

Herrera Province



Herrera Province is centered on the Península de Azuero, a semi-arid landmass that more closely resembles rural USA than the American tropics. Looked upon by Panamanians as their country's heart and soul, the Península de Azuero is one of the country's major farming and ranching centers. It is also the strongest bastion of Spanish culture left in Panama, especially considering that many residents of Azuero can trace lineage directly back to Spain.

However, history and culture didn't arrive in Herrera with the Spaniards. Long before the Spanish conquistadores began carving up the region, Herrera (and even Azuero) was home to the Ngöbe-Buglé, who left behind a rich archaeological record. In fact, much of what we know about the pre-Columbian practices of this indigenous group was obtained from an excavation site near present-day Parita (for more information, see the boxed text, p157). Sadly, the Ngöbe-Buglé were forced out of the province by early colonists, though many were able to later find refuge in the Chiriquí highlands.

Today, Herrera (particularly Azuero) proudly upholds its Spanish legacy, which is best evidenced by the province's famous festivals. In the town of Océ, the patron saint festival is marked by the joyous parading of newlywed couples through the streets. In the town of Parita, the feast of Corpus Christi is celebrated with great merriment (and a large appetite) 40 days after Easter. In the town of Pesé, lively public re-enactments of the Last Supper, Judas' betrayal and Jesus' imprisonment are performed during the week preceding Easter. All of these festivals, which ultimately revolve around copious amounts of eating, drinking and dancing, provide a window into the rich Spanish heritage of this province. Although Herrera is lacking in terms of traditional tourist sights, partying in the streets with fiercely proud locals is a wonderful cultural experience that complements time spent exploring Panama's more scenic attractions.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Kicking off your shoes, letting your hair down and living it up at any of Herrera's lively **festivals** (p151)
- Strolling through historic **Parita** (p156)
- Birding at **Playa El Aguillito** (p155), a tidal mudflat that attracts rare migratory seabirds
- Beholding the apocalyptic **Parque Nacional Sarigua** (p156), a sad monument to environmental devastation



■ POPULATION: 107,830

■ AREA: 2341 SQ KM

■ ELEVATION: SEA LEVEL TO 3478M



CHITRÉ

pop 46,000

Chitré, the capital of Herrera Province, is the largest city on the Península de Azuero, and the cultural and historic capital of the region. Although the city was founded in 1848, colonial records indicate that there was a village here as early as 1558, which indicates that Chitré is one of the oldest settlements in the country. Today, the city is home to several streets of ornate red-tiled row homes, which hark back to the early days of Spanish settlement.

For most travelers, Chitré serves as a springboard for exploring the peninsula. Highlights include the ceramic shops in La Arena, the Humboldt Ecological Station at Playa El Aguillito, Parque Nacional Sarigua, the historic town

of Parita, the *seco* (a distilled liquor akin to rum) factory at Pesé and the wildlife refuge at Cenegón del Mangle, as well as other spots in neighboring Los Santos Province (p161). The sites of some of the peninsula's best festivals are just a quick bus ride away, but Chitré does host a few wild parties of its own (see opposite).

Orientation

The Interamericana connects with the Carretera Nacional (the National Hwy) at the town of Divisa, atop the Península de Azuero. From there, the Carretera Nacional runs southeast 37km to Chitré. From Chitré, it runs 31km further to Las Tablas, in Los Santos Province, then further south toward the southern edge of the peninsula.

LOS FIESTAS DE AZUERO (PART I)

Festivals in the Península de Azuero are famous throughout Panama for their traditional celebrations, many of which revolve around aspects of life in the time of the early Spanish settlers. If your trip to Panama coincides with any of the festivals listed below, it's worth making an effort to visit. You may lose a day or two to a vicious hangover, but partying in the streets with locals until the wee hours of the morning is something you'll never forget.

The following are some of the peninsula's best known festivals:

- Festival of San Sebastián – January 20 in Ocú.
- Carnaval – the four days before Ash Wednesday (February/March) in Chitré and Parita.
- Semana Santa – March/April in Pesé.
- Fiesta de San Juan Bautista – June 24 in Chitré.
- Patronales de San Pablo & San Pedro – June 29 in Pedasí and La Arena.
- Festival del Manito Ocueño, Fiesta Popular, Matrimonio Campesino, El Duelo del Tamarindo & El Penitente de la Otra Vida – August (dates vary) in Ocú.
- Founding of the District of Chitré 1848 – October 19 in Chitré.

For more information on the festivals listed above, see the various town and city listings in this chapter.

For listings of festivals in Los Santos Province, see p163.

Chitré is the first major town the Carretera Nacional encounters as it winds southeast from Divisa. When the highway reaches Chitré, it becomes Paseo Enrique Geenzier, changing name again a dozen blocks further east, to Calle Manuel Maria Correa. The Carretera Nacional re-emerges at the southern end of town.

The town's cathedral and the adjacent central square, Parque Union, are one block south of Calle Manuel Maria Correa between Av Obaldía and Av Herrera. There are numerous hotels and restaurants within a short walk of the square.

Information

For money matters, try **Banco Nacional de Panamá** (Paseo Enrique Geenzier; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Thu & Sat, to 3pm Fri) or **HSBC** (Av Herrera; ☎ 9am-1pm Mon-Fri), which lies just north of the cathedral; both have ATMs. **Sanchi Internet** (Calle Aminta Burgos de Amado; per hr US\$0.75; ☎ 8:30am-11:30pm), one block west of the park, has reliable connections and keeps regular hours.

Tourist information is available at the new IPAT office in La Arena.

Sights

For information on popular day-trips from Chitré, see p154.

MUSEO DE HERRERA

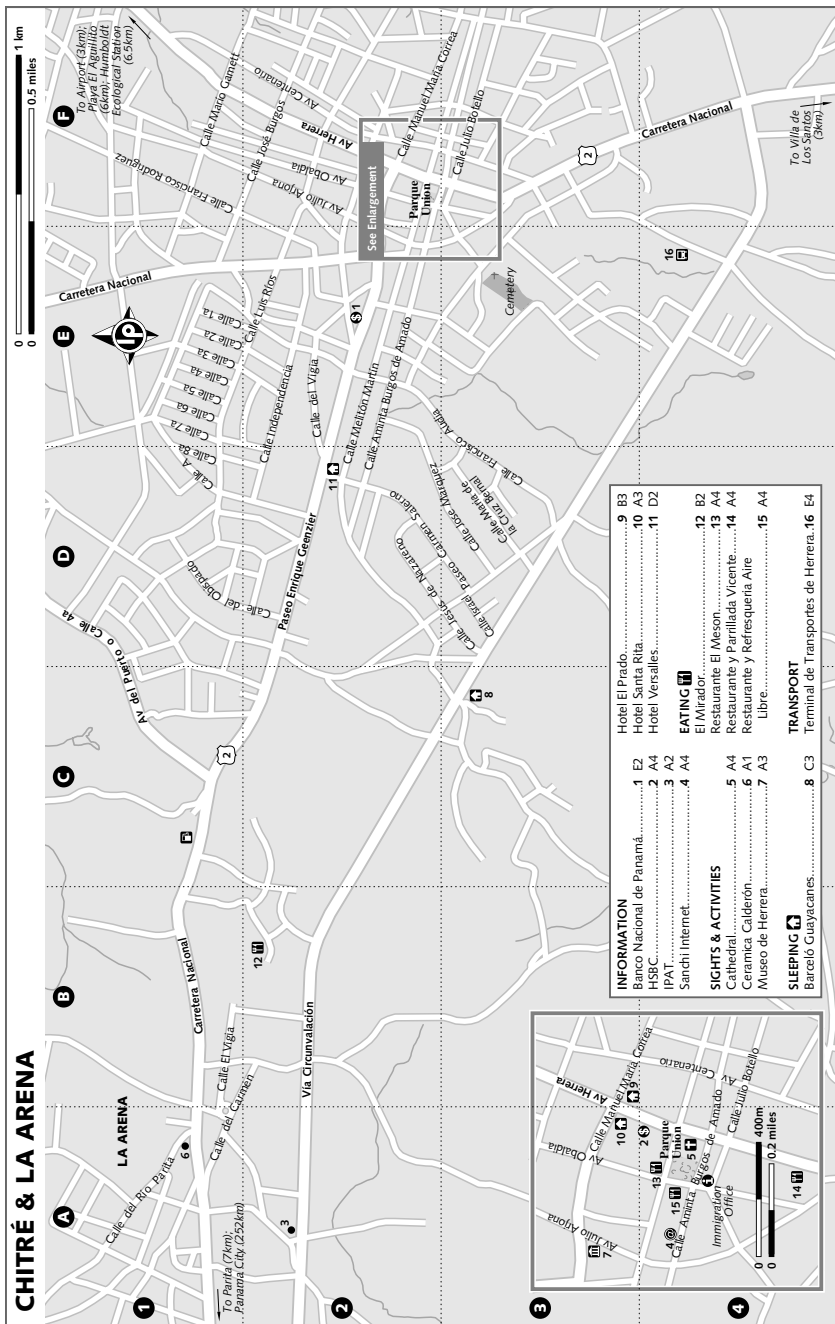
This anthropology and natural history **museum** (☎ 996 0077; Paseo Enrique Geenzier; adult/child US\$1/0.25; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4pm Tue-Sat, 8-11am Sun) contains many well-preserved pieces of pottery dating from 5000 BC until the time of the Spanish conquest. Some of the pieces that were found at the excavation sites outside Parita are here, although most of those artifacts are on display at the anthropology museum in Panama City (p87).

Also on display are replicas of *huacas* (golden objects placed with indigenous peoples at the time of burial), found on the peninsula, as well as numerous photos of archaeologists at work and maps showing where the pottery and *huacas* were found. Be sure to visit the museum's 2nd floor, where you'll find photos of Azuero residents, authentic folkloric costumes and religious artifacts (including the original bell of Chitré's cathedral, which was cast in 1767). Signs are in Spanish only.

CATHEDRAL

The city's soaring cathedral dates from the 18th century, but was substantially re-modeled in 1988. Today, the entire ceiling is made of polished mahogany, the walls are adorned with near-life-size figures of saints and large, vivid stained-glass windows depicting momentous events in the life of Jesus, and the stations

CHITRÉ & LA ARENA



INFORMATION	Hotel El Prado.....	9 B3
Banco Nacional de Panamá.....	1 E2	
Hotel Santa Rita.....	10 A3	
HSBC.....	2 A4	
IPAT.....	3 A2	
Sanchi Internet.....	4 A4	
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	El Mirador.....	12 B2
Restaurante El Mesón.....	13 A4	
Restaurante y Parrillada Vicente.....	14 A4	
Cerámica Calderón.....	6 A1	
Museo de Herrera.....	7 A3	
Libre.....	15 A4	
SLEEPING	Terminal de Transportes de Herrera.....	16 E4
Barceló Guayaquanes.....	8 C3	

of the cross are marked by 4m teak crosses and intricately carved figurines. Unlike many cathedrals that impress through ostentation, this one is striking for its elegant simplicity and fine balance of gold and wood.

Festivals & Events

Chitré's **Carnaval** festivities, held each year on the four days before Ash Wednesday (in February or March), feature parades, folkloric dancing, water fights and lots of drinking. On June 24 Chitré's patron saint festival, the **Fiesta de San Juan Bautista**, starts with a religious service followed by bullfights (the animals are merely teased), cockfights and other popular activities. And on October 19 festivities that celebrate the **Founding of the District of Chitré** (1848) include parades, historical costumes and much merriment.

Sleeping

If you plan to attend any of the festivals in Chitré, you'll have difficulty finding a place to stay if you arrive without a reservation. For Carnaval, rooms often book up months in advance, though you can always visit on a day-trip or plan on sleeping in a hotel outside the city.

Hotel El Prado (☎ 996 4620; Av Herrera; d without/with air-con US\$15/20; P) Although it's certainly not going to win a beauty pageant, this cheap and functional budget hotel offers up cookie cutter rooms that'll do in a pinch. The El Prado is definitely starting to show its age, though the rooms are set back from the street and are fairly quiet, and air-con and occasional hot water are nice perks at this price range. The 2nd-floor restaurant has nice views of the street below, and the hearty plates of traditional Panamanian fare on offer are a good way to absorb all the excess alcohol in your gut if you've been partying too hard.

Hotel Santa Rita (☎ 996 4610; cnr Calle Manuel María Correa & Av Herrera; d without/with air-con US\$15/20; P) Santa Rita was one of the city's first hotels, though frequent coats of paint and a little tender loving care have kept it looking younger than its age. The well-maintained rooms have air-con and private hot-water bathrooms, and the private balconies are a nice way to soak up the street scene. As far as budget hotels go, this is great value, and if you squint your eyes just right (and give in a bit to your imagination), you can almost

imagine how elegant the Santa Rita must have been in its heyday.

Hotel Versailles (☎ 996 4422; Paseo Enrique Geenzier near Paseo Carmen Salerno; d/ste US\$25/45; P) It certainly would look out of place in Paris, though this French-inspired hotel is easily one of Chitré's best. Spacious guestrooms are a notch above the competition, and feature comfortable beds, air-con and private hot-water bathrooms, though anyone in need of some serious stretching room should consider splurging on the suites. The on-site restaurant and bar is a good place for an evening meal and a nightcap, though the best part of staying at the Versailles is taking a lap or two in the pool – perfect for cooling off after a particularly hot Azuero day.

our pick Barceló Guayacanes (☎ 996 8969; www.barcelo.com; Via Circunvalación; s/d/ste US\$40/55/80; P) Although Chitré isn't exactly Panama's top resort destination, this relatively new addition to the Barceló chain is built around an artificial lake just outside town, and features such four-star amenities as a swimming pool, disco, gourmet restaurant, spa and gym. Although it's not as grand as the Pacific resorts further up the coast toward Panama City, it's easily the most luxurious hotel in Azuero, and a good place to post up for a few days if you want a sophisticated level of comfort. The rooms are excellent value considering they come equipped with modern amenities including air-con, satellite TV and tiled bathrooms with attractive metal accents.

Eating

Chitré's fishermen cast from 2am to 6am and sell their haul soon after their return from the sea, so most of the seafood served in Chitré has been caught the same day. For this reason, Chitré is known throughout the peninsula as having fresh seafood – and it's surprisingly cheap.

Restaurante y Refresquería Aire Libre (Av Obaldia; mains US\$3-5; ☎ 6:30am-10pm) This pleasant open-air café faces the western end of the plaza, and is a good place to soak up the tropical climes and indulge in a bit of people-watching. Good inexpensive Panamanian dishes are on offer including *camarones al ajillo* (shrimp with garlic), though a cup of coffee and some chocolate ice cream is an equally divine choice.

Restaurante y Parrillada Vicente (Av Herrera; mains US\$3-6) If you're looking to take a break from all

the rice and beans, this greasy-spoon Chinese restaurant serves up all your Latin American-Asian favorites. Brightly painted walls hung with Van Gogh prints form the backdrop to excellent chow mein, chicken with sweet-and-sour sauce and roast pork.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Chitré's airport is northeast of town; follow Av Herrera north from the town square to reach it. A taxi ride there costs US\$2.50.

Air Panama (☎ 996 4021; at airport) flies from Chitré to Panama City at least twice a week (US\$40).

BUS

Chitré is a center for regional bus transportation. Buses arrive and depart from the **Terminal de Transportes de Herrera** (☎ 996 6426), 1km south of downtown, near Vía Circunvalación. To get to the station, take a taxi (US\$1 to US\$2) or catch a 'Terminal' bus (US\$0.25) at the intersection of Calle Aminta Burgos de Amado and Av Herrera. The terminal has a restaurant that's open 24 hours a day.

Tuasa (☎ 996 2661) and **Transportes Inazun** (☎ 996 4177) buses depart from Chitré for Panama City (one way US\$6, four hours, every 45 to 60 minutes from 1:30am to 6pm).

Other buses departing from Chitré operate from sunrise to sunset, and include the following destinations:

Divisa (US\$1; 30min; every 15min)

La Arena (US\$0.25; 15min; every 15min)

Las Minas (US\$2; 1hr; every 30min)

Las Tablas (US\$1; 40min; every 20min)

Macaracas (US\$2; 1hr; hourly)

Ocú (US\$2; 1hr; hourly)

Parita (US\$0.50; 15min; every 45min)

Pedasi (US\$2; 1hr; hourly)

Pesé (US\$1; 20min; every 30min)

Playa El Aguillito (US\$0.50; 12min; every 20min)

Playas Monagre & El Rompío (US\$1; 30min; every 20min)

Santiago (US\$2; 1½hr; every 30min)

Villa de Los Santos (US\$0.25; 10min; every 10min)

To get to David or Panama City from Chitré, take a bus to Divisa and then catch a *directo* (direct bus) to either city. Buses leave from the Delta station at the intersection of the Interamericana and the Carretera Nacional. You likely won't have to wait more than 30 minutes. The bus fare will set you back US\$7

or US\$8. If you're trying to get to Chitré from the Interamericana, ask the bus driver to stop in Divisa. He'll know to stop near the Delta station. At the station, catch any bus heading toward Chitré.

Getting Around

If you need to travel by vehicle, a taxi is the best way to go. They're cheap – most fares in town are between US\$1 and US\$2.

AROUND CHITRÉ

Some of the most interesting sights in the Azuero Peninsula are just a short bus-ride away from downtown Chitré.

La Arena

Several kilometers west of downtown Chitré, and bisected by the Carretera Nacional, is the famous ceramics center of La Arena. The pottery made in this tiny village mimics the pre-Columbian designs of the Ngöbe-Buglé who once lived nearby. Today, La Arena produces some of the highest quality pottery in the country, and is one of the best places to watch sculptors working their trade. Also, if you're shopping for souvenirs, the prices here for pottery will be lower than anywhere else, and you'll be supporting the artisans directly.

The best of the town's several pottery factories is **Ceramica Calderón** (near Calle del Río Parita & Carretera Nacional), where you can buy traditional painted ceramics at wholesale prices. These pieces are made on the premises in a workshop directly behind the roadside showroom. All the pottery is made by hand with the help of a foot-powered potter's wheel. The artisan who makes most of the ceramics sold here is Angel Calderón, who's been making ceramics professionally for almost 50 years. If you visit Angel's shop, be sure to take a look at the ovens out back – they're quite impressive.

Although there are no places to stay in La Arena, downtown Chitré is just 5km away. A taxi ride from Parque Unión to La Arena shouldn't cost you more than US\$2, and there are several buses an hour that won't cost you more than a quarter.

Atop a hill in La Arena, **El Mirador** (The Lookout; mains US\$3-7; ☎ 4pm-midnight) is a popular spot where tourists from around Panama congregate to take in the views of the city and the surrounding plains. The food is standard at best, though the twinkling lights of Chitré makes for an atmospheric night out. To find the

BIRDING AT PLAYA EL AGUILLITO

Seven kilometers away from Chitré's Parque Union is Playa El Aguillito, which is not so much a sandy beach as it is a mudflat created by silt deposited by two nearby rivers, the Río Parita and the Río La Villa. At low tide, the mudflat stretches more than 2km from the high-water mark across to the surf, and thousands of birds descend upon the mud in search of plankton and small shrimp. Interestingly enough, the actual 'playa' part of the mudflats is artificial and was the result of a failed attempt to create a sunbathing beach by cutting down a mangrove forest back in the 1960s.

Most of the birds that descend on El Aguillito are migratory, flying between Alaska and the tip of South America. For reasons that escape scientists, these birds return during the winter year after year to exactly the same beach – and to no others in the area. This is rather amazing when you consider how many thousands of kilometers the birds fly during a single season, and how many feeding grounds they must pass over.

Playa El Aguillito regulars include roseate spoonbills, sandpipers, warblers, black-necked stilts, white-winged doves, black-bellied plovers, yellow-crowned amazons, yellowlegs and ospreys. The beach is also home to common ground-doves, which are only found in Panama in this one spot. When the tide is high, these birds congregate around salt ponds to the immediate east of Playa El Aguillito.

Of particular interest to birders is the western sandpiper, whose far-flung summer breeding grounds are the Alaskan islands and Siberia. From the fall to the spring, these amazing birds migrate south along the Pacific coast of the Americas, and return to the same feeding grounds each year. For the past several decades, Playa El Aguillito has been visited by thousands of western sandpipers annually, and the birds typically arrive in enormous flocks numbering in the hundreds.

Unfortunately, various factors ranging from environmental pollution to El Niño warming have begun to take their toll on species population, and it isn't helping that feeding grounds such as Playa El Aguillito are endangered. Unfortunately, habitat destruction is on the rise throughout Panama, especially as investors start to eye wetlands and waterfronts as potential fisheries or even beachfront property. In nature, animals don't respect international border lines, and a simple construction project in coastal Panama can have disastrous results for an entire population of birds on a remote Alaskan island.

The good news is that Chitré-born 'friend of the birds' Francisco Delgado is heading the **Humboldt Ecological Station**, which is located toward the northwest end of the beach – look for an 'Estacion Ecologica Alejandro von Humboldt' sign. Since 1983, Francisco and a group of fellow local environmentalists have banded more than 15,000 birds and have monitored them with the assistance of scientists based in other countries.

The work conducted at the station has helped support the conclusion that annually frequenting the same feeding grounds is an important survival mechanism for long-distance migratory birds. Since transcontinental voyages require an enormous amount of energy, reliable feeding grounds are crucial for the birds' survival. This is particularly true for species such as the western sandpiper, which can typically fly for days on end without stopping to eat.

At the station, there are several items on display including a map showing the migratory routes of all the bird species that pass through the area, as well as plans for a much more comprehensive research and conservation center that is awaiting funding. In the meantime, the modest building serves as an ongoing biological research station, and is usually bustling with activity, especially during the busy migratory season when the bulk of the tagging takes place. Francisco himself is usually around to answer questions in English and Spanish, and his legion of assistants and volunteers are an interesting lot to talk to. If Francisco is not around, you can reach him at his **home** (☎ 996 1725).

Playa El Aguillito is reached from Chitré via Av Herrera; it's just past the airport. A bus leaves the Chitré station for the beach every 20 minutes or so from sunrise to sunset. The one-way fare is US\$0.50. A taxi ride from town costs US\$3 one way.

Mirador from downtown Chitré, head west on the Paseo Enrique Geenzier for about 2.5km and turn left onto the road that begins just past the large 'Chino Bar' sign. At the fork, turn right and continue for another 400m until you reach the top of the hill.

Parque Nacional Sarigua

Ten kilometers north of downtown Chitré, this **national park** (entrance US\$3; ☎ 8am-4pm) is arguably the most important pre-Columbian site in Panama. The Sarigua site has been dated back 11,000 years based on shell mounds and pottery fragments, although much of it has yet to be excavated. Unfortunately, the main hurdle preventing wide-scale excavation is the fact that the entire national park is a 'tropical desert' – or rather, that is what Panama's national environmental authority, ANAM (Autoridad Nacional de Ambiente) would have you believe.

On the contrary, this national park was created in 1984, and consists of 8000 hectares of wasteland that was once dry tropical rainforest and coastal mangrove patches. Simply put, Sarigua is the end product of slash-and-burn agriculture. People moved into the area, cut down all the trees, set fire to the debris, planted crops for a few harvests and then left. Because the forest that had held the thin topsoil in place was removed, the heavy rain that falls here every year carried the topsoil into creeks and then into rivers and out into the sea.

What you see in Parque Nacional Sarigua today is the nutrient-deficient rock that had been underneath the topsoil. Despite the example of Sarigua, the Panamanian government still encourages deforestation throughout the country (most notably in the Darién) to promote the same variety of wasteful and unsustainable agriculture.

What makes matters even worse is that part of the park actually serves as the waste-disposal site for Chitré, Parita and other cities in Azuero. In fact, directly behind the ANAM ranger station (where you pay the entrance fee), you can see garbage poking up out of the ground. Although major dumping has been curtailed in recent years, it's still occurring within the park.

A visit to Sarigua is not for everyone, though it's a sober reminder of the Earth's fragility, and the rapid speed in which we as humans can alter the environment. From the *mirador* (lookout) behind the ranger station,

you can gaze out at the dry, cracked earth and swirling dust storms that used to be a living, breathing ecosystem. If you have your own transportation, you can also drive a few kilometers into the park, though much of Sarigua is off-limits to the public. Not surprisingly, there are a lot of questionable activities taking place (illegal dumping being the first and foremost). The coastal edges of the park are also home to privately owned commercial shrimp farms, which stand as a testament to the rapid destruction of Panama's wetland habitats.

To get here from the Carretera Nacional, take the Puerto Limón turnoff, a couple of kilometers northwest of Parita. After 1km you'll notice the foul smell of a nearby pig farm. After another 1km you'll come to the park turnoff. Follow the signs for 2km, until you come to a structure on the left – this is the ANAM station.

Buses do not go to the park. A round-trip taxi ride to the ANAM station from Chitré costs about US\$20.

Parita

pop 4000

Just 6km northwest of downtown Chitré, Parita is one of those hidden gems that travelers love to stumble across. Founded in 1558 and named after the departed Ngöbe-Buglé chief (see the boxed text, opposite), Parita is chock full of colonial structures, the majority of which date from the 18th century. The buildings near the center of town have thick walls and beams as solid as railroad ties, as well as roofs made of red convex tiles – the fancier structures even have sweeping arcades facing out to the street. However, despite its historic core, Parita is known to few people outside the Península de Azuero, so it's unlikely that you will see any tourists here, Panamanian or otherwise.

Parita follows a grid pattern. As you come to intersections near the town's center (which is about 500m from the Carretera Nacional) and glance both ways, you'll see buildings that look much the same as they have for centuries.

The **church** in Parita is the only one in Panama that has its steeple located directly over its entrance rather than over a corner of the structure. This is very unusual as bell towers are always extremely heavy, and therefore are generally built on pillars that rest upon a massive foundation. In fact, it is a major

RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST

During the 1940s, a series of major excavations of indigenous tombs took place just 10km outside Parita. Although there was little structural evidence above ground, the tombs themselves yielded some of the finest pre-Columbian artifacts that have ever been discovered by archaeologists in Panama.

The bulk of the artifacts uncovered were ceremonial pottery, a good portion of which were vessels mounted on tall pedestal bases of two types: painted globular bowls and other bowls in the form of king vulture effigies. The painted globular bowls were brightly colored and adorned with fanciful bird and reptile designs. The more elaborate bowls were shaped to resemble king vultures, with finger-long wings flaring from their sides and bulbous heads and stubby tails at their ends.

In each of the mounds, archaeologists were amazed to discover one incredible artifact cache after the next. For example, in one mound, more than 100 nearly identical red-painted, globular jars with short necks were found. In another, archaeologists found long-necked bottles, 40 painted pots in the form of bird effigies and exquisitely carved batons shaped like stylized alligators, made from manatee ribs. Yet in another mound, were the remains of a young girl with a necklace of hollow gold beads.

However, perhaps the most amazing find was an urn that contained the remains of a single man and a necklace made of more than 800 human teeth. Nearly all the teeth were front incisors, which means that the teeth of at least 200 people were required to make the jewelry. The circumstances under which the necklace was created remain a mystery, though it's not hard to speculate about their origins. Clearly, the indigenous peoples of Azuero were living in violent times.

Of course, ultimately the greatest danger to the survival of these early communities was the arrival of the Spanish settlers, who wasted no time in exterminating the indigenous peoples in Azuero. Unfortunately, their efforts were so effective that what little we do know about these early communities comes from the reports of ruthless conquistadors.

Tantalizing but far from adequate descriptions of the people who created these objects have been left to us by Gaspar de Espinosa and Gonzalo de Badajoz, who led looting expeditions on the peninsula between 1515 and 1525. Since the Spaniards for the most part viewed the natives of Panama as disposable objects, these reports are more a glorification of their conquests than anthropological ethnography. However, they represent one of the few windows we have into the early lives of these communities.

Although today the Azuero Peninsula is best thought of as a dry, semi-arid landscape of cattle ranching farms and massive agricultural plots, in the colonial era the land was completely covered by dry tropical rainforest and thick mangrove patches. As a result, early communities were able to subsist on hunting and fishing, but they did rely on small-scale agriculture, which included rice, beans and manioc. At the time, there were several different indigenous tribes living in the peninsula, though the region was controlled by a powerful Ngöbe-Buglé chief named Parita.

For decades, Parita and his fierce warriors were able to prevent the Spaniards from settling on the peninsula. However, when Espinosa led a later raid on the peninsula, he found to his pleasant surprise that Parita had recently died. Instead of confronting the chief in combat, the raiders found him lying dead in a room containing an astounding 161kg of gold ornaments. Also found near the dead leader were 20 native captives who were lashed to house posts by cords around their necks – these poor souls had been destined to be buried alive with the great chieftain. Also expected to be buried with Parita were his wives and household attendants, who were slaughtered beside the dead chief.

Following the death of Parita, the Spanish rapidly colonized the Peninsula de Azuero and exterminated all of its residents, though a few Ngöbe-Buglé communities were able to safely flee to the jungled mountains in what is now Chiriquí Province. In fact, so fearful were these communities of white people that until only a few decades ago, they continued to place deadly traps along trails to kill or maim outsiders.

curiosity to the residents of Parita that the steeple hasn't collapsed upon the entryway. Although the church was completed in 1723, you'll never see a Parita resident loitering near the entrance.

Beside the church is a grassy square in which cattle-roping demonstrations are held from August 3–7, during the town's patron-saint festivities.

Two doors down from the southeastern corner of Parita's church is a **workshop** (☎ 974 2242/2036) which specializes in the restoration of altars – it is the only such workshop in the country. The artisans working here, Macario José Rodríguez and the twin brothers José Sergio López and Sergio José López, have been restoring the altars of Panama's colonial churches since the 1970s. All three men speak some English and they are very friendly – chances are they'll let you take a look around.

To find the home of one of the country's top **mask makers**, Darido López, return to the Carretera Nacional and find the Shell station near the turnoff. Darido's house is about 100m northwest of the gas station, on the opposite side. Visitors can identify his home by the masks hanging beside his front door. Darido has been making colorful masks for folkloric dancers since the 1960s. While he continues to make masks and satin costumes worn by dirty-devil dancers, these days most of his masks are exported to the USA and to Europe – most cost between US\$20 and US\$80. (For more information on another of Panama's top mask makers, see p163.)

Although there are no places to stay in Parita, downtown Chitré is just 10km away. A taxi ride from Parque Unión to Parita shouldn't cost you more than US\$4, and there are several buses an hour that won't cost you more than 50c.

Refugio de Vida Silvestre Cenegón del Mangle

This 775-hectare **refuge** near Parita protects a mangrove forest at the mouth of the Río Santa María, an important wildlife area and nesting ground for wading birds. The most commonly sighted species here are great egrets, cattle egrets and tri-colored herons – in fact, many of the herons that now inhabit the *Palacio de las Garzas* (Palace of the Herons), the official residence of the Panamanian president, came from this reserve.

The refuge is accessed by a 500m-loop trail that follows a boardwalk through the mangrove forest. Along the way, keep your eyes fixed on the eerie waters below as the abundance of wading birds also attracts hungry caimans and crocodiles. The herons are here year round, though opportunistic reptiles tend to congregate during the June to September mating season. Watch your step during this time of year – you really don't want to fall in here!

The primary attraction of the refuge is the birds, though locals claim that the small pools here or **Los Pozos** (the Wells) have health-giving properties. In our opinion, these unattractive muddy puddles seem to be great places for various biting insects to roost, though who are we to argue with lore!

The refuge is not reachable by bus; instead, it's a 45-minute drive north of Chitré via the Carretera Nacional and easily accessible as a day-trip. Take the turnoff to Los Pozos, which is signposted. After 1km the road forks at a church in the village of Paris; take the right branch and it becomes a dirt road. Proceed 4km on this road, after which you'll come to a sign with an arrow showing you where to go and indicating you're 2km from the wells and the entrance to the refuge.

Pesé

pop 2700

The town of Pesé, 19km southwest of Chitré, is famous for its annual Good Friday representation of the Golgotha drama – a re-enactment of Christ's crucifixion. Of course, the real reason why you're probably here has to do with the endless sea of sugarcane plantations that ring the town.

Pesé is home to the country's largest *seco* factory, **Seco Herrerrano** (☎ 974 9621; fax 974 9593; admission free; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Sat), established in 1936. It's a rather small factory, with only 45 workers, but its output is incredible: 36,000 1L bottles every business day (Monday to Saturday). If you stop by during this time, you can tour the distillery and the mill, and taste some free samples – just have someone else drive you back to Chitré when you're ready to go.

The mill operates only during the harvest season, which lasts from mid-January to mid-March. During this time, you can see tons of sugarcane being fed into huge presses to extract the sweet juice. The juice is then pumped into huge containers, where it ferments. The

LOCAL LORE: JUNTA DE EMBARRE

One of the principal joys of traveling in the Península de Azuero is getting a sense of the traditional Spanish culture that has continued to thrive in this far-flung corner of Central America. One need only arrive in any of the peninsula's towns or cities during one of the famous annual festivals to discover a side of Panama that few foreigners are ever given the opportunity to see.

Festivals aside, the Spanish cultural heritage of Azuero lives on in various forms, including a number of bizarre and antiquated traditions. One of the more unusual practices is *junta de embarre*, which literally translates to 'meeting of covering with mud.' Following a local wedding, villagers will gather to build a crude mud hut for the newlywed couple. According to local lore, this practice is designed to symbolize the joining together of two households as well as the beginning of a new family.

Although this custom is dying out in some of the larger towns and cities, the tradition continues to thrive in some of the more traditional towns and villages in the peninsula. So, don't be surprised if you're riding through the countryside, and you happen to come upon a blushing bride and groom standing next to their muck castle!

most impressive aspect about the whole operation is the speed of the pressing and the power of the machinery.

If you wish to take a tour, fax your request at least a week in advance. Send it to Carlos Cedeño. Carlos speaks basic English, so keep your request simple. Don't expect a reply – it's fine to just show up. If you speak Spanish, you can also try calling ahead, though the phone is not always picked up.

Pesé can be reached by frequent buses from the Terminal de Transportes de Herrera in Chitré (US\$1, 20 minutes).

OCÚ

pop 9000

About 20km by road west of Pesé, sleepy Ocú would be indistinguishable from neighboring towns were it not for its reputation as one of Panama's top hat-making centers. Not long ago, Ocú, which straddles a loop road that links it and the major towns of Chitré, Pesé, Los Pozos and Las Minas, used to be where Panamanians went to buy the finest panama-style hats made in their country.

Until the 1990s, Ocú's many hat makers could take their intricately braided merchandise to the town square every morning, and expect to have it all sold by noon. Truckers, who were major hat buyers, used to make special trips to Ocú for their headgear. But, once high-quality hats became available in Penonomé (p139), which is conveniently located on the Interamericana, the truckers stopped making special trips to Ocú. Today, local hat makers sell their wares to wholesale vendors who later resell them in

Penonomé, though Ocú still retains its proud artisan tradition.

Sights

HAT MAKERS

Today, there are still a fair number of hat makers in Ocú, and if you wish, you can visit some of them and see how a genuine panama hat is made. The finest are so tightly braided that you can turn them over and fill them with water and they won't leak. The time needed to make a hat varies from one week to one month, and prices range from US\$25 to US\$150 depending on the quality.

If you decide to visit a hat maker, go see Elena Montilla and/or Ezequela Maure – they live only two houses apart at the northern end of town on the main street, Av Central. To find their houses, drive or walk about 1km on Av Central from the town plaza until you reach a fork in the road. A dirt road splits to the left, while the main paved road sweeps right; if you pass the Jorón El Tijera restaurant, in the fork of the road, you've gone too far. Ezequela's house is on the left side of the street, about four houses south of the fork. Elena's house is two doors down. None of Ocú's hat makers speak English.

Festivals & Events

The **Festival del Manito Ocuéño**, one of the country's best folklore events, is held in Ocú during the third week in August. The three-day festival was established to maintain the region's traditional culture, and folklore groups from throughout Herrera Province present their dances in traditional dress. The fiesta's

climax is a Sunday morning church wedding, after which the couple is paraded through the streets on horseback by friends and family.

Ocú is also famous for its **patron saint festival**, usually held January 20–23. During this festival, an effigy of St Sebastian is paraded through the streets at night, and devotees walk behind the statue carrying lighted candles. This festival includes folklore programs and an agricultural fair.

Sleeping

There are several small hotels in Ocú, but the best place to stay is at the **Habitaciones de Juan Pablo** (☎ 974 1312; d US\$10; P), a friendly, family-run affair. Just on the edge of town off the road connecting Ocú with the Interamericana (on the left if arriving from the Interamericana), you'll see a sign that reads '*se alquilan habitaciones*' (rooms for rent), marked with a flag. Here, you'll find eight basic rooms, each with two double beds and clean private cold-water bathrooms.

Getting There & Away

Ocú can be reached by frequent buses from the Terminal de Transportes de Herrera in Chitré (US\$2, one hour).

SAN JOSÉ

Just outside Ocú, in the small village of San José, lies one of Panama's most organized artisan groups. **Artesanía Ocuëña** (www.artesaniasocu.bizland.com) was founded in 1994 by a group of 20 members – all women – who carry on the intricate work of making *montunos* (traditional folklore outfits), *polleras* (traditional dresses from the Península de Azuero) and a range of other handmade items such as tablecloths and place mats. Today, the group numbers about 50 and is receiving international attention (not least from the German government, who helped fund the construction of their workshop/studio in San José). The embroideries here are simply exquisite.

To visit the workshop, take the turnoff (the sign says 'Los Llanos') on the left side of the road as you head north of Ocú in the direction of the Interamericana. The turnoff is about 1km from the central plaza. From there it's a 15-minute drive along a dirt road until you reach the community. You can also catch an 'Ocú–Los Llanos' *chiva* (rural bus; US\$0.50) in front of the main plaza in Ocú. If no one's around when you stop in, ask around for **Ana Marin** (☎ 601 7430) or **Guillermina Montilla** (☎ 694 2251). The co-op also sells over the internet.