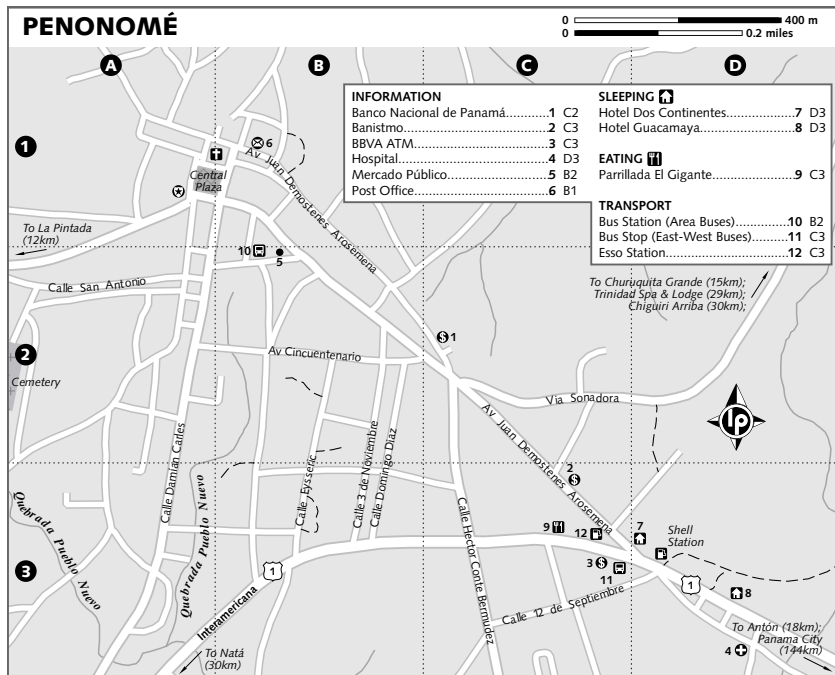
Hotel Guacamaya (☎ 991 0117; hguacamaya@cwpanama.com.pa; Interamericana; d from US\$30; **P** ♿) A few doors down from the Hotel Dos Continentes, rooms at the Guacamaya are slightly more expensive, though they're significantly more spacious. Regular rooms with modern furniture are nice enough, though it's worth paying a few extra dollars and snagging one of the larger rooms that overlooks the mountains. There is a good restaurant on the premises that serves up all your standard Panamanian offerings.

Parrillada El Gigante

(Interamericana; mains US\$3-5) A short walk to the west of the Esso station, this pleasant, open-sided restaurant serves traditional country-style food and hot, cheesy pizzas. Courtesy of the Lebanese owner, there are also several Middle Eastern dishes on the menu including falafel and hot pita bread.

Getting There & Away

Buses traveling to and from Penonomé via the Interamericana use a small parking lot opposite the Hotel Dos Continentes as a passenger pick-up and drop-off point. Buses pass through in either direction every 10 to 15 minutes. Area buses, such as those to Churuquita Grande (US\$1, 45 minutes, every 30 minutes), Aguadulce (US\$1, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes), La Pintada (US\$1, every 30 minutes), San Pedro, Chiguirri Arriba (US\$1.50, 80 minutes, seven per day) and El Copé (US\$1.50, one hour), use a station two blocks southeast of the central plaza. From Penonomé there are frequent buses to Panama City (US\$4, 2½ hours, every 20 minutes) and David (US\$7, 4½ hours, every 35 minutes).



PANAMA HATS

A Panama hat or simply a Panama is a traditional brimmed hat made from a Panama-hat palm (*Carludovica palmata*). Although originally from Ecuador, the hat became popular in Panama during the construction of the canal when thousands of Panamas were imported for use by the workers. After American President Theodore Roosevelt donned a Panama during his historic visit to the canal, the hats became the height of fashion.

Unlike the better-known Panamas from Ecuador, which are woven from crown to brim in one piece, this kind is made by a braiding process, using a half-inch braid of palm fiber, usually of alternating or mixed white and black. The finished braid is wound around a wooden form and sewn together at the edges, producing a round-crowned, black-striped hat. It's a common sight in the rural parts of Panama, and it's not uncommon for political contenders to don hats periodically to appear as 'one of the people.'

Penonomé is known throughout Panama as the place to buy the hats that bear the country's name. The highest-quality Penonomé hats are so tightly put together that they can hold water – prices range from US\$10 up to US\$150. Surprisingly, there's no one place to buy these hats in Penonomé as they are made in outlying towns and brought to the city for sale. However, many are sold by hat vendors standing outside stores and restaurants near the Esso gas station by the entrance to town. You can also try the **Mercado de Artesanías Coclé** (☎ 8am-4pm) at the eastern end of town and the Mercado de Artesanías La Pintada in the nearby town of La Pintada (see below).

Getting Around

Due to its size and importance, Penonomé has no shortage of taxis. The best place to hail one is by the Esso gas station, near the entrance to town. You can also find one near the central plaza. The fare for any destination in town is not usually more than US\$3, and often it's half that.

LA PINTADA

This small foothill town, just 12km northwest of downtown Penonomé, boasts an artisans' market and a cigar factory. If you're staying in Penonomé for the night or simply passing through the area, it's worth stopping at La Pintada to pick up some attractive handicrafts and a few fresh-rolled cigars direct from the source.

La Pintada's famous **Mercado de Artesanías La Pintada** (Paintado Artisans' Market; ☎ 983 0313; ☎ 9am-4pm) specializes in Penonomé-style Panama hats. The material used in Panamas occasionally varies from one town to the next, though here the headgear is made of *bellota* (palm fiber) and also of *pita*, which is related to cactus. There are several *bellota* and *pita* plants growing in front of the market, so you can see what they look like. Other items of particular interest are dolls wearing handmade folkloric costumes, *seco* (the local fire-water) bottle covers made from hat palm, and handmade brooms.

The market is easy to find. As you drive through La Pintada on the main road from Penonomé, you'll come to a very large soccer field on the left side of the road. The market is on the far side of this field.

The second obligatory stop in La Pintada is the **Cigars Joyas de Panama** (☎/fax 983 0304; joyapan@yahoo.com). The factory's owner, Miriam Padilla, began growing tobacco in La Pintada with three Cubans in 1982, though they went their separate ways in 1987 when the Cubans emigrated to Honduras to open a cigar factory. Left to her own devices, Miriam sent choice samples of her tobacco to tourists and other people she'd met in Panama over the years, seeking investors for a factory. Today Miriam and her son, Braulio Zurita, are La Pintada's largest employers, employing 80 workers who make a total of 22,000 cigars a day. The employees work at rows of desks in a long, concrete-sided, aluminum-roofed, one-story building the size of a large home, which is the pride of the neighborhood.

The cigars are made in an assembly process that begins at one end of the building with leaf separation from stem, and ends at the other end of the building with the packaging of the final product. From here, the cigars are shipped primarily to the USA, France and Spain. A box of 25 of the highest-quality cigars costs US\$50 in Panama and twice that outside the country. Joyas de Panama cigars

also come flavored – with a hint of vanilla, rum or amaretto. Miriam and Braulio speak English, and cigars are clearly much more than a business to them.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to the factory from the artisans' market, just drive southeast from the market, straight toward Penonomé (ignore the Pana American Cigar Co, which is en route to Joyas de Panama). You'll come to Café Coclé, on your right; take the well-maintained dirt road just beyond it (the road that initially parallels the paved road, not the next right). Follow this road about 1km until you see a simple thatched-roof restaurant on the right side of the road immediately followed by the open-sided cigar factory with a corrugated metal roof.

TRINIDAD SPA & LODGE

our pick **Trinidad Spa & Lodge** (☎ 983 8900; www.posadaecologica.com in Spanish; d US\$79-99; **P** **♿**) is an incredible find that's well worth the time it takes to get there – it's reachable by paved road and located in Chiguirí Arriba, 29km to the northeast of Penonomé. The lodge sits atop a summit with sweeping views of green valleys and imposing peaks intermittently shrouded by clouds, looking not so much like a slice of Central America but rather the famous karst formations outside Guilin, China.

The main structure, set amid gardens that attract many species of bird, is home to an outstanding restaurant and bar. Vegetarian items are available, nearly all of the food is grown organically and a selection of Chilean wines accompanies the meals. The building also houses a holistic spa that offers everything from manicures and facials to mud baths and herbal oil massages.

A short walk from the main building are several secondary buildings, which are home to a variety of tranquil rooms outfitted with private terraces, steamy hot-water bathrooms and colonial-inspired furnishings. The premier room here costs a little more (US\$99) because word has slipped that it is one of former President Moscoso's favorite rooms – many Panamanian guests now request it.

Guests at the Trinidad are treated to guided hiking tours, ranging from easy nature walks to arduous treks, taking in river, waterfall and forest scenes. Area wildlife

includes three-toed sloths, night monkeys, deer and armadillos. Four species of toucan and many species of hummingbird also live here, and can occasionally be seen from the comfort of the inn's creek-fed swimming pool.

Getting There & Away

To get to the inn from central Penonomé, take the well-marked turnoff for Churuquita Grande, several hundred meters northwest of the Hotel Dos Continentes. Proceed past Churuquita Grande and follow the signs to Chiguirí Arriba and the inn.

Alternately, go to Penonomé's area bus station and take a 'Chiguirí Arriba' bus (US\$1.50, 80 minutes). Buses depart at 6am, 10am and 11am and 12:30pm, 2pm, 4:30pm and 6pm.

PARQUE NACIONAL OMAR TORRIJOS & LA RICA

Simply put, Parque Nacional Omar Torrijos (or simply El Copé) is one of Panama's hidden gems, though difficult access and relative obscurity have kept the tourist crowds away. The park encompasses some of the most beautiful forests in Panama, with montane forest on the Pacific side of the Continental Divide and humid tropical forest on the Caribbean side.

El Copé is also home to the full complement of Panama's wildlife, including such rare bird species as the golden-olive woodpecker, red-fronted parrotlet, immaculate antbird and white-throated shrike-tanager, as well as all four species of felines, Baird's tapirs and peccaries.

One of the wonderful surprises to greet visitors to El Copé is the excellent condition of the park's trail system, which was recently given a major makeover by US Peace Corps volunteers, Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente (ANAM) rangers and members of Panama Verde (a Panamanian student ecological group). Another surprise: this park offers the easiest and surest point from which to see both the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans (from the lookout above the cabin).

Orientation & Information

There is a **ranger station** (☎ 6am-8pm; admission per day US\$3) just inside the entrance of the park where visitors can pay accommodations and

admission fees. Permits to camp in the park are payable at the ranger station.

Hiking

Next to the ranger station you'll find two side-by-side trails – the leftmost trail follows the ridgeline and summits a nearby mountain in about an hour. Here, you'll be rewarded with panoramic views of both oceans and the surrounding canopy.

If you take the rightmost trail, you'll be following the Caribbean slope of the Continental Divide, though be advised that this trail does not end, and should under no circumstances be attempted without a guide. However, if you can arrange a guide through the ranger station, this is a fantastic trail that passes several rivers, winds up and down several mountain peaks and penetrates deep into the heart of the forest.

Behind the ranger station, you'll find the entrance to a short interpretative trail that points out local species of trees and plants. This trail is only about 500m in length, but it's a great introduction to the flora of the region.

Another hiking option is to spend a night with the Navas family – see below.

Be advised that there are poisonous snakes in the park including the infamous fer-de-lance – as a precaution, inform others of your intentions, always hike in boots and stick to the trails.

Sleeping & Eating

About 200m up the road from the ranger station is a small **cabin** (campsites US\$5, r per person US\$5) with four beds and a kitchen with simple cooking facilities and basic toilet and cold-water shower. It also has a loft and living room, allowing a total of 10 to sleep comfortably if you have your own gear. Either way, you'll need a sleeping bag – it cools off at night in the mountains so bring some warm clothing as well. If you've brought your own tent, there is a groomed spot alongside the cabin where you can pitch for the night.

Another excellent way of visiting the park is taking advantage of the services of the friendly Navas family. They rent rooms in their **house** (☎ 983 9130; r with meals per person US\$15-20) in Barrigon, and they also have a cabaña, **Albergue Navas** (☎ 983 9130; r with meals per person US\$15-20), in La Rica, a beautiful community inside the park. Accommodations at both places are rus-

tic, but very well maintained and inexpensive, with all meals included. The family – Santo and Anna Navas and their sons – work as guides, as they have done in the past for scientists and birders. They help to maintain the park and its trails and their knowledge and love of the area is quite apparent.

Barrigon can be reached by car or public transportation from El Copé. From Barrington it's a two- to three-hour hike or a horseback ride to La Rica, where you'll find a cool and pleasant community with a beautiful river and swimming holes, with access to secluded, orchid-covered waterfalls, virgin rain and cloud forest, and excellent bird-watching.

From La Rica, you can take day hikes to the summits of cerros Marta and Peña Blanca, visit the impressive waterfalls of Chorros de Tife and even hike to the ruins of Torrijos' plane; see p137.

La Rica is remote (no phone, electricity or road), and the hiking is strenuous, but it is a nature lover's dream and comes highly recommended. All the arrangements can be made through Santo and Anna Navas (Spanish only). Call ahead, or ask around for the Navas family when you reach Barrigon.

Getting There & Away

The turnoff for this national park is on the Interamericana, 18km west of Penonomé. From the turnoff, it's another 32.8km to the park's entrance. The road, paved for the first 26km, winds through rolling countryside dotted with farms and small cattle ranches. The paved road ends at the small town of El Copé. The remaining 6.8km of the drive to the park is on a dirt road that's so bad that a 4WD vehicle with a very strong motor and excellent tires is needed. There is no public transportation to the park. If you don't have a car, catch a bus from Penonomé to El Copé (US\$1.50, one hour) and transfer there in a minibus to Barrigon (US\$0.50), the closest village to the park. From there it's a one-hour hike into the park.

If you're driving, take the turnoff as marked from the Interamericana and proceed 26km. You will then see a sign directing you to the park (to the right) and another to the park's Sede Administrativa (administrative office). There's no reason to go to the administrative office, so stay to the right and continue until you reach the park's entrance.

NATÁ

pop 6300

Despite that fact that Natá – founded on May 20, 1522 – is the oldest surviving town in Panama, little remains of this rich history aside from a well-preserved church and a handful of colonial houses. Today, Natá is little more than a sleepy country town, and most of its inhabitants work at the area's sugar refineries or in the fields around town.

Although there's little reason to linger, it's worth stopping in Natá just to take a gander at its historic centerpiece, namely one of the oldest churches in the Americas. The town is also a good base for exploring the ruins at El Caño, one of only two archaeological parks in the country open to the public.

History

In 1515 a chief named Tataracherubi, whose territory covered much of what would later become northern Coclé Province, informed the Spanish conquistadors Alonso Perez de la Rúa and Gonzalo de Badajoz of the wealth of his neighbor to the southwest, a chief named Natá. 'Natá has much gold, but he has few fighting men,' was the gist of that conversation.

Naturally, the conquistadors went after Natá's gold. Perez and his 30 men arrived first; Badajoz and his 130 men were not far behind. Perhaps a bit overanxious, Perez and his party soon found themselves amid a large indigenous settlement. Retreat was impossible, but Perez grabbed the native chief and threatened to kill him, and thus forced Natá to tell his warriors to back off.

Then Badajoz and his well-armed soldiers showed up, and Natá was forced to surrender a large quantity of gold. The Christians remained for two months in the village named after the chief before they headed south and plundered more villages. Two years later, the Spaniards, led by Gaspar de Espinosa, returned to Natá and established one of the earliest European settlements on the isthmus.

The Indians, meanwhile, were enslaved. As an incentive to settle in Natá, the ruthless Spanish governor Pedro Arias de Ávila divided the village and its inhabitants among 60 soldiers who agreed to start a pueblo there.

Sights

IGLESIA DE NATÁ

This historic church, which has remained close to its original state after all these years,

is reason enough to visit Natá. Following an extensive renovation in the late 1990s, the church's fine colonial facade and a remarkable interior have been restored to their former grandeur.

If you look closely at the altar of the Virgin, you'll notice sculpted fruit, leaves and feathered serpents on its two columns – clearly the influence of its indigenous artisans. The position of the carved angels at its base signifies the power the artisans felt the angels possessed.

Notice also the Holy Trinity painting to the right of the altar. The painting was created in 1758 by the Ecuadorian artist José Samaniego, though for many years it was kept from public view. The reason behind this unscrupulous censorship is that the painting represents the Trinity as three people who all look like Christ, which is not in conformity with Church canon.

Under the floor beneath the painting are three skeletons that were discovered by restorers in 1995 while working on the floor. Surprisingly, no one knows who they are or how many other skeletons may be lying beneath the church's floor.

Father Victor Raul Martinez leads Natá's congregation, and he can usually be found inside the church. He speaks English, and if you ask him politely, he'll unlock a door and lead you up a narrow flight of stairs to the belfry. Once in the belfry, you'll discover four bells, all dating from the 20th century – the original bells were made of solid gold and were stolen years ago.

The choir platform above the entryway was built in 1996 to the specifications of the original. The original columns (the rough ones) that support the church's roof are made of *nispero*, a hardwood found in Bocas del Toro Province. The smooth columns are new and also made of *nispero*. The entire ceiling was replaced in 1995 and is made of pine and cedar.

PARQUE ARQUEOLÓGICO DEL CAÑO

This **archaeological park** (adult/child US\$1/0.25; ☎ 9am-noon & 12:30-4pm Tue-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) is one of only two sites in the country that are open to the public (the other is Barriles, in Chiriquí Province, p211). Although the site is extremely modest in comparison to large-scale excavations in other countries in Central America, this is perhaps the best place in Panama to get a sense of the country's indigenous traditions.

The site was excavated during the 1920s by an American who allegedly left with most of the objects he came across. The objects that weren't pilfered are now kept in a small museum, which contains dozens of pieces of pottery, arrowheads and carved stones. The objects are believed to date from a culture that lived in El Caño about 1500 years ago. The few signs at the museum are in Spanish only, and the site's caretaker unfortunately can offer little reliable information about El Caño's history.

In addition to the museum, there is a small excavation pit in the park, which contains a burial site in which five skeletons were found in the exact same position as visitors see them today. Nearby there's also a field containing dozens of stone columns that were lined up and stood on end in recent years, though their significance to the lost culture is unknown.

The turnoff for the town of El Caño is on the Interamericana, about 8km north of Natá. The park is another 3km from the turnoff, down an occasionally mud-slicked road. El Caño is not served by bus, but you can take a taxi here from Natá.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Rey David (☎ 993 5149; s/d US\$18/24; P ♻️) If you find yourself stuck in Natá for the night, there's only one place to stay in town, and it's the Rey David. This modest hotel is located on the main road that leads into town from the Interamericana, and consists of 20 simple concrete box-style rooms with private hot water bathrooms and decent beds. This spot is good value and will definitely do in a pinch, though it's unlikely you'd want to spend any more time here than you need to.

Restaurante Vega (mains US\$2-4) Two doors up from Hotel Rey David, Restaurante Vega serves traditional Panamanian staples as well as a few Chinese staples. Greasy but filling chow mein and fried lo mein with shrimp are a nice change from all the rice and beans.

Getting There & Away

Natá can be reached by all the buses that use this stretch of the Interamericana, except for the few nonstop buses that cruise between Panama City and Paso Canoas. Buses pass by in either direction every 15 minutes or so. Tell the driver to drop you at Natá, and they'll

let you off beside the Restaurante Vega. Often there's a taxi parked in front of the café. You can catch buses eastward to Penonomé (US\$1, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes), Panama City (US\$4, 2½ hours, every 30 minutes) and points in between. Westward, there are regular connections to Aguadulce (US\$0.50, 15 minutes, every 20 minutes), Divisa (US\$1, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes), David (US\$7.50, 4½ hours, every hour) and points all along the Interamericana.

AGUADULCE

pop 8300

Aguadulce's name is a contraction of *agua* and *dulce* (meaning 'sweet water'), and it is said that this bustling city was named by Spaniards who were pleased to come across a freshwater well amid the arid landscape. Today, the town is known more for its *dulce* as the town is surrounded by fields and fields of sugar cane. From mid-January to mid-March of each year, the cane is cut and then refined at several large refineries in the area. One of these mills, the Ingenio de Azúcar Santa Rosa offers tours – a must-do if you're in the area during the grinding season.

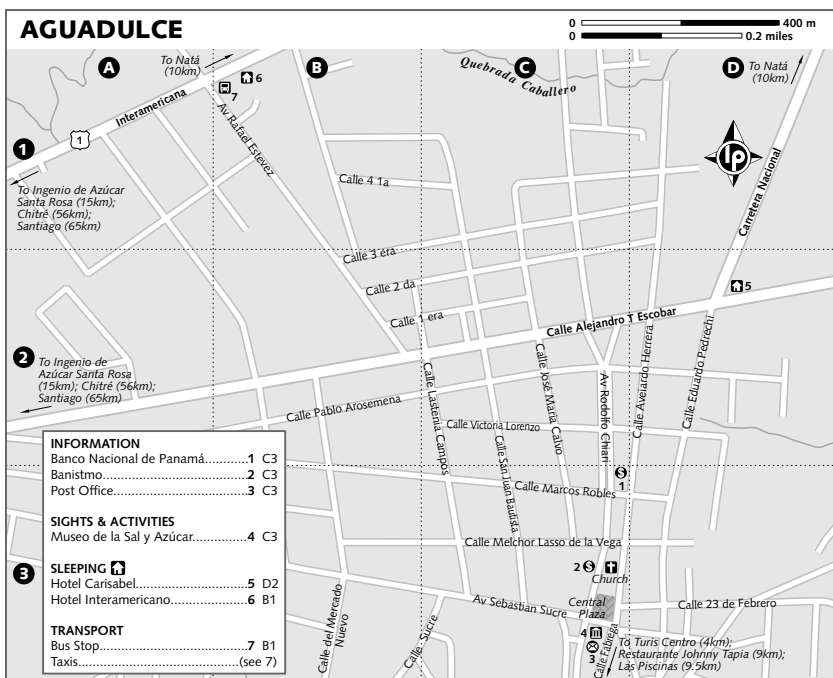
There are salt flats south of downtown, and until recently there was also a sizeable salt works here. Unable to compete with the lower prices of Colombian salt however, the salt works here closed its doors in 1999. Today, the flats now serve as a crucial habitat for marsh and shore birds, and the area is rapidly becoming popular with roseate spoonbills and wood storks, as well as various varieties of local and international birders.

Orientation

Aguadulce is located smack in the center of hot, dry country, 10km south of Natá. Like so many cities and towns in Panama, Aguadulce sits beside the Interamericana, though its downtown is 1km from the highway.

The main road into town from the highway is Av Rafael Estevez. The Hotel Interamericana marks the turnoff. There are always taxis here, and the parking lot next to the hotel is also the town's main bus stop.

To get to Aguadulce's central plaza, drive south on Av Rafael Estevez several blocks until it ends at its intersection with Calle Alejandro T Escobar. Turn left here, onto Calle Alejandro T Escobar, drive 3½ blocks to Av



Rodolfo Chiari and then turn right. The central plaza and church will appear on your left, four blocks later.

Information

Banco Nacional de Panamá (Av Rodolfo Chiari) Has an ATM

Banistmo (Av Rodolfo Chiari) Has an ATM

Post office (Av Rodolfo Chiari) Near the central plaza, just around the corner from the Museo de la Sal y Azúcar.

Sights & Activities

INGENIO DE AZÚCAR SANTA ROSA

The **Santa Rosa Sugar Refinery** (☎ 987 8101/8102; ☎ 7am-4pm Mon-Fri, 7-11:30am Sat), located 15km west of Aguadulce, is a must-see if you're in the area from mid-January to mid-March. During grinding season, the refinery processes over 6500 tons of raw sugar cane per day.

Because the land here is hilly and rocky, the cane must be harvested by hand. Four thousand people are hired to help with harvesting and production, and they bring the cane in as fast as they can, 24 hours a day, six days a week (on Sunday everyone goes to church). Most of the cane is harvested on company land,

but the mill still buys about 3% of its cane from *campesinos* (farmers), who bring it in on carts pulled by tractors and oxen. Around 135kg of cane enters the mill each second via a huge conveyor belt that's continually fed from trucks coming in from the fields. By day's end, the yield of refined sugar is around 675,000kg (1.5 million pounds). All this cane is sent through grinders that resemble a stack of studded roller pins – except that each one weighs 20 tons and is about the size of a Buick. They spin quickly, and the cane that passes through them is crushed flat.

Occasionally the machine chokes. A 10-second choke results in a pileup of 1350kg of cane, and jackhammers are required to remove the clog. To give you an idea of the grinders' power: when a choke starts to occur, railroad ties are pushed into the grinders. In the fraction of a second it takes for the ties to pass through, they are chewed up as if they were breadsticks, but even as they're pulverized, they act as battering rams, punching bunched-up cane through the machines.

Also on the property is a replica of the original house of the mill's first owner,

built in 1911. This museum is nicely done, and contains many exhibits on the history of sugar production in the New World. All its furniture and articles on display are originals.

To book tours, ask for Gonzalo Pérez (he speaks English and Spanish). The refinery would like at least 24 hours' notice to receive visitors.

If you're driving from Aguadulce, the turnoff for the mill will be on the right-hand side of the Interamericana and marked by a sign (there's an Esso station opposite). Take the road 500m, and you'll come to a white guard station with a tiny chapel in front of it. Give your name to the guard and follow instructions.

You can also take a taxi from Aguadulce (which could cost US\$25 if the driver waits for you and takes you back to town), or you can catch any bus headed in the direction of the refinery and tell the driver to drop you at the Ingenio de Azúcar Santa Rosa (US\$0.50, 20 minutes, every 15 minutes). Be forewarned that the walk from the guard station to the mill is more than 1km down a paved road lined with mature teak trees.

LAS PISCINAS

These popular **swimming pools** are located 9.5km from downtown Aguadulce, just beyond the salt flats and 250m past Restaurante Johnny Tapia. They consist of four 1.5m-high pools constructed in tideland about 150m from the high-water mark. If the tide is out, you can walk over the muddy sand that separates the pools from the shore and take a dip. The water's murky (it's saltwater, after all), but it's not polluted, as the pools are nearly 10km from town. The view from the pools is mostly one of a big, beautiful sky, with distant foothills on one side and the ocean spreading out before you on the other.

The tideland beyond the pools is quite expansive. When the tide is out, you can walk nearly 2km before reaching the ocean. But be careful; once the tide turns, it rises rather quickly, and it's frighteningly easy to be swept out to sea if you're caught in the rush. If you've walked 1km or so beyond the pools and notice the tide rising, head inland immediately.

Once the site of a salt works, today the tidelands serve as an important habitat for various species of birds. When the tide is out,

SUGAR IN THE RAW

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

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

In industrial countries, sugar is one of the most heavily subsidized agricultural products. Sugar prices in the US, EU and Japan are on average three times the international market cost as governments maintain elevated price floors by subsidizing domestic production and imposing high tariffs on imports. As a result, sugar exporting countries are excluded from these markets, and thus receive lower prices than they would under a system of free trade.

Brazil, which exports more than a quarter of the world's supply of refined sugar and heads a coalition of sugar exporting nations, has repeatedly lobbied the World Trade Organization to reform the market. For countries like Panama however, sugar production is mainly a domestic industry as it's not profitable to export sugar to countries that levy a high tariff on imports.

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

The next time you're driving through cane country, look for signs advertising *jugo de caña* as there's nothing quite like a glass of fresh sugar cane juice.

the birding here is fantastic – several species of marsh and shore birds descend on the area in search of food. In fact, the flats are also famous for their jumbo shrimp, which are harvested in great abundance and served in restaurants throughout the country. When the tide is in, keep an eye out for sea lions, which are occasionally spotted swimming near the pools.

The best way to get to the pools is by taxi. Tell the driver to take you to *Restaurante Johnny Tapia*. From *Johnny Tapia*, walk south (away from town). On the left side of the road are mangroves, beginning a little way from the restaurant. After you've walked about 100m, you'll see a clearing in the mangroves, and through the clearing you'll be able to spot the pools (if the tide is out).

MUSEO DE LA SAL Y AZÚCAR

This rather unusual **museum** (☎ 997 4280; Plaza 19 de Octubre; adult/child US\$0.75/0.25; 🕒 9am–5pm Tue–Sat, 2–5pm Sun) faces the central plaza. As its name suggests, the Museum of Salt and Sugar documents the history of Aguadulce's salt and sugar industries. A good portion of the exhibits also detail the role Aguadulce's salt and sugar have played in Panamanian life.

The museum also contains artifacts including guns, uniforms and swords from the Colombian civil war (1899–1903). It also displays a number of pre-Columbian artifacts, mostly ceramics and tools found in the cane fields nearby. Signage is in Spanish only.

TURIS CENTRO

This modest **recreation area** (☎ 997 3720; free admission, bike/skate rental per hr US\$1/1.50, boat rental per 15min US\$1.50; 🕒 11am–8pm) is 4km from downtown Aguadulce, on the road to *Restaurante Johnny Tapia*. Here, in the middle of salt flats and scrub brush, you can rent bikes, skates, or hire paddleboats for the small pond. There's also a children's playground and an inexpensive open-sided restaurant. A taxi here costs about US\$2.

Festivals & Events

Aguadulce's biggest celebration is **Carnaval**, which is held the four days before Ash Wednesday, and features parades, floats, Miss Aguadulce ceremonies, and lots of music, dancing and drinking. Other big events include the **patron saint festival** on July 25 and the city's **founding day** on October 18, 19 and 20.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Interamericano (☎ 997 4363; fax 997 4975; Interamericana; d US\$20; 📞 📺 📺) Near Av Rafael Estevez, this popular budget hotel is the best value in town. Cookie-cutter rooms are dimly lit and not much to look at, but you can't beat the price, especially since they come with air-con and private hot-water bathrooms. However, the best perk of staying here is the well-cared-for swimming pool, and the poolside bar-restaurant is a nice touch.

Hotel Carisabel (☎ 997 3800; cnr Calle Alejandro T Escobar & Carretera Nacional; s/d US\$25/35; 📞 📺 📺) Near the downtown area, the recently renovated Carisabel is easily Aguadulce's best accommodations. Although the building itself isn't particularly attractive, the service here is friendly and professional, and the airy rooms have fresh coats of paint, and the tiled bathrooms are spacious and have steamy showers. There's also an inviting pool here as well as popular bar-restaurant serving country-inspired favorites.

Restaurante Johnny Tapia (seafood US\$2.50–3.50; 🕒 from 8am) One of the best places to enjoy Aguadulce's nationally famous jumbo shrimp is this very casual beachside diner just past the salt flats, 9km from downtown Aguadulce. Named for its ebullient owner-waiter, this relaxed spot offers everything from shrimp ceviche and shrimp salad to shrimp soup and pan-fried shrimp.

Getting There & Away

Buses arrive and depart from the small parking lot beside Hotel Interamericana on the highway. Destinations west include Divisa (US\$1, 30 minutes, every 30 minutes), where you can change for buses to Chitré, Santiago (US\$1.75, one hour, every 30 minutes) and David (US\$7, four hours, every 45 minutes). Destinations east include Natá (US\$0.50, 15 minutes, every 20 minutes), Penonomé (US\$1, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes) and Panama City (US\$5, three hours, every 20 minutes). A taxi from the parking lot into town costs US\$1.

Getting Around

Taxis are the best way to get from one part of Aguadulce to another if you don't feel like walking. Fares rarely exceed US\$2, although you can expect to pay a little more at night. Always agree on a price before entering a taxi.

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