

Central Pacific Coast



Those gigantic aquamarine waves keep rolling in, just as they always have along Mexico's central Pacific coast. It's the primal rhythm backing any visit to this land of isolated beaches and giant sunsets. Sit yourself down in the sand for a week or an afternoon and, if you're lucky, spy humpback whales breaching on the horizon, or a pod of dolphins surfacing from the waves. Beyond the beach, experience a natural high in mangrove-fringed lagoons, pristine bays, and ramshackle fishing villages, or mix it up with some good living in a cosmopolitan resort town.

Don't stop there: head deeper inland toward the blue silhouette of the lofty Sierras Madre, where the tourism track becomes a rutted path that sometimes disappears completely. You can take months exploring the coast on the cheap, roaring along the coastal highway in 2nd-class buses, or hanging onto the back of a pickup packed with locals on your way to a fishing village where fishing nets are still strung by hand.

One of the world's top tourist destinations, the coast is also a land of mega-resorts, cruise ships, camera-toting tourists and rowdy spring-breakers on weekend drinking binges. Join in, or ignore them completely. You can snorkel, surf, sail, ride horses, scuba dive, explore lagoons by boat, mountain bike along ocean cliffs and drink yourself silly. Spend a week in a fabulous beachfront guesthouse, where food and drink are prepared fresh daily, or enjoy considerable luxury in a world-class hotel, where you can soak up the sun and read a book before indulging in the best spa treatment or full-body massage of your life. The good life here means finding your own rhythm.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Take the pulse of the new **Old Mazatlán** (p429) in its gorgeously renovated historic center
- Experience the living history of **Mexcaltitán** (p442), thought by some to be the ancestral homeland of the Aztecs
- People-watch and promenade on the beautiful beachfront *malecón* in **Puerto Vallarta** (p453)
- Thrill at the fearless finesse of La Quebrada cliff-divers of **Acapulco** (p503)
- Surf the aggressive barrel swells in **Boca de Pascuales** (p480)



■ PUERTO VALLARTA JANUARY DAILY HIGH: 26°C | 78°F

■ PUERTO VALLARTA JULY DAILY HIGH: 33°C | 91°F

History

Archaeologists view pre-Hispanic Mexico's Pacific coast as a unified region, defined by its tradition of shaft or chamber tombs (underground burial chambers at the base of a deep shaft). The ceremonial centers around the tombs suggest a fairly developed spiritual and religious life.

The Spanish arrived in Mexico in 1519 and soon traveled to Acapulco, Zihuatanejo, Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo. In 1564 conquistador Miguel López de Legazpi and Father André de Urdeneta first sailed from Barra de Navidad to the Philippines and soon after claimed it for Spain. Soon after, Acapulco became an established port link in the trade route between Asia and Europe.

It was not until the middle of the 1950s that tourism really hit the coast, starting in Acapulco and Mazatlán, with Puerto Vallarta soon to follow. In recent years more and more foreigners have bought and developed land along the coast, most noticeably around Puerto Vallarta.

Climate

It's hot – very hot – and wet from May and early November. Hurricanes are occasional unwelcome guests in September and October. The high-tourist season understandably coincides with the cooler, dry season from late November to late April.

Dangers & Annoyances

Mexico's central Pacific coast is *tranquilo* (peaceful), with little crime. Major coastal resorts have a large and visible police presence so violent crimes against visitors are rare.

Of the resort cities, Acapulco is the most known for crime, and in recent years several grisly murders have threatened to curb the resort's tourism industry. The violence, however, is primarily related to drug trafficking. Visitors who avoid the town's inland neighborhoods have little to fear. The coastal Hwy 200, which has had an up-and-down safety record, is now mostly safe for travel. The stretch through Michoacán and Guerrero still has a reputation for being unsafe at night, although increased law enforcement has greatly improved the situation. The most likely danger you'll encounter are the powerful undertows that can make swimming deadly. Heed local warnings and swim with caution. Otherwise, kick back – you're on vacation!

Getting There & Away

There are plenty of direct international flights from the US and Canada to Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta, Zihuatanejo and Acapulco. For those traveling by car, the toll roads between the US border and Tepic make for easy sailing, but they're not cheap. As elsewhere in Mexico, the free roads oscillate between smooth pavement and shock-busting potholes. High quality bus services connects the resort centres to inland Mexico.

Getting Around

Bus travel in this region is easy and surprisingly comfortable. The buses serve nearly every community, large or small, but nicer buses – with air-con, comfortable seats, cleanish bathrooms, TVs and other classy comforts – serve bigger towns.

If you're driving, note that nearly everything on coastal Hwy 200 – service stations, stores, tire shops – closes around sundown.

CULIACÁN

☎ 667 / pop 605,000

Sitting pretty in a fertile river valley, this thriving capital of Sinaloa is first and foremost an administrative and agricultural center. Many travelers pass through en route to other places; the ones that linger come to appreciate the particular rhythms of this typical, primarily middle-class Mexican metropolis. Admire the stately 19th-century cathedral in Culiacán's bustling historic center. Stroll through the atmospheric Plazuela Álvaro Obregón and by the handsome Palacio Municipal. Twilight is sublime on the pretty *malecón* (waterfront street) walkway along the Río Tamazula and Río Humaya. Along the way, you'll pass a good selection of restaurants and well-run hotels.

Frequent buses connect Culiacán with Mazatlán to the south and Los Mochis (p337) to the north – it's about 210km (a three-hour drive) from either place.

MAZATLÁN

☎ 669 / pop 380,000

Having outgrown its image as a chintzy mid-20th century resort town, today's Mazatlán is one of Mexico's most alluring and inviting beach destinations. Over the past decade, the 'Pearl of the Pacific' has breathed new life into its historic center, and the ongoing renewal program continues to bear fruit. The result is something truly unique: a historic city with a



resplendent colonial district only a short walk from a 20km-long crescent of sandy beach.

To take the pulse of Mazatlán, don't linger too long in the Zona Dorada (Golden Zone), Mazatlán's traditional tourist playground. There you'll find knick-knack shops, pack-'em-in restaurants and resort hotels lined up like dominoes, but few surprises. Instead head straight for the city's gorgeous *pueblo viejo* (old town). Here, against a backdrop of cobbled streets, crumbling edifices and an ever-increasing number of newly restored gems, you'll find a cultural renaissance under way. Catch a performance at the wonderful refurbished Teatro Ángela Peralta and then a late-night bite at the atmospheric Plazuela Machado. Step into one of Mazatlán's excellent small museums or go treasure hunting in one of the many new small boutiques. One big attraction is free for all – the daily spectacle of rocky islands silhouetted against the tropical sunset, as the fiery red fades into the sea, and another starry night begins.

History

In pre-Hispanic times Mazatlán (which means 'place of deer' in the Náhuatl language) was populated by Totorames, who lived by hunting, gathering, fishing and growing crops. 'Old' Mazatlán, the traditional town center, dates from the 19th century. Tourists started coming in the 1930s, and in the 1950s some hotels appeared along Playa Olas Altas, Mazatlán's first tourist beach. From the 1970s onward, a long strip of hotels and tourist facilities spread north along the coast. More significantly, in the early 1990s restoration efforts began on key downtown buildings, including the theater and other stately edifices facing Plazuela Machado. By 2005 the picturesque plaza had been transformed, and a year later work was concluded on the boardwalk and monuments of Av Olas Altas.

Orientation

Old Mazatlán, the city center, is near the southern end of a peninsula, bounded by the Pacific Ocean on the west and the Bahía Dársena channel on the east. The center of the city is the cathedral, on Plaza Principal, which is surrounded by a rectangular street grid. At the southern tip of the peninsula, El Faro (The Lighthouse) stands on a rocky prominence, overlooking Mazatlán's sportfishing fleet and the La Paz ferry terminal.

The beachside boulevard changes names frequently as it runs along the Pacific side of the peninsula north from Playa Olas Altas. It heads around some rocky outcrops, and around the wide arc of Playa Norte to the Zona Dorada, a concentration of hotels, bars and businesses catering mainly to package tourists. Further north are more hotels, a marina and some time-share condominium developments.

Information

Banamex Old Mazatlán (Map p431; Juárez); Zona Dorada (Map p430; Av Camarón Sábalo) Has branches near Plaza Principal and in the Zona Dorada.

Clínica Balboa (Map p430; ☎ 916-79-33; Av Camarón Sábalo 4480; 🕒 24hr) English is spoken at this well-regarded, walk-in medical clinic.

Coordinación General de Turismo (Map p431; ☎ 981-88-86/87; www.sinaloa-travel.com; Carnaval 1317; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Proffers information about lodging deals and what to see and do in Mazatlán and Sinaloa state.

Cyber Café Mazatlán (Map p430; Av Camarón Sábalo 204; per hr M\$35) Pricey but fast and convenient.

Emergency (☎ 060)

Fire (☎ 981-27-69)

Lavandería La Blanca (Map p430; Camarón Sábalo 357; per 3kg M\$65)

Main post office (Map p431; Juárez s/n) On the east side of Plaza Principal.

Tourist police (☎ 914-84-44)

Sights

OLD MAZATLÁN

The old town is a forward-thinking place rooted firmly in the past. At its center is the soaring 19th-century **cathedral** (Map p431; cnr Juárez & Calle 21 de Marzo) with its high yellow twin towers and a dramatic interior. Two blocks north, on Juárez and Valle, is a vibrant local **market** full of clothes, housewares, produce, juice stands and shoppers.

A short southwesterly walk will bring you to the tree-lined **Plazuela Machado** (Map p431; cnr Av Carnaval & Constitución). The plaza and surrounding streets are abuzz with art galleries, cafés and restaurants. The center of attention is the **Teatro Ángela Peralta** (Map p431) half a block south of the plaza. All kinds of cultural events are staged here.

West of the center is **Playa Olas Altas**, a small beach in a small cove. The breezy seafront road, Paseo Olas Altas, strongly evokes 1950s-era Mazatlán, with a couple of faded relic hotels.

MAZATLÁN



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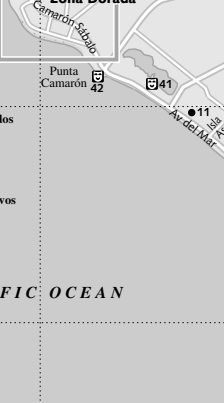
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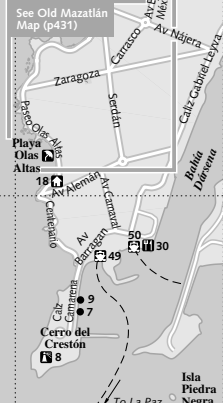
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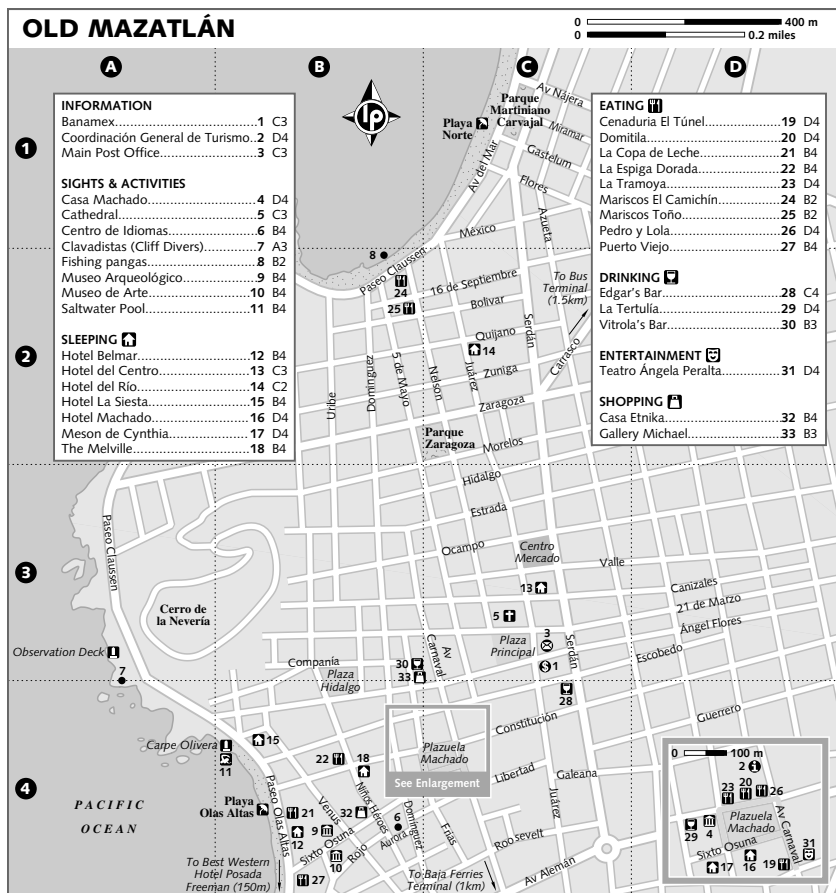
CENTRAL PACIFIC COAST

See Enlargement



PACIFIC OCEAN





Nearby is the platform from which the **clavadistas** (cliff divers; Map p431) cast their bodies into the treacherous ocean swells for your enjoyment. Tip accordingly. You're most likely to see the divers perform around lunchtime on Saturday and Sunday (they won't risk their necks until a crowd has assembled).

At the peninsula's south end, a prominent rocky outcrop is the base for **El Faro** (Map p430), 135m above sea level and said to be the second-highest lighthouse in the world (after the one in Gibraltar). You can climb up there for a spectacular view of the city and coast.

MUSEUMS

The small but absorbing **Museo Arqueológico** (Map p431; ☎ 981-14-55; Sixto Osuna 76; admission M\$25;

🕒 10am-1pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun) invokes Sinaloan history and culture with changing exhibitions of pre-Hispanic petroglyphs and sculptural objects. There are some wall texts in English. Opposite, the small **Museo de Arte** (Map p431; ☎ 985-35-02; cnr Sixto Osuna & Carranza; admission M\$20; 🕒 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) makes a convincing case for the vitality and innovation of contemporary Mexican art with changing exhibitions of digital works, sculpture, prints and paintings. Wall texts are in Spanish and English.

Also worth a peek is the **Casa Machado** (Map p431; Constitución 79; adult/student M\$20/10; 🕒 10am-6pm), a restored 19th-century house filled with a collection of antique French and Austrian furniture, clothing and other items.

BEACHES & ZONA DORADA

With over 16km of beaches it's easy to find a stretch of sand to call your own. The following beaches are listed in geographic order, from south to north.

In Old Mazatlán, the crescent-shaped **Playa Olas Altas** (Map p431) is where tourism first flourished in the 1950s. The pebbly beach is not ideal for swimming but it's a grand place to soak up some regional history.

Flanked by a broad *malecón* popular with joggers and strollers, the golden sands of **Playa Norte** (Map p431) begin just north of Old Mazatlán. The beach arcs toward **Punta Camarón** (Map p430), a rocky point dominated by the conspicuous castle-like Fiesta Land nightclub complex.

The most luxurious hotels face the fine, uncrowded **Playa Las Gaviotas** (Map p430) and **Playa Sábalo** (Map p430), the latter extending north of the Zona Dorada. Sheltered by picturesque islands, here the waters are generally calm and ideal for swimming and water sports. Further north, past the ever-evolving **Marina Mazatlán** (Map p430), are the serene **Playa Brujas** (Witch Beach, off Map p430) and **Playa Cerritos** (off Map p430). Both have a smattering of excellent seafood restaurants and are surfing destinations. To get to these by bus, catch a 'Cerritos Juárez' bus from the Fiesta Land complex or from along Camarón Sábalo in the Zona Dorada; with a bit of bargaining, transportation by taxi should cost no more than M\$100.

ISLANDS

Resembling breaching whales in silhouette, the three photogenic land masses (Map p430) jutting from the sea are Mazatlán's signature islands. With secluded beaches and limpid waters ideal for snorkeling – and great multitudes of seals and marine birds – they provide an ideal day trip destination. On the left is **Isla de Chivos** (Island of Goats); **Isla de Pájaros** (Island of Birds) is on the right. Most visited is the one in the middle, **Isla de Venados** (Deer Island). The islands are part of a wildlife refuge designated to help protect the marine fauna and birds they harbour.

The most popular option for visiting the islands is the five-hour Deer Island Tour (US\$42) to Isla de Venados departing at 9:30am Tuesday to Sunday from the marina at El Cid Mega Resort (see p436). The price includes activities and a (frankly, meager) lunch. These trips are often booked to ca-

capacity, and at last visit proffered sub-par snorkeling equipment.

If you desire a more reflective, low impact exploration of the island, consider the excellent kayak tour led by Sendero México (p434) for a US\$55/30 per adult/child. A short boat ride will drop you off on Isla de Venados, from where you'll spend most of the day kayaking, snorkeling, hiking and sun worshipping. The bilingual guides are pleased to share their wildlife knowledge and sea kayaking expertise.

Isla de la Piedra

Escape artists love Isla de la Piedra (Stone Island, Map p430), located southeast of Old Mazatlán, for its beautiful, long sandy beach bordered by coconut groves. Anyone with an appetite sings the praises of the simple *palapa* (thatched-roof shelter) restaurants. Surfers come for the waves, and on Sunday afternoons and holidays the restaurants draw Mexican families. Most other times you'll have the beach to yourself.

Several companies offer all-inclusive, no-hassle excursions to Isla de la Piedra (it's actually a peninsula) including open bar, lunch, and a menu of activities such as water sports and short rides on forlorn, skinny horses. Consider instead **King David's Mazatlán Jungle Tour** (Map p430; ☎ 914-14-44; Calz Joel Montes Camarena s/n; adult/child US\$45/30; ☎ Tue-Thu & Sat), which offers a five-hour ecotour into the gorgeous bird-filled mangroves of a protected wildlife refuge. Stops along the way include an enormous coconut plantation, a secluded beach strewn with sand dollars, and a rustic restaurant for a hearty lunch of freshly smoked fish. Offered separately is a five-hour bird-watching tour (adult/child US\$50/30), which goes even deeper into Isla de Piedra's protected waterways.

It's a simple matter to get to Isla de Piedra on your own. Take a small water taxi (round-trip M\$10, every 10 minutes from 7am to 6pm) from the Playa Sur *embarcadero* near the Baja Ferries terminal. You'll be dropped off at a jetty just a short walk from the Isla de la Piedra beach. 'Playa Sur' buses leave for the boat dock from the north side of the Plaza Principal (Map p431).

Activities

SURFING

With a season lasting from late March through November, Mazatlán boasts several noteworthy surfing sites and a couple of great surf

shops. The longest-established surf shop in town is **Mazatlán Surf Center** (Map p430; ☎ 913-18-21; www.mazatlansurfcenter.com; Av Camarón Sábalo 500-4; board rentals per day/week M\$200-250/1000, 2hr lesson M\$500; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, 1-9pm Sun), known for its popular surfing lessons and infectious passion for the sport. From June to September it conducts improvised one-week surfing expeditions (from US\$750) to famous far-flung spots like Patolé, Celestinos and Mármol.

Also consider **Palm Surf** (Map p430; ☎ 914-06-87; palmsurf.com.mx; Av Camarón Sábalo 333; board rentals per day M\$250, 2hr lesson M\$300-400; ☎ 9:30am-6pm Mon-Sat), with good boards for rent and reputable lessons.

OTHER WATER SPORTS

The **Aqua Sport Center** (Map p430; ☎ 913-33-33; El Cid Mega Resort, Av Camarón Sábalo s/n) is the place to go for other water sports, including scuba diving (one-tank dive M\$600), snorkeling rentals (per day M\$110), jet skiing (per half-hour M\$500), banana-boat rides (M\$88), parasailing (M\$330), and kayak rentals (M\$165 to M\$275 per hour). Water sports equipment can also be hired from the beaches of most other large beachfront hotels.

HORSEBACK RIDING

If you love (or would love) to canter beside the sea, your best bet is with **Ginger's Bi-Lingual Horses** (☎ 988-12-54; www.mazinfo.com/gingershorses; Playa Bruja; 1hr tour M\$250; ☎ 10am, 11:30am, 1pm & 2:30pm Mon-Sat). The horses are healthy, happy and eager to stretch their legs on the trails leading through coconut plantations and on the bewitching Playa Bruja. Take a 'Cerritos Juárez' bus from Zona Dorada or a taxi to Playa Bruja.

SPORTFISHING

Handily located at the confluence of the Sea of Cortez and the Pacific Ocean, Mazatlán is world famous for its sportfishing – especially for marlin, swordfish, sailfish, tuna and *dorado* (dolphinfish). It can be an expensive activity (US\$300 to US\$450 per boat for a day in an 11m cruiser with four to six people fishing), though small-gauge fishing from a 7m *super panga* (fiberglass skiff) is less expensive (US\$210 to US\$260 per boat with up to six people fishing).

Boats leave from the El Cid Mega Resort marina and Marina Mazatlán, but discounts up to 20% are offered by the operators based on the peninsula on Calz Camarena (Map p430).

If you'd rather negotiate directly with a fisher – while saving a little moolah – confer with the independent operators offering half-day *panga* trips for US\$75 to US\$125, depending on the season. You'll find them waiting for you on the Playa Norte beach, alongside Paseo Claussen (Map p431).

Aries Fleet (Map p430; ☎ 916-34-68; ariesfleet.elcid.com; Marina El Cid) Supports catch and release practices.

Flota Bibi (Map p430; ☎ 981-36-40; www.bibifleet.com; Calz Camarena s/n) Proudly operates a six-person boat and gives steep discounts in the low season.

Flota Saballo (Map p430; ☎ 981-27-61; Calz Camarena s/n)

GOLF & TENNIS

Mazatlán has two renowned championship golf courses. The most striking is the **Estrella del Mar Golf Club** (off Map p430; ☎ 800-727-4653; www.estrelladelmar.com; Isla de la Piedra; green fees 9/18 holes US\$69/110, dub rentals US\$35-50), just south of the airport along the coast. El Cid Mega Resort (p436) offers a challenging alternative north of the Zona Dorada, with 9/18 holes for US\$60/75, but during the high season only guests may be allowed to play.

Play tennis at **Racquet Club Gaviotas** (Map p430; ☎ 913-59-39; Rio Ibis s/n; per hr M\$120) in the Zona Dorada, at El Cid Resort and at almost any of the large hotels north of the center.

Courses

Centro de Idiomas (Map p431; ☎ 985-56-06; www.spanishlink.org; Aurora 203; classes per week with/without homestay US\$250-285/435-470) offers Spanish courses for three or five hours (Monday to Friday) with a maximum of six students per class. Registration is Saturday morning from 9am to noon. The school also facilitates individual instruction (three/five-hour classes per week US\$320/540), volunteer work within the community, and homestays with three meals a day. Prices listed are for the first week of study; discounts are offered for each additional week.

Mazatlán for Children

Kids love this town, if only for the many opportunities to get wet.

Saltwater pool (Map p431; bathroom & changing room M\$30; ☎) One of the most economical and enjoyable places to take a dip is at this small, all-natural pool below the Carpe Olivera statue on Paseo Olas Altas. Kids and their adults splash around as waves crash over the pool's seaward edge.

MazAgua (off Map p430; ☎ 988-00-41; Entronque Habal-Cerritos s/n; admission M\$120; 🕒 10am-6pm Mar-Dec; ♿) Splashing around is also the featured activity here, where kids can go hog wild with water toboggans, a wave pool and other amusements. Children under the age of three are free. The 'Cerritos-Juárez' bus takes you there from anywhere along the coastal road.

Acuario Mazatlán (Map p430; ☎ 981-78-15; www.acuariomazatlan.gob.mx; Av de los Deportes 111; adult/child M\$60/40; 🕒 9:30am-6pm; ♿) One of Mexico's largest aquariums with 52 tanks with 250 species of freshwater and saltwater fish and other creatures. Sea lion, diving and bird shows are presented daily at 10:30am, noon and 3pm.

Tours

BICYCLE TOURS

Kelly's Bicycle Shop and Tours (Map p430; ☎ 914-11-87; www.kellys-bikes.com; Av Camarón Sábalo 204; 🕒 10am-2pm & 4:30-8pm Mon-Sat) leads wild and woolly one- to four-hour mountain-bike tours (M\$295) into the hills, over scenic paved routes and down challenging single-track trails. Mountain bikes can be rented for M\$150 per day.

BOAT TOURS

In addition to Isla de Venados trips (see p432), several boats take three-hour **sightseeing tours** (M\$150), most leaving from the marina near El Faro at 11am. Two-hour sunset cruises (sometimes called 'booze cruises') include hors d'oeuvres and alcohol (M\$250 to M\$350). Check flyers around town, talk to a tour agent or call the operators of boats such as **Costalegre** (Map p430; ☎ 982-31-30; Calz Camarena s/n) and **Yate Fiesta** (Map p430; ☎ 981-71-54; Calz Camarena s/n).

The speedy vessel **Trimaran Kolonahe** (Map p430; ☎ 916-34-68; Marina El Cid) sets sail for Isla de Venados each morning at 9am, and returns to sea again at 2:30pm for a sunset cruise with open bar. Both tours are priced at US\$35.

BUS TOURS

Several companies offer a variety of tours in and around Mazatlán. Prices are about the same from company to company for the same tours: a three-hour city tour (US\$25); a colonial tour (US\$42 to US\$50) to the foothill towns of El Quelite, Concordia and Copala; and a tequila factory tour (US\$35) that includes the village of La Noria. Hotel pick-ups are standard.

Recommended agencies:

Hudson Tours (Map p430; ☎ 913-17-64; www.hudson-tours.com; Apartamentos Fiesta, Ibis 502) Smaller, per-

sonalized tours including snorkeling (US\$30), city (US\$25), spearfishing (US\$35), hiking (US\$25) and shopping (US\$25).

Vista Tours (Map p430; ☎ 986-83-83; www.vistatours.com.mx; Av Camarón Sábalo 51) A variety of tours: El Quelite (US\$35), Cosalá (US\$75), and the San Ignacio Missions (US\$75).

WILDLIFE AND WHALE-WATCHING TOURS

Close to a range of ecosystems – from mangrove-lined estuaries to tropical deciduous and dry thorn forests – Mazatlán offers nature-lovers a diverse and enriching experience. For bird-watches, more than 400 species of birds can be seen in and around Mazatlán. With a well-articulated green ethos, **Sendero México** (Map p430; ☎ 940-86-87; www.senderomexico.com; Av Playa Las Gaviotas s/n) offers an impressive array of guided bird-watching tours (US\$35 to US\$145) including forays by kayak into coastal lagoons and excursions into the foothills east of town.

If being in the wake of cetaceans floats your boat, try **Onca Explorations** (Map p430; ☎ 990-16-32; www.oncaexplorations.com; Av del Mar 1022) and its four-hour whale and dolphin exploration led by biologist Oscar Guzón (US\$85, from December to May). During your journey, learn about whale research techniques as the crew collects information on the behavioral ecology of the whales and conducts a photo-identification project. Also offered is a four-hour snorkeling expedition to several islands with an emphasis on marine ecology (US\$65, year-round), and a fascinating five-hour tour to the archeological site Las Labradas (US\$55), where the only beachside petroglyphs in the Americas exist.

Festivals & Events

Carnaval Mazatlán has Mexico's most flamboyant Carnival celebrations. For the week leading up to Ash Wednesday (the Wednesday 46 days before Easter), the town goes on a nonstop partying spree. It ends abruptly on the morning of Ash Wednesday, when Roman Catholics go to church to receive ash marks on their foreheads for the first day of Lent. Be sure to reserve a hotel room in advance. **Sinaloa Festival de los Artes** Culture vultures should plan to visit in November–December for this art and performance festival centred at the Peralta Theater. **Virgen de Guadalupe** The day of the Virgen de Guadalupe is celebrated on December 12 at the cathedral. Children come in colorful costumes.

Sleeping

Befitting an old resort town, Mazatlán has an extensive choice of accommodations for

any budget, from luxury resorts to vintage old-style hotels and a growing selection of charming, expat-run B&Bs.

BUDGET

Hotel del Río (Map p431; ☎ 982-44-30; Juárez 2410; d/q M\$200/350; 🏠) This tidy family-run hotel, close to the beach in a working-class neighborhood, is a long-time traveler favorite. Several rooms are on the dark side; request one of the few bright ones that face seaward. All rooms have cable TV, and the seventh night is free.

Hotel del Centro (Map p431; ☎ 981-26-73; Canizales 717; s/d M\$200/300; 🏠) Its proximity to both Plaza Principal and the lively public market makes this well-kept cheapie a great choice for budget travelers who favor downtown bustle over the more predictable rhythms of the beach. The 24 rooms are plain and the beds a tad squishy, but they're very clean and otherwise well kept.

Hotel Belmar (Map p431; ☎ 985-11-12/13; Paseo Olas Altas 166 Sur; s/d M\$280-330; 🏠 🏠 🏠) This totally faded 1950s classic harkens back to Mazatlán's swanky early days as a tourist mecca. The more than 200 rooms run the gamut from threadbare and dingy to perfectly acceptable; ask to see several before making your choice. The best rooms – including the one John Wayne favored – are up a few flights of stairs. These have air-con and sea-view balconies well positioned to benefit from salty breezes and gratifying views over Playa Norte.

Hotel Coral Reef (Map p430; ☎ 913-29-41; Av Playa Gaviotas 4; d M\$400-450; 🏠 🏠) This old tourist haunt with worn sea- and pool-view rooms clings to life overlooking a nice stretch of sand in the Zona Dorada just north of Hotel Playa Mazatlán.

The trailer parks are near the beaches toward the north end of the town, though most of them are not especially attractive for tent camping. Of these, **Mar Rosa Trailer & RV Park** (Map p430; ☎ 913-61-87; mar_rosarv@mzt.megared.net.mx; Av Camarón Sábalo 702; RV sites M\$300-390) gets the thumbs-up for its excellent location overlooking Playa Sábalo, just north of Zona Dorada.

MIDRANGE

Hotel La Siesta (Map p431; ☎ 981-26-40, 800-711-52-29; www.lasiesta.com.mx; Paseo Olas Altas 11 Sur; r with/without view M\$450/350; 🏠 🏠 🏠) Sitting pretty above Playa Norte, La Siesta has a lush courtyard and some of the choicest sea-view rooms in

Old Mazatlán. All 51 spacious and tidy rooms have cable TV and a touch of character. The recent addition of an attractive small pool makes this Mazatlán's best value.

Hotel Machado (Map p431; ☎ 982-14-63, 987-22-17; ernestorubio@hotmail.com; Av Sixto Osuno 510; s M\$500-600, d M\$620-850; 🏠 🏠) This new arrival, the only hotel on gorgeous Plazuela Machado, strikes just the right note with its mix of modern conveniences and colonial ambience. Six spacious units with high ceilings and deluxe bathrooms are filled with original art and have fridges and microwaves. A modest breakfast is included. Prices drop on Monday through Wednesday.

Meson de Cynthia (Map p431; ☎ 136-02-84, from the US ☎ 310-633-8739; www.elmesondecynthia.com; Av Sixto Osuno 408; r M\$500, ste M\$650-700; 🏠 🏠) Just a stone's throw from Plazuela Machado is this stylish newcomer with six comfy abodes with cable TV, and a sprawling rooftop terrace with a hot tub.

Apartamentos Fiesta (Map p430; www.mazatlanapartments.com; Rio Ibis 502; 1-/2-bedroom apt M\$520/680; 🏠 🏠) Features 13 very appealing apartments of different size and layout. All have kitchens and pleasing decor and are peacefully located in or near an ornate, mature tropical garden.

Hotel Azteca Inn (Map p430; ☎ 913-44-77; www.aztecin.com.mx; Av Playa Gaviotas 307; d M\$760; 🏠 🏠 🏠) Situated close to the beach and smack-dab in the middle of the Zona Dorada is this serviceable motor lodge. The 74 rooms lack personality but do have good, firm mattresses and room service from the decent onsite restaurant.

The Melville (Map p431; ☎ 982-84-74, toll-free from the US 866-395-2881; www.themelville.com; Av Constitución 99; 1-bedroom ste M\$800-900, 2-bedroom ste M\$1000; 🏠 🏠) Formerly a telegraph office and later a convent for Carmelite nuns, this lovingly preserved neoclassical building and its large, tranquil courtyard provide the perfect setting for Mazatlán's newest and best boutique hotel. Each distinct suite has a kitchenette and is filled with splendid art, costly antiques, and plenty of period detail.

Marley Motel (Map p430; ☎ 913-55-33; motmarley@mzt.megared.net.mx; Av Playa Gaviotas 226; 1-bedroom apt M\$850-900, 2-bedroom apt M\$930-1030; 🏠 🏠 🏠) This small Zona Dorada motel offers exceedingly comfortable seafront apartments with well-equipped kitchens and – best of all – privileged beach access.

TOP END

Rooms at Mazatlán's top-end hotels can be reserved quite economically as part of a holiday package – see your travel agent or poke around online.

Hotel Los Arcos (Map p430; ☎ 913-50-66; www.motellosarcos.com; Av Playa Gaviotas 214; s/d M\$900/1050, ste M\$1030-1180; P ☎ ☎) Also right on the beach is this attractive hotel featuring bright suites with kitchenettes and dining areas, a small pool and commanding sea views of the offshore islands. They're very comfortable, spacious and clean, and the beach is readily accessible.

Best Western Hotel Posada Freeman (Map p431; ☎ 985-60-60, from the US 866-638-88-06; www.posadafreeman.com; Paseo Olas Altas 79; r incl buffet breakfast M\$932-1168, ste M\$1534; P ☎ ☎) Perched over Old Mazatlán's historic waterfront, this recently reborn hotel offers character, comfort and grand ocean and city views. The well-equipped gym, winning rooftop bar and striking pool make it an exceptional value.

Playa Mazatlán (Map p430; ☎ 989-05-55; www.hotelplaya.net; Av Playa Gaviotas 202; r M\$1315-1641, ste M\$2198-2632; P ☎ ☎) This large resort – the first built in the Zona Dorada – maintains impeccable standards. The 425 rooms – most with ocean views – have satellite TV, private terrace and the thoughtful touches that mark a classy operation. Manicured tropical gardens and a breezy oceanside restaurant make this Mazatlán's best large hotel.

Inn at Mazatlán (Map p430; ☎ 913-55-00; www.innatmaz.com; Camarón Sábalo 6291; r M\$1480, ste M\$2115-4830; P ☎ ☎) This excellent highrise hotel has attentive service and offers 208 bright, cheerful rooms and suites, all with ocean views and private balconies or terraces. It's right on the beach.

El Cid Mega Resort (Map p430; ☎ 913-33-33; www.elcid.com.mx; Av Camarón Sábalo s/n; r M\$2124-2360, ste M\$4484-6254; P ☎ ☎) A behemoth decked out in 1980s-style luxury. This 1068-room, 2.9-sq-km minicity has it all – seven pools, several dive shops, restaurants, travel agencies, kids' areas, gyms and more.

Eating

With all those fishing and shrimping boats heading out to sea every morning, it's no wonder that Mazatlán is famous for fresh seafood. Treat yourself to *pescado zarandeado*, a delicious charcoal-broiled fish stuffed with onion, tomatoes, peppers and spices. A whole

kilo, feeding two people well, usually costs around M\$100.

The restaurants in the Zona Dorada cater mainly to the tourist trade. For something better, head to Plazuela Machado. It's sublime in the evening when music plays, kids frolic and the plaza is softly lit to create a very romantic atmosphere.

OLD MAZATLÁN**Budget**

La Espiga Dorada (Map p431; ☎ 985-18-43; Constitución 217; pastries M\$5; ☎ 8am-6pm) Doña Betty Pompa has operated this bakery for nearly 50 years from her home in a grand old building built in 1837. Try the fluffy sweet bread called *concheta* or a perfect meringue cookie. There's no sign; just follow your nose.

Mariscos Toño (Map p431; Av 16 de Septiembre s/n; mains M\$30-60; ☎ noon-8pm) This unassuming old town seafood joint is deservedly popular for its simple seafood cocktails, *ceviches* and tostadas, all served super fresh at tables lining the street. You're unlikely to see too many tourists slurping down the place's *caracol* (sea snail).

Puerto Viejo (Map p430; ☎ 982-18-86; Paseo Olas Altas 25; mains M\$30-80; ☎ 10am-6pm) A good time crowd of expatriate locals gathers here for drinks at sunset. Many of them will return tomorrow for super fresh seafood sent straight from the port. The well-priced *comida corrida* (prix-fixe menu; M\$38) regularly features selections like *mole* and tuna *ceviche*.

Cenaduría El Túnel (Map p431; Av Carnaval 1207; mains M\$45-55; ☎ noon-midnight) This atmospheric cheapie has been serving local favorites like *pozole* (shredded pork in broth) and smoked marlin *enchiladas* for over 50 years.

Midrange

Mariscos El Camichín (Map p431; ☎ 985-01-97; Paseo Claussen 97; mains M\$50-120; ☎ 11am-10pm) Facing Playa Norte, this popular patio restaurant serves delicious seafood under a cool *palapa* roof. Suave elderly mariachis are known to play in the back room.

Pedro y Lola (Map p431; ☎ 982-25-89; Av Carnaval 1303; mains M\$50-170; ☎ 10am-2am) Named after beloved Mexican singers Pedro Infante and Lola Beltrán, this very popular sidewalk restaurant-bar serves toned-down Mexican favorites and seafood dishes like garlic octopus (M\$90) and fish *papillote* (wrapped in parchment and steamed in white wine, M\$110).

La Copa de Leche (Map p431; ☎ 982-57-53; Paseo Olas Altas 122; mains M\$60-160; ☎ 8am-7pm) Harkening back to a bygone Mazatlán, this old-timer is prized by the local gentry for its authentic menu. The economical *comida corrida* is served all day long, but for something really delicious you'd do well to try the hearty *sopa de mariscos*, a soup with squid, shrimp, fish and a wedge of lime.

La Tramoja (Map p431; ☎ 985-50-33; Constitución 509; mains M\$70-125; ☎ 11am-2am) Hearty Mexican meat dishes are set out on spacious sidewalk tables. Ravenous? Try the *carne azteca* – a steak stuffed with *huitlacoche* (corn fungus) and served on a bed of *nopales* (prickly pear cactus).

Mariscos La Puntilla (Map p430; ☎ 982-88-77; Flota Playa Sur s/n; mains M\$75-130; ☎ 8am-7pm) Popular with Mexican families for the weekend breakfast buffet (M\$85), this open-air eatery has a relaxed atmosphere and fantastic *pescado zarandeado*. It's near the Isla de la Piedra ferries, on a small point with a view across the water.

Domitila (Map p431; ☎ 136-04-36; Constitución 515; mains M\$75-155; ☎ 11am-10pm) This romantic new restaurant is doing its part to raise the ante for gourmet fare on Plazuela Machado. The waiters are quick to replenish your fresh *tamarindo* (tamarind) margarita and the plates are delicious and well presented. Feeling decadent? Try the small squid stuffed with crab meat and salsa with cheese sauce.

ZONA DORADA & AROUND

Budget

Tomates Verdes (Map p430; ☎ 913-21-36; Laguna 42; mains M\$35-50; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) This cozy and unpretentious lunch spot serves dishes like *pechuga rellena* (stuffed chicken breast) and flavorful soups like *nopales con chipotle* (spicy cactus).

La Cocina de Ana (Map p430; ☎ 916-31-19; Laguna 49; mains M\$35-70; ☎ noon-4pm Mon-Sat) This friendly place offers well-prepared buffet lunch fare such as meatball soup, chili con carne and paella in a small, homey dining area.

Arre Lulú (Map p430; ☎ 916-71-31; Av de las Garzas 18; mains M\$55-180; ☎ 7am-11pm) This exuberantly painted little joint starts serving alcohol shortly after sunrise. You may want to stick around for lobster, shrimp or the traditional Mexican dishes. Wash it all down with a refreshing *Michelada* (beer mixed with lime juice, chili sauce and a dash of Worcestershire).

Also recommended:

Pura Vida (Map p430; ☎ 916-58-15; cnr Bugambilias & Laguna; juices M\$20-35, snacks M\$20-60; ☎ 8am-10:30pm) Fresh juices and vegetarian fare.

Tacos Luna (Map p430; Av Camarón Sábalo 400; tacos M\$10; ☎ noon-midnight) Chow down the local way.

Midrange

Miso Sushi (Map p430; ☎ 913-02-99; Av Las Gaviotas 17; sushi rolls M\$50-120; ☎ 1pm-11pm) Mazatlán has several sushi restaurants, but none as cosmopolitan as this trendy favorite, recommended for its hipster decor, good music and super-fresh, well-presented fare.

Pancho's Restaurant (Map p430; ☎ 914-09-11; Av Las Gaviotas 408; mains M\$86-200; ☎ 7am-11pm) Overlooking Playa Gaviotas, this is a good spot to catch the sunset, slurp a monster margarita, or devour a huge seafood platter including lobster, octopus, a whole red snapper and, for good measure, a pair of frog legs.

Restaurant Rioja (Map p430; ☎ 916-61-80; Av Camarón Sábalo; mains M\$100-120; ☎ 7am-11pm) The elderly waiters at this old-fashioned Spanish restaurant dish out authentic paella and a nice selection of well-presented *tapas* and European favorites like *coq au vin* (chicken stew with wine).

Top End

Vittore Italian Grill (Map p430; ☎ 986-24-24; Av Las Gaviotas 100; mains M\$130-250; ☎ noon-midnight) This elegant spot with romantic patio seating features delicious calorie-rich pasta dishes and memorable seafood and beef dishes (including a delicious beef filet with blackberry sauce, melted Gruyère cheese and wild mushrooms). The service is rather formal.

Casa Loma (Map p430; ☎ 913-53-98; Av Las Gaviotas 104; mains M\$150-320; ☎ 1:30-10:30pm; ☎) Escape the tourist scene and enjoy a sophisticated meal at this genteel dining destination. Enjoy roast duck à l'orange or the Mazatlán favorite poached fish *blanca rosa* (M\$174) in a swanky dining room or outdoors by the burbling patio fountain.

Drinking

Edgar's Bar (Map p431; ☎ 982-72-18; cnr Serdán & Escobedo; ☎ 9am-midnight) For a taste of Old Mazatlán grab a tequila or two at this crusty old bar, a mainstay since 1949. Friendly old men sing karaoke beneath vintage photographs, and giant shrimp are brought to your table in buckets. According to the sign on the door, women are welcome.

La Tertulia (Map p431; ☎ 983-16-44; Constitución 1406; ☎ Mon-Sat) This lively spot – perfect for top shelf tequila-sipping – is decorated exclusively with bullfighting posters and the stuffed heads of vanquished *toros* (bulls).

Vitrolas' Bar (Map p431; www.vitrolasbar.com; Frias 1608; ☎ 5pm-1am Tue-Sun) This gracious gay bar in a beautifully restored building is romantically lit and, overall, more button-down than mesh muscle-shirt.

Watering holes ideal for heavy partying and youthful exploits:

Jungle Juice (Map p430; ☎ 913-33-15; Av de las Garzas 101) A cantina-style place with exotic fruit drinks and a breezy nook upstairs.

Señor Frogs (Map p430; ☎ 982-19-25; Calz Camarón Sábalo s/n) This brash, ebullient good-time joint gets wild on weekends.

Entertainment

What could be better than a day on a warm beach followed by a night in a town that really knows how to party? Choose from throbbing discos, a couple of thriving gay venues and a much-loved theater. For entertainment listings check *Pacífic Pearl* or *Viejo Mazatlán*, available in hotel lobbies around town.

NIGHTCLUBS

Mazatlán has earned its reputation as a nightlife destination with a great selection of high-energy dance clubs. Most charge covers in the M\$100 to M\$200 range; the price of admission generally includes a free drink. The scene starts percolating around 10pm and boils over after midnight. While some clubs close at 2am, several others remain lively until 5am.

Fiesta Land (Map p430; ☎ 984-16-66; Av del Mar s/n) That ostentatious white castle on Punta Camarón at the south end of the Zona Dorada is home to two of Mazatlán's most popular nightspots. Valentino's draws a mixed crowd to three dance floors throbbing with hip-hop and Latin music. When the DJ offends, you can escape to Bora Bora, popular for its beachside dance floor and lax policy on bar-top dancing. This is the place to go after 2am when other bars begin to close.

Joe's Oyster Bar (Map p430; ☎ 983-53-33; Av Loaiza 100; ☎ 4pm-2am) This popular spot perched over the beach is OK for a sunset drink in the early evening, but it goes ballistic after 11pm when it's packed with college kids dancing on tables, chairs and each other. On a tiny lane that connects Av Playa Gaviotas to the beach.

El Caracol (Map p430; ☎ 913-33-33; El Gid Mega Resort, Av Camarón Sábalo s/n; ☎ Tue-Sat) This after-hours favorite boasts Mazatlán's best light show and a gargantuan two-level dance floor connected by a chute. The smartly dressed crowd stays late for techno, hip-hop, salsa and *cumbia* music.

Coliseo's Disco Forum (Map p430; ☎ 984-16-66; Av del Mar 1223; ☎ 11am-2am) Party like a Roman: the state-of-the-art sound system in this huge club draws talented DJs and a dance-crazed crowd.

Pepe Toro (Map p430; ☎ 914-41-76; www.pepetoro.com; Av de las Garzas 18; ☎ Thu-Sun) This colorful club attracts a fun-loving mostly gay crowd. On Saturday night there's a transvestite strip show at 1am.

THEATER

Teatro Ángela Peralta (Map p431; ☎ 982-44-46; www.teatroangelaperalta.com; Av Carnaval 47) To feel the pulse of Mazatlán's burgeoning culture scene, a night at the Peralta is a must. Built in 1860, the theater was lovingly restored over five years to reopen in 1990. It has an intimate auditorium with three narrow, stacked balconies. Events of all kinds are presented – movies, concerts, opera, theater and more. A kiosk on the walkway out front announces current and upcoming events. The schedule is fullest around the October-November Sinaloa Fiesta de los Artes.

LIVE MUSIC

If you get a chance, try to hear a rousing traditional *banda sinaloense* – a boisterous brass band unique to the state of Sinaloa. Watch for announcements posted around town or broadcasted from slow-moving cars with speakers mounted on top. These and other large music shows are staged at Coliseo's Disco Forum (above) and at the recently opened live music venue **Las Flores Premier** (Map p430; ☎ 990-05-05; Av Camarón Sábalo s/n).

BULLFIGHTS

Tickets for bullfights are available from travel agencies, major hotels and from the **Salón Bacanora** (Map p430; ☎ 986-91-55), beside Plaza de Toros.

Plaza de Toros (Map p430; Av Buelna) Just inland from the Zona Dorada traffic circle, Mazatlán's only bullring hosts *corridos de toros* (bullfights) at 4pm Sunday from mid-December to Easter.

CINEMAS

Cinemas Gaviotas (Map p430; ☎ 983-75-45; Av Camarón Sábalo 218; admission Thu-Tue M\$38, Wed M\$22) Has six screens showing recent releases, including some in English.

Shopping

The Zona Dorada is replete with stores selling clothes, pottery, jewelry and crafts. One noteworthy stop is **Sea Shell City** (Map p430; ☎ 913-13-01; Av Loaiza 407; ☎ 9am-7pm), packed with an unbelievable assortment of you-know-what. For something slightly more rarefied, try the shopping complex at Hotel Playa Mazatlán where several high-end shops sell fine crafts including masks from Guerrero and tinware from Oaxaca.

In Old Mazatlán at the **Centro Mercado** (Central Market; Map p431) you can enjoy a classic Mexican market experience, complete with vegetable stands, spice dealers, food stalls and shops selling bargain-priced crafts.

If you're looking to purchase something special, head to the streets surrounding Plazuela Machado, where a growing selection of galleries and boutiques gives joy to browsers.

Gallery Michael (Map p431; ☎ 69-167-816; Ángel Flores 601) has a broad inventory of high-quality curios, pottery, jewelry and housewares. The family-run **Casa Etnika** (Map p431; ☎ 116-84-71; Av Sixto Osuno 50) offers a small, tasteful inventory of unique objects from Mexico and elsewhere.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Rafael Buelna International Airport (MZT; ☎ 928-04-38) is 27km southeast of the Zona Dorada. Carriers servicing the airport include the following:

Aero California (☎ 985-25-87; Airport) Direct service to Guadalajara, La Paz, Mexico City and Tijuana.

Aeroméxico (Map p430; ☎ 914-11-11; Av Camarón Sábalo 310) Service to Atlanta, Los Angeles, Chicago and San Francisco, via Mexico City. Direct service to San Diego, Phoenix, La Paz, Guadalajara and Mexico City.

Alaska Airlines (☎ 985-27-30; Airport) Direct service to Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle.

Continental (☎ 800-900-5000; Airport) Direct service to Houston.

US Airways (☎ 981-11-84; Airport) Direct service to Phoenix.

Mexicana (Map p430; ☎ 913-07-72; Av Camarón Sábalo) Service to Denver, Los Angeles, Los Cabos, via Mexico City. Direct service to Guadalajara and Mexico City.

BOAT

Baja Ferries (Map p430; ☎ 985-04-70; www.bajaferris.com; tickets adult/child M\$800/400; ☎ ticket office 8am-3pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun), with a terminal at the southern end of town, operates ferries between Mazatlán and La Paz in Baja California Sur (actually to the port of Pichilingue, 23km from La Paz). The 17-hour ferry to Pichilingue departs at 3pm (you should be there with ticket in hand at 1pm) on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday from the terminal. Strong winter winds may cause delays. Tickets are sold from two days in advance until the morning of departure. See p306 for cabin and vehicle prices.

BUS

The full service **Central de Autobuses** (Main Bus Station; Map p430; ☎ 982-83-51; Ferrusquilla s/n) is just off Av Ejército Mexicano, three blocks inland from the northern end of Playa Norte. All bus lines operate from separate halls in the main terminal.

Local buses to small towns nearby (such as Concordia, Copala and Rosario) operate from a smaller terminal, behind the main terminal.

There are several daily long-distance services:

| Destination | Fare | Duration | Frequency |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|----------|-----------|
| Culiacán | M\$130 | 2½hr | 24 daily |
| Durango | M\$357 | 7hr | 6 daily |
| Guadalajara | 1st-class | 8hr | 8 daily |
| | M\$355 2nd-class | 9hr | 12 daily |
| Manzanillo | M\$563 | 12hr | 1 daily |
| Mexico City (Terminal Norte) | 1st-class | 18hr | 6 daily |
| | M\$808-950 2nd-class | 20hr | 12 daily |
| Monterrey | M\$703 | | |
| | M\$856 | 16hr | 2 daily |
| Puerto Vallarta | 1st-class | 7hr | 5 daily |
| | M\$327 | | |
| | 2nd-class | 8hr | 2 daily |
| | M\$280 | | |
| Tepec | M\$170 | 4½hr | 1 daily |
| Tijuana | 1st-class | 26hr | 3 daily |
| | M\$900 | | |
| | 2nd-class | 28hr | 16 daily |
| | M\$759 | | |

Or take a bus to Tepec, where buses leave frequently for Puerto Vallarta.

To get to San Blas, go first to Tepic then get a bus from there – a 2nd-class service from Tepic to San Blas is M\$42 and takes one hour.

CAR

Shop around for the best rates, which begin at US\$40 per day during the high season. There are several rental agencies in town:

Alamo (Map p430; ☎ 913-10-10; Av Camarón Sábalo 410)

Budget (Map p430; ☎ 913-20-00; Av Camarón Sábalo 402)

Hertz (Map p430; ☎ 913-60-60; Av Camarón Sábalo 314)

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Taxi and *colectivo* vans (picking up and dropping off passengers along predetermined routes) operate from the airport to town (27km). Tickets (*colectivo*/taxi M\$60/250) can be purchased for both at a transportation booth in the arrival hall. There is no public bus running between Mazatlán and the airport.

BUS

Local buses run from 6am to 10:30pm. Regular white buses cost M\$5; air-con green buses cost M\$10. Route Sábalo–Centro travels from the Centro Mercado to Playa Norte via Juárez, then north on Av del Mar to the Zona Dorada and further north on Av Camarón Sábalo. Route Playa Sur travels south along Av Ejército Mexicano, near the bus station and through the city center, passing the market, then to the ferry terminal and El Faro.

To get into the center of Mazatlán from the bus terminal, go to Av Ejército Mexicano and catch any bus going south. Alternatively, you can walk 500m from the bus station to the beach and take a Sábalo–Centro bus heading south (left) to the center.

BICYCLE

Kelly's Bicycle Shop and Tours (p434) can provide mountain bikes for M\$150 per day.

TAXI

Mazatlán has a special type of taxi called a *pulmonía*, a small open-air vehicle similar to a golf cart. There are also regular red-and-white and green-and-white taxis called 'eco-taxis' that have rates from M\$80 to M\$100 for trips around town. *Pulmonías* can be slightly cheaper (or much more expensive) depending

on your bargaining skills, the time of day and whether or not there is a cruise ship in port.

AROUND MAZATLÁN

Several small, picturesque colonial towns in the Sierra Madre foothills make pleasant day trips from Mazatlán. **Concordia**, founded in 1565, has an 18th-century church with a baroque facade and elaborately decorated columns. The village is known for its manufacture of high-quality pottery and hand-carved furniture. It's about a 45-minute drive east of Mazatlán; head southeast on Hwy 15 for 20km to Villa Unión, turn inland on Hwy 40 (the highway to Durango) and go another 20km.

Also founded in 1565, **Copala**, 40km past Concordia on Hwy 40, was one of Mexico's first mining towns. It still has its colonial church (1748), colonial houses and cobblestoned streets. It's a 1½-hour drive from Mazatlán.

Rosario, 76km southeast of Mazatlán on Hwy 15, is another colonial mining town. It was founded in 1655 and its most famous feature is the towering gold-leaf altar in its church, the Nuestra Señora del Rosario. You can also visit the home of beloved songstress Lola Beltrán, whose long recording career made *ranchera* (Mexico's urban 'country music') popular in the mid-20th century.

In the mountains north of Mazatlán, **Cosalá** is a beautiful colonial mining village that dates from 1550. It has a 17th-century church, a historical and mining museum in a colonial mansion on the plaza, and two simple but clean hotels. To get to Cosalá, go north on Hwy 15 for 113km to the turnoff (opposite the turnoff for La Cruz de Alota on the coast) and then go about 45km up into the mountains.

Buses to Concordia (M\$20, one hour, every 15 minutes from 6am to 6pm), Copala (M\$30, 1½ hours, three per day) and Cosalá (M\$90, three hours, two per day) depart from the small bus terminal at the rear of Mazatlán's main bus station. For Rosario, take an 'Escuinapa' bus or any heading south on Hwy 15 (M\$30, 1½ hours, hourly from 6am to 6pm). You can also take tours to any of these towns (see p434).

TEACAPÁN

☎ 695 / pop 3000

Travelers grown weary of the bright lights of the city are increasingly drawn to this small fishing village at the tip of an isolated penin-

DETOUR: TUFTED JAY PRESERVE

Like some travelers, the tufted jay favors higher elevations, and specifically the cool forested canyons of the Sierra Madre Occidental. This striking bird – white with a long tail, a black bib and wings, and something of a mohawk – attracts bird-watching enthusiasts from afar to the **Tufted Jay Preserve** (☎ 669-940-8687; www.tufted-jay-preserve.org; info@senderomexico.com; cabins M\$800-900, 2-/6-person tent M\$400/600), a nature resort located high in the mountains southeast of Mazatlán. You don't have to be a birder to be enchanted by this beautiful enclave, an environmental easement created with Pronatura, a Mexican NGO, in 2005 to protect the lush habitat of its endemic namesake. Occupying lands that were until recently selectively logged by the small *ejido* (cooperative) from the nearby community of Palmito, the enterprise has observed the best practices of sustainable community development. With help from the Mexican department of forestry, the *ejido* received money to build accommodations which would be part of a project to promote ecotourism in the area and provide an alternative source of income to the community. Today, nature lovers and escape artists come for hiking, bird watching, horseback riding and simple accommodations, including a pair of appealing two bedroom lantern-lit wooden cabins with kitchenette and hot water (but no electricity or fridge), or in safari tents with wood stoves, flannel sheets and goose down quilts. Hearty meals (M\$90 per person) for groups of four or more are prepared by women from the *ejido* in an open-air kitchen, or by you in your cabin. Advance reservations for accommodations and meals are essential.

It's a three-hour journey from Mazatlán by car. From the Villa Unión junction on Hwy 15, drive east on Hwy 40 to the 202km marker, then left on the dirt road for about 20 minutes of bumpy going. Buses (M\$82, three hours, five 1st class; or M\$70, 3½ hours, four 2nd class) traveling between Mazatlán and Durango stop in Palmito; pre-arranged transportation from town is included as part of your reservation. Single and multi-day bird-watching tours to the Tufted Jay Preserve can also be booked with Sendero México (p434).

sula, 126km south of Mazatlán at the border of Nayarit and Sinaloa. Surrounded by a rich mangrove ecosystem and in close proximity to several pristine beaches, Teacapán is prime territory for escape artists and nature buffs. The surrounding estuaries are replete with egrets, ducks and herons. Boating excursions into the mangrove swamps can be arranged with local fishermen at Boca de Teacapán, the natural marina. Local guides offer overnight trips to Isla de Pájaros, an epic bird-watching spot, and to local archaeological sites.

Villas María Fernanda (☎ 954-53-93; www.villasmariaterminal.com; r M\$450-550, ste M\$550, house M\$1000-2200; 🚗 🚲) is an attractive small resort offering spacious, comfortable rooms, suites with kitchen and a house for up to 10 people. Kids love the cheerful pool with water slide.

Restaurant & Bungalows Señor Wayne (☎ 954-56-95; r/cabaña M\$250/350; 🚗 🚲), an immaculate family-run operation, has seven clean rooms and two economical *palapa*-roofed *cabañas*. Also on the premises is Teacapán's best restaurant (mains M\$60 to M\$120), serving big breakfasts, steaks and seafood.

To get there from Mazatlán's 2nd-class bus terminal, catch one of the frequent buses

to Escuinapa (M\$20, 2½ hours) and transfer there for a Transportes Esquinapa bus to Teacapán (M\$30, one hour). By car, take Hwy 5-23 from Escuinapa on Hwy 15.

SANTIAGO IXCUINTLA

☎ 323 / pop 17,000

Despite its charming plaza and impressive gazebo held aloft by eight busy iron muses, Santiago Ixcuintla is mainly of interest as the jumping-off point for Mexcaltitán. It's not a tourist town but there are a couple of good hotels and an interesting cultural stop. The **Centro Huichol** (☎ 235-11-71; Calle 20 de Noviembre 452; 🕒 9am-2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Sat) is a handicrafts center where Indigenous Huichol learn skills to create and sell their distinctive arts and crafts as well as market their work and generate sustainable income. You'll find it 10 blocks northeast of the city center on the road to Mexcaltitán.

Hotel Casino Plaza (☎ 235-08-50; Ocampo & Rayón; s/d M\$275/320; 📞 🚗 🚲), near the market, is modern and pleasant, with a good **restaurant** (mains M\$30-80) featuring a daily breakfast buffet (M\$60). The recently opened **Hotel Plaza Los Reyes Santiago** (☎ 235-42-57; 20 Noviembre Ote 89;

s/d/ste M\$280/300/300-400; 🚻 🚰) is another good option with its clean, modern rooms.

To get to Santiago by car, turn off Hwy 15 63km northwest of Tepic and travel 7km west. Buses to Santiago Ixcuintla leave frequently from Tepic. From Mazatlán you must take a 2nd-class bus to Penas where frequent local buses go to Ixcuintla.

Combis from Santiago Ixcuintla to La Batanga (M\$20, at 7am, 10am, noon and 2pm), the leaving point for boats to Mexcaltitán, go from the Terminal de Taxis Foráneos at 73 Juárez Oriente, one block north of the plaza. Transportes del Pacífico also runs a 2nd-class bus to La Batanga (M\$20, one hour, 37km) daily at 7am. A one-way taxi will run to about M\$150.

MEXCALTITÁN

☎ 323 / pop 900

This ancient island village, settled sometime around the year AD 500, is believed by some experts to be Aztlán, the ancestral homeland of the Aztec people. Today it's foremost a shrimping town. Men head out into the surrounding wetlands in the early evening in small boats, to return just before dawn with their nets bulging. All day long, shrimp are spread out to dry on any available surface throughout the town, making the prospect of an afternoon stroll a pungent, picturesque proposition.

Tourism has scarcely made a mark here. Mexcaltitán has one hotel, a couple of pleasant waterside restaurants and a small museum, making it a pleasant place to visit for a night.

Sights & Activities

The Museo Aztlán del Origen (admission M\$5; 🕒 9am-2pm & 4-6:30pm Tue-Sun), on the northern side of the plaza, is small but enchanting. Among the exhibits are many interesting ancient objects and a reproduction of a fascinating long scroll, the *Códice Riturini*, telling the story of the Aztec peoples' travels, with notes in Spanish.

You can arrange **boat trips** (M\$300 per hour) on the lagoon for bird-watching, fishing and sightseeing – every family has one or more boats.

Festivals & Events

Semana Santa Holy Week is celebrated in a big way here. On Good Friday a statue of Christ is put on a cross in the church, then taken down and carried through the streets.

Fiesta de San Pedro Apóstol This raucous festival, celebrating the patron saint of fishing, is on June 29. Statues of St Peter and St Paul are taken out into the lagoon in decorated *lanchas* for the blessing of the waters. Festivities start around June 20, leading up to the big day.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Ruta Azteca (☎ 232-02-11, ext 128; Venecia 98; s M\$150-300, d M\$300-350, tr M\$400-450) The town's best, worst, and only hotel. Rooms are simple and marginally clean; ask for one out the back that has a view of the lagoon.

The shrimp *tamales* sold in the morning from a wheelbarrow on the streets are a local culinary highlight. On the east shore, accessible by a rickety wooden walkway, **Restaurant Alberca** (mains M\$40-60; 🕒 7am-6pm) has a great lagoon view and a menu completely devoted to shrimp. Don't leave town without trying the local specialty of *albóndigas de camarón* (battered and fried shrimp balls served with a savory broth). Or perhaps a rich *jugo de camarón* (shrimp juice) or *paté de camarón*.

Getting There & Away

From Santiago Ixcuintla take a bus, taxi or *colectivo* to La Batanga, a small wharf where *lanchas* depart for Mexcaltitán. The arrival and departure times of the *lanchas* are coordinated with the bus schedule. The boat journey takes 15 minutes and costs M\$10 per person. If you miss the *lancha* you can hire a private one for M\$70 (plus M\$15 for each additional person) between 8am and 7pm.

SAN BLAS

☎ 323 / pop 12,000

The tranquil fishing village of San Blas, 70km northwest of Tepic, has been slated by government tourism officials to become a big resort town for decades. That's not to say it's changed much. It's still the peaceable, drowsy backwater it's always been, and therein lies its charm. Visitors come to enjoy isolated beaches, fine surfing, abundant bird life, and tropical jungles reached by riverboats, much as they always have. A smattering of entertaining bars and restaurants and an amiable beach scene add to the mix, making for an enjoyable stay.

San Blas was an important Spanish port from the late 16th century to the 19th century. The Spanish built a fortress here to protect their trading galleons from marauding British and French pirates. It was also the

AZTEC LAUNCHING PAD?

A visit to ancient Mexcaltitán is undeniably evocative of the distant past. But was it really once Aztlán, the mythical ancestral homeland of the Aztecs?

The local version of the town's origin contends that the Aztecs left here around AD 1091 to begin the generations-long migration that led them eventually to Tenochtitlán (modern Mexico City) around 1325. Proponents point to the striking similarities between the cruciform design of Mexcaltitán's streets and the urban layout of early Tenochtitlán. A pre-Hispanic bas-relief in stone found in the area is also provided as evidence – it depicts a heron clutching a snake, an allusion to the sign the Aztecs hoped to find in the promised land. And then there are the chronicles of reports by Aztecs to Spanish missionaries, including one in which it was related that the ancestors lived happily in beautiful Aztlán, where there were all kinds of ducks, herons and other water birds. Indeed, the name Aztlán means 'place of egrets' – and there are certainly plenty of those milling about.

But not everyone is so sure. Competing theories place Aztlán in the Four Corners area of the United States, in Wisconsin and even in Alaska. 'No serious archeological study has ever been done in Mexcaltitán,' says Jesus Jauregui, an expert in western Mexico at the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexico City. 'Aztlán is a mythical place, not a historical one.'

Local opinion goes both ways. One fisherman who considered the facts as they're displayed at the town's museum wasn't buying. 'Why would anyone leave?' he asked.

port from which Junipero Serra, the 'Father' of the California missions, embarked on his northward peregrination.

Information

Banamex (Av Juárez s/n) Has an ATM.

Caseta Telefónica (☎ 285-41-40; Av Juárez 666; ☎ 7am-10pm)

Cibernet la Web (Canalizo 155; per hr M\$10; ☎ 9am-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-11pm Sun) Speedy internet access.

Health Clinic (☎ 285-12-07; cnr Azueta & Campeche; ☎ 24 hrs daily)

Post office (cnr Sonora & Echeverría)

Tourist office (☎ 285-02-21; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri)

This basic tourist office, at Playa El Borrego across from Stoner's Surf Camp, has a few maps and brochures about the area and the state of Nayarit.

Sights & Activities

Although the beaches dominate here, everyone loves the boat tours through the estuaries where birds and wildlife abound.

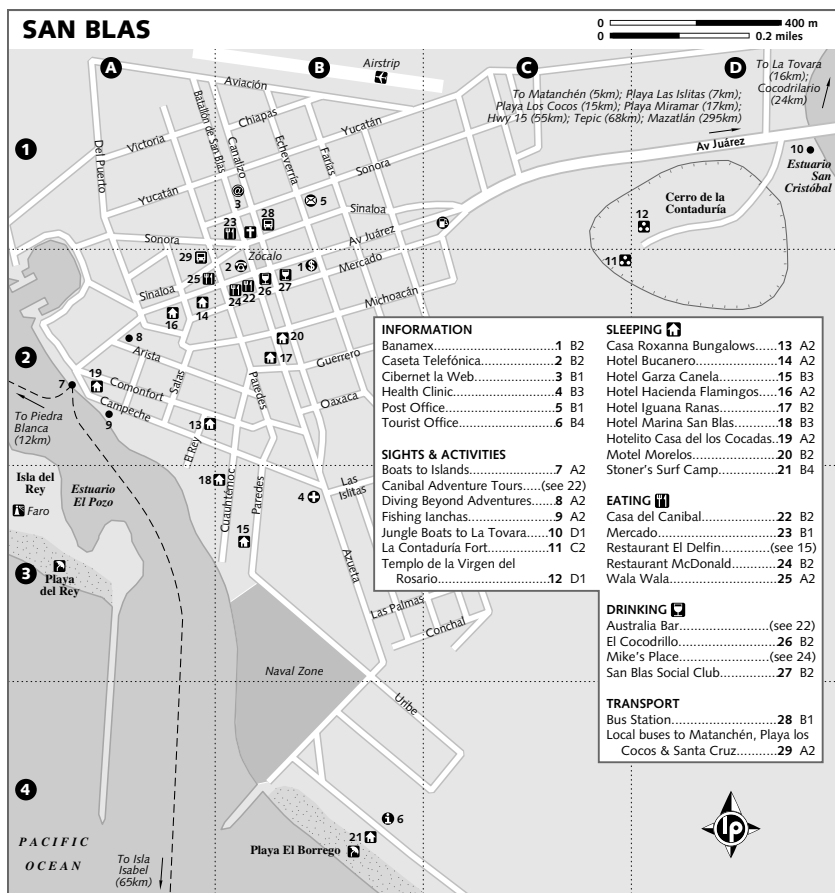
BOAT TRIPS

A boat trip through the jungle to the freshwater spring of **La Tovar** – a federally protected estuary – is a real San Blas highlight. Small boats go from the *embarcadero*. The three-hour trips go up Estuario San Cristóbal to the spring, passing thick jungle and mangroves. Bring your swimsuit to swim at La Tovar; there's a restaurant there, too. For a few pesos more you can extend the trip from La Tovar

to the **Cocodrilario** (crocodile nursery), where toothy reptiles are reared in captivity for later release in the wild. For a group of up to four people it costs M\$360 to go to La Tovar (3½ hours) and M\$440 to the Cocodrilario (four hours). Each extra person costs M\$90/110 to La Tovar/Cocodrilario.

More boat trips depart from a landing on Estuario El Pozo. They include a trip to **Piedra Blanca** (M\$300, two hours) to visit the statue of the Virgin, to **Isla del Rey** (M\$10, five minutes) just across from San Blas and to **Playa del Rey**, a 20km beach on the other side of the Isla del Rey peninsula. Here you can also hire boatmen to take you on bird-watching excursions for about M\$250 per hour.

You can make an interesting trip further afield to **Isla Isabel**, four hours northwest of San Blas by boat. You really need a couple of days to appreciate this national park and protected ecological preserve. To visit you'll need permission from the port captain. The island is a bird-watcher's paradise, with colonies of many species and a volcanic crater lake. There are no facilities, so be prepared for self-sufficient camping. The official price for transportation of up to five people is M\$5000, but deep discounts are possible depending on your negotiation skills. For trips to Isla Isabel, ask at the boat landing on Estuario El Pozo. Alternately, you can make the trip with Diving Beyond Adventures (p445).



BEACHES

The beach closest to the town is **Playa El Borrego**, at the end of Azueta. Broad waves roll in with bravado, and swimming can be treacherous in some conditions – beware of rip currents and heed locals' warnings.

The best beaches are southeast of town around Bahía de Matanchén, starting with **Playa Las Islitas**, 7km from San Blas. To get here, take the road toward Hwy 15 and turn off to the right after about 4km. This paved road goes east past the village of Matanchén, where a dirt road goes south to Playa Las Islitas and continues on to follow 8km of wonderfully isolated beach. Further down on the paved road **Playa Los Cocos** and **Playa Miramar**, also popular for surfing, have *palapas*

under which you can lounge and drink fresh coconut milk.

SURFING

With many beach and point breaks, beginner and intermediate surfers choose San Blas as the place to hone their skills. The season starts in May, but the waves are fairly mellow until September and October when the south swell brings amazingly long waves curling into Mantanchén Bay. Surf spots include El Borrego, Second Jetty, La Puntilla, Stoner's, Las Islitas and El Mosco.

At Playa El Borrego, **Stoner's Surf Camp** (☎ 285-04-44; www.stonerssurfcamp.com; surfboard rental per hr/day M\$30-50/100-150, lessons per hr M\$150) is the nexus of the scene. National longboard

champion 'Pompis' Cano gives lessons and holds court under the *palapa*, and you can also stay here.

CERRO DE LA CONTADURÍA

The climb to the top of the Cerro de la Contaduría has a double payoff: a gratifying view and a strong aura of history. Stroll around the ruins of the 18th-century Spanish **La Contaduría Fort**, where colonial riches were once amassed and counted before being shipped off to Mexico City or the Philippines. The place is still guarded by a collection of corroded cannons. Nearby are the gorgeous ruins of the **Templo de la Virgen del Rosario** (admission M\$10), built in 1769. You'll find the road up just west of the bridge over Estuario San Cristóbal.

Tours

From December to May, **Diving Beyond Adventures** (☎ 285-12-81; www.divingbeyond.com; Av Juárez 187) leads affordable adventure experiences including diving, kayaking, hiking, bird- and whale-watching. It uses local guides and practices sound low-impact environmental tours. The signature trip is a three-day diving, fishing and camping extravaganza to Isla Isabel (US\$300 per person). It also rents kayaks (US\$20 for four hours).

Another option is **Canibal Adventure Tours** (☎ 285-14-21; www.casadelcanibal.com; Av Juárez 53), which offers sumptuously catered four- to six-hour personalized tours (US\$75 per person) including 'secret beach parties,' waterfall hikes, horseback riding, and mountain zip-line tours.

Sleeping

San Blas has plenty of very reasonably priced hotels and one noteworthy fine hotel. In local parlance, a 'bungalow' sleeps more than two and includes a kitchen.

BUDGET

Stoner's Surf Camp (☎ 285-04-44; campsites M\$30, cabins M\$100-400) Right on the beach are five rustic cabins with electricity, mosquito nets and fans at this friendly traveler hangout and surf center. There's space to camp, a communal kitchen, lots of hammocks, and a restaurant serving well-prepared fare (including vegetarian meals). Tent rental costs M\$20.

Hotel Bucanero (☎ 285-01-01; Av Juárez 75; s/d/tr M\$150/250/350; (P)) It's seen better days but still

sparkles with old salty character. The dark, rough-around-the-edges rooms face a big leafy courtyard featuring a weathered cannon.

Motel Morelos (☎ 285-13-45; Batallón 108; r M\$200) It's stark but homey, with simple fan-cooled rooms around a central courtyard. An old pelican has made the place home for over a decade, ever since the proprietors nursed him back to health after an injury. He's cute but decidedly not cuddly.

Hotel Iguana Ranas (☎ 285-08-95; Batallón 165; d/t M\$350/500; (P)) This friendly hotel with pleasant rooms and new furnishings is the best value in town for an air-conditioned abode. Prepare to get to know the family that runs the place.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hotelito Casa de los Cocadas (☎ 285-09-60; Av Juárez 145 Pte; s/d M\$500/700; (P) (P)) With its pleasant location near the estuary, this small family-run hotel in a tastefully renovated building affords a comfortable, carefree stay. The seven rooms are fastidiously kept and include cable TV. Bicycles (M\$30 to M\$50 per hour) are available to rent.

Casa Roxanna Bungalows (☎ 285-05-73; www.casa.roxanna.com; El Rey 1; bungalows M\$550-650; (P) (P) (P)) This refined haven offers seven capacious bungalows and a long pool on manicured grounds. English is spoken and discounts are offered for longer stays.

Hotel Hacienda Flamingos (☎ 285-09-30; www.sanblas.com.mx; Av Juárez 105; r M\$690-850, ste M\$800-1060; (P) (P) (P)) This superbly restored colonial gem provides the classiest accommodations in town. The spacious rooms and courtyard are evocative of old Mexico without even a whiff of kitsch. There's a classy lounge serving well-crafted cocktails and *botanas* (snacks).

Hotel Marina San Blas (☎ 285-14-37; www.sanblas.com.mx; Cuahtémoc 197; s/d M\$770/960; (P) (P) (P)) The 10 bright rooms at this good new hotel all have terraces affording rewarding views across the peaceful estuary to Isla del Rey; Climb into one of the complementary kayaks and paddle across.

Hotel Garza Canela (☎ 285-01-12; www.garzacanela.com; Paredes 106 Sur; s/d M\$912/1152, ste M\$1344-2357; (P) (P) (P)) Modern, professional and comfortable, the Garza Canela is a reliable top-end choice. Standard rooms are spacious and decorated in colonial style; the suites are enormous and contemporary with marble floors. It's also home to the best restaurant, Restaurant El Delfín (p446), and gift shop in town.

Eating

San Blas is a casual town with casual restaurants, all serving fresh seafood. On the beach, *palapa* restaurants are notable for delicious fish cooked in the *campechano* style, with tomatoes, onion, octopus, shrimp and oyster. The cheapest eats can be found at the local *mercado* on the corner of Sonora and Batallón.

Wala Wala (☎ 285-08-63; Av Juárez 183; mains M\$45-200; ☺ Mon-Sat) This cheerfully decorated restaurant serves inexpensive, tasty home-style meals. It's mostly basic Mexican and pasta with a few specialties such as lobster (M\$200) and *pollo con naranja* (chicken with orange, M\$80).

Restaurant McDonald (☎ 285-04-32; Av Juárez 36; mains M\$50-100) Recently remodeled after more than 50 years in business, this highly regarded meeting place serves basic *antojitos* (small plates), seafood dishes and beautifully-presented *carne asada* (M\$85).

Casa del Canibal (☎ 285-14-12; Av Juárez 53; mains M\$75-125; ☺ 5:30-9:30pm Wed-Sat, 9am-noon & 5:30-9:30pm Sun) Beloved among the town's expat population, this friendly eatery does a dynamite shrimp scampi, a rich beef stroganoff and a perfectly cooked steak. The garrulous owner is a true foodie and it shows.

Restaurant El Delfin (☎ 285-01-12; Hotel Garza Canela, Paredes 106 Sur; mains M\$70-180) This, the best choice for fine dining, serves an impressive array of rich, gourmet dishes. Desserts are magnificent and the international wines are reasonably priced.

Drinking & Entertainment

The nightlife in San Blas is unexciting but pleasant enough, with a good selection of low-key watering holes from which to choose. Most open up at dusk and close late, which in this town means midnight.

San Blas Social Club (cnr Av Juárez & Canalizo) Jazz records line the wall – you can pick one out and the gentleman bartender will slap it on. There's live music Friday and Saturday, movies on Wednesday and good strong coffee every morning.

Australia House Bar (Av Juárez 34) The long bar of this upstairs pool room, celebrating Down Under chic, is dotted with cool youths and grungy foreigners throwing drinks back. The jukebox is legendary.

Mike's Place (Av Juárez 36) This lively bar primes the dance floor with a good mix of blues

and rock. There's live music from Friday to Sunday.

El Cocodrilo (Av Juárez 6) This old favorite still attracts gringos in the evening, using well-priced cocktails as bait.

Getting There & Around

The little **bus station** (cnr Sinaloa & Canalizo) is served by Norte de Sonora and Estrella Blanca 2nd-class buses. For many destinations to the south and east it may be quicker to go to Tepic first. For Mazatlán, transfer in Tepic. Daily departures include the following:

Guadalajara (M\$180, 5hr, 1 at 7am)

Puerto Vallarta (M\$106, 3½hr, 4 at 7:30am, 10am, 1:30pm & 4:30pm)

Santiago Ixcuintla (M\$35, 1hr, 2 at noon and 5pm)

Tepic (M\$42, 1hr, hourly 6am-8pm)

Second-class buses also depart from the corner of Sinaloa and Paredes several times a day, serving all the villages and beaches on Bahía de Matanchén.

Taxis will take you around town and to nearby beaches – a good option with two or more people. Rent bicycles from Wala Wala (see left) for M\$15/70 per hour/day or Stoner's Surf Camp (see p445) for M\$70 per day.

TEPIC

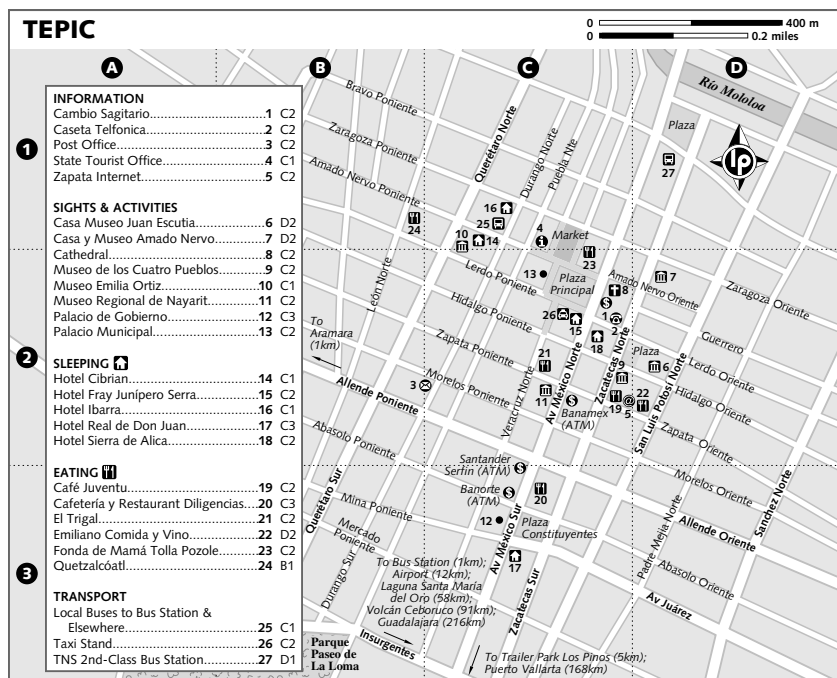
☎ 311 / pop 295,000 / elevation 920m

The capital of Nayarit state, like other Mexican cities of a certain size, can seem dreary in the considerable heat of the afternoon. But at dusk, as the blackbirds cry out from the belfry of the gorgeous cathedral and the historic buildings are transformed by artful lighting, this old town can make even the most jaded traveler swoon.

Founded by the nephew of Hernán Cortés in 1524, today it's a forward-thinking, predominantly middle-class place with a veritable hum of provincial hustle and bustle playing out on its narrow streets. Indigenous Huicholes are often seen here, wearing their colorful traditional clothing, and Huichol artwork is sold on the street and in several shops. Adding interest are an imposing neo-Gothic cathedral and several engrossing museums.

Orientation

Plaza Principal, with the large cathedral at the eastern end, is the heart of the city. Av México, the city's main street, runs south



from the cathedral to Plaza Constituyentes, past banks, restaurants, the state museum and other places of interest. The main bus station is on the southeastern side of the city with plenty of buses serving the center.

Information

Banks and *casas de cambio* line Av México Nte between the two plazas. You'll find the post office at the corner of Durango Sur and Morelos.

Cambio Sagitario (Av México Nte 220; ☎ 9am-2pm) Convenient location and so-so rates.

Caseta Telefonica (☎ 212016-74; Lerdo 13 Ote; ☎ 8am-11pm)

State tourist office (☎ 216-56-61, 212-80-36; www.turismonayarit.gob.mx; cnr Puebla Nte & Amado Nervo Pte; ☎ 9am-8pm) A great resource with free maps and extensive information about everything in Tepic and the state of Nayarit.

Zapata Internet (Zapata s/n, per hr M\$10) Fast, with good monitors and webcams.

Sights

The ornate **cathedral** on Plaza Principal, dedicated in 1804, casts a regal eye over Plaza

Principal. Take a peek inside to marvel at the over-the-top altar, over which a robed mannequin of the Virgin Mary is hoisted into heaven by a delegation of angels and cherubs. Opposite the cathedral is the **Palacio Municipal** (city hall), where you'll often find Huicholes under the arches selling handicrafts at very reasonable prices. South of the plaza, look inside the **Palacio de Gobierno** (Av México; ☎ 8am-6pm) to see some impressive and colorful murals. Painted by José Luis Soto and finished in 1999, they present a contemporary imagining of the history of Mexico. Soto's frenetic, surreal vision of hell and conflict beneath the cupola is chilling.

MUSEUMS

Residing in a palatial 18th-century neoclassical house with a lovely courtyard, the **Museo Regional de Nayarit** (☎ 212-19-00; Av México Nte 91; admission M\$34; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) presents changing exhibitions concerned primarily with pre-Hispanic objects, including ancient pottery and tomb artifacts, as well as colonial painting and Huichol culture. Also on hand are an important pre-Hispanic bas-relief

found near Mexcaltitán, and one stupendous stuffed crocodile.

A couple of interesting museums are housed in impressive restored colonial residences. The **Casa y Museo Amado Nervo** (☎ 212-29-16; Zacatecas Nte 284; admission free; ☞ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) celebrates the life of the preeminent 19th century Mexican poet Amado Nervo, born in this house in 1870. The collection is slight, but the house itself is lovely to behold. The **Casa Museo Juan Escutia** (☎ 212-33-90; Hidalgo Ote 71; admission free; ☞ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri) was the home of Juan Escutia, one of Mexico's illustrious *niños héroes* (child heroes). He died in 1847 at age 17 defending Mexico City's Castillo de Chapultepec from US forces. It's simply furnished and is evocative of early 19th-century Mexico.

The **Museo de los Cuatro Pueblos** (Museum of the Four Peoples; ☎ 212-17-05; Hidalgo Ote 60; admission free; ☞ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) displays contemporary popular arts of the Nayarit's Huichol, Cora, Nahuatl and Tepehuano peoples, including clothing, yarn art, weaving, musical instruments, ceramics and beadwork.

Aramara (☎ 216-42-46; Allende Pte 329; admission free; ☞ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun) is a small museum of visual arts. The **Museo Emilia Ortiz** (☎ 212-26-52; Lerdo Pte 192; admission free; ☞ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) honors the painter Emilia Ortiz (1917-96) and her work.

Sleeping

In its historic center Tepic rewards travelers with a good selection of comfortable, good-value independent hotels.

Trailer Park Los Pinos (☎ 210-27-28; Blvd Tepic-Xalisco 150; campsites/RV sites M\$50/150; ☑) About 5km south of town, this spacious park offers 24 trailer spaces with full hookups and wireless internet. The leafy, grassy grounds make tent camping a pleasure.

Hotel Cibrian (☎ 212-86-98; Amado Nervo Pte 163; s/d M\$220/270; (P) ☞ ☑) Budget travelers flock to this squeaky clean central hotel for clean, bright rooms with TV and telephone. The rooms overlooking a busy street can get noisy, but for the price you can't beat it. The economical restaurant downstairs does brisk business.

Hotel Ibarra (☎ 212-32-97; Durango 297 Nte; s/d/t M\$330/350/370; (P) ☞ ☑) The rooms are stark but clean, and the small restaurant serves up good, economical Mexican fare. It's nothing to write home about, but for the money this pragmatic choice offers a decent value.

Hotel Sierra de Alica (☎ 212-03-22; Av México Nte 180; s/d M\$460/595; (P) ☞ ☑) This old midrange vacationer retains a pleasing retro vibe and impeccable standards. The 60 bright, spacious rooms are plain but otherwise accommodating, with satellite TV and phone. It's so close to Plaza Principal that you can hear the cathedral bells ring.

Hotel Fray Junípero Serra (☎ 212-25-25; www.frayjunipero.com.mx; Lerdo Pte 23; s/d M\$849/944; (P) ☞ ☑) The 90 rooms in this efficient modern hotel are tastefully appointed and come with deluxe amenities; many have a view over the plaza.

Hotel Real de Don Juan (☎/fax 216-18-88; Av México Sur 105; r/ste M\$1150/1850; (P) ☞ ☑) This beautifully done-up old hotel overlooking Plaza Constituyentes strikes the right balance between colonial character and urbane style. Two imposing angel warrior statues keep watch over the tranquil lobby, while upstairs the 48 rooms are decked out in appealing pastel colors, with luxurious king beds and marble-accented bathrooms. A good restaurant and classy bar dominate the 1st floor, and on the roof there's a clubby lounge with a view.

Eating & Drinking

Tepic has a good selection of vegetarian restaurants, but the city's local specialties are shrimp based.

Cafeteria y Restaurant Diligencias (☎ 212-15-35; Av México Sur 29; mains M\$20-60) There's no better place than this to sit around for hours on end nursing a cup of coffee, nibbling on a buttery biscuit, and poring over a travel guide. Groups of men congregate all day in this vintage dining hall, chatting and ordering snacks and eventually the *comida corrida* (M\$60).

Fonda de Mamá Tolla Pozole (☎ 212-41-19; Andador Merida s/n; mains M\$30-45; ☞ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat; ☒) The unflappable women who run this exemplary breakfast and lunch nook know a thing or two about hearty Mexican comfort food. A big breakfast will set you back only M\$30.

Café Juventu (☎ 216-41-72; Zacatecas 120 Nte; mains M\$45-80) A youthful crowd meets here for light meals, drinks and perhaps a game of pool. The street level is set up in an intimate café style; upstairs the vibe is more that of a nightclub.

our pick Emiliano Comida y Vino (☎ 216-20-10; Zapata 91 Ote; mains M\$97-220) Tepic's cuisine scene gets a lift from this chic restaurant and its intimate bar. They have a nice way of pulling a cork, and stock a selection of the finest wines produced in Mexico. Still, the best reason to

show up is the menu, which features artfully crafted dishes from around the country.

Jonasing for soy? Vegetarians rejoice at these two old favorites, both serving economical fare in a pretty courtyard.

El Trigo! (☎ 216-40-04; Veracruz Nte 112; M\$20-46; ♻) Offerings include wholemeal quesadillas, veggie burgers and an excellent *menú del día* (daily set menu, M\$60).

Quetzalcóatl (☎ 212-99-66; León Nte 224; mains under M\$40; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun; ♻) The best 15-peso veggie burger in town.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Tepic's **airport** (TPQ; ☎ 214-21-95) is in Pantanal, a 15km drive from Tepic, going toward Guadalajara. There's no public transportation between downtown and the airport; a taxi runs about M\$120. **Aero California** (☎ 214-23-20; Airport) offers direct flights to Mexico City and Tijuana, with connections to other centers. **Aeromar** (☎ 800-237-66-27) offers three daily flights to Mexico City.

BUS

The main bus station is on the southeastern outskirts of town; local buses marked 'Estación' make frequent trips between the bus station and the city center, stopping at the corner of Amado Nervo and Durango.

The main bus companies are Elite and Ómnibus de México (both 1st class) and Transportes del Pacífico (1st and 2nd class). Daily departures from Tepic include the following.

Guadalajara (M\$194, 3½hr, frequent 1st class; M\$169, 3½hr, frequent 2nd class)

Mazatlán (M\$170, 4½hr, hourly 1st class; M\$147, 4½hr, hourly 2nd class)

Mexico City (M\$600, 10hr, hourly 1st class; M\$525, 11hr, 6 2nd class)

Puerto Vallarta (M\$150, 3½hr, hourly 1st class 3am-9pm; M\$115, 3½hr, hourly 2nd class 1am-10pm)

TNS operates a small terminal north of the cathedral near the Río Mololoa, with 2nd-class service to San Blas (M\$42, one hour, hourly 2nd class from 5am to 7pm) and Santiago Ixcuintla (M\$40, 1½ hours, 30 minutes, hourly 2nd class from 6am to 7pm).

Getting Around

Local buses (M\$4) operate from around 6am to 9pm. Combis (M\$4) operate along

Av México from 6am to midnight. There are also plenty of taxis, and a taxi stand opposite the cathedral.

AROUND TEPIC

Laguna Santa María del Oro

Surrounded by steep, forested mountains, idyllic Laguna Santa María del Oro (elevation 730m) fills a volcanic crater 2km around and is thought to be over 100m deep. The clear, clean water takes on colors ranging from turquoise to slate. It's a pleasure to walk around the lake and in the surrounding mountains, spotting numerous birds (some 250 species) and butterflies along the way. You can also climb to an abandoned gold mine, cycle, swim, row on the lake, kayak or fish for black bass and perch. A growing number of small restaurants serve fresh lake fish and seafood.

Koala Bungalows & RV Park (☎ 311-264-36-98; koala@nayarit.com; camping per child/adult M\$25/40, r M\$250, bungalow M\$450-750) is a peaceful park with a restaurant, campsites and well-maintained bungalows sleeping up to 10 people. Turn left at the terminus of the road which descends to the lake.

For an idyllic upscale experience head to the **Santa María Resort** (☎ 311-214-68-34; www.santamariaresort.com; ste/bungalow M\$1521/3325-4171; ☎ ☎ ☎). Resembling a stately old hunting lodge with its rustic chic rooms and bungalows and dramatic views, this place has relaxation written all over it. The deluxe amenities, day spa and dramatic pool make for a luxurious stay.

To get here, take the Santa María del Oro turnoff about 40km from Tepic along the Guadalajara road; from the turnoff it's about 10km to Santa María del Oro, then another 8km from the village to the lake. Buses marked 'Laguna' (M\$40, one hour) depart from the corner of Amado Nervo and Durango and from in front of the bus station in Tepic periodically during daylight hours.

Volcán Ceboruco

This active volcano consisting of two calderas and three cinder cones last erupted in 1870, so you'll be safe walking the short trails at the top. The 15km cobblestoned road up the volcano passes lava fields and fumaroles (steam vents), with lush vegetation growing on the slopes. The road begins at the village of Jala, 7km off the highway from Tepic to Guadalajara; the turnoff is 76km from Tepic, 12km before you reach Ixtlán del Río. You can also visit as

part of a tour; several Puerto Vallarta-based companies include a stop at the volcano as part of their 'tequila tour' itineraries.

CHACALA

☎ 327 / pop 300

Like other small towns along this stretch of coast, the tiny coastal fishing village of Chacala is changing fast as its reputation grows as a travelers' destination. For now, it retains its status as a not-quite-so-secret-any-more paradise. Located 96km north of Puerto Vallarta and 10km west of Las Varas on Hwy 200, it sits pretty along a beautiful little cove backed by verdant green slopes and edged by rugged black rock formations at either end. With just one main, sandy thoroughfare and a few cobbled side streets, it's a lovely place to unwind and contemplate the horizon.

There's no ATM; banking and communication services are readily available in Las Varas. Deposito Jorge, on the beach, offers phone and fax service.

Casa Pacífica (☎ 219-40-67; www.casapacificachacala.com; Islas Marias s/n), the de facto town booster office, books a wide range of varied vacation rentals (US\$35 to US\$100 per night) and operates a popular breakfast café (from 8am to 10am Monday through Saturday).

Activities

Hereabouts, the sea provides most of the action. For small boat excursions ask for Federico, Cundo or Beto at the fishing dock, located at the northern tip of the shoreline. Whale watching and fishing trips cost around M\$200 per person, while a surfing expedition to the remote spot La Caleta – where a wicked left breaking point break tries to dump surfers on the rocky beach – runs about M\$700 per person. You can also hike to La Caleta; it's a challenging but rewarding two-hour effort each way. Ask at Casa Pacífica (above) for a copy of their hand-drawn map.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping is possible on the beach, and there are several unique accommodations from which to choose.

Our pick **Techos de Mexico** (☎ 275-02-82; www.playachacala.com/techos.htm; r M\$180-400) Travelers interested in befriending the locals should consider arranging their accommodations through this program – a home building project run in partnership with Habitat for

Humanity – which enables residents to help each other build good homes with adjacent guest units with bath. There are currently nine homes, most with room for up to four people. Rooms are separate from the host home and are updated but basic (some come with kitchen). Look for the distinctive Techos signs as you pass through town.

Super-chic and tucked away in the unspoiled jungle overlooking the edge of the cove, **Majahua** (☎ 219-40-54; www.majahua.com; Playa Chacala s/n; r ind breakfast M\$1586-2028, ste M\$3360) is an earthy ec lodge. It offers five beautifully designed rooms, an outdoor restaurant and spa services. It's a five-minute walk from the parking area located just up the road from Mar de Jade.

Those who favor the beach head to **Hotel las Brisas** (☎ 219-40-15; www.lasbrisaschacala.com; r M\$450; ☎ ☎), which shares a beachfront locale with Chacala's best seafood restaurant. There are nine clean units upstairs with TV and wireless internet, and downstairs there's shrimp and beer. Sweet.

Run by a young Mexican-American family, **Bungalows Casa Monarca** (☎ 219-4125; Oceano Atlantico s/n; bungalows M\$650; ☎ ☎) offers two fresh and beguilingly appointed bungalows, each with two queen beds. The small pool makes this a good choice for families. It's a short distance up the hill from the fishing dock.

You can grab a meal at any of the dozen-plus *palapa* restaurants on the beach. For super-fresh seafood purchase straight from the fisherman at the pier situated on the northern tip of the shoreline; the daily catch starts coming in at around 7am. Some of the beachside restaurants will cook it up for you for a small fee.

Getting There and Away

For Chacala, get off a Puerto Vallarta–Tepic bus at Las Varas and take a *colectivo* taxi (M\$20) from there. If you're driving, the Hwy 200 turnoff is 1km south of Las Varas.

RINCÓN DE GUAYABITOS

☎ 327 / pop 2000

On the coast about 60km north of Puerto Vallarta, 'Guayabitos' is a tailor-made beach-resort town catering to Mexican holidaymakers and to winter visitors from Canada and other cold places. It's nothing fancy and shows its weathered age. Weekends are busy, but the beautiful beach is practically empty during the rest of the week.

Activities include swimming, fishing, horseback riding and hiking up to the cross on the hill for the fine view. Boats take whale-watching trips from November to March.

On the main drag you'll find many economical spots to grab a bite. Most hotels are midrange places offering bungalows with kitchen facilities and accommodations for two, four or more people. Among these, the best are the following:

Hotel Posada la Misión (☎ 274-03-57; posadamision@prodigy.net.mx; Retorno Tabachines 6; d M\$400, bungalows M\$650-800; (P) (♿) (♿)) This well-run, colonial-accented hotel offers quaint rooms and bungalows with sea views.

Posada Real (☎ 274-07-07; cnr Av Sol Nuevo & Huanacastle; d/q M\$650/850, bungalows M\$850-1000; (P) (♿) (♿)) An audaciously painted hotel offering bungalows, a good restaurant and an enormous hot tub.

Villas Buena Vida (☎ 274-02-31; www.villasbuenavida.com; Retorno Laureles s/n; r M\$847, ste M\$1105-1373; (P) (♿) (♿)) A luxurious beachfront option with villas and large suite, plus a range of outdoor activities opportunities.

Second-class buses coming from Puerto Vallarta (M\$80, 1½ hours) or Tepic (M\$60, two hours) may drop you off on the highway at Rincón de Guayabitos, but sometimes they don't stop here. A couple of kilometers toward Tepic, La Peña is a sure stop. *Colectivo* vans operate frequently between La Peña and Guayabitos (M\$5, 10 minutes) or you can take a taxi (M\$30).

AROUND RINCÓN DE GUAYABITOS

There are many pleasant little beach towns south of Rincón de Guayabitos that make good day trips from either Guayabitos or Puerto Vallarta; they all have places to stay and eat. Visit places like **Playa Los Ayala** (Km 96), 3km south of Guayabitos, **Lo del Marco** (Km 108) and **San Francisco** (Km 118). First- and 2nd-class buses traveling along Hwy 200 will drop you off about 1km from the edge of each town.

SAYULITA

☎ 329 / pop 2300

Once upon a time – okay, it was the late 1990s – Sayulita really *was* a tranquil fishing village. Many of the town's *norteamericano* residents still describe it that way, but the truth is that Sayulita, while still low-key, has definitely been 'discovered' and can at times feel like a crowded gringo outpost. The bloom really

fell off the rose a few years back when the news got out about Sayulita's growing sewage treatment problem. A new, modern treatment plant, completed in 2006, seems to have solved the problem. Through it all, Sayulita's many admirers have sung the praises of the beautiful sandy beach and amiable surfing scene, the great restaurants and tasteful B&Bs, and of course, those world-famous tacos. Note that there's a time difference between Sayulita, which is in Nayarit state, and Puerto Vallarta, which is in Jalisco (Nayarit is one hour behind Jalisco). Many businesses catering to visitors are closed from May through November.

Information

The nearest full service bank is in Bucerías, 12km to the south on Hwy 200. There are now three ATMs in town, including one on the plaza. There's not a proper tourist office, but most of the vacation rental offices around town are happy to share their maps and brochures.

Galería Internet (Mariscal 43; per hr M\$20; 9am-2pm & 5-10pm) Good machines and a speedy connection.

Sayulita Caja de Cambio (☎ 291-30-05; Delfín 44; (♿) 7am-7pm Mon-Sat) Near the plaza; offers so-so exchange rates.

Sights & Activities

You can arrange bicycle hire, boat trips, horseback riding, trekking or kayaking from operators on the main street. One popular nearby destination is **Playa Los Muertos**, where picnics and boogie-boarding top the action. It's a 15-minute walk south along the coast road. You can also hire a boat to take your group out to the uninhabited **Islas Marietas** – a protected national park – for picnicking, snorkeling and swimming.

Rancho Mi Chaparrita (☎ 291-31-12; www.michaparrita.com; Sánchez 14; (♿) 9am-4pm) is the best established tour operator, offering horseback rides to Los Muertos and Carrisitos beaches (per person US\$25, 1½ hours) and longer rides into the mountains (per person US\$85), a zip-line canopy on which thrill seekers can whoosh from tree to tree on 13 lines strung high above the forest floor (adult/child US\$75/55) and boat trips to the Islas Marietas (US\$180 for up to six people, three to four hours).

SURFING

Sayulita is a classic boarder town, and it's a simple matter to join in the fun. Medium-

sized waves pour dependably from both the left and the right, so you can practice your well-honed moves or even take up the sport for the first time.

For rentals or lessons, your best bet is with the well-established **Lunazul** (☎ 291-20-09; Marlin 4; surfboard/body board rentals per day M\$300/200, lessons per 90min M\$400).

Sleeping

A good selection of private villas can be browsed on the website Sayulita Life (www.sayulitalife.com). The following prices are for the winter high season.

El Camarón Camping (Del Palmar s/n; campsites per person/hut M\$40/250) This grassy, kick-back camping spot on the beach north of town is the heart of the scene for young surfers and hippies.

Sayulita Trailer Park & Bungalows (☎ 390-27-50; www.pacificbungalow.com; Miramar s/n; campsites & trailer sites with hookups M\$160-240, 1-bedroom bungalow M\$550-850, 2-bedroom bungalow M\$850) Maintains an attractive, palm-shaded property beside the beach, with a restaurant and snack bar. Discounts are offered to those who stick around for a while.

Hotel Diamante (☎ 291-31-91; www.hoteldiamante.sayulita.com; Miramar 40; s/d/q M\$375/425/650; 🏠 🚿) This well-priced favorite has small, basic but bright rooms and two breezy communal kitchens. The property is well maintained and the service accommodating.

Fiambaláa Hotel (☎ 291-30-86; Las Gaviotas 10; r with shared/private bathroom M\$450/700) Above a thriving Argentinean restaurant is this quality basic choice with clean, no-nonsense rooms with ceiling fans and a terrace overlooking the street. There's no proper reception area; present yourself at the restaurant.

our pick Petit Hotel d'Hafa (☎ 291-38-06; Revolución 55; www.sayulitalife.com/hafa; r M\$550-850) Just steps away from the plaza is this choice newcomer with six fan-cooled rooms with two and three high-quality beds. The charismatic owner, having sailed around the world, brings her considerable creativity and taste to bear in the design and decor, which favors Moorish flourishes, bright colors and welcoming communal spaces. Feeling more like an environment than a small hotel, it's an instant classic.

Bungalows Aurinko (☎ 291-31-50; www.sayulita-vacations.com; cnr Marlin & Revolución; 1-/2-bedroom bungalows M\$889/1389, ste M\$1166; 🏠 🚿) Smooth river-stone floors, open-air kitchens, exposed

raw beams and well-appointed decor make this a very memorable place to stay. Huichol art adorns the walls while Oaxacan linen covers the beds. All units have a kitchen and purified water.

Bungalows Los Arbolitos (☎ 291-31-11, in the US 888-453-0501; sayulitabungalow@earthlink.net; Marlin 20; s/d/apt M\$950/1250/1960; 🏠 🚿) Los Arbolitos harbors nine intimate and luxurious suites, two with kitchens. Craftwork touches, creative design and lush gardens make this a classy night's sleep.

Eating & Drinking

Sayulita has earned its reputation as a foodie paradise. The town has a beguiling selection of small, bistro-style cafés, providing agreeable contrast to the lively, inexpensive *palapas* on the beach.

Sayulita Fish Taco (☎ 291-32-72; José Mariscal 13; tacos from M\$20; 🕒 noon-3pm & 5:30-9pm Mon-Sat) This place has been doling out real-deal tacos to gringos for years. Some have even rated them as the very best in Mexico. A preposterous claim, perhaps, but it's hard to deny that they're uncommonly good. Ditto for the top-shelf margaritas.

Rollie's (Revolución 58; breakfast M\$45-65; 🕒 7am-noon) This is *the* place for breakfast. Rollie and friends lovingly serve Western breakfasts with an occasional Mexican twist, well-pulled espresso and morning cocktails. Choose music from Rollie's collection, or sing along with him.

Sayulita Café (☎ 291-35-11; Revolución 37; mains M\$75-135; 🕒 5-11pm) With an atmospheric dining room and candlelit sidewalk tables, this old favorite offers a crash course on traditional dishes from Puebla, Oaxaca, Chiapas and Jalisco. Families with small children are graciously accommodated.

Café Caminito (☎ 291-35-64; Marlin 12; mains M\$90-120; 🕒 4:30-10pm Thu-Tue) South American cuisine makes a good showing at this chic spot. Munch on flaky Argentinian empanadas stuffed with fish while taking in the scenery from the 2nd-floor pub overlooking the plaza.

La Bicyclette (☎ 291-36-35; Navarrete 9; mains M\$170-195; 🕒 6pm-midnight Mon-Fri) An instant success, striking the right balance with its intimate enclosed courtyard and improvisational, ever-changing menu. Think shrimp flambéed in Mexican absinthe and homemade bread and paté. A reggae band sets the tone on Saturday nights.

PUERTO VALLARTA IN FOUR DAYS

Rise and shine! Take a morning dip in the sparkling Bahía de Banderas and a stroll on one of Vallarta's many **beaches** (p454). Stop in at the **Museo del Cuale** (p456) or linger beneath the shady rubber trees on the **Isla Río Cuale River Walk** (p454). Spread out a towel on the beach of your choice and scan the horizon for **whales** (p460). Join the happy throng on the waterfront **malecón** (p454) and enjoy the varied **public sculptures**. Linger over dinner at one of Vallarta's splendid **restaurants** (p462) and then hit one of the sizzling late-night **dance clubs** (p465).

On day two, get up early (yeah, right) and continue indulging in the pleasures of the city with some **shopping** (p466), or take your pick from the many opportunities for **outdoor adventures** (p456): go diving, fishing, or horseback riding.

On your third day, visit the beautiful **Jardines Botánicos de Vallarta** (p456), or hop a boat for the far-flung beaches of **Las Ánimas** (p456), **Quimixto** (p456) or **Yelapa** (p456).

For the fourth day, catch a bus to the kick-back town of **Sayulita** (p451) for a surfing lesson or simply a surf.

Getting There & Around

Sayulita is about 35km north of Puerto Vallarta just west of Hwy 200. Ten buses per day operate between Sayulita and the Puerto Vallarta bus terminal (M\$20, one hour), and any 2nd-class bus headed north will drop you at the turnoff. In Puerto Vallarta, you can also catch a bus from the stop fronting Sam's Club. A taxi between Puerto Vallarta and Sayulita costs M\$450 to M\$600, depending on your negotiation skills.

PUERTO VALLARTA

☎ 322 / pop 151,000

Puerto Vallarta – referred to simply as 'Vallarta' by its many aficionados – is one of Mexico's liveliest and most sophisticated resort destinations. Stretching around the sparkling blue Bahía de Banderas (Bay of Flags) and backed by lush palm-covered mountains, one couldn't ask for a better place to while away a cosmopolitan vacation. Each year millions come to laze on the dazzling sandy beaches, browse in the quaint shops, nosh in the stylish restaurants and wander through the picturesque cobbled streets or along its beautiful *malecón*. If the pretty town beaches aren't enough, you can venture out on cruises, horseback rides, diving trips and day tours – and be back in time for a late dinner and an even later excursion to one of the many sizzling nightspots on offer. Puerto Vallarta is the gay capital of Mexico (see boxed text, p464).

History

Vallarta was just another humble village until 1954, when planes filled with tourists first

landed on a dirt airstrip in Emiliano Zapata, an area that is now the center of Vallarta. A decade later John Huston chose the nearby deserted cove of Mismaloya as a location for the film of Tennessee Williams' *The Night of the Iguana*. Hollywood paparazzi descended on the town to report on the tempestuous romance between Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. Vallarta suddenly became world-famous, with an aura of steamy tropical romance. Travelers have been pouring in ever since.

Orientation

The 'old' town center, called Zona Centro, is the area north of Río Cuale, with the small Isla Cuale in the middle of the river. The city's two principal thoroughfares are Morelos and Juárez, which sandwich the Plaza Principal. Many fine houses, quite a few owned by foreigners, are found further up the Río Cuale valley, also known as Gringo Gulch.

South of the river, the Zona Romántica is another tourist district with smaller hotels, restaurants and bars. It has the only two beaches in the city center – Playa Olas Atlas and Playa de los Muertos.

North of the city are a strip of giant luxury hotels called the Zona Hotelera; Marina Vallarta, a large yachting marina (9km from the center); the airport (10km); the bus station (12km); and Nuevo Vallarta, a new resort area of hotel and condominium developments (18km). To the south of the city are a few more large resorts and some of the most beautiful beaches in the area.

For information on getting to the city center from the airport and bus station, see p466.

Information**BOOKSTORES**

Libros Libros Books Books (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-71-05; Calle 31 de Octubre 127) Has a fair selection of magazines and books (including Lonely Planet guides) in English.

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 222-15-33)

Fire (☎ 223-94-76)

Police (☎ 060, 223-25-00)

INTERNET ACCESS

Aquarius Internet (Map pp458-9; 523 Juárez; per hr M\$15; ☎ 24hr) The best, with flat screens, fast connection and plenty of terminals.

LAUNDRY

There are many laundries around town, all of which are closed Sunday and charge about M\$40 per load.

Lavandería Blanquita (Map pp458-9; Madero 407A)

Lavandería Elsa (Map pp458-9; Olas Altas 385)

MEDIA

Vallarta Today (www.vallartatoday.com) is a better English-language newspaper than its local competition, the weekly *Vallarta Tribune*. Both papers are free. *Bay Vallarta* is a free monthly guide with useful culture and shopping listings.

MEDICAL SERVICES

San Javier Marina Hospital (Map p455; ☎ 226-10-10; Av Ascenso 2760) Vallarta's best-equipped hospital.

MONEY

Although most businesses in Vallarta accept US dollars as readily as they accept pesos, their exchange rates suck. There are several banks around Plaza Principal; most of them have ATMs.

Vallarta has many *casas de cambio*; their rates differ and are slightly less favorable than the banks. Look for them on Insurgentes, Vallarta and the *malecón*.

POST

Main post office (Map pp458-9; Mina 188)

TELEPHONE & FAX

Pay phones (card only) are plentiful everywhere in town. Many internet cafés offer long-distance service.

Telecomm (Map pp458-9; Hidalgo 582) Offers fax as well as phone service.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Municipal tourist office (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-25-00, ext 230; Juárez s/n; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri) Vallarta's busy but competent office, in the municipal building at the northeast corner of Plaza Principal, has free maps, multilingual tourist literature and bilingual staff.

Sights

Puerto Vallarta also has amazing natural scenery and a growing number of cultural attractions. The perfect beaches remain Vallarta's main draw.

The heart of Zona Centro is the **Plaza Principal** (Map pp458-9), also called Plaza de Armas, just near the sea between Morelos and Juárez. On the sea side of the plaza is an outdoor amphitheater backed by **Los Arcos** (Map pp458-9), a row of arches that has become a symbol of the city. The wide **malecón** stretches about 10 blocks north from the amphitheater and is dotted with bars, restaurants, nightclubs and a grand collection of public sculptures. Uphill from the plaza, the crown-topped steeple of the **Templo de Guadalupe** (Map pp458-9) is another Vallarta icon.

A trip to Vallarta wouldn't be complete without lingering on **Isla Río Cuale** (Map pp458-9), where the city's earliest residents built their humble homes. Upstream you'll notice two rickety cable suspension bridges, connecting the island to the Zona Romántica.

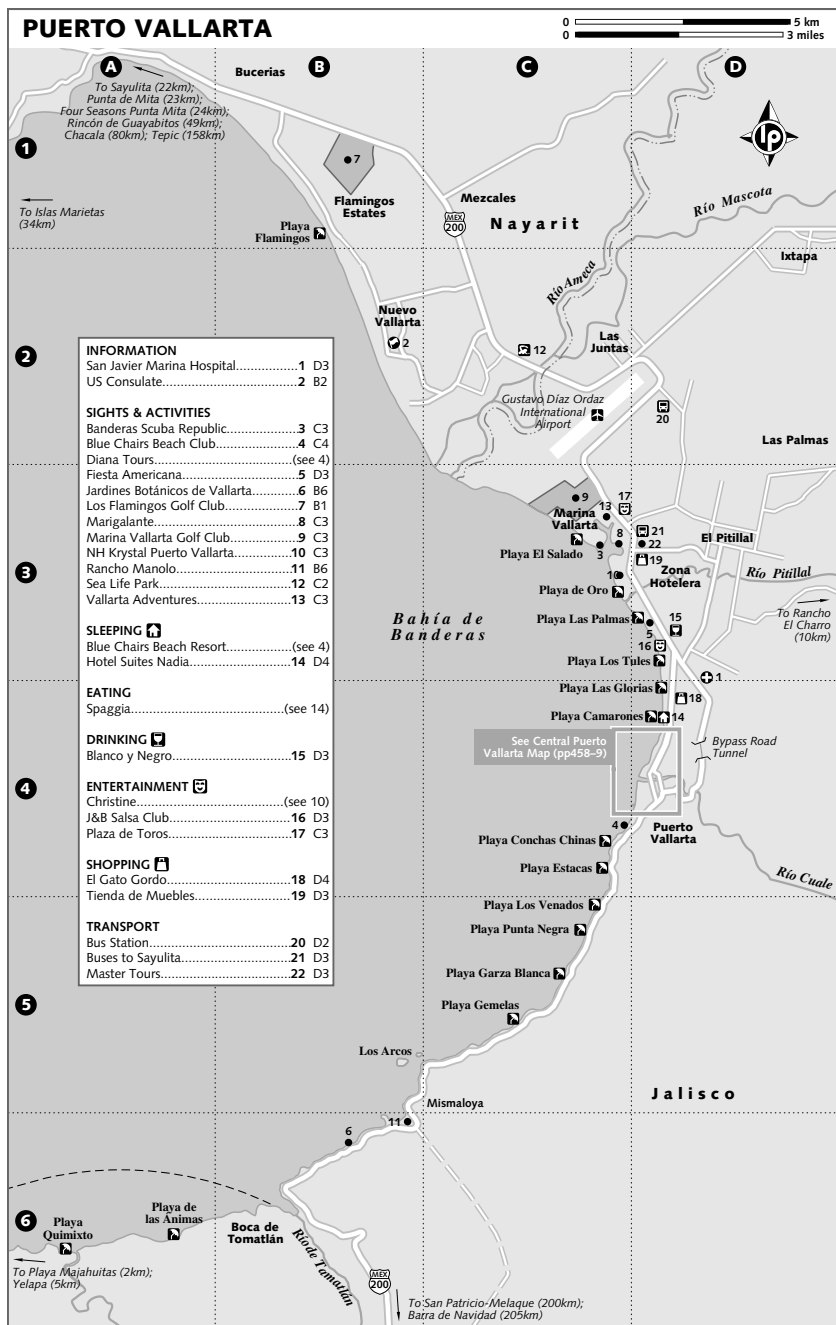
BEACHES

The beaches of the Bahía de Banderas strike many personalities. Some are buzzing with cheerful activity, others offer quietude and privacy. Most beaches mentioned here feature on the Puerto Vallarta map (p455).

Only two beaches, **Playa Olas Altas** (pp458-9) and **Playa de los Muertos** (Beach of the Dead; Map pp458-9) are handy to the city center; they're both south of the Río Cuale. On Sundays, join the scores of Mexican families who come to while away their day off. At the southern end of Playa de los Muertos is the stretch of sand called **Blue Chairs**: it's one of Mexico's most famous gay beaches.

North of town, in the Zona Hotelera, are **Playa Camarones**, **Playa Las Glorias**, **Playa Los Tules**, **Playa Las Palmas** and **Playa de Oro**. Nuevo Vallarta also has beaches and there are other, less developed beaches right around the bay to Punta de Mita.

Mismaloya (Map p455), the location for *The Night of the Iguana*, is about 12km south of



town. The tiny scenic cove is dominated by a gargantuan resort. About 4km past Mismaloya, southwest along the coast, is **Boca de Tomatlán**, a peaceful seaside village that's less commercialized than Puerto Vallarta. Buses marked 'Boca' stop at both places; the 'Mismaloya' bus only goes as far as Mismaloya.

Further around the southern side of the bay are the more isolated beaches, from east to west, of Las Ánimas, Quimixto and Yelapa, all accessible only by boat (p467). **Playa de las Ánimas** (Beach of the Spirits; Map p455) is a lovely beach with a small fishing village and some *palapa* restaurants offering fresh seafood. **Quimixto** (Map p455), not far from Las Ánimas, has a waterfall accessible by a half-hour hike or you can hire a pony on the beach to take you up.

Yelapa, furthest from town, is one of Vallarta's most popular cruise destinations. This picturesque cove is crowded with tourists, restaurants and parasailing operators during the day, but empties out when the tourist boats leave in the late afternoon. There are several comfortable places to stay the night.

MUSEO DEL CUALE

This tiny **museum** (Map pp458-9; Paseo Isla Cuale s/n; admission free; ☎ 10am-3pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat) near the western end of Isla Cuale has a small collection of beautiful pottery, grinding stones, clay figurines and other ancient objects. Text panels are in Spanish and English.

JARDINES BOTÁNICOS DE VALLARTA

Orchids, bromeliads, agaves and wild palms line the paths of this gorgeous recently opened **nature park** (Map p455; ☎ 205-72-17; Hwy 200, Km 24; admission M\$30; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun), located half an hour south of Puerto Vallarta. Butterflies flit by as you dine at the open-air restaurant. Follow hummingbirds down paths and through fern grottoes. Slap on some bug juice and make a day of it. Take the 'El Tuito' bus (M\$15) from the corner of Carranza and Aguacate in Puerto Vallarta, or hop in a taxi for about M\$200.

Activities

Restless souls need not go far to find activities like swimming with dolphins, bungee jumping, mountain biking and whale-watching. Snorkeling, scuba diving, deep-sea fishing, waterskiing, windsurfing, sailing and parasailing can be arranged on the beaches in

front of any of the large hotels or through the tourist office.

DIVING & SNORKELING

Below the warm, tranquil waters of the Bahía de Banderas is a world of stingrays, tropical fish and garishly colored corals. Vallarta has several diving and snorkeling operators. Most dives include transportation, gear and light meals. Most dive outfits also offer snorkeling trips, which usually means snorkelers tag along with divers.

Banderas Scuba Republic (Map p455; ☎ 135-78-84; www.bs-republic.com; Av Marina Sur cnr Vela; snorkeling trips US\$25, 2-tank dive trips US\$85-150, PADI Open Water certification US\$350) maintains a high degree of professionalism with its small-group excursions to both well- and lesser-known sites. Private diving tours (from US\$400) also are offered.

Vallarta Adventures (see p460) has 'gold palm' (PADI accredited) instructors and acclaimed service. Snorkeling costs US\$35 to US\$60, two-tank dive trips cost M\$80 to M\$125, and PADI Open Water certification is M\$330.

DEEP-SEA FISHING

Deep-sea fishing is popular all year, with a major international fishing tournament held every mid-November. Prime catches are sailfish, marlin, tuna, red snapper and sea bass. Fishing trips can be arranged dockside at Marina Vallarta or at the cooperative on the *malecón*.

Fishing and Tours PV (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-12-02; www.fishingandtourspv.com; 1-8 person fishing charters US\$200-450; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat), with an office on the *malecón* near the Hotel Rosita, acts as an agent for a long list of sportfishing boats. During the low season try your luck at fishing for a discount.

Master Baiter's (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-40-43; www.mbsportfishing.com; Calle 31 de Octubre 107; 1-8 person fishing charters US\$250-900) Despite the silly name, the two accomplished fish hunters that run this business have an outstanding record of connecting their clients with gargantuan fish. They'll return a third of your cash if you don't bag a game-class catch.

HORSEBACK RIDING

Vallarta's jungly mountains are wonderful to explore from the privileged perspective of horseback. Most stables charge around M\$15 per hour, or M\$100 for a full-day excursion.

Rancho El Charro (off Map p455; ☎ 224-01-14; www.ranchoelcharro.com; rides US\$56-100) is recommended for its healthy horses and scenic three- to eight-hour trots into the Sierra Madres. Several rides have been conceived for kids. Setting it apart from competitors are its multi-day tours, including the tempting 'Overnight Lost in the Jungle Ride' (US\$350). It provides transportation from Puerto Vallarta hotels.

Rancho Manolo (Map p455; ☎ 228-00-18, 222-36-94; rides US\$35) Headquartered in Mismaloya beneath the highway bridge opposite the resort, this cheerful operation keeps 25 horses and ponies fat and happy. Their most popular tour is a three-hour jaunt through jungle landscape to a remote rustic restaurant with a terrific swimming hole.

GOLF & TENNIS

Vallarta's golfing credentials have been burished in recent years with the opening of four new courses. Most acclaimed is the Jack Nicklaus-designed **Four Seasons Punta Mita** (off Map p455; ☎ 291-60-00; Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita; green fees US\$175), where golfers are blissfully distracted from the challenging course by the sweeping ocean vistas. One hole, nicknamed 'Tail of the Whale,' is located on a natural island and requires the use of an amphibious golf cart.

Other courses are listed here:

Los Flamings Golf Club (Map p455; ☎ 298-06-06; Hwy 200 s/n; green fees US\$130) Recently renovated, 13km north of town.

Marina Vallarta Golf Club (Map p455; ☎ 221-05-45; Paseo de la Marina s/n; green fees US\$128) An exclusive 18-hole, par-74 course just north of Marina Vallarta.

Most of the resort-style hotels have tennis courts for guests. Hotels welcoming nonguests for tennis include:

NH Krystal Puerto Vallarta (Map p455; ☎ 224-02-02; Av Las Garzas s/n, Zona Hotelera; per hr US\$13)

Fiesta Americana (Map p455; ☎ 224-20-10; Paseo de las Palmas s/n, Zona Hotelera; per hr US\$18)

CRUISES

A host of daytime, sunset and evening cruises are available in Vallarta. The most popular ones are the cruises to Yelapa and Las Ánimas beaches; others go to the Islas Marietas, further out. Prices are generally negotiable, starting at US\$45 for sunset cruises and beach trips; longer trips lasting four to six hours with meals and bottomless cocktails will set you

back US\$80 to US\$100. Leaflets advertising cruises are available throughout town.

On Thursday and Friday **Diana Tours** (☎ 222-15-10) offers an all-day gay and lesbian cruise, with plenty of food, drink and snorkeling (US\$75). It leaves from Blue Chairs Beach Resort.

Courses

One-day classes in traditional Mexican cooking (M\$850) are held monthly from May through July at El Arrayán Cocina Tradicional (p463). The fee includes breakfast, instruction in the restaurant's kitchen, take-home recipes and a full meal. For more information, call ☎ 222-71-95.

Language courses at **Centro de Estudios Para Extranjeros** (CEPE; Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-20-82; www.cepe.udg.mx; Libertad 105-1) range from US\$151 for a week of basic tourist Spanish to US\$533 for a month of university credit courses. Private instruction costs US\$25 per hour. The center, associated with the Universidad de Guadalajara, arranges homestays with local families for US\$437 to US\$469 per week.

Puerto Vallarta for Children

If your tot has a pirate fetish, the little lad or lassie won't tolerate missing a cruise on the **Marigalante** (Map p455; ☎ 223-03-09; www.marigalante.com.mx; ☎), a reproduction Spanish galleon that does pirate-themed daytime cruises (adult/child US\$85/42) from 9am to 5pm and an evening cruise from 6pm to 11pm. The latter culminates in a mock pirate attack on the *malecón*. It departs from the Terminal Marítima in Marina Vallarta, off Blvd Francisco Ascencio opposite Sam's Club.

Kids will also get a kick out of **Sea Life Park** (Map p455; ☎ 297-07-24; Carr Tepic Km 155; admission adult/child US\$18/14; ☎ 10am-6pm; ☎), which has 12 waterslides, a lazy river swimming pool and a daily dolphin show.

Tours

Nature and outdoor tours are one of Puerto Vallarta's strongest suits. The following companies tread lightly and follow eco-friendly business practices.

Eco Ride (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-79-12; www.ecoridemex.com; Miramar 382; tours M\$500-1400) Surrounded by the mountains, jungle and sea, Vallarta offers some truly thrilling mountain biking. This outfit offers guided one-day cycling tours suited for beginners and badasses alike.

CENTRAL PUERTO VALLARTA

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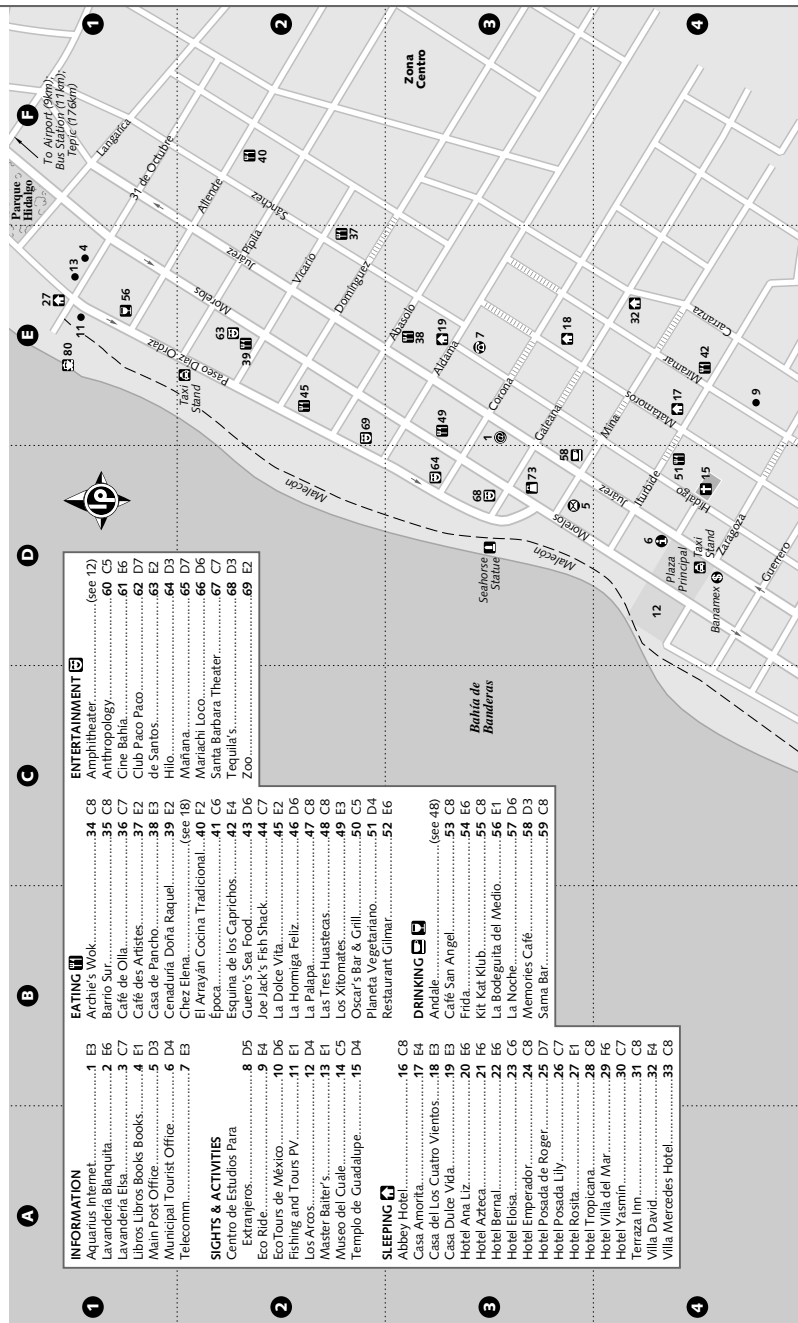
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The most challenging is a 50km expedition from El Tuito (a small town at 1100m) through Chacala and down to the beach in Yelapa. The views are stunning.

Vallarta Adventures (Map p455; ☎ 297-12-12; www.vallarta-adventures.com; Av Las Palmas 39, Marina Vallarta) These guys do it all with humor, enthusiasm and professionalism, offering whale-watching (adult/child US\$70/35), cultural tours (US\$75 to US\$210), trips to San Sebastian (US\$75) and other historic towns, zip-line canopy tours (adult/child US\$79/69), and much more.

Ecotours de México (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-65-06; www.ecotoursvallarta.com; Vallarta 243) Run by a couple of enthusiastic naturalists, this is your best option for whale-watching (adult/child US\$85/65), guided hiking tours (adult/child US\$45/57), bird-watching tours (adult/child US\$52/73), and nocturnal sea-turtle experiences (adult/child US\$35/46).

Festivals & Events

Sailfish and Marlin Tournament (www.fishvallarta.com) This major international tournament is held every November.

Festival Gourmet International (www.festivalgourmet.com) Puerto Vallarta's culinary community has hosted this mid-November festival since 1995.

Día de Santa Cecilia On November 22 the patron saint of mariachis is honored, with all the city's mariachis forming a musical procession to the Templo de Guadalupe in the early evening. They come playing and singing, enter the church and sing homage to their saint, then go out into the plaza and continue to play.

Virgen de Guadalupe All of Mexico celebrates December 12 as the day of honor for the country's religious patron. In Puerto Vallarta the celebrations are more drawn out, with pilgrimages and processions to the cathedral day and night from November 30 until the big bash on December 12.

Sleeping

When it comes to accommodations you're spoiled for choice in Puerto Vallarta. Options include economical digs near the river, singular and stylish small inns and villas, party-happy beach hotels and luxurious mega-resorts.

The following prices are for the December to April high season; low-season rates can be as much as 20% to 50% less. And remember, if you plan on staying a week or more, negotiate for a better rate; monthly rates can cut your rent by half.

A HOLIDAY FOR WHALES

Like many people reading this book, during the winter months humpback whales come to the Bahía de Banderas to mate. They leave their feeding grounds in Alaskan waters and show up in Mexico from around November to the end of March. Once arrived, they form courtship groups or bear the calves that were conceived the year before. By the end of March, the whales' attention turns to the long journey back to their feeding grounds up north. Whale-watching trips operate from December to March.

Because of their emphasis on education and well-articulated ethos, the naturalist guides of Ecotours de México (see left) and Vallarta Adventures (see left) lead the best whale-watching tours.

BUDGET

Vallarta's cheapest lodgings are south of the Río Cuale, particularly along Madero. All rooms come with fan.

Oasis Hostel (off Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-26-36; www.oasishostel.com; Libramiento 222; dm M\$140; ☑) This well-run youth hostel is not conveniently located, but it offers the cheapest bed in town. There are two dorm rooms – one for females and the other mixed – with a total of 16 bunks. Continental breakfast, kitchen facilities and free internet are part of the deal. And best of all: no curfew or lockout. Check the website for detailed directions from the bus station.

Hotel Azteca (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-27-50; Madero 473; s/d/t M\$200/300/400, apt M\$600-650) This graceful old-timer offers decent rooms surrounding an intimate, shady, palm-potted courtyard. Street-facing rooms are lighter, but all offer good budget value. On the roof level there's a great apartment with tremendous views over the town and into the mountains.

Hotel Villa del Mar (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-07-85; www.hvilladelmar.com; Madero 440; s M\$250-280, d M\$300-330, t M\$350) This clean, sprawling budget place came into its own in the 1970s and hasn't changed much since. The cheapest rooms are tiny and dour with little light, but the rooms with a terrace are surprisingly terrific.

Also consider these two:
Hotel Bernal (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-36-05; Madero 423; s/d M\$180/220) An old standby with dark, basic cleanish rooms around a courtyard.

Hotel Ana Liz (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-17-57; Madero 429; s/d/t M\$190/250/300) Pleasant, fan-cooled rooms with few frills.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Posada Lily (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-00-32; hotel-lily@hotmail.com; Badillo 109; s M\$300-350, d M\$500-550, with air-con extra M\$50; 🍷) This amazingly priced option just off the beach offers 18 clean and pleasant rooms with fridge, TV and good natural light. The larger rooms have three beds and small balconies that overlook the street. For air-con, add M\$50.

Hotel Yasmin (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-00-87; Badillo 168; s/d M\$433/481; 🍷) In spite of the gruff management and typically small rooms, this old budget standby has a terrific location a block from the beach, amidst a dizzying assortment of bars, cafés and restaurants. Hold fast for the brighter and quieter upstairs rooms.

Hotel Eloisa (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-64-65; www.hotel-eloisa.com; Cárdenas 179; s M\$602-732, d M\$659-789, tr M\$745-875, ste M\$1193; 🍷 🍷) With a great location near the beach, this recently renovated hotel provides uncommon value. The pleasant standard rooms have rustic furniture, tiled floors and two double beds; some also feature views and furnished balconies. Avoid the darker rooms facing the courtyard.

Casa de Los Cuatro Vientos (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-01-61; www.cuatrovientos.com; Matamoros 520; r/ste M\$725/847; 🍷) The cozy rooms have white brick walls, hand-painted trim and gleaming red-tiled floors. Quality vintage furnishings add style and class. There's also a two-room suite with a large bedroom and two day beds. The rooftop bar is an attraction in itself, affording terrific views of the cathedral and the entire bay. The snazzy candlelit restaurant seals the deal.

Hotel Emperador (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-17-67; www.hotelempedorpv.com; Amapas 114; d M\$640, ste M\$940-2100; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This contemporary beach hotel overlooks an ideal swimming beach. Oceanfront rooms celebrate the sea with large balconies featuring dining tables and kitchenettes – so you can prepare and eat your food al fresco. Each room has a fridge, cable TV, in-room phones, a king-sized bed and a sleeper couch.

Hotel Tropicana (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-09-12; www.htropicana.com; Amapas 214; d M\$720-920, ste M\$1000-1320; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This venerable 160-room beach hotel is eminently romantic. The standard rooms are appealing with white brick walls,

attractive carved headboards, hand-painted woodwork and rustic furniture.

TerrazaInn (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-54-31; www.terrazainn.com; Amapas 299; r M\$900-950) Nestled on terraces opposite Playa de los Muertos, this little gem is the perfect hideaway for couples craving romantic solitude. There are only 10 units – each is unique and attractive, with interesting architectural features like arched doorways, columns and brick ceilings with exposed timbers. Some units have a small kitchen.

Villa Mercedes Hotel (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-21-48; www.villamercedes.com.mx; Amapas 175; d M\$950-1050, ste M\$1150-1300, apt M\$1300-1600; 🍷 🍷) This small, revitalized hotel in the Los Muertos neighborhood has a fine aesthetic and an aura of tranquility. The 15 units are spotless and accommodating, with kitchenettes or full kitchens. The penthouse apartment sleeps up to six in style, with a terrace and a partial sea view.

Also recommended are the following:

Hotel Rosita (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-10-33; www.hotelrosita.com; Paseo Díaz Ordaz 901; d/tr M\$570-750; 🍷 🍷) A vintage beach hotel with no-nonsense rooms.

Hotel Posada de Roger (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-08-36; www.posadaaroger.com; Badillo 237; s/d/tr/q M\$580/660/770/880; 🍷) An agreeable, central hotel and travelers' hangout.

TOP END

Puerto Vallarta's top-end options are mostly dominated by large, homogenous resorts. The following are very special, small and stylish places and are a great alternative if you're looking for something intimate.

Casa Dulce Vita (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-10-08; www.dulce-vida.com; Aldama 295; ste M\$766-2188; 🍷 🍷) With the look and feel of an Italian villa, this collection of seven spacious suites offers graceful accommodations and delicious privacy. Most have private terraces, high ceilings and plentiful windows, with sunny living areas and extra beds for groups. Even when the place is fully booked it retains a quiet and intimate atmosphere. There's a well-situated pool and manicured tropical gardens.

Hotel Suites Nadia (Map p455; ☎ 222-52-52; www.hotelsuitesnadia.com; Uruguay 127; s M\$875-1200, d M\$1000-1500, t M\$1125-1650; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This choice boutique hotel with only 10 units offers seriously classy digs overlooking Playa Camarones. Units are chic and breezy, with flat-screen TVs and large, attractive bathrooms. Furnishings and decor eschew the typical Mexican bric-a-brac in favor of stylish, urbane styling. Up on

the roof is a wonderful small pool and hot tub, with rewarding views of bay and beaches.

Casa Amorita (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-49-26; www.casaamorita.com; Iturbide 309; r M\$2190; 🍷) Located on a quiet street above the din of the *malecón*, this romantic getaway with four rooms and a capacity of eight guests offers unique and luxurious accommodations. Some may find it a wee bit precious, but others will swoon. Complimentary breakfasts are fresh, healthy and hearty.

Eating

Foodies are pampered in Puerto Vallarta, and return visitors rate its cuisine scene as a prime attraction. A goodly number of noteworthy chefs from abroad have put down roots, offering competing menus of tremendous breadth and variety. There's also a great selection of economical, family-run eateries serving mouthwatering traditional Mexican fare, and the taco stands lining the streets of the Zona Romántica make for quick, delicious meals.

ISLA RÍO CUALE & SOUTH

Budget

Some of the tastiest and cheapest food in town comes from the taco stands along Madero in the early evening. Women sell delicious *tamales* and *flan* along Insurgentes at dusk.

La Hormiga Feliz (Map pp458-9; cnr Madero & Vallarta; tacos & quesadillas M\$5-8; 🕒 8am-5pm & 7pm-1am Mon-Sat) Madero has several open-late taco stands, and every one of them brags about their freshly-made salsa. The salsa here is so good that Miguel – who's been chopping it up and mashing it down since 1998 – just lets it speak for itself. Slather it on an *adobado* (marinated pork) taco and then do it again.

Guero's Sea Food (Map pp458-9; 298 Madero; fish tacos/tostadas M\$10/26; 🕒 noon-7pm Thu-Tue) Come to this unsassuming little hole-in-the-wall for delicious inexpensive crustaceans.

Las Tres Huastecas (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-30-17; cnr Olas Altas & Rodríguez; mains M\$50-95; 🕒 7am-7pm) This is the place for delicious Mexican favorites in a homelike atmosphere, at local prices. The charming owner, a poet calling himself 'El Querreque,' recites verse as readily as he recites the house specialties.

Midrange

Restaurant Gilmar (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-39-23; Madero 418; breakfast M\$25-60, mains M\$60-135; 🕒 7am-11pm Mon-Sat) The young owner brings a lot of verve

to the table, along with tasty Mexican dishes and seafood at reasonable prices.

Café de Olla (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-16-26; Badillo 168; mains M\$65-210; 🕒 9am-11pm Wed-Mon) This well-loved traditional Mexican restaurant nurtures a lively atmosphere with its sidewalk grill and open kitchen. Mariachis stroll through it all as the owner greets everyone who walks through the door like old family.

Uncommon Grounds Buddha Lounge (off Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-38-34; Cardenas 625; mains M\$75-195; 🕒 noon-close Wed-Sun) Part restaurant, part women's social club, this welcoming café is an agreeable place to spend an evening. Beautifully presented dishes with amiable names (anyone for a 'Planet Utopia Salad?') are trotted out from the kitchen with panache by hosts Lydia and Anne. Vegetarians are well taken care of, as are those in need of a cocktail. You can also get a chair massage and shop in the small boutique.

Época (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-25-10; Sérdán 174; mains M\$80-185; 🕒 8am-10:30pm Wed-Mon) A civilized option overlooking Playa Los Muertos, Época has quickly taken its place among Vallarta's top tier beach restaurants. Dine on duck breast tostadas, Oaxacan pork with green mole, grilled *nopal* salad, and fried bananas.

Joe Jack's Fish Shack (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-20-99; Badillo 212; mains M\$95-150; 🕒 noon-11pm) Seafood aficionados flock to this joint for fish and chips and dishes like whole sea bass, garlic shrimp and great slabs of mahi mahi. Large groups are graciously accommodated on the pleasant rooftop terrace. The service is jovial and quick, and the music classic rock.

Top End

Red Cabbage Café (off Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-04-11; Rivera del Río 204A; mains M\$80-175; 🕒 5-11pm; 🍷 🍷) Though the atmosphere is casual, with fabulous eclectic and bohemian artwork, the food is serious and features old recipes and uncommon indigenous sauces. The soups – including a cream of peanut and a piquant tortilla soup – are to die for. It's a pleasant 10-minute walk from the Zona Romántica; from Cardenas turn right on Rivero del Río where the road crosses the river.

Barrio Sur (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-03-73; Pulpito 122; mains M\$90-190; 🕒 8am-2pm & 6-11pm Mon-Sat) This spacious alfresco dining retreat is gorgeously lit at night, and the international latin cuisine coupled with the cool world music might make a friendly date turn passionate.

The menu reinvents several standard South American dishes, adding a touch of Euro-Asiatic influences here and there.

Oscar's Bar & Grill (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-07-89; Isla Río Cuale 1; mains M\$90-225; 🕒 11am-11pm) Inhabiting a beautiful setting on the peaceful seaward tip of Isla Cuale, this restaurant is a fine choice for a romantic meal. Enjoy dishes like fish carpaccio with soy cilantro sauce or Chihuahua cheese fondue.

La Palapa (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-52-25; Púlpito 103; mains M\$110-295; 🕒 8am-11pm) Elegant beach dining at its best. Tables are positioned to take full advantage of the sea views, making it a particularly marvelous spot for breakfast or sunset. Chilean sea bass with blonde miso and pickled ginger is just one of the delicacies on the menu.

Archie's Wok (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-04-11; Rodríguez 130; mains M\$130-210; 🕒 2-11pm Mon-Sat) This elegant, urbane restaurant has long showed Puerto Vallarta a thing or two about good eating. The menu changes but it's always Asian fusion, with savory fish in rich tropical sauces as the highlight. There's live music Thursday through Sunday.

NORTH OF THE RÍO CUALE

Budget

Canaduría Doña Raquel (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-30-25; Vicario 131; mains M\$30-60; 🕒 6-11:30pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 2-11pm Sat & Sun) You can smell the richness of the traditional Mexican basics served here from a block away. Friendly atmosphere and friendly prices.

Casa de Pancho (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-00-21; Abasolo 236; mains M\$40-50; 🕒 6-11pm) It couldn't be more simple: a few plastic tables set up in a mostly bare room. But the economical *pozole*, enchiladas and other basic dishes are simply splendid. Carlos, the genial waiter/cook/owner, loves to spread the gospel of salsa.

Esquina de los Caprichos (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-09-11; Miramar 402; tapas M\$40-75; 🕒 1-10pm Mon-Sat) A tiny little place with only six tables and a lot of class. Most of the dishes you would expect to find at a tapas bar in Barcelona – delicious garlic-heavy gazpacho, buttery grilled scallops, fava bean stew – are served here on charming handmade plates.

Planeta Vegetariano (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-30-73; Iturbide 270; tacos & quesadillas M\$45-65; 🕒 8am-10pm; 🍴) This gem of a place with only 10 tables eschews the cheese for fresh, dairy-free dishes like soy enchiladas, banana lasagna (yes, that's right)

and a wide range of creatively conceived salads. The economical buffet and homey atmosphere cause many Vallarta visitors to forget about all that culinary din and return again and again.

Midrange

Los Xitomates (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-16-95; Morelos 610; mains M\$70-180; 🕒 6pm-midnight) This innovative restaurant targets younger diners with its hybrid *alta cocina Mexicana* (gourmet Mexican) cuisine, which takes pre-Hispanic and Mexican recipes and rounds them out with Mediterranean, Asian or Caribbean influences. It can be noisy when busy, but the service is always top notch.

La Dolce Vita (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-38-52; Paseo Díaz Ordaz 674; mains M\$70-105; 🕒 noon-2am) A cheerful, often crowded spot for wood-fired pizzas, well-priced pastas, and people-watching. There's often live jazz music. Request a table upstairs by the window for great views.

Top End

Café des Artistes (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-32-28; Sánchez 740; mains M\$115-240; 🕒 6-11:30pm Mon-Sat) Many consider this to be Vallarta's finest restaurant. Whether or not you're prone to superlatives, you're sure to enjoy its romantic ambience and exquisite French cuisine. The service is formal but unobtrusive, and reservations are recommended.

Chez Elena (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-01-61; Matamoros 520; mains M\$140-210; 🕒 6-11pm) Back in the martini era this small, atmospheric restaurant was a meeting place for the likes of Liz Taylor, Richard Burton, Peter O'Toole and other well-known appetites. Without having ever let down its culinary standards, it's still imbued with gracious allure. Try the savory Mayan pork dish called *cochinita pibil* with achiote chile sauce. And by all means, take in the view from the rooftop lounge.

our pick El Arrayán Cocina Tradicional (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-71-95; Allende 344; mains M\$155-230; 🕒 6-11pm Wed-Mon) Owner Carmen Porras takes special pleasure in rescuing old family recipes from obscurity and finding new converts for real traditional Mexican cuisine. Her restaurant, with its open kitchen and romantic courtyard, emphasizes local ingredients: the delicious *panela* cheese comes straight from the small dairy south of Puerto Vallarta and the corn used for the tortillas is locally produced and comes directly from the mill. House specialties include crispy duck *carnitas* with orange sauce

GAY PUERTO VALLARTA

Come on out – the rainbow flag flies high over Puerto Vallarta and its formidable selection of gay bars, nightclubs, restaurants and hotels. With increasing international awareness of Vallarta as a gay destination, the number of annual gay visitors is on the rise. Sadly, most of the nightclubs cater specifically to gay men, but there are several small bars where women congregate. The **Gay Guide Vallarta** (www.gayguidevallarta.com) booklet has tons of information and a helpful map for finding gay-friendly businesses.

Blue Chairs Beach Club (Map p455; Playa de los Muertos) is the most popular, visible gay beach bar, with droves of gay couples enjoying the sun's ubiquitous rays and cool drinks. A great place to start, it's located at the south end of Playa de los Muertos.

Clubs & Nightspots

Most dance clubs stay open until at least 4am and some stay open well past sunrise.

Mañana (Map pp458-9; Carranza 290; cover M\$100-200) With both indoor and outdoor spaces, this jubilant new space has taken gay Vallarta by storm.

Club Paco Paco (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-18-99; Vallarta 278; cover M\$50) The new owners have revived the original spirit of this venerable disco-cantina, open until 6am. Simply smashing transvestite reviews are staged Friday through Sunday mornings at 12:30am and 3am.

Anthropology (Map pp458-9; Morelos 101; cover M\$50) It's raining men at this sizzling dance mecca with its dark, intimate rooftop patio. Women are unapologetically disallowed.

The following gay bars are mostly mellow. **Kit Kat Klub** (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-00-93; Púlpito 120) is an ultra-hip dinner-show spot with wicked martinis. **La Noche** (Map pp458-9; Cárdenas 257; ☎ 4pm-2am)

– scrumptious! – and rib eye steak marinated in Mexican spices with blood orange tequila sauce. Raise a toast to a truly memorable meal with a shot of fiery *raicilla*, a rare agave distillate produced in Jalisco.

Spaggia (Map p455; ☎ 223-94-17; Uruguay 109; mains M\$159-275; ☎ 8am-1am) Overlooking Playa Camarones, this cosmopolitan beach restaurant knows how to make an impression. Even in the heat of the afternoon the feeling is breezy and contemporary. You can dine on rack of lamb, seafood *pozole*, tuna sashimi, baked oysters, or pan-fried duck – but be sure to wait at least 20 minutes before taking a dip.

Drinking

Vallarta has many choice spots for sipping a strong coffee or tipping a tipple. It's ridiculously easy to become inebriated here, where two-for-one happy hours are as reliable as the sunset and the margarita glasses look like oversized snifters. Coffee shops open about 7am and close around midnight; most bars keep the lime squeezers occupied until well after that.

La Bodeguita del Medio (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-15-85; Paseo Díaz Ordaz 858) This graffiti-covered Cuban joint has live music, stiff mojitos and a great beach ambience.

Blanco y Negro (Map p455; ☎ 293-25-56; cnr Lucerna & Niza, Zona Hotelera; ☎ Mon-Sat) Mainly attracting locals, this pleasant bar and café is a great place to make friends and hear *trova* (Latin acoustic pop ballads).

Café San Angel (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-21-60; Olas Altas 449) Start your day in this artsy, relaxed café that has sidewalk tables filled with gringos sitting pretty, sipping black coffee and nibbling on snacks and sweets.

Other drinking options worth considering include these two:

Memories Café (Map pp458-9; cnr Mina & Juárez; ☎ 7pm-midnight) Conversation is king at this down-to-earth, low-key spot popular with locals and visitors alike.

Andale (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-10-54; Olas Altas 425) Party hearty with throngs of young vacationers to very loud classic rock.

Entertainment

Vallarta's main forms of nighttime entertainment revolve around dancing, drinking and dining. At night everyone and their brother strolls the *malecón*, choosing from a fantastic selection of restaurants, bars and hot nightspots. Entertainment is often presented in the amphitheater by the sea, opposite Plaza Principal. Softly lit Isla Cuale is a quiet haven for a romantic promenade in the early evening.

is well loved for its convivial atmosphere and buff bartenders. **Sama Bar** (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-31-82; Olas Altas 510; 🕒 5pm-2am) is a likable small place with big martinis. Women, men, gringos and locals: all make friendly at **Frida** (Map pp458-9; Cárdenas 361), a cozy and sociable cantina featuring enticing drink specials. Ditch the boys at Uncommon Grounds Buddha Lounge (see p462).

Resorts & Inns

Blue Chairs Beach Resort (Map p455; ☎ 222-50-40; www.hotelbluechairs.com; Almendro 4; d/ste M\$1082/1950, apt M\$1202-1366; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Overlooking one of Mexico's most famous gay beaches, this resort is a good place to let it all hang out (although officially the beach has a 'no nudity' policy). There are bars and restaurants on the beach and a raucous nightspot with live entertainment on the roof. The breezy and attractive rooms have cable TV; apartments have kitchenettes.

Villa David (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-03-15, toll-free from the US 877-832-3315; www.villadavidpv.com; Galleana 348; r M\$1169-1622; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Reservations are essential and clothing optional at this swanky gay retreat in a beautiful hacienda-style mansion. It's the only such bed and breakfast in Vallarta's historic district. With gorgeously landscaped grounds and tastefully appointed rooms, this is the perfect choice for a romantic getaway with a special Fred.

Abbey Hotel (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-44-88; www.abbeyhotelvallarta.com; Púlito 138; r M\$1290-1936, ste M\$1740-2450; 🏠 🚿 🚿) This mid-sized gay-oriented hotel – well known for its large, sociable hot tub – is smack dab in the middle of the Puerto Vallarta action. The 55 bright units are distinguished by their well-equipped bathrooms with big, luxurious showers and the balconies, many with excellent views.

NIGHTCLUBS & DISCOS

Along the *malecón* are a bunch of places where teen and 20-something tourists get trashed and dance on tables. On a good night, they all stay open until 5am. You can see from the street which one has the most action. Cover charges are normally waived early in the week; on weekends they often include one or two drinks.

de Santos (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-30-52; Morelos 771; weekend cover M\$100; 🕒 Wed-Sun) Vallarta's choicest nightspot commands the most artful DJs and an open-air rooftop bar furnished with oversized beds. On the dance floor the music is frenetic, but there's also a mellow chill lounge.

Christine (Map p455; ☎ 224-69-90; Av Las Garzas s/n; cover M\$100-200; 🕒 Wed-Sun) At the NH Krystal Puerto Vallarta, this flashy dance club is occasionally explosive, with cutting edge sound and lighting systems.

J&B Salsa Club (Map p455; ☎ 224-69-90; Av Ascencio 2043; cover M\$100) Vallarta's premier latin dance club (pronounced 'hota-bey') features live bands Thursday through Sunday, with DJs the rest of the week. The salsa lessons (M\$20, from 9:30pm to 10:30pm Wednesday to Friday) are a big draw. Also try these places:

Hilo (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-53-61; Paseo Díaz Ordaz 588; weekend cover M\$70-100) With epic statues of revolutionary heroes, it's a cool space well-designed for getting a groove on.

Zoo (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-49-45; Paseo Díaz Ordaz 638; weekend cover M\$100) Good sound system, and cages in which to dance.

THEATERS

Santa Barbara Theater (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-20-48; Olas Altas 351; admission without dinner M\$120-220, with dinner M\$250-350; 🕒 8pm Wed-Sat Nov-Apr) This cabaret-style theatre stages musical reviews, concerts, plays and movies. Show up at 6pm for dinner in the breezy upstairs restaurant.

BULLFIGHTS

Bullfights (admission M\$250) are held at 5pm on Wednesday from November to April, in the **Plaza de Toros** (Map p455) opposite the marina.

CINEMAS

Cine Bahía (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-17-17; cnr Insurgentes & Madero; admission adult/child M\$38/25) Recent releases are often shown in English with Spanish subtitles.

MARIACHIS

Two places present regular mariachi music. One attracts tourists; the other is mainly for Mexicans.

Tequila's (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-57-25; Galeana 104) This upstairs restaurant-bar features live

mariachi music every night except Monday, between 8pm and 10:30pm. There's no cover, but you'll be expected to tip well if the mariachi serenade your table.

Mariachi Loco (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-22-05; cnr Cárdenas & Vallarta; cover M\$50, dinner M\$80-145) Usually attracting a very enthusiastic all-Mexican crowd, this restaurant-bar presents an entertaining (if slightly amateur) show of music, comedy and mariachi every night at 10:30pm Monday and Tuesday and at 11:30pm Wednesday through Saturday. It's a great bit of local color.

Shopping

Vallarta is a haven for shoppers, with many shops and boutiques selling fashionable clothing, beachwear and crafts from all over Mexico. The following places have the good goods, and will pack and ship your purchases.

Mercado de Artesanías (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-09-25; A Rodríguez 260) Selling everything from Taxco silver, sarapes (blankets with a head opening, worn as a cloak) and huaraches (woven leather sandals), to wool wall-hangings and blown glass.

Tienda de Muebles (Map p455; ☎ 224-08-47; Av Ascension 2556) With a gargantuan showroom, this is your best bet for best-price Mexican decor, housewares, and furniture.

Bazaar Artes Indias (Map pp458-9; ☎ 222-12-43; Insurgentes 194) Well-stocked store with clothes, jewelry, masks and decor at prices below many similar establishments.

El Gato Gordo (Map p455; ☎ 223-03-00; Av de México 1083) This rather small shop looks harmless enough, but it's chock full of *lucha libre* (Mexican wrestling) masks and Cuban cigars. These two products should not be used simultaneously.

Huaracheria Fabiola (Map pp458-9; ☎ 293-46-57; Vallarta 145) This Vallarta-style cobbler produces custom-made sandals in 24 hours.

Artesanías Flores (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-07-73; Cardenas 282) and **Huichol Collection** (Map pp458-9; ☎ 223-21-41; Morelos 490) sell Huichol beadwork, thread paintings and jewelry.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Gustavo Díaz Ordaz International Airport (Map p455; PVR; ☎ 221-12-98; Carr Tepic, Km 7.5, Zona Aeropuerto) is 10km north of the city and is served by the following carriers:

Aeromexico (☎ 221-12-04) Direct service to Acapulco, Los Angeles, León, Mexico City, Monterrey and Tijuana.

Alaska Airlines (☎ 221-13-50) Direct service to Los Angeles, Portland, San Francisco and Seattle.

American Airlines (☎ 221-17-99) Direct service to Chicago, Dallas, Mexico City and St Louis.

Continental (☎ 221-22-12) Direct service to Houston and Newark.

Frontier (☎ from the US 800-432-1359) Direct service to Denver and Kansas City.

Mexicana (☎ 221-18-23) Direct service to Chicago, Los Angeles and Mexico City.

Ted (☎ from the US 800-225-58-33) United's budget carrier offers direct service to Denver and San Francisco.

US Airways/America West (☎ 221-13-33) Direct service to Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Phoenix and San Diego.

BUS

Vallarta's **long-distance bus station** (Map p455) is just off Hwy 200, about 10km north of the city center and 2km northwest of the airport.

Primera Plus and ETN bus lines have offices (Map pp458-9) south of the Río Cuale at Cárdenas 268 and at Insurgentes 276.

See the table opposite for daily departures from the main terminal.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Starting at about US\$40 to US\$50 per day, car rentals are pricey during the high season, but deep discounts are offered at other times. You'll do well to book online. For more information about renting cars in Mexico, see p994.

Car rental agencies at the airport:

Advantage (☎ 221-14-49)**Avis** (☎ 221-11-12)

Budget (☎ 221-17-30)

Dollar (☎ 223-13-54)

Hertz (☎ 221-14-73)

National (☎ 209-03-56)

Master Tours (Map p455; ☎ 209-05-29; Av Ascension 2740), opposite the Hacienda Hotel & Spa, rents out trail bikes and scooters (M\$150 per hour).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The cheapest way to get to/from the airport is on a local bus for M\$5. 'Aeropuerto,' 'Juntas' and 'Ixtapa' buses from town all stop right at the airport entrance; 'Centro' and 'Olas Altas' buses go into town from beside the airport entrance. A taxi from the city center costs around M\$75. From the airport to the city, taxis ask as much as M\$150, but it shouldn't cost more than M\$100 to go to most parts of the city.

BICYCLE

For a two-wheeled buzz, check out Eco Ride (p457). It rents out mountain bikes for both guided or self-guided tours, from M\$250 per day.

BOAT

Vallarta's water taxis serve the beautiful beaches on the southern side of the bay. These beaches that are accessible only by boat. Departing from the pier at Playa de los Muertos, they head south around the bay, making stops at Playa Las Ánimas (25 minutes), Quimixto (30 minutes) and Yelapa (45 minutes); the round-trip fare is M\$220 for any destination. Boats depart at 10am, 11am, 11:30am, 12:30pm, 4pm and 4:30pm, and return mid-afternoon (note that the last two boats from Puerto Vallarta return in the morning).

A water taxi also goes to Yelapa from the beach just south of Hotel Rosita, on the northern end of the *malecón*, departing at 11:30am Monday to Saturday (round-trip M\$250, 30 minutes).

Private yachts and *lanchas* can be hired from the southern side of the Playa de los Muertos pier for about US\$140 for four hours. They'll take you to any secluded beach around the bay; most have gear aboard for snorkeling and fishing.

BUS

Local buses operate every five minutes from 5am to 11pm on most routes, and cost M\$5. Plaza Lázaro Cárdenas at Playa Olas Altas is a major departure hub. Northbound local bus routes also stop in front of the Cine Bahía, on Insurgentes near the corner of Madero.

Northbound buses marked 'Hoteles,' 'Aeropuerto,' 'Ixtapa,' 'Pitillal' and 'Juntas' pass through the city heading north to the airport, the Zona Hotelera and Marina Vallarta; the 'Hoteles,' 'Pitillal' and 'Ixtapa' routes can take you to any of the large hotels north of the city.

Southbound 'Boca de Tomatlán' buses pass along the southern coastal highway through Mismaloya (M\$5.50, 20 minutes) to Boca de Tomatlán (M\$5.50, 30 minutes). They depart from Carranza near the corner of Aguacate, leaving every 15 minutes from 5:30am to 11pm.

TAXI

Cab prices are regulated by zones; the cost for a ride is determined by how many zones you cross. A typical trip from downtown to the Zona Hotelera costs M\$30 to M\$80; the fare to Mismaloya is about M\$100. Always determine the price of the ride before you get in. Hailing a cab is easy in the city center along the *malecón*. There are several taxi stands,

BUSES FROM PUERTO VALLARTA

| Destination | Fare | Duration | Frequency |
|---|--|----------------|---|
| Barra de Navidad (can also take any bus to Manzanillo) | 1st-class M\$173 2nd-class M\$145 | 3½hr 3½-4hr | 4 daily 6 daily |
| Guadalajara | M\$250-270 | 5½hr | frequent |
| Manzanillo | 1st-class M\$218 2nd-class M\$184 | 5hr 5hr | 3 daily 5 daily |
| Mazatlán | 1st class M\$285 | 8hr | 2 daily, 6pm & 9pm, or take a bus to Tepic for frequent buses depart to Mazatlán. |
| Mexico City (Terminal Norte) | deluxe M\$990 1st class M\$752 | 13hr 14hr | 1 8 |
| Rincón de Guayabitos (buses continue to Tepic) | 1st-class M\$70 2nd-class M\$55 | 1½hr 2½hr | frequent frequent |
| San Blas | 2nd class M\$106 | 3½hr | 4 daily, 7am, 10am, noon and 3pm, or take a bus to Tepic for transfer |
| San Patricio-Melaque | 1st-class M\$172/140 2nd-class M\$140 | 3½hr 4hr | 4 daily 3 daily |
| Tepic | M\$115 M\$95 | 3½hr 4hr | frequent frequent |

including one on Paseo Díaz Ordaz at Papila, one on Juárez at Plaza Principal, and one on Carranza at Plaza Lázaro Cárdenas.

COSTALEGRE BEACHES

South of Puerto Vallarta, the stretch of Mexico's Pacific coast from Chamela to Barra de Navidad is blessed with many fine beaches. Tourism promoters and developers refer to this shoreline as the 'Costalegre' (Happy Coast) or the 'Mexican Riviera.'

Following are the beaches from north to south (with kilometer numbers measured from the junction of Hwys 80 and 200 just outside San Patricio-Melaque).

Playa Pérula (Km 76), a sheltered beach at the northern end of tranquil 11km-long Bahía de Chamela, is great for swimming and extended walks. There's a smattering of *palapa* restaurants and cheap accommodations.

At Bahía de Chamela, **Playa Chamela** (Km 72) and **Playa La Negrita** (Km 64) are isolated, relaxing beaches with a couple of restaurants but no hotels. The nine islands in the expansive bay are beautiful to see in silhouette at sunset.

With the help of local activists, endangered hawksbill sea turtles are making a comeback at **Playa Careyes** (Km 52). The only place to stay is the romantic – but pricey – **El Careyes Beach Resort and Spa** (☎ 315-351-00-00; www.elcareyesresort.com; Carretera Barra de Navidad at Km 53.5; d US\$365, 1-/2-bed-room, US\$420-608, ste US\$701-1106; P ☒ ☑ ☒ ☒ ☒).

Escape artists love **Playa Tecuán** (Km 33) for its long deserted white-sand beach and eerie abandoned resort. This is a great option for those wanting to camp. It's a 10km drive off the highway on a rutted gravel road.

On the palm-fringed Bahía Tenacatita, **Playa Tenacatita** (Km 30) has clear snorkeling waters and a large mangrove lagoon with good bird-watching. There are a few enjoyable restaurants and decent hotels. Also on this bay is **Playa Boca de Iguanas** (Km 19) and **Playa La Manzanilla** (Km 13). The surf is mild, the sand is hot and wonderful, and the beach is shallow for a long way out, making it good for a swim. Both villages have restaurants and accommodations.

BAHÍA DE NAVIDAD

The tight arc of the Bahía de Navidad is practically ringed by deep, honey-colored sand with two resort towns at either end, waving amiably at each other. Situated 5km apart, Barra de Navidad and San Patricio-Melaque are siblings with distinct personalities. Barra

is beloved for its attractive cobbled streets and aura of good living while San Patricio-Melaque, the scrappier of the two, draws budget-minded travelers seeking to get back to basics in a place that eschews pretension.

San Patricio-Melaque

☎ 315 / pop 7500

Known by most as Melaque (*may-lah-kay*), this kick-back beach resort hasn't lost its old Mexico charm. Besides being a popular vacation destination for Mexican families and a low-key winter hangout for snowbirds (principally Canadians), the town is famous for its weeklong Fiesta de San Patricio (St Patrick's Day Festival) in March.

INFORMATION

Barra de Navidad's tourist office (see p471) has some basic information on Melaque.

Banamex (Gómez Farías s/n) Has an ATM and will change US and Canadian dollars; traveler's checks are changed from 9am to noon only.

Casa de Cambio Melaque (Gómez Farías s/n, Pasaje Comercial 11) Changes cash and traveler's checks.

Caseta Blanquita (Morelos 52) Offers fax and phone services.

El Navegante (Gómez Farías 48; per hr M\$20) Internet access.

Post office (Orozco 13) Located near Corona.

Total Laundry Service (Gómez Farías 26; per kg M\$10)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

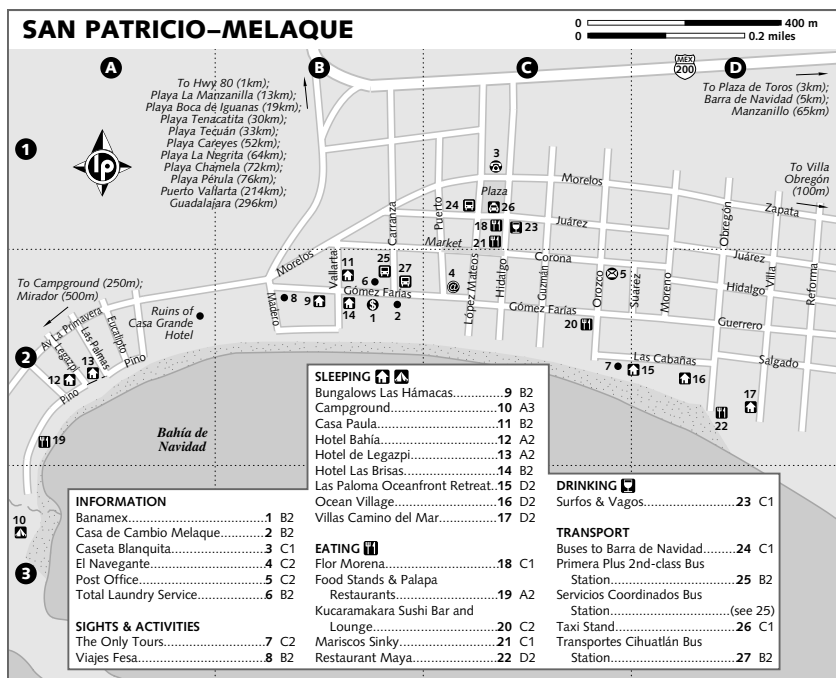
Simply relax and take it easy. The main activities are swimming, lazing on the beach, watching pelicans fish at sunrise and sunset, climbing to the *mirador* (lookout point) at the bay's west end, prowling the plaza and public market, or walking the beach to Barra de Navidad.

Viajes Fesa (☎ 355-9124; fesaviajes@yahoo.com; Gómez Farías 15C) books one-day tours to Colima (M\$300) and Guadalajara (M\$305), and sells tickets for boat passage to Tenacatita (M\$180) and for ETN buses.

The Only Tours (☎ 355-67-77; raystourismelaque@yahoo.com; Las Cabañas 26) runs popular full-day snorkeling tours (M\$250) and tours to Colima (M\$500). For rent are mountain bikes (M\$60/100 per half-/full day), snorkeling gear and body boards (each M\$100 per day).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Fiesta de San Patricio This festival, honoring the town's patron saint, is Melaque's biggest annual celebration and takes place in March. A week of festivities – in-



cluding all-day parties, rodeos, a carnival, music, dances and nightly fireworks – leads up to St Patrick's Day.

St Patrick's Day Held on March 17, this day is marked with a mass and the blessing of the fishing fleet. Take care when the *barrachos* (drunks) take over after dark.

SLEEPING

Rates vary greatly depending on the season; the following prices are for the high season (November through May). Discounts are common for longer stays.

Budget

Ejidal Campground (campsites per night/month M\$30/1000) This beachfront campground at the west end of Av La Primavera has no facilities or hookups, but the setting is undeniably beautiful. At last visit, a shower and bathroom were under construction; in the meantime, the nearby *enramadas* (palapa restaurants) charge a nominal fee for showers and bathroom usage.

Casa Paula (☎ 355-50-93; Vallarta 6; s/d M\$150/200) In this simple home there are four basic rooms with concrete floors, TV and fridge around a courtyard. It's very quiet and a pleasant family

atmosphere pervades. Sadly, the mattresses are squishy.

Hotel de Legazpi (☎ 355-53-97; hotel@delegazpi.com; Pino 8; d/tr M\$350/400, with kitchen M\$550; (P) (☎)) Right on the beach, the Legazpi has bright, if a bit worn, rooms. It's very popular for its four ocean-view rooms, well-tended pool and a shady circular patio overlooking the beach, perfect for reading, yoga or wave-watching.

Bungalows Las Hámacas (☎ 355-51-13; Gómez Farías 13; d/q/ste M\$350/700/900; (P) (☎)) Ideal for larger groups, the beachfront Las Hamacas has chipping paint and big rooms with full kitchens. Overall, it's well-kept and serene, with lots of quality reading nooks, a peanut-shaped pool, and a good restaurant overlooking the beach. The suite sleeps six comfortably.

Midrange

Hotel Bahía (☎ 355-68-94; Legazpi 5; d/q M\$350-450, bungalows M\$600; (☎)) Just half a block from the beach, this family-run place is one of Melaque's best deals. It's clean, very well maintained and has a communal open-air kitchen. Four of the 23 units have private kitchen, but several are rather dark.

Hotel Las Brisas (☎ 355-51-08; Gómez Farías 9; s/d M\$350/500, bungalows M\$800-1800; 🏠 🚿 🚿) The beachfront Las Brisas has one of the nicest pools in the neighborhood, outdoor communal cooking facilities, cheery staff and a small library. All rooms have fridge and TV. The largest bungalow sleeps nine.

Villas Camino del Mar (☎ 355-52-07; www.villas.caminodelmar.com.mx; Villa 6; d M\$560, ste M\$980-1360, penthouse M\$1900-2250; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Clean and dazzlingly white, this terrific beach hotel has two glorious pools and a wide range of rooms to choose from ranging from small rooms to expansive, luxurious penthouses. It also handles reservations for three other properties in the neighborhood.

Top-End

Ocean Village (☎ 355-52-07; Las Cabañas s/n; villas M\$1100-1600; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Nine tranquil, beautifully-appointed villas in one- and two-bedroom configurations offer delicious privacy and privileged beach access via a private stair. Each unit is capacious and brightly decorated with an eye toward color and contrast.

Las Paloma Oceanfront Retreat (☎ 355-53-45; www.lapalomamexico.com; Las Cabañas 13; studios per week M\$7400-8800, one-/two-bedroom penthouse per week M\$10,440-17,600; 🏠 🚿 🚿 🚿) Original art abounds at this unique boutique resort. The 14 singular, comfortable studios have kitchens and terraces with rewarding ocean views. Lush gardens, a 25m beachside swimming pool, a well-stocked library and internet access make an extended stay here extremely tempting. Drawing, painting and mask-making classes are held from November to April. From October to April, units rent by the week; steep discounts and per-night rates are offered during the summer.

EATING & DRINKING

From 6pm to midnight, food stands serve inexpensive Mexican fare a block east of the plaza along Juárez. A row of pleasant *palapa* restaurants stretches along the beach at the west end of town.

Flor Morena (Juárez s/n; mains M\$20-40; 🍷 6-11pm Wed-Sun) You may have to wait to get a seat in this tiny, all-women-run place, but it's worth it. Everything is made fresh, there are plenty of vegetarian options and even the house speciality, shrimp *pozole*, costs only M\$40.

Mariscos Sinky (cnr Hidalgo & Corona; mains M\$50-75; 🍷 9am-8pm) A simple, time-honored joint

with shaded sidewalk tables serving a local sea harvest. The toothsome seafood soup is made to order with a whole fish.

Kucaramakara Sushi Bar and Lounge (☎ 355-50-50; Gómez Farías 47; sushi rolls M\$62-72; 🍷 1pm-midnight Tue-Sun) On a dusty street, this incongruously hip eatery capitalizes brilliantly on its proximity to the sea, serving super fresh rolls, tempura and sashimi in a contemporary setting.

Restaurant Maya (☎ 102-07-75; www.restaurantmaya.com; Obregón 1; mains M\$74-150; 🍷 6-10:30pm Tue-Sat & 10am-2pm Sun) The menu changes regularly but the quality at this Asian-fusion beachside hotspot is consistently excellent. Dinners include a range of gourmet salads, grilled meats and fish with exotic sauces, and there are appetizers like curried fish cakes and rich salads. Western favorites like eggs Benedict and rich omelettes with Brie rule the brunch menu.

Surfos & Vagos (☎ 355-64-13; Juárez s/n; 🍷 8pm-2am Wed-Mon) Rocking to an agreeable beat, this 2nd-floor open *palapa* mixes up margaritas so stiff you can ride a wave on them.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

For information on the nearest airport to Melaque, see p474.

Bus

Melaque has two bus stations. **Transportes Cihuatlán** and **Primera Plus/Servicios Coordinados** are on opposite sides of Carranza at the corner of Gómez Farías. Both have 1st- and 2nd-class buses and ply similar routes for similar fares.

Buses trundling out of these stations include:

Barra de Navidad (M\$4, 10min, every 15min 6am-9pm)

Guadalajara (M\$242, 5hr, 14 1st class; M\$205, 7hr, 20 2nd class)

Manzanillo (M\$50, 1-1½hr, 14 1st class; M\$40, 1-1½hr, 28 2nd class hourly 5am-11:30pm)

Puerto Vallarta (M\$170, 4-5hr, 4 1st class; M\$90-140, 5hr, 18 2nd class)

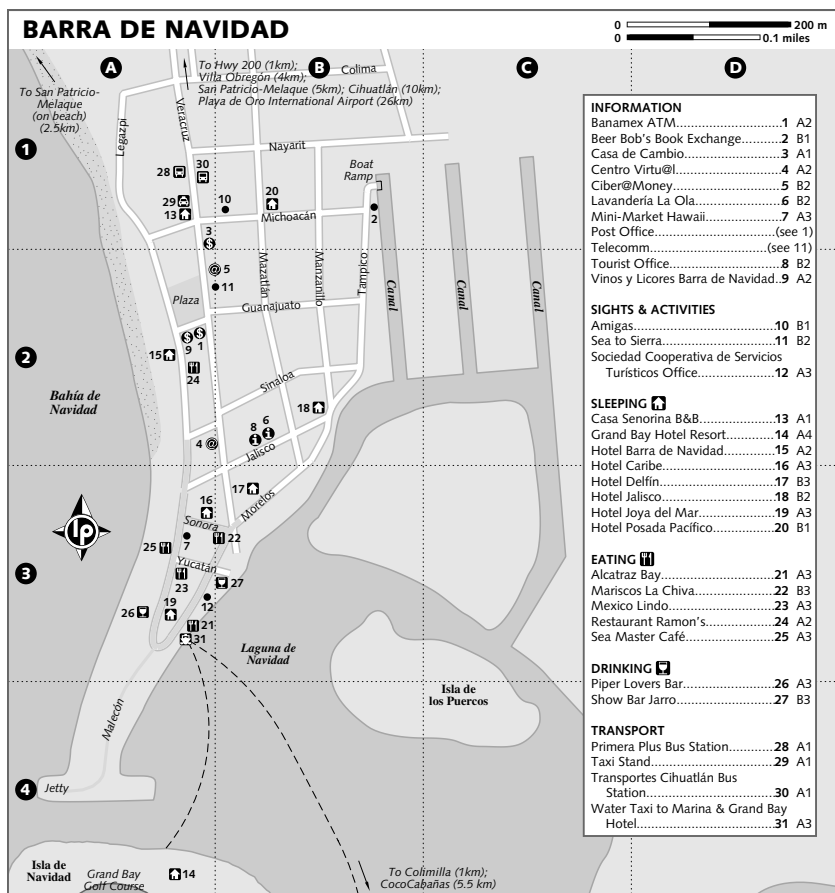
Taxi

A taxi between Melaque and Barra should cost no more than M\$50; they congregate at the plaza.

Barra de Navidad

☎ 315 / pop 4000

The charming town of Barra de Navidad (usually simply called Barra) is squeezed onto a sandbar between Bahía de Navidad and the Laguna de



Navidad. Barra de Navidad first came to prominence in 1564 when its shipyards produced the galleons used by conquistador Miguel López de Legazpi and Father André de Urdaneta to deliver the Philippines to King Felipe of Spain. By 1600, however, most of the conquests were being conducted from Acapulco, and Barra slipped into sleepy obscurity (a state from which it has yet to fully emerge).

INFORMATION

Banamex (Veracruz s/n) This ATM is air-conditioned.

Ciber@Money (Veracruz 212C; per hr M\$25; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Sat) Has a decent internet connection, and also cashes traveler's checks.

Lavandería La Ola (Jalisco 69, per 3kg M\$33) Laundry with same-day pickup.

Post office (Veracruz s/n)

Telecomm (Veracruz 212B; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Telephone and fax services.

Tourist office (☎ 355-51-00; www.costalegre.com; Jalisco 67; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) This regional office has information about Barra and the other towns of the Costa Alegre. It also runs an information kiosk on the jetty during the high tourist season.

Vinos y Licores Barra de Navidad (Legazpi s/n; ☎ 8:30am-11pm) Money-changing facilities, TelMex cards, and booze.

ACTIVITIES

Barra's steep and narrow beach is lovely to behold, but conditions are sometimes too rough for swimming. The gentlest conditions are generally in the mornings.

Boat Trips

Trips into the Laguna de Navidad are a Barra highlight. The boatmen's cooperative, **Sociedad Cooperativa de Servicios Turísticos** (Veracruz 40; ☎ 9am-5pm), books a variety of boat excursions ranging from half-hour trips around the lagoon (\$20 per boat) to all-day jungle trips to Tenacatita (M\$2500 per boat). One popular tour travels around the lagoon and visits the tiny village of Colimilla, where there are several welcoming seafood restaurants (M\$200, three hours). Prices (good for up to eight people) are posted at the open-air lagoonside office. The cooperative also offers fishing, snorkeling and diving trips.

For a short jaunt out on the water you could also catch a water taxi from a nearby dock and head over to the Grand Bay Hotel Wyndham Resort on Isla de Navidad or Colimilla (M\$20 round-trip; see p474).

Fishing

The waters near Barra are rife with marlin, swordfish, albacore, dorado, snapper and other more rarefied catches. Fishing trips on *lanchas* can be arranged at the boatman's cooperative for about M\$400 per hour, including gear; the fishermen are ready to go most mornings at 6am. Many of the trips include snorkeling stops.

Golf

Grand Bay Golf Course (☎ 337-90-24; Grand Bay Hotel Wyndham Resort, Isla Navidad; green fees 9/18/27 holes US\$160/180/200) is a celebrated 27-hole course with excellent vistas and greens carved into ocean dunes against a backdrop of mountains. Caddies and rental clubs are available.

COURSES

Barra's relaxing vibe makes it a good choice for an education vacation. Study Spanish at **Amigas** (☎ 104-1670; www.easyspanish.net; Michoacan 58; lessons per hr private/semi-private US\$15/11.50), a friendly small school dedicated to making language instruction fun and instantly applicable. Many of the classes are taught in the town in real life situations, and in addition to the basics of grammar you'll learn a thing or two about Mexican slang.

TOURS

The Mexican-owned **Sea to Sierra** (☎ 355-57-90; www.seatosierra.com; Veracruz 204) offers a wide range of active adventures through remote,

gorgeous territory. Choose from mountain bike tours (four/eight-hour tours M\$300 to M\$700), diving and snorkeling excursions (one/two-tank dives M\$850/1200, snorkeling per boat M\$1500 to M\$2000) and horse-back adventure tours (two/seven-hour tour M\$500/1200). Ask about the multi-day eco- and cultural-adventure tours.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Big-money international fishing tournaments are held annually for marlin, sailfish, tuna and dorado.

Torneo Internacional de Pesca is the most important fishing tournament and is three days long. It's held around the third week in January.

SLEEPING

Barra has fewer beachfront rooms than its neighbor Melaque. The prices listed here are for the high season (between November and May).

Budget

Hotel Caribe (☎ 355-59-52; Sonora 15; s M\$150-200, d/t 200/300) For the low price you get a rooftop terrace, hot water and your pick of 18 clean but worn rooms. Downstairs there's a pleasant garden offering respite on a hot afternoon.

Hotel Jalisco (☎ 355-85-05; mariodiaz468@hotmail.com; Jalisco 81; s/d M\$150/200; 📺) The jovial proprietor at this simple hotel enjoys acting as an emissary for his foreign guests, and personally offers complementary Spanish instruction three days a week. The 13 rooms are a mixed bag; several are dark but the street-facing units are cheerful. Guests enjoy free use of bicycles.

Hotel Posada Pacífico (☎ 355-53-59; Mazatlán 136; s/d M\$180/280, bungalow M\$400-500; 📺) This friendly, comfortable posada has 25 large, clean rooms with TV, and an additional four bungalows sleeping up to four people. It's Barra's best budget digs.

Midrange

Hotel Delfín (☎ 355-50-68; www.hoteldelfinmx.com; Morelos 23; d/t/apt M\$495/595/1200; 📺 📺 📺) The homey Delfín is one of Barra's best hotels. It has 24 large and pleasant rooms featuring shared balconies, a grassy pool area and an exercise room. Discounts are available for longer stays but repeat customers fill the place in winter.

Hotel Joya del Mar (☎ 355-69-67; hoteljoyadelmar@yahoo.com.mx; Veracruz 209; s M\$450-550, d M\$500-600, t M\$550-650, ste M\$900-950; ☒ ☕ ☺) Right on the main drag, this well-run hotel offers 1st-floor rooms that are blah. Things improve considerably upstairs with comfortably furnished rooms and suites and a pair of breezy suites with commanding views of the lagoon.

our pick Casa Senorina B&B (☎ 355-53-15; www.casasenorina.com; cnr Michoacán & Veracruz; s/d/ste M\$600/790/1200; ☕ ☺ ☺) Until recently a striking private residence, this property has been reborn as Barra's most stylish accommodations. The eight romantic rooms are uniquely attractive, with Moroccan accents, stained glass, and wood details. Pamper yourself in the splendid pool or with an onsite massage or facial. Classy meals are served on a pleasant terrace by a burbling fountain.

Hotel Barra de Navidad (☎ 355-51-22; www.hotelbarradenavidad.com; Legazpi 250; s/d/tr/bungalows M\$820/860/900/1300; ☕ ☺) Providing Barra's best beach access, this glowingly white, modern beachside hotel harbors a shaded intimate courtyard and a small but inviting pool. The best rooms have ocean views and air-con.

Top End

Getting away from it all is a matter of considerable luxury on Isla Navidad, a short water-taxi ride across the lagoon from Barra de Navidad.

Grand Bay Hotel Resort (☎ 355-50-50; www.islanavidad.com.mx; Rinconada del Capitán s/n, Isla Navidad; d US\$500-560, ste US\$593-941; ☕ ☺ ☺) This super-luxury resort with its own marina is magnificent and very large. The same size description applies to the rooms, which have marble floors, hand-carved furniture, and bathrooms big enough to herd sheep in. The numerous amenities include three grass tennis courts, golf packages, a 'kids' club' day-care center and big fluffy bathrobes.

our pick CocoCabañas (☎ cell phone 315-1000441, from the US 281-205-4100; www.ecocabanas.com; Isla de Navidad; d/tr/q M\$1000/1150/1300; ☺ ☺) Get off the grid and into a chic beach hut at this off-the-beaten-path resort. With its green wetland water treatment system and impressive solar array which powers the entire inn, you feel good about spending your pesos at this pioneering green lodging outpost – a rarity in Mexico. The four two-storey wood and adobe cabañas – each sleeping two couples comfortably – afford brilliant sea views through

the large windows. A good restaurant serving seafood and Mexican dishes also whips up big, fresh breakfasts, which are included in the price. The inn is on Isla de Navidad, 4.5km from the fishing village of Colimilla. To get there, take a water taxi from the lagoon boat dock in Barra (M\$10) and place a call from Mary's restaurant for pickup, or negotiate for water taxi service all the way (about M\$150). Bicycles are provided for guests for a small fee.

EATING & DRINKING

Several of Barra's many good restaurants are on the beachfront with beautiful sunset views, and others overlook the lagoon. Simple, inexpensive little indoor-outdoor places line Veracruz in the center of town. However, most are open only in the high season.

Mexico Lindo (Legazpi 138; mains M\$40-95; ☎ 8:30am-midnight) With simple plastic tables under a corrugated tin roof, this place somehow manages to feel romantic and intimate at night. The menu features regional favorites like savory and sour tortilla soup, quesadillas, garlic fish tacos and shrimp *ceviche*. A good selection of cocktails seals the deal.

Restaurant Ramon's (☎ 355-64-35; Legazpi 260; mains M\$45-121; ☎ 7am-11pm) This casual and friendly restaurant is justifiably popular for its excellent fish tacos, *chili rellenos*, and local and gringo favorites like fish and chips. The portions are large and the salsa gratis.

Mariscos La Chiva (Sonora 22; mains M\$50-90; ☎ noon-6pm Wed-Mon) Completely unpretentious, this simple eatery serves super-fresh seafood dishes like *rollo de mar* – a fish fillet stuffed with octopus and crab – and shrimp with poblano chile salsa and cheese. It's a great spot to linger, befriending the local fishermen who lunch here.

Alcatraz Bay (☎ 355-70-41; Veracruz 12; mains M\$80-200; ☎ noon-10pm) This romantic spot overlooking the lagoon is a grand place to while away a hot afternoon watching the *lanchas* come and go while dining on soups, salads or the house specialty, *molcajetes camarón* (shrimp simmering in a cheesy broth), served in a bowl carved from volcanic rock.

Sea Master Café (☎ 355-51-19; Legazpi 146; mains M\$85-160; ☎ lunch & dinner) With hip decor, live music and winning sea views, this place scores by taking liberties with seafood, with delicious results. It's also a swanky choice for your sunset happy hour.

Piper Lovers Bar (☎ 355-67-47; www.piperlover.com; Legazpi 154A; ☎ 10am-2am) With its tough motorcycle-bar look and loud live music Wednesday through Saturday (from 9pm), this is the place to rock.

Show Bar Jarro (Veracruz; ☎ 9pm-4am) A down-to-earth, gay-friendly disco with pool tables and lagoon views, near Yucatán.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Air

Barra de Navidad and Melaque are served by **Playa de Oro International Airport** (ZLO), 26km southeast of Barra on Hwy 200. The airport also serves Manzanillo. To get to town from the airport, take a taxi (M\$300, 30 minutes), or take a bus 15km to Cihuatlán and a cheaper taxi from there. For flight details, see p478.

Boat

Water taxis operate on demand 24 hours a day from the dock at the southern end of Veracruz, offering service to the Grand Bay Hotel Resort, the marina, the golf course and Colimilla. All trips are M\$10. Also see p472 for information on boat trips.

Bus

The long-distance buses stopping at San Patricio-Melaque (p470) also stop at Barra de Navidad (15 minutes before or after). Transportes Cihuatlán's station is at Veracruz 228; Primera Plus and ETN operate from small terminals nearby, on the opposite side of Veracruz.

In addition to the long-distance buses, colorful local buses connect Barra and Melaque (M\$5, every 15 minutes, 6am to 9pm), stopping in Barra at the long-distance bus stations (buses stopping on the south-bound side of the road loop round Legazpi and back to Melaque).

Taxi

Catch taxis from the official **stand** (cnr Veracruz & Michoacán) to get the best price. A taxi to San Patricio-Melaque shouldn't cost more than M\$50.

MANZANILLO

☎ 314 / pop 110,700

Manzanillo has a bit of an identity crisis. On one hand, it is Mexico's busiest commercial seaport, servicing cargo ships, pleasure cruises and naval vessels from around the world. It's

also a growing tourist destination, attracting beach lovers to its fine golden sands (the famous slow-motion scene of Bo Derek running along the beach in Blake Edwards' *10* was filmed here) and anglers to the self-proclaimed 'Sailfish Capital of the World.'

The personalities don't always match up. Beaches are often streaked with oil that washes up from the busy harbor. And for every ambitious new nightclub or restaurant that opens, another shuts down – a sign that tourism is not keeping up with development. The government has poured millions of pesos into renovation projects like the beautiful downtown *malecón*, the seaside *zócalo* and sculpture gardens to attract visitors, but tourism remains an afterthought in Manzanillo. Still, it's a fine city to chill out in for a few days or to use as a base for exploring the more charming beaches south of town.

Orientation

Manzanillo extends 16km from northwest to southeast. The resort hotels and finest beaches begin at Playa Azul, across the bay from Playa San Pedrito, the closest beach to the center. Further around the bay is the Península de Santiago, a rocky outcrop holding Brisas Las Hadas resort and Playa La Audiencia. Just west of the peninsula, Bahía de Santiago is lined with excellent beaches.

Central Manzanillo is bound by Bahía de Manzanillo to the north, the Pacific Ocean to the west and Laguna de Cuyutlán to the south. Av Morelos, the main drag, runs along the north edge of the town center, beside the sea. At its east end it meets Av Niños Héroe, which leads to Hwy 200.

For information on getting to the city center from the airport and bus station, see p479.

Information

Several banks with ATMs are scattered around the city center.

Caseta Telefónica (Map p476; Av Morelos 144;

☎ 9am-10pm) Long-distance telephone and fax service.

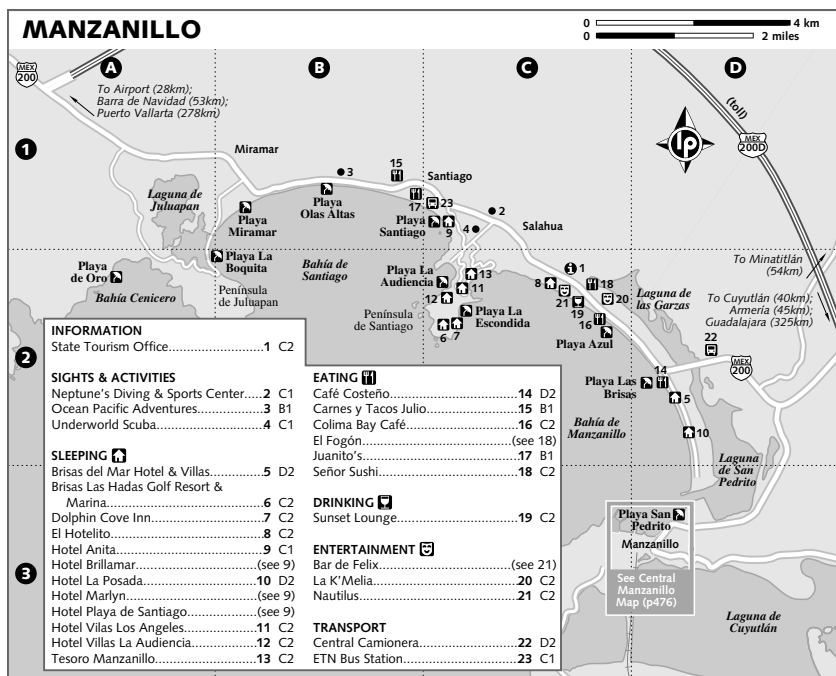
Public telephones are plentiful around the center.

HSBC (Map p476; Av México s/n) Currency exchange.

Lavandería Lavimatic (Map p476; Madero; per kg M\$125; ☎ Mon-Sat) Within walking distance of the center, near Domínguez.

Members.com (Map p476; Juárez 116; per hr M\$15;

☎ 9am-11:30pm) Offers fast connections in a comfortable atmosphere.



Post office (Map p476; Galindo 30)

State tourism office (Map p475; ☎ 333-22-64; www.visitacolima.com.mx; Blvd Miguel de la Madrid 4960, Km 8.5; ☎ 9am-3pm & 5-7pm Mon-Thu, 9am-3pm Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Dispenses information on Manzanillo and the state of Colima.

Tourist police (Map p476; ☎ 332-10-04; cnr Av 21 de Marzo & Madero) Stationed behind the Presidencia Municipal.

Sights & Activities

MUSEO UNIVERSITARIO DE ARQUEOLOGÍA

The University of Colima's **archaeological museum** (Map p476; ☎ 332-22-56; cnr Niños Héroes & Glorieta San Pedrito) presents interesting objects from ancient Colima state and rotating exhibits of contemporary Mexican art. At the time of research, the museum was closed for a long-delayed renovation project, with no end in sight.

BEACHES

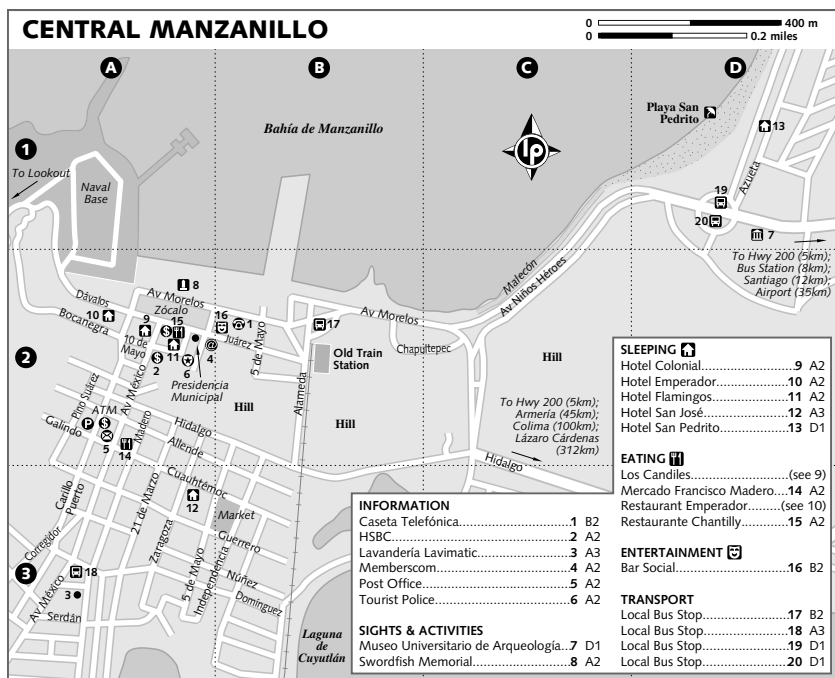
Playa San Pedrito (Map p476), 1km northeast of the *zócalo*, is the closest – and dirtiest – beach to town. The next closest stretch of sand, spacious **Playa Las Brisas** (Map p475), caters to a

few hotels. **Playa Azul** (Map p475) stretches northwest from Las Brisas and curves around to Las Hadas resort and the best beaches in the area: **La Audiencia**, **Santiago**, **Olas Altas** and **Miramar** (all on Map p475). Miramar and Olas Altas have the best surfing and bodysurfing waves in the area; surfboards can be rented at Miramar. Playa La Audiencia, lining a quiet cove on the west side of the Península de Santiago, has more tranquil water and is popular for waterskiing and other noisy motorized water sports.

Local buses marked 'Santiago,' 'Las Brisas' and 'Miramar' head around the bay to the towns of San Pedrito, Salahua, Santiago, Miramar and beaches along the way. 'Las Hadas' buses take a more circuitous, scenic route down the Península de Santiago. These buses pick up passengers from local bus stops along the length of Av 21 de Marzo, and from the main bus station every 10 minutes from 6am to 11pm.

WATER SPORTS

Snorkeling, windsurfing, sailing, waterskiing and deep-sea fishing are all popular around the bay. The scuba diving in Manzanillo can



be spectacular, and there are many sites to explore – either off the beach or out on the bay. Try **Underworld Scuba** (Map p475; ☎ 333-36-78; www.divemanzanillo.com; Hwy 200, Km 15). Its complete PADI dive center charges M\$873 for two-tank dives, including equipment, or M\$3275 for PADI certification. Another good choice is **Neptune's Diving & Sports Center** (Map p475; ☎ 334-30-01; www.neptunesdiving.com; Hwy 200, Km 14.8), which offers similar dives, costs and services to those of Underworld Scuba. It also takes night dives and snorkeling trips.

FISHING

Sailfish and dorado are found in the waters off Manzanillo during every season of the year, while marlin and tuna are generally in the area from November to March. Supporting Manzanillo's only catch-and-release program (though they also offer standard fishing trips), the well-run **Ocean Pacific Adventures** (Map p475; ☎ 335-06-05; www.gomanzanillo.com/fishing) offers fishing trips on 26ft (M\$2730) and 40ft cruisers (\$3275); prices are for the whole boat and include gear, drinks and having your fish cooked up for dinner.

Festivals & Events

Fiestas de Mayo These fiestas celebrate the founding of Manzanillo in 1873. Festivities involve sporting competitions and other events over the first 10 days in May.

Sailfish Tournaments Manzanillo's famous international sailfish tournament (pescamanzanillo.com) takes place in early November; a smaller national tournament is held in February.

Sleeping

The cheapest hotels in town are located within a block or two of the *zócalo*. There are more places in the somewhat shabby area a few blocks south of the city center. Prices are naturally higher around the bay and Santiago Peninsula, where the better beaches are located. Prices listed here are for high-season, roughly December 1 to January 10 and Semana Santa (Easter Week). During the low season, prices may drop 20% to 40%.

BUDGET

Hotel San José (Map p476; ☎ 332-51-05; Cuahtémoc 138; s/d/tr M\$150/250/350) This well-kept budget option near the market is a tad more pleasant than the cheapies near the waterfront.

Hotel Emperador (Map p476; ☎ 332-23-74; Dávalos 69; s/d M\$150/300) Half a block from the *zócalo*, this simple but clean refuge has some top-floor rooms that are marginally brighter than the rest. The hotel's restaurant is good and is one of the cheapest in town.

Hotel Flamingos (Map p476; ☎ 332-10-37; Madero 72; s/d M\$200/250) On a quiet side street, this old cheapie offers 30 clean, basic rooms. Some can be musty; ask for one with two beds and an outside window.

MIDRANGE

Hotel San Pedrito (Map p476; ☎ 332-05-35; hotel sanpedrito@hotmail.com; Teniente Azueta 3; s/d M\$300/400; ☎ ☎ ☎) This hotel sits next to Playa San Pedrito, the beach nearest to downtown. Old tiled rooms are generous in size, but worn and dank – see a few before deciding. From the *zócalo*, walk 15 leisurely minutes (just over 1km) east along the *malecón*, or catch a local bus and get off at the archaeology museum.

Hotel Colonial (Map p476; ☎ 332-10-80, 332-06-68; Bocanegra 100; s/d M\$320/480; ☎ ☎) This atmospheric old hotel in the heart of downtown retains the character of an hacienda. Big rooms, tiled outdoor hallways and a thick colonial air make it the best deal in town.

Hotel Anita (Map p475; ☎ 333-01-61; s/d M\$280/560) This is the cheapest place on Playa Santiago, with endless remodeling efforts and 36 large, faded rooms.

Hotel Villas La Audiencia (Map p475; ☎ 333-08-61; Península de Santiago; r/villas from M\$613 ☎ ☎ ☎) Although a bit far from Playa Audiencia (on the Santiago Peninsula), this moderately priced hotel is good value, especially for families. All the villas come with a kitchen and satellite TV.

our pick Hotel La Posada (Map p475; ☎ 333-18-99; www.hotel-la-posada.info; Cárdenas 201; s/d M\$580/780; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This charming, beachside B&B is a Manzanillo gem. Loyal guests return annually to the 'passionate pink' posada for its personalized service and amenities like the open-air dining room and library, big bright rooms decorated in Mexican handicrafts, an honor bar and a small pool overlooking the beach where you can watch ships – and the occasional whale – trawling the harbor.

El Hotelito (Map p475; ☎ 333-61-20; www.manzanillo inn-hotelito.com; Blvd Miguel de la Madrid 3181; r incl breakfast M\$750 ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This cute, intimate inn has high-end amenities at a moderate price like the infinity pool with jacuzzi, bar, wi-fi, TV

and a beachside location that can't be beat. The eight rooms and hotel are tastefully decorated in a Mexican minimalist style.

Brisas del Mar Hotel & Villas (Map p475; ☎ 334-11-97; www.brisasdelmarmanzanillo.com; Playa Las Brisas; d/ste/villa M\$800/1700/2400; ☎ ☎ ☎) The beautiful, generous suites and villas at Brisas del Mar are all modern and colorfully decorated. They're beachside and within walking distance of some action. The huge pool is big enough for swimming laps.

Also consider the following hotels.

Hotel Brillamar (Map p475; ☎ 334-11-88; r from M\$400, bungalows from M\$900; ☎ ☎ ☎) All breezy rooms come with TV, and bungalows have a kitchen.

Hotel Marilyn (Map p475; ☎ 333-01-07; d/ste from M\$600/650; ☎ ☎ ☎) An older property but good value for money, with pleasant rooms with TV and fan. The more expensive rooms have sea views and balconies.

Hotel Playa de Santiago (Map p475; ☎ 333-02-70; hoplasean@prodigy.net.mx; d/tr M\$748/871, ste from M\$1300) Has a good family rate, with two children under 10 staying free; the private sea-view balconies are amazing.

TOP END

Hotel Villas Los Angeles (Map p475; ☎ 333-17-02; www.villaslosangeles.com; Av La Cima s/n, Península de Santiago; s & d/t M\$1000/1500; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) A great top-end choice on the Santiago Peninsula, this family-run hotel is located in a secluded forest high above the hustle and bustle of Manzanillo. The rooms are big and comfy (more expensive rooms have kitchenettes), surrounding an immaculate pool and garden.

Dolphin Cove Inn (Map p475; ☎ 333-20-00, 334-15-15; www.dolphincoveinn.com; Av Vista Hermosa s/n, Península de Santiago; s/d M\$1270, ste M\$1600; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This cliffside hotel adjacent to Las Hadas and killer views has huge white and blue rooms with large marble bathroom, kitchenette and cable TV.

Tesoro Manzanillo (Map p475; ☎ 333-20-00; Av de la Audiencia 1, Playa Audiencia; d from M\$2750; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) A white, sterile hotel above Playa Audiencia. With endless amenities and activities, it mostly caters to tour groups and folks who enjoy spending their holiday in one place.

Brisas Las Hadas Golf Resort & Marina (Map p475; ☎ 331-01-01; www.brisas.com.mx; Av Vista Hermosa s/n, Playa Audiencia; r incl breakfast M\$3000, ste M\$4214; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Manzanillo's most exclusive hotel sits above the bay like a Moorish seaside kingdom of white marble, spires and domes. The massive complex contains nearly 300 rooms and suites with marble floors,

all-white furnishings and plentiful amenities; some have private pools. The Bo Derek flick *10* was shot here.

Eating

Several good down-to-earth options are on the *zócalo*, while chain and chain-like spots line Hwy 200 around the bay.

CENTRAL MANZANILLO

Restaurante Chantilly (Map p476; ☎ 332-01-94; Juárez 44; mains M\$18-90) This crowded cafeteria and *nevería* (ice-cream parlor) has reasonably priced meals and snacks, plus a generous *comida corrida*, espresso and good ice cream.

Mercado Francisco Madero (Map p476; cnr Madero & Cuauhtémoc; mains M\$20-50; ☎ 7am-6pm) This market has a number of inexpensive food stalls to choose from.

Restaurant Emperador (Map p476; ☎ 332-23-74; Hotel Emperador, Dávalos 69; mains M\$20-50) Good, cheap and simple, this intimate ground-floor restaurant is popular with locals and budget travelers. Highlights here are the set breakfasts and the meat-and-seafood *comida corrida*.

Los Candiles (Map p476; ☎ 332-10-80; Hotel Colonial, Bocanegra 100; mains M\$40-110) This restaurant opens onto a pleasant patio, has a menu of surf-and-turf fare, and a full bar with sports dominating the satellite TV.

OUTSIDE THE CENTER

Señor Sushi (Map p475; ☎ 334-53-87; Carretera 200, Km. 9.5; sushi from M\$10; rolls M\$28-60; ☎ noon-midnight) Tired of tacos? This thatched-roof Japanese restaurant serves up great sushi plus tasty teppanyaki and tempura dishes.

Juanito's (Map p475; ☎ 333-94-40/41; www.juanitos.com; Carretera 200, Km 13.5; mains M\$20-120; ☎ 8am-11pm) A local tradition since 1976, Juanito's is popular for its American comfort food like pancake breakfasts, hamburgers, BBQ chicken and milkshakes, plus internet access, satellite TV and bookshelf.

Café Costeño (Map p475; ☎ 333-94-60; Lázaro Cárdenas 1613, Playa Las Brisas; breakfasts M\$30-M\$60; ☎ 9am-10:30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) A good start to your day: French toast, hotcakes and omelettes are cheerfully served along with espresso and cappuccino. Sit in the shady garden out back.

Carnes y Tacos Julio (Map p475; ☎ 334-00-36; Carretera 200, Km 14.3; mains M\$39-55; ☎ 8am-midnight) Savory grilled meat is the specialty at this lively place, but breakfast, pasta and other tourist-friendly fare won't disappoint.

El Fogón (Map p475; ☎ 333-30-94; Carretera 200, Km 9.5; mains M\$75-110) This open-air steakhouse is a local favorite – a perfect choice for a romantic dinner. Cow is king here, including prime rib, beef fajitas and the house specialty, *molcajetes* (a hearty dish of meat and veg).

Colima Bay Café (Map p475; ☎ 333-11-50; Carretera 200, Km 6.5, Playa Azul; mains M\$98-170; ☎ 2pm-1am) This super-fun Mexican restaurant keeps things lively, with thumping DJ music while guests graze on generous portions.

Drinking

For a perfect sunset with great atmosphere, head to the aptly-named **Sunset Lounge** (Map p475; ☎ 333-68-74 www.sunsetlounge.com.mx; Carretera 200; ☎ dusk to dawn). Happy hour is from 6pm to 8pm. Don't be late!

Behind the doors of the **Bar Social** (Map p476; cnr Av 21 de Marzo & Juárez; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Sat) is a world frozen in the past; congenial elderly bartenders dote on you as the jukebox plays scratchy decades-old singles.

Entertainment

If you're in town on a Sunday evening, stop by the *zócalo* (Map p476), where multiple generations come out to enjoy ice cream and the warm evening air. On some nights, bands play traditional music from the gazebo. Every night around sunset, in a scene eerily reminiscent of the Hitchcock classic *The Birds*, swallows and blackbirds perch on overhead wires and fill the air with their songs – just make sure you're not standing underneath them for too long.

Manzanillo isn't exactly known for its nightlife, but there are a few discos to keep club kids happy. The industrial **Nautilus** (Map p475; ☎ 334-33-31; Carretera 200, Km 9.5; admission M\$50-150; ☎ Fri & Sat nights), looks like one of the many cargo ships anchored in nearby Manzanillo Bay. A superb sound system, lasers, smoke machines and strong drinks keep the crowds gyrating. Next door, **Bar de Felix** (Map p475; ☎ 333-1875) is a sedate lounge with comfy couches and chill-out Spanish music.

La K'Melia (Map p475; ☎ 333-74-87; Carretera 200, Km 9.5; admission M\$20; ☎ noon-midnight) attracts Mexican families to its daily live music and dance shows.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Playa de Oro International Airport lies between a long and secluded white-sand beach

and tropical groves of bananas and coconut, 35km northwest of Manzanillo's Zona Hotelera on Hwy 200.

Alaska Airlines (☎ 334-22-11; airport) Direct service to Los Angeles.

America West (☎ from the US 800-235-92-92) Direct service from Phoenix.

Continental (☎ from the US 800-231-08-56) Direct service to Houston.

Providing direct service to Mexico City:

Aeroméxico (☎ from the US 800-237-66-39, airport ☎ 334-12-26)

Mexicana (☎ from the US 800-531-79-21, from Mexico 555-998-5998)

BUS

Manzanillo's airport-like Central Camionera (Map p475) is northeast of the center near Playa Las Brisas, just off Blvd Miguel de la Madrid (Hwy 200). It's an organized place with two tourist offices, phones, eateries and left-luggage facilities. Frequent daily departures:

| Destination | Fare | Duration |
|------------------|------------|----------|
| Armería | M\$28 | 45min |
| Barra de Navidad | M\$50-60 | 1-1½hr |
| Colima | M\$60 | 1½-2hr |
| Guadalajara | M\$140-210 | 4½-8hr |
| Lázaro Cárdenas | M\$170-210 | 6hr |
| Mexico City | M\$500-620 | 12hr |
| Puerto Vallarta | M\$180-210 | 5-6½hr |
| San Patricio | M\$60 | 1-1½hr |
| Melaque | M\$50 | 1-1½hr |

From its own terminal near Santiago at Carretera 200, Km 13.5, **ETN** (☎ 334-10-50) offers deluxe and 1st-class services to Barra de Navidad (M\$60, one to 1½ hours, three daily), Colima (M\$80, 1½ to two hours, seven daily) and Guadalajara (M\$280, five hours, seven daily). ETN also provides daily service to the airport in Guadalajara (M\$280).

Getting Around

There's no bus route to or from the airport, but most resorts have shuttle vans. **Transportes Turísticos Benito Juárez** (☎ 334-15-55) shuttles door-to-door to and from the airport for M\$390 per person for private service (one or two people) or M\$100 per person when three or more share the ride. A taxi between Manzanillo and the airport costs M\$250 to M\$350.

Local buses heading around the bay to San Pedrito, Salahua, Santiago, Miramar

and beaches along the way depart every 10 minutes from 6am to 11pm from the corner of Madero and Domínguez, the corner of Juárez and Calle 21 de Marzo near the *zócalo*, and from the main bus station. Fares (pay the driver as you board) are M\$5 to M\$6, depending on how far you're going.

Taxis are plentiful in Manzanillo. From the bus station, a cab fare is around M\$20 to the *zócalo* or Playa Azul, M\$60 to Playa Santiago and M\$90 to Playa Miramar. Always agree on a price before you get into the taxi.

CUYUTLÁN & EL PARAÍSO

☎ 313

With their black-sand beaches, gentle waves and laid-back attitudes, the twin resorts of Cuyutlán (population 926) and El Paraíso (population 189) are great places to get away from it all. The quiet little beach towns are popular with Mexican families but see few gringos. Cuyutlán has a better selection of hotels and services, but El Paraíso is less crowded and more tranquil. Bring your flip-flops; the black sand gets very hot!

Orientation & Information

Cuyutlán is at the southeastern end of Laguna de Cuyutlán, 40km southeast of Manzanillo. Sleepy El Paraíso is 6km south-east of Cuyutlán along the coast, but 12km by road. Both resorts have public telephones, *mini supers* convenience stores and beach supply shops. In Cuyutlán, check your email at **Jacana Ciber Cafe** (☎ 326-40-41; 96A Hidalgo; per hr M\$15). For other basic services like banks or a post office, you'll have to visit Armería, a regional market town 12km east of Cuyutlán.

Sights & Activities

Cuyutlán is known for its **ola verde**, a giant green wave which appears offshore at dusk between April and May. It's supposedly caused by little green phosphorescent critters, but it's the subject of much local debate. The **Museo de Sal** (Salt Museum; suggested donation M\$10; ☎ 9am-6pm), located in an old salt storage barn a block behind the *zócalo*, traces the region's history of sea salt extraction and economy.

El Tortuguero (☎ 328-86-76; tortugacuyutlan@hotmail.com; admission M\$20; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a beachside turtle sanctuary located 4km east of Cuyutlán toward Paraíso. Since it opened in 1993,

conservationists have released more than 500,000 Green, Black and Leatherback turtle hatchlings into the wild here. The center also has small iguana and crocodile sanctuaries, an education center, swimming pools and a picnic area. Don't miss the Tortuguero's **lagoon trips** on the **Palo Verde Estuary**, a nature preserve that's home to 1007 species of birds, including 257 migratory birds. *Lanchas* sail through mangrove tunnels and past sunbathing crocodiles. Tours cost M\$40 for the 45-minute ride. Water conditions permitting, there's also a two-hour round-trip ride to El Paraíso (M\$65).

Sleeping & Eating

The area's beachfront accommodations are cheaper than at other coastal resorts, but note that camping on the beaches is no longer permitted. The high seasons here are Christmas and around *Semana Santa*, when Cuyutlán's hotels are always booked solid. Both beaches are lined by dozens of *enramada* restaurants serving fresh, local seafood. At night, Cuyutlán's *zócalo* comes to life with vendors hawking cheap tacos, hot dogs and other greasy treats.

CUYUTLÁN

Hotel San Miguel (☎ 326-40-62; Hidalgo s/n; s M\$140, d without/with breakfast M\$280/360; 🍷) The best deal in town, the San Miguel has basic rooms and a rooftop pool and patio overlooking the town.

Hotel Fenix (☎ 326-40-82; www.cuyutlandirectory.com; hotelfenixcuyutlan@yahoo.com; Hidalgo 201; s M\$150, d M\$300-550 with air-con & TV; 🍷) The friendliest hotel in town is run by American Geoff and his Mexican wife Olivia. Remodeled rooms upstairs have air-con and satellite TV. The Fenix restaurant serves up the best *huevos rancheros* breakfast in town. Olivia, a real estate agent, can also help book extended-estate properties.

Hotel San Rafael (☎ 326-40-15; www.hotelsanrafael.com; Veracruz 46; s/d M\$400-600; 🍷) The town's nicest hotel has 28 inviting rooms with sea views, a large pool and a huge outdoor thatched-roof restaurant.

Hotel María Victoria (☎ 326-40-04; Veracruz 10; r M\$500-680; 🍷) With its *Jetsons*-like architecture and beach-front location, Victoria was once Cuyutlán's most exclusive hotel; it has fallen into disrepair and no longer worth the going rates.

EL PARAÍSO

None of the hotels in El Paraíso offer much more than crumbling, grubby cement cells. Your best bet is **Hotel Paraíso** (☎ 322-10-32; r M\$315-385 with TV & air-con; 🍷 🍷 🍷), a two-building complex with 60 decent rooms and a nice restaurant. The better rooms are located in the new wing across the street from the beach. The hotel is located to the left of the T-intersection at the entrance to town.

Getting There & Away

Cuyutlán and Paraíso are connected to the world through Armería, a dusty but friendly little service center on Hwy 200, 46km southeast of Manzanillo and 55km southwest of Colima. From Armería a 12km paved road heads west past coconut orchards to Cuyutlán; a similar road runs 8km southwest from Armería to El Paraíso.

To reach either place by bus involves a transfer in Armería. Long-distance buses stop at a small depot on Hwy 200 in downtown Armería. Second-class buses run between Manzanillo to/from Armería every 15 minutes from 6am to midnight (M\$25, 45 minutes) and to Colima from Armería every half-hour from 5:45am to 10:30pm (M\$25, 45 minutes). Buses also go every 20 minutes to Tecoman (M\$70, 15 minutes), where you can connect with buses heading southeast on Hwy 200 to Lázaro Cárdenas and elsewhere. They all stop along the roadside on Hwy 200 in the center of Armería.

Buses to Cuyutlán and El Paraíso depart from Armería's market, two blocks north and one block east of the long-distance bus stop. To Cuyutlán (M\$8.50, 20 minutes), they depart every half-hour from 6am to 7:30pm. To El Paraíso (M\$60, 15 minutes), they go every 45 minutes.

There are no buses directly between Cuyutlán and El Paraíso; you must return to Armería and change buses again. It's possible to walk along the beach between Cuyutlán and El Paraíso in about two hours; bring plenty of water and only go during daylight. The beach between the Tortuguero and El Paraíso is completely deserted and perfect for skinny-dipping!

BOCA DE PASCUALES

☎ 313 / pop 60

Boca de Pascuales is a legendary surf spot that attracts the best boarders from around the world. Aggressive barrel swells range from

EDGAR ÁLVAREZ

This 30-year-old surfboard shaper and hotel owner lives at Boca de Pascuales.

When did you take up surfing? I learned to surf about 15 years ago and have been doing it ever since. I used to play football (soccer) on the beach and I'd watch the California guys surfing and thought it looked like fun. So I started practicing, little by little, until I could ride the big swells. Boca de Pascuales has some of the best surfing in the world. The waves attract surfers and professionals from as far away as Tasmania.

Can you tell us about your surfboard business? I've been repairing boards for a while and a few years ago I started making my own boards – Pascuales Surfboards. A new, handmade board costs between M\$2500 and M\$3000 pesos.

What is it about surfing that attracts you? I think surfing is the greatest sport in the world. You're out there alone, nobody telling you what to do. It's just you and the wave.

2m to 5m in the summer season and storm waves occasionally reach 10m. There's a heavy beach break. Pascuales is strictly for experienced surfers; don't tempt fate if you're not up to speed.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Real de Pascuales (☎ 329-4229 or 108-3253; www.pascualesurf.com.mx; tent or hammock per person M\$30, r without/with air-con M\$250/350) Better known as Edgar's Place, this hotel is the local surfing nexus. Edgar Álvarez welcomes surfers from all over the world and fixes their boards when they get munched. The rooms are spartan to the extreme, but that's the way the dudes seem to like it.

Paco's Hotel (☎ cell phone 200-1247362; magofra_15_38@hotmail.com; r without/with air-con M\$350/400) Previously known as Estrella del Surf, Paco's is the nicer of the two hotels in town. Each comfy room has a different flower theme, lovingly painted and decorated by Paco's daughter Lulu. The hotel also has a decent onsite restaurant.

ourpick **Las Hamacas del Mayor** (☎ 324-0074; www.lashamacasdelmayor.com.mx; mains M\$70-180; ☎ 10am-6pm; ♿) A local tradition since 1953, Las Hamacas is one of the most famous restaurants in Colima state despite its off-the-beaten-path location. The two-level restaurant seats 1000 people and is open every day of the year. Strolling mariachis entertain the crowd. A swimming pool keeps the kids busy. Exquisite seafood specialties include fish fillet stuffed with octopus and shrimp, marinated in garlic sauce. Absolutely divine!

Getting There & Away

To get to Pascuales, travel first to the town of Tecomán, 12km east of Armería. Combis

between Tecomán's central bus station and Pascuales run once an hour from 7am to 8pm (M\$6, 20 minutes). A taxi in either direction will set you back M\$70. If driving, follow the sign from downtown about 10km to the beach.

MICHOACÁN COAST

Highway 200 hugs the shoreline most of the way along the beautiful 250km coast of Michoacán, one of Mexico's most beautiful states. The route passes dozens of untouched beaches – some with wide expanses of golden sand, some tucked into tiny rocky coves, some at river mouths where quiet estuaries harbor multitudes of birds. Several have gentle lapping waves that are good for swimming, while others have big breakers suitable for surfing. Many of the beaches are uninhabited, but some have small communities. Mango, coconut, papaya and banana plantations line the highway, while the green peaks of the Sierra Madre del Sur form a lush backdrop inland. Blue signs or billboards along Highway 200 mark the turnoffs for most beaches.

Boca de Apiza

At the mouth of the Río Coahuayana, which forms the Michoacán-Colima border, Boca de Apiza is a mangrove-lined, hot black-sand beach with a 300m line of competing seafood *enramadas*. On Sunday afternoons it gets quite busy with local kids splashing in the river. To get here, turn off Hwy 200 at the town of Coahuayana (Km 228) and continue about 4km to the beach. On the Michoacán side, Mexican families have built many *palapa* shelters for Sunday picnics. A long beach heads northwards, with a sandy access road going inland 6.5km to meet back with Hwy

200. Kilometer markers begin counting down from Km231 at the state border.

San Juan de Alima

Twenty kilometers south of Boca de Apiza, near where the highway meets the coast, is the cobblestoned town of **San Juan de Alima** (Km 211). It's popular with surfers, with medium-sized waves and creamy breakers just off the coast. There are several beachfront restaurants and modern hotels, *all* of them blue.

Hotel Parador (☎ 327-90-38, 327-90-21; s M\$250, d without/with air-con M\$400/450; (P) ♻) A good variety of rooms, some with balconies and views. The hotel also has the most popular restaurant in town.

Hotel San Juan (☎ 327-90-11; r without/with air-con 300/450; (P) ♻) The light-blue hotel has San Juan's only internet café. Rooms are basic but clean.

Las Brisas

The cliff-hugging road south of San Juan climbs above the coast, offering gorgeous views of desolate sandy beaches below. The tiny white strands of **Las Brisas** (Km 207) is accented by just a few *palapa* restaurants and one hotel, the white stucco **Hotel Paraíso** (☎ 327-90-55; www.paraisolasbrisasmichoacan.com; s/d M\$600/800; (P) ♻). For bird-watchers, there is a nice mangrove lagoon about 1km south of town.

Playa La Tida

Another renowned surfing destination, **Playa La Tida** (Km 183) is known for its long, left point break and mostly attracts foreign surfers with their own vehicles. The long beach is divided by a freshwater, swimmable river. There are a few *enramadas* serving fresh seafood; some have basic rooms for rent.

Faro de Bucerías

Faro de Bucerías, or Diver's Lighthouse (Km 173), is a sheltered crescent beach with clear, pale-blue waters and yellow sand that's perfect for snorkeling, swimming or sun worshiping. The local Nahua community operate a long line of *palapa* seafood restaurants offering plentiful, fat lobsters. There are no hotels here, but you can bring your own RV or pitch a tent under a *palapa*.

Playa Maruata

With clear turquoise waters and golden sandy beaches, **Playa Maruata** (Km 150) is the most

beautiful beach in Michoacán. The Nahua fishing village has a bit of a hippie reputation, attracting beach bums from all over. It's a tranquil, friendly place to hang out with your sweetie or a large stack of paperbacks.

Maruata actually has three beaches, each with its own unique character. The left (eastern) is the longest, a 3km pristine crescent-shaped beach with creamy yellow sand and calm waves perfect for swimming and snorkeling. The small middle arc is okay for strong swimmers. It's sheltered by climbable rocky heads riddled with caves, tunnels and blow holes, and marked by the unusual **Dedo de Dios** (God's Finger) formation rising from the sea. The far-right (western) beach is known as **Playa de los Muertos** (Beach of the Dead), and for good reason; it has dangerous currents and ferocious waves. During low tide, you can scale the rocks on the far right side of *Muertos* to reach a secluded cove where discreet nude sunbathing is tolerated. But don't get stuck here when the tide comes in. A crucifix on the rocks serves as a stark memorial to the people who have been swallowed by the sea.

Playa Maruata is also the principal Mexican beach where black sea turtles lay their eggs (each night from June to December). Conservationist groups also release hatchlings here.

There's a small grocery store and a restaurant near the town's bleak plaza, but otherwise there are no real concrete structures or hotels. The *enramadas* on the left beach serve delicious fresh seafood and are also your best bet for camping. Most charge M\$25 per person to pitch a tent or rent a hammock; some have tents to rent for an extra M\$50. Those who need four semi-solid walls can find a few rustic *cabañas* for M\$120 to M\$250. There are several discreet parking spots for RVs.

Barra de Nexpa

☎ 753 / pop 110

At Km 55.75, just north of Puente Nexpa bridge and 1km from the highway down a rough cobble road, lies the small community of Nexpa. It's long been a haven for surfers, attracted to the salt-and-pepper sandbar and healthy waves (which build up and curl sharply in the mornings). But word has gotten out, and nonsurfers have now discovered this quaint little village thanks to its welcoming, laid-back atmosphere, lovely empty beach and delicious restaurants.

SLEEPING & EATING

Águilas del Mar (☎ 531-52-55; campsites per person M\$25, s/d M\$150/180 (P)) Águilas has several simple rooms with a communal bathroom and shared balconies with hammocks. The restaurant (open Thursday to Tuesday) serves up an amazing *Pulpo al Diablo* – octopus marinated in a sweet and spicy sauce.

Rio Nexpa Rooms (☎ 531-52-55; www.surf-mexico.com/sites/nexpa; r M\$300; (P)) This beautifully crafted southeast Asian-style *palapa*, about 200m inland along the river, has four comfortable rooms with three full-sized beds and a loft. There's a shared kitchen, a lagoonside garden area and a tranquil communal sitting room.

Villas Cheyo's (☎ 110-30-93; cheyo_nexpa@hotmail.com; cabañas M\$400-800) Originally called Gilberto's, this was the town's first 'hotel,' built by Don Gilberto, the father of Nexpa's surf scene. There's a variety of *cabañas*, some more rustic than others, some with kitchen and most with hammocks. There's also a communal kitchen and shower block for campers/RVs, and Gilberto Jr offers taxi service to Caleta de Campos (M\$50). Look for Cheyo's sign on the right side as you enter town.

Mar De Noche (☎ 531-50-37, 118-39-31; www.nexpasurf.com; r & cabañas M\$1000, ste M\$1500) The most luxurious rooms in town, the two-story *cabañas* have comfy beds, kitchens and private bathrooms. There's also an adjacent six-room hotel with modern amenities. Low-season prices are about a third of the high season ones given. The beachfront restaurant (open 9am to 9pm), decorated with hand-carved wood columns depicting scenes of Mexican life, has a terrific breakfast menu (M\$10 to M\$35). Dinner costs about M\$70 to M\$100.

La Isla Restaurant (mains M\$25-99) The place where gringos gather in the morning for the serve-yourself coffee.

Restaurant Chicho's (mains M\$30-65) Good food, good views and basic *cabañas* for rent (singles/doubles M\$150/250). It's just south of the well-signed and always crowded La Isla Restaurant.

The **Surf Shop** (☎ 106-8553, ☎ 9am-9pm) behind La Isla has a small grocery store, internet café and offers surfboard rentals for M\$40 per hour or M\$150 per day.

Caleta de Campos

☎ 753 / pop 2000

Caleta (Km 50) is a regional service center that has all the essentials, including a gas sta-

tion, a *caseta*, late-night *taquerías* (taco stalls) and *torta* (sandwich) shops, a pharmacy and several grocery stores. The main part of town is on a bluff overlooking an azure bay. The beach below is not as charming as Nexpa, but it does have a nice selection of seafood *enramadas*, and the protected beach is better for novice surfers. The area's best surf shop, **Surf y Espuma** (☎ 531-52-55; surfboard rental per day M\$100), has two locations, one on the main drag near Hotel Yuritzi and a smaller shop on the beach.

Hotel Los Arcos (☎ 531-50-38; s/d M\$200/250, s/d with air-con & hot water M\$400/500; (P) (☎)), toward the ocean at the end of the main drag, is a bit run-down, but the owners are friendly and the bird's-eye view of the Bahía de Bufadero's blowhole is stunning.

Hotel Yuritzi (www.hoteluritzi.com; Corregidora 10; s/d M\$350/400, s/d with air-con & TV M\$450/550; (P) (☎)) is modern, well maintained and comfortable, and is preferred by business travelers and families.

Hourly buses depart Caleta's *zócalo* for Lázaro Cárdenas (M\$40, 1½ hours) from 5am to 7pm. A taxi between Caleta de Campos and Barra de Nexpa costs about M\$50.

Playa Azul

☎ 753 / pop 3100

The largest, most built-up resort on the Michoacán Coast, Playa Azul is a swimmer's paradise: a wide beach with café con leche-colored sands, clear aqua-green water, gently rolling waves and a sandy shallow bottom – you can walk 100m out to sea and still only be waist-deep. The sounds of strumming mariachis and clinking beer bottles beckon from the many beachside *palapa* restaurants. Unfortunately, Playa Azul's downtown is not as inviting, with litter everywhere, dusty streets covered in potholes and a dilapidated *zócalo* occupied by dodgy-looking folks. A nearby alternative is Laguna Pichi, a freshwater lake 2.5km east of town that's surrounded by palm trees and seafood *enramadas*. Boat trips take visitors to view the flora and fauna that inhabit the surrounding mangrove forest. But don't forget bug spray.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Playa Azul (☎ 536-00-24/91; Carranza s/n; campsites/RV sites M\$150/180, r without/with air-con & TV M\$550/820; (P) (☎)) The upmarket, 73-room Playa Azul has a small trailer park and

enjoyable rooms. Kids will love the huge pool and giant waterslide; adults will love the swim-up bar. The poolside Las Gaviotas restaurant/bar is a good bet for anything from pizza to *pozole*.

Hotel María Isabel (☎ 536-00-16; Madero s/n; s/d M\$200/300, s/d with air-con & TV M\$250/400; (P) ♿ ♻️ 🚰) On the far (east) side of the plaza, this hotel has frugal but clean rooms and friendly staff.

Hotel Andrea (☎ 536-02-51; Emiliano Zapata 879; s/d M\$250, tr/q M\$550; (P)) A great budget choice just one block from the beach, this new hotel has modern large rooms and huge bathrooms.

Hotel María Teresa (☎ 536-00-05; Independencia 626; s/d M\$250/450, s/d with air-con & TV M\$300/550; ♿ 🚰) The 42 large and comfy balconied rooms are fresh and up-to-date. There's also a poolside *palapa* restaurant-bar, an attractive garden patio and a small nightclub. Located two blocks north of the plaza.

There are several *cocina económica* restaurants on Av Aguiles Serdan, around the corner from Hotel Playa Azul. Two good choices are **Restaurant Galdy** and **Cocina Económica Doña Tere**, where you can grab tasty meals for less than M\$40.

Colectivo minivans run every 10 minutes from 5am to 9pm between Playa Azul and Lázaro Cárdenas (M\$12, 30 minutes, 24km). Taxis between Playa Azul and Lázaro Cárdenas cost around M\$100. If you're traveling here by long-distance bus, ask the driver to let you off in La Mira, at the intersection of Hwys 200 and 37. From here, you can catch a *colectivo* to Playa Azul (M\$6, 15 minutes).

LÁZARO CÁRDENAS

☎ 753 / pop 74,900

As an industrial port city, Lázaro has nothing of real interest for travelers – but because it's a hub for several bus lines, travelers do pass through. Lázaro is also a regional service center where you will find banks, a post office, pharmacies and a Pemex station.

Sleeping & Eating

There are several cheap hotels and restaurants clustered around the bus terminals.

Hotel Reyna Pio (☎ 532-06-20; Corregidora 78; s/d M\$264/319; ♿) A good, friendly budget hotel with clean, spacious rooms. It's located on the corner of Av 8 de Mayo, a block west of Av Lázaro Cárdenas and near the bus terminals.

Hotel Casablanca (☎ 537-34-81; www.hcasablanca.com.mx; Nicolás Bravo 475; s/d M\$480/760; (P) ♿ ♻️ 🚰 🚰)

Catering to business travelers, this hotel has 56 modern rooms with balconies and wide windows overlooking the city or mountains. Other features include TVs, pool (with Jacuzzi) and secure parking. Look for this high-rise a block east of Av Lázaro Cárdenas.

NH Krystal Express (☎ 533-290-00; www.nh-hotels.com; Circuito de las Universidades 60; r/st M\$1657/1842; (P) ♿ ♻️ 🚰 🚰) This four-star, corporate hotel has posh rooms with modern amenities including a gym, pool and restaurant. It's located on the Av Lázaro Cárdenas traffic circle about one mile north of the bus terminals.

Getting There & Away

Lázaro has four bus terminals, all within a few blocks of each other. **Galeana** (☎ 532-02-62) and **Parhikuni** (☎ 532-30-06), with services northwest to Manzanillo and inland to Uruapan and Morelia, share a **terminal** (Lázaro Cárdenas 1810). Directly across the street, La Línea, Vía Plus, Sur de Jalisco, Autovías and Omnibus de Mexico share another **terminal** (☎ 537-18-50; Lázaro Cárdenas 1791) and serve the same destinations as Galeana and Parhikuni, plus Colima, Guadalajara and Mexico City.

The **Estrella Blanca terminal** (☎ 532-11-71; Francisco Villa 65), two blocks west behind the Galeana terminal, is also home base for TuriStar Sur and Elite. From here, buses head southeast to Zihuatanejo, Acapulco and Oaxaca; up the coast to Manzanillo, Mazatlán and Tijuana; and inland to Uruapan, Morelia and Mexico City. The **Estrella de Oro terminal** (☎ 532-02-75; Corregidora 318) is one block north and two blocks west of Estrella Blanca and serves Zihuatanejo, Acapulco and Mexico City.

There are frequent daily buses:

| Destination | Fare | Duration |
|------------------|------------|----------|
| Acapulco | M\$144-183 | 6-7hr |
| Caleta de Campos | M\$44 | 1½hr |
| Colima | M\$174 | 4-6½hr |
| Guadalajara | M\$400 | 9-11hr |
| Manzanillo | M\$175-225 | 6-7hr |
| Mexico City | M\$450 | 8-12hr |
| Morelia | M\$300-360 | 4-8hr |
| Puerto Vallarta | M\$355 | 12hr |
| Uruapan | M\$160-210 | 3-6hr |
| Zihuatanejo | M\$61 | 2-3hr |

Combis to Playa Azul via La Mira (M\$12, 30 minutes, 24km) trawl Av Lázaro Cárdenas every 10 minutes from 5am to 9pm. A taxi

between Lázaro Cárdenas and Playa Azul costs M\$100 to M\$120.

TRONCONES & MAJAHUA

☎ 755 / pop 600

Not long ago, Troncones was a poor, sleepy fishing and farming village. That all changed in the mid-1990s when wealthy North American colonists arrived and began building luxury beachfront vacation homes and B&Bs. Tourists followed for the unspoiled beaches, relaxing atmosphere and world-class surfing. Development continues and is now spilling over into neighboring Majahua. Despite this, Troncones retains its sleepy village feel; chickens and burros roam wild, the single main street is still unpaved and there is precious little to do aside from relaxing in a hammock and soaking up the sun.

Orientation & Information

Troncones is located about 25km northwest of Ixtapa, at the end of a 3km paved road from Hwy 200. The paved road ends at a T-intersection where it connects to the dusty beachfront road along Troncones.

Troncones is made up of four beach communities: Troncones, Troncones Point, Manzanillo Bay and Majahua. The majority of tourist attractions are to the right (northwest) of the T-intersection, where the dirt road runs 4km past Troncones Point to reach the calmer waters of Manzanillo Bay. The road continues a short way to the small village of Majahua, where another dirt road (rough in the wet season) leads back out to Hwy 200.

Of the four communities, Troncones is the most built up. At the T-intersection you'll find a few small grocery stores, laundry and several cheap food vendors. The surf in Troncones and Troncones Point is rough and more geared to surfers. Manzanillo Bay is a sheltered cove more conducive to swimming and snorkeling, either in the bay or in the lovely tide pools that dot the rocky shore. Majahua is a traditional fishing village with a few *enramada* restaurants and a mellow beach layered with fine shells for beachcombers.

Activities

SURFING

Troncones has several world-class surf spots. The beach breaks here can be excellent in summer, but the wave to chase is the left at **Troncones Point**. When it's small, the take-

off is right over the rocks (complete with sea urchins), but when it's big, it's beautiful and beefy and rolls halfway across the bay.

The **surf shop** at the Inn at Manzanillo Bay (p486) rents out an excellent selection of short and long boards, as well as boogie boards (M\$120 half-day, M\$240 full day). It also offers surf lessons (M\$500, 90 minutes) and arranges guided boat trips to many of the best local surf spots. **Mexcalli Surf School** (☎ 101-39-04; surfboard rentals M\$200 per day), about 100m inland from the T-intersection, offers board lessons, rentals and repairs.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

There's good **snorkeling** and **swimming** in the protected cove off Playa Manzanillo. **Horseback riding** is quite popular; locals stroll the beach with their steeds looking for customers. Other activities include **mountain biking**, **kayaking**, **fishing**, **hiking**, **bird-watching**, **sea-turtle spotting** and **spelunking** through the limestone cave system near Majahua. These and many other activities can be arranged through **Costa Nativa Eco Tours** (☎ cell phone 755-5563616), or through your hotel.

Sleeping & Eating

Reservations are necessary almost everywhere during the high season (November through April); several places also require multiple-night stays. During low season, prices can be 50% lower, but be aware that many lodging facilities close down for the summer.

TRONCONES

Mar y Sol (☎ 553-28-40; r with fan/air-con M\$250/300) Above the *Miscelánea Jasmin* grocery store at the T-intersection, this place has basic rooms, some with a large shared balcony.

our pick **Quinta d'Liz** (☎ 553-29-14; www.playatroncones.com; d with breakfast M\$400) Quinta d'Liz, run by friendly and laid-back owner Luis, is a collection of six colorful, round bungalows just steps from the beach. Each simple room has a private bathroom, fan and a good double bed. There's also a communal kitchen to store your drinks for the nightly gatherings on the patio. It's located southeast (left) of the T.

El Burro Borracho (☎ 553-28-34; www.burroborracho.com; ☎ 11:30am-10pm; mains M\$20-M\$250) The popular and laid-back Burro Borracho (Drunk Donkey) is owned by Dewey McMillin, the 'father' of modern-day Troncones. House specialties include fresh seafood and US

classics. Live folklore dancing is held every Sunday night. Simple bungalows (M\$500) are also available.

Casa Ki (☎ 553-28-15; www.casa-ki.com; bungalows M\$950-1200, house M\$2000) A charming retreat, Ki features a thoughtfully furnished main house sleeping up to six people and four colorful free-standing bungalows with access to a communal kitchen. It's all set on a verdant beachside property.

Present Moment Retreat (☎ 103-00-11; www.presentmomentretreat.com; s M\$2060, d per person M\$1215; weekly all-inclusive packages available; restaurant mains M\$160-220; (P) (Q) (V)) A stunning 'conscious living' spa resort, Present Moment is a haven for the body and mind, specializing in yoga, meditation and massage. The 10 private, thatched-roof bungalows are minimal but luxurious, all surrounding a beautiful pool and gardens. The organic restaurant is the best (and priciest) in town, with dishes for vegetarians and carnivores alike.

MANZANILLO BAY

Hacienda Edén (☎ 553-28-02; www.edenmex.com; r M\$920, bungalows M\$920-\$1030; ste M\$1300; (P) (Q)) On Playa Manzanillo, 4km north of the T-intersection, this tranquil beachfront gem has lovingly decorated bungalows, hotel rooms and air-conditioned suites. Tropical hardwoods, Talavera tiles, high-beamed ceilings and other touches are used to great advantage. Edén is also home to the gourmet Cocina del Sol restaurant and bar, and the boutique gift shop Fruity Keiko.

Inn at Manzanillo Bay (☎ 553-28-84; www.manzanillobay.com; Playa Manzanillo; bungalows M\$1500; restaurant mains M\$80-300; (P) (Q) (R)) This lovely guest house has 10 thatched-roof bungalows with king-sized beds, canopied mosquito netting, traditional Mexican furnishings, ceiling fans and hammocked terraces. There's also a popular restaurant and bar, a surf shop and easy access to the primo break at Troncones Point.

Casa Manzanillo (☎ 553-28-31; www.innmexico.com; r M\$1625-2166; (P) (Q) (R)) The whimsical architecture features an open floor plan with a three-story-tall thatched roof, and rooms interconnected by wooden gangways and stairs. Rooms look a bit dated, but are large and comfy. The new infinity pool overlooking the beach is a major plus.

MAJAHUA

The Resort at Majahua Palms (☎ 556-08-51; www.majahuapalms.com; d/q M\$1500/2000; apt for 8 M\$3000; res-

taurant mains M\$65-220; (P) (Q) (R)) This secluded resort 6km northwest of the T-intersection is a good choice for families, with large, thatched bungalows and pleasant decor. The pool and patio are huge, and the restaurant has an extensive Mexican and American menu.

Getting There & Away

Driving from Ixtapa or Zihuatanejo, head northwest on Hwy 200 toward Lázaro Cárdenas. Just north of Km 30 you'll see the marked turnoff for Troncones; follow this winding paved road 3km west to the beach.

Second-class buses heading northwest toward Lázaro Cárdenas or La Unión from Zihuatanejo's long-distance terminals will drop you at the turnoff for Troncones (M\$20, 45 minutes) if you ask. You can also catch La Unión-bound buses from the stop a couple of blocks east of Zihuatanejo's market (M\$12).

White *colectivo* vans shuttle between Hwy 200 and Troncones roughly every half-hour (M\$6); some continue on to Majahua. In a pinch, hitchhiking is common here.

A taxi from Zihuatanejo airport to Troncones will set you back almost M\$700. From Zihuatanejo or Ixtapa, you'll pay about M\$350.

IXTAPA

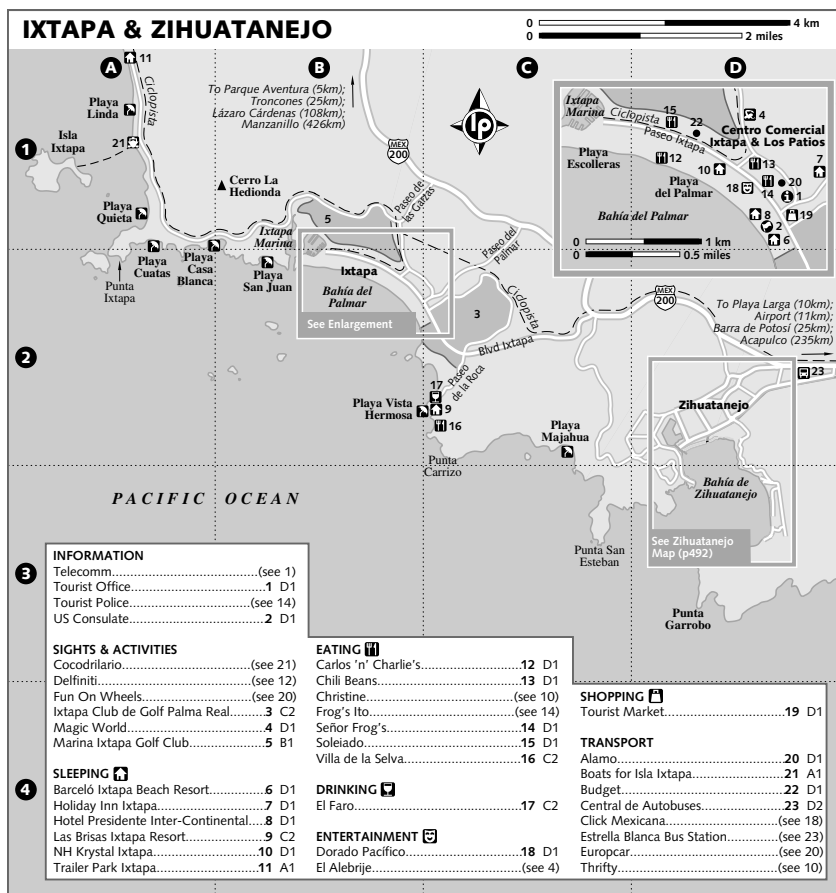
☎ 755 / pop 6400

At first glance, Ixtapa is a model of perfection. The beaches are spotless. The glitzy hotels are modern and luxurious. Not a palm tree or blade of grass out of place. But dig deeper and you'll soon realize it's all a mirage. Ixtapa was a huge coconut plantation until the late 1970s when Fonatur (the Mexican government's tourism development group) decided that the Pacific coast needed a Cancún-like resort. The result was Ixtapa, a soulless, sterile collection of concrete high-rises and chain restaurants. Locals have attempted to repair that image by opening traditional restaurants and focusing on the area's natural beauty. But Ixtapa remains a Disneyfied resort that will never be able to manufacture the charm or character of its sister city, Zihuatanejo.

Information

Telecomm (☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Found behind the tourist office.

Tourist office (Sefotur; ☎ 553-19-67; ☎ 8am-8:30pm Mon-Fri, to 3pm Sat) This state-run office is in Plaza Los Patios, across from Señor Frogs. Be aware that the many



unofficial sidewalk kiosks offering 'tourist information' are actually touting time-share schemes.

Tourist police (☎ 553-20-08; Centro Comercial La Puerta) Close to the tourist office.

The *centro comercial* shopping center on Blvd Ixtapa contains banks, ATMs, currency exchange shops, a 24-hour pharmacy, a movie theater, an overpriced Internet café and a grocery store. The nearest post office is in Zihuatanejo.

Sights

BEACHES

Ixtapa's big hotels line **Playa del Palmar**, a long, broad stretch of white sand that's often overrun by parasail and Jet-ski outfits. Be very

careful if you swim here: the large waves crash straight down and there's a powerful undertow. Just getting onto the beach can be a pain if you're not a hotel guest. There are few public access ways to the beach, and the only other option is to cut through a hotel lobby and hope you don't get hassled by snobby doormen.

Playa Escolleras, at the west end of Playa del Palmar near the entrance to the marina, has a strong break and is favored by surfers. Further west past Punta Ixtapa, **Playa Quieta** and **Playa Linda** are popular with locals.

Isla Ixtapa is a beautiful oasis from the concrete jungle of Ixtapa. The turquoise waters are crystal-clear, calm and great for snorkeling (gear rentals cost M\$50 per day). Isla Ixtapa

has four beaches; **Playa Corales** on the back side of the island is the nicest and quietest, with soft white sand, an offshore coral reef and little tide pools harboring starfish and sea urchins. *Enramada* seafood restaurants and massage providers dot the island. Frequent boats to Isla Ixtapa depart from Playa Linda's pier from 9am to 5pm (M\$45 round-trip, five minutes each way).

Playa Linda has a small **Cocodrilario**, or crocodile reserve, that is also home to fat iguanas and several bird species. You can watch the crocs from the safety of the wooden viewing platform located near the bus stop.

Activities

Bicycling is a breeze along a 15km *ciclopista* (bicycle path) that stretches from Playa Linda, north of Ixtapa, practically into Zihuatanejo. Mountain bikes can be rented in Ixtapa from **Fun on Wheels** (☎ 553-02-59; Centro Comercial Los Patios; ☎ 9am-8pm) for M\$50/200 per hour/day.

Scuba diving is popular in the warm, clear waters. Both of the Zihuatanejo diving outfits (p491) take trips to several sites in the area.

The **Ixtapa Club de Golf Palma Real** (☎ 553-10-62) and the **Marina Ixtapa Golf Club** (☎ 553-14-10) both have 18-hole courses, tennis courts and swimming pools. The **yacht club** (☎ 553-11-31; Porto Ixtapa) is beside the Ixtapa Marina. **Horseback riding** (M\$150 per hour) is available at Playa Linda.

Parque Aventura (☎ 115-17-33; www.parque-aventura.com; ☎ 8:30am-6pm), about 5km north of Ixtapa on Hwy 200, is an outdoor adventure course through the woods with suspension bridges and zip-lines.

Magic World (☎ 553-13-59; admission M\$70; ☎ 10:30am-5:30pm) aquatic park has rides, waterslides, toboggans and other amusements. At **Delfiniti** (☎ 553-27-07; www.delfiniti.com; ☎ 10am-4pm), swim with dolphins for a ridiculous M\$860 for 20 minutes, or ogle them underwater for free through the side of their glassed aquarium.

Adventours (☎ 553-10-69, 553-19-46; www.ixtapa-adventours.com) offers a variety of guided 'ecological tours' in Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo. Popular packages include a **snorkeling** and **kayaking** tour of Isla Ixtapa, and a **birding** and **crocodile-watching** walking tour.

Sleeping

With the exception of the campground, Ixtapa's resorts are all top-end. Prices listed here are rack rates for high season, which

runs from mid-December to mid-January plus Easter week. Prices can drop by 25% or more the rest of the year. Better rates are often available through package deals or from hotel websites.

Trailer Park Ixtapa (☎ 552-02-95; trailerparkixtapa@gmail.com; campsites per person M\$70; RV sites M\$300) Ixtapa's only budget accommodations is a lovely new beachfront campground located in a coconut grove. The large, gated resort has modern amenities including a grocery, showers, clubhouse, restaurant, laundromat and wi-fi. It's located 1.7km north of Playa Linda, where the highway from Ixtapa and the *ciclopista* terminate.

NH Krystal Ixtapa (☎ 553-03-33; www.nh-hotels.com; Blvd Ixtapa s/n; d from M\$998; P ☒ ☑ ☒ ☑ ☑) has some of the best-value rooms on the strip (all with ocean view), an excellent pool, seven restaurants, the popular nightclub Christine and a kids' club.

Holiday Inn Ixtapa (☎ 555-05-00; www.holiday-inn.com; Av Paseo del Palmar 1; rooms M\$1302-3363; P ☒ ☑ ☒ ☑ ☑) A sterile business hotel located two blocks behind the tourist market has comfortable rooms with corporate-style furnishings and sliding glass balcony doors but, oddly, no balconies.

Barceló Ixtapa Beach (☎ 555-20-00; www.barceloixtapa.com; Blvd Ixtapa s/n; per person all-inclusive from M\$1515; P ☒ ☑ ☒ ☑ ☑) The Barceló is an all-inclusive resort that caters to families and groups. The hotel has a fine pool and patio area, but the overly loud dance music there is a mood-killer.

Las Brisas Ixtapa Resort (☎ 553-21-21; www.brisas.com.mx; from M\$2400; P ☒ ☑ ☒ ☑ ☑) An enormous orange wedge rising from the sands, Brisas sits on an isolated stretch of Playa Vista Hermosa south of Ixtapa's main strip. The hotel has recently completed a two-year renovation. The result is a contemporary Mexican interior with lots of color and wood throughout. All 416 rooms have extra-large terraces with 1st-rate ocean views and hammocks. The lobby bar is one of the best in town.

Hotel Presidente Inter-Continental (☎ 553-00-18, in the US 888-424-6835; http://ixtapa.interconti.com; Blvd Ixtapa s/n; d incl breakfast M\$2560-M\$4920; P ☒ ☑ ☒ ☑ ☑) One of the most popular beachfront hotels is 1st-class all the way, with a gym, sauna, tennis courts, seven restaurants and a kids' club with Spanish classes for little ones.

Eating

Chili Beans (☎ 553-33-13; www.chilibeansixtapa.com; Ixtapa Plaza; mains M\$30-120; ☎ 7:30am-11pm) An excellent choice for good, traditional Mexican food such as *chile relLENos* and chicken *mole*. It's a popular breakfast spot for North American favorites like blueberry pancakes and omelettes as big as your head.

Señor Frog's (☎ 553-22-82; Blvd Ixtapa s/n; mains M\$56-215) The Frog serves up zany antics along with familiar Mexican dishes, burgers and iguana.

Frog's Ito (☎ 553-22-82; Blvd Ixtapa s/n; sushi per piece M\$15-25, rolls M\$25-95) Serves sushi, noodle dishes and Asian salads.

Soleiado (☎ 553-21-01; Blvd Ixtapa; mains M\$75-250; ☎ 8am-11pm) Extremely good, moderately priced, always crowded sidewalk café opposite the Park Royal hotel has an extensive international menu ranging from eggs Benedict breakfast to Schezuan chicken or linguini.

Villa de la Selva (☎ 553-03-62; hwww.villadelaselva.com; Paseo de la Roca Lote D; mains M\$160-475; ☎ 7pm-late) This elegant contemporary Mediterranean restaurant was once the former home of Mexican president Luis Echeverría. The cliffside villa has superb sunset and ocean views. Offerings include crab tacos, salmon with couscous, duck breast, filet mignon and an extensive wine list. Reservations a must.

Entertainment

All the big hotels have bars and nightclubs. Many also have discos; in the low season most of these charge less and open fewer nights.

Christine (☎ 553-04-56; Blvd Ixtapa s/n; admission women/men M\$100/200; ☎ 10:30pm-dawn) Christine has the sizzling sound and light systems you'd expect from one of the most popular discos in town.

El Alebrije (☎ 553-27-10; Paseo de las Garzas s/n; admission M\$190) A fog machine, banks of computerized lights, pop, rock, house, salsa and merengue, plus an open bar: what more do you want?

Carlos 'n' Charlie's (☎ 553-00-85; Blvd Ixtapa s/n) Things can get wild on this chain restaurant's dance floor right above the beach; on weekends it fills with hard-partying young tourists and locals.

El Faro (☎ 555-25-00; www.pacificacom.mx; Ixtapa Marina; ☎ 6pm-11pm). Located at the top of the Pacifica Resort and accessed by a gondola, El Faro has amazing views and live jazz music. Reservations required.

Several of Ixtapa's big hotels including **Dorado Pacifico** (☎ 553-20-25) hold 'Fiesta Mexicana' parties featuring folkloric dancing, mariachis, buffet, open bar, games and sometimes fireworks. Expect to pay between M\$320 and M\$420. Reservations can be made directly through hotels and are open to non-hotel guests.

Shopping

Tourist market (Paseo Ixtapa s/n; ☎ 9am-10pm) A tacky market packed with everything from T-shirts and shot glasses to silver and pottery. Shopping is much better in Zihuatanejo.

Getting There & Around

For information on getting to Zihuatanejo, the essential stop for getting to Ixtapa, see p497. Private *colectivo* vans provide transportation from the airport to Ixtapa for M\$100 per person, but not in the other direction. A taxi to the airport from Ixtapa costs M\$120 to M\$140.

There is no bus station within Ixtapa itself; the **Central de Autobuses** northwest of Zihuatanejo services both towns. Local buses run frequently between Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo from 5:30am to 11pm (15 minutes, M\$7). In Ixtapa, buses stop along the main street in front of all hotels. In Zihuatanejo, buses depart from the corner of Juárez and Morelos. Buses marked 'Zihua-Ixtapa-Playa Linda' continue through Ixtapa to Playa Linda. A bus ride within Ixtapa costs M\$4.50.

A taxi between Zihuatanejo and Ixtapa should be around M\$50; always agree on a price before getting into a cab.

ZIHUATANEJO

☎ 755 / pop 62,400

The sister cities of Zihuatanejo (see-wah-tah-neh-ho) and Ixtapa could not be more radically different. While Ixtapa is a purpose-built, idyllic version of Mexico, Zihuatanejo is the real deal. Zihuatanejo, or Zihua as it's affectionately called, is a Pacific paradise of beautiful beaches, friendly people and an easygoing lifestyle. Until the 1970s, Zihua was a sleepy fishing village best known as a hideaway for pirates and hippies; Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman escaped here to live out the simple life in *The Shawshank Redemption*. With the construction of Ixtapa next door, Zihua's population and tourism industry boomed practically overnight.

Parts of the city have become quite touristic, especially when cruise ships are in town. Luxury hotels are slowly replacing old family guesthouses. But for the most part, Zihua has thankfully retained its lovely, historic charm. The downtown narrow cobblestone streets hide wonderful local restaurants, bars, boutique shops and artisan studios. Fishermen still meet every morning on the beach by Paseo del Pescador (Fishermen's Passage) to sell their catch of the day. At night, young lovers and families stroll carefree along the romantic waterfront sidewalk. Zihua is the best of both worlds.

Orientation

Though Zihua's suburbs are slowly spreading beyond the bay and into the hills, the city's center is compressed within a few blocks. It's difficult to get lost; there are only a few streets and they're clearly marked. Ixtapa, 8km northwest, is easily reached by frequent local buses or by taxi. The airport is about 13km southeast of the city, and the long-distance bus terminals are about 2km northeast of town.

Information

EMERGENCY

Emergency (☎ 060; ☎ 24hr)

Hospital (☎ 554-36-50; Av Morelos) On Morales and Mar Egeo.

Tourist police (☎ 554-20-40; Alvarez) Next to the basketball court.

INTERNET ACCESS

Zihuatanejo is crawling with Internet cafés.

Infinitum Internet (Bravo 12; per hr M\$10) Also has a travel agency.

LAUNDRY

Lavandería del Centro (☎ 554-97-91; Guerrero 17; per 3kg M\$15; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) Self-service is also available.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Dr Rogelio Grayeb (☎ 554-33-34, 553-17-11) Provides medical assistance 24/7, speaks English and he makes house calls!

MONEY

Zihuatanejo has many banks and *casas de cambio* where you can change US dollars and traveler's checks. The following banks have ATMs.

Banamex (cnr Ejido & Guerrero)

Bancomer (cnr Juárez & Bravo; ☎ 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat)

Banorte (cnr Juárez & Ejido; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat)

POST

Post office (☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

Located in the same building as Telecomm, behind the big yellow Coppel department store off Morales.

TELEPHONE & FAX

Long-distance telephone and fax services are available at several *casetas*, including two on the corner of Galeana and Ascencio. Telmex card phones are all around town.

Telecomm (☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

Located within the post office; has fax service.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist kiosk (Álvarez s/n; ☎ 9am-8pm high season)

Offers free information, maps and brochures in the heart of town.

Tourist office Municipal office (☎ /fax 554-20-01; www

.ixtapa-zihuatanejo.com; Zihuatanejo Pte s/n, Colonia La Deportiva; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri; Branch office (off Paseo de la Bahía; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) The municipal office is found upstairs in the *ayuntamiento* (city hall), 2km northeast of the town center. Local buses between Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo stop out front. The branch office is near the south end of Playa La Ropa.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Various agencies provide travel services and arrange local tours.

Turismo Internacional del Pacífico (TIP; ☎ 554-75-10/11; cnr Juárez & Álvarez; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat, 5-7pm Sun)

Dangers & Annoyances

A 2003 study published by Profepa, Mexico's environmental agency, cited 16 of the country's beaches as having unacceptably high levels of bacterial contamination. At the top of the list were Playas La Ropa, Las Gatas and Municipal, all on Bahía Zihuatanejo and caused by insufficiently treated sewage and contaminated runoff. Mexico responded by investing millions of dollars to clean up the bay and modernize sewage systems and fishing boat fleets. Just as things were beginning to look up, in 2007 the government announced plans to build a giant cruise ship terminal smack in the middle of the bay, setting off a heated battle between developers and

environmentalists. At the time of writing, no final decision had been made on the controversial project.

Sights

MUSEO ARQUEOLÓGICO DE LA COSTA GRANDE

This small **archeology museum** (☎ 554-75-52; cnr Plaza Olof Palme & Paseo del Pescador; admission M\$10; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) houses exhibits on the history, archaeology and culture of the Guerrero coast. Most signs are in English and Spanish.

BEACHES

Waves are gentle at all of Bahía de Zihuatanejo's beaches. If you want big ocean waves, head west toward Ixtapa.

Playa Municipal, in front of town, is the least appealing beach on the bay. **Playa Madera** (Wood Beach) is a pleasant five-minute walk east from Playa Municipal along a concrete walkway (popular with young couples in the evening) around the rocky point.

Walk over the hill along the steep Carretera Escénica for another 15 to 20 minutes (less than 1km) from Playa Madera, you'll reach the broad expanse of **Playa La Ropa** (Clothes Beach), named for a Spanish galleon that wrecked and washed its cargo of silks ashore. The beach is bordered by palm trees and seafood restaurants. It's an enjoyable walk, with the road rising up onto cliffs that offer a fine view over the water. One of Zihua's most beautiful beaches, La Ropa is great for swimming, parasailing, waterskiing and sand-soccer. You can also rent sailboards and sailboats.

Isolated **Playa Las Gatas**, or Cat Beach, is named for the whiskered nurse sharks who once inhabited the waters. It's a protected

beach, crowded with sunbeds and restaurants. It's good for snorkeling (there's some coral) and as a swimming spot for children, but beware of sea urchins. Beach shacks and restaurants rent out snorkeling gear for around M\$50 per day. Boats to Playa Las Gatas depart frequently from the Zihuatanejo pier, from 9am to 5pm. Buy tickets (M\$35 round-trip) at the booth at the foot of the pier; one-way tickets can be bought on board.

About 10km south of Zihuatanejo, just before the airport, **Playa Larga** has big waves, beachfront restaurants and horseback riding. Nearby **Playa Manzanillo**, a secluded white-sand beach reachable by boat from Zihuatanejo, offers the best snorkeling in the area. To reach Playa Larga, take a 'Coacoyul' combi (M\$6, 10 minutes) from Juárez opposite the market and get off at the turnoff to Playa Larga; another combi will take you from the turnoff to the beach.

Activities

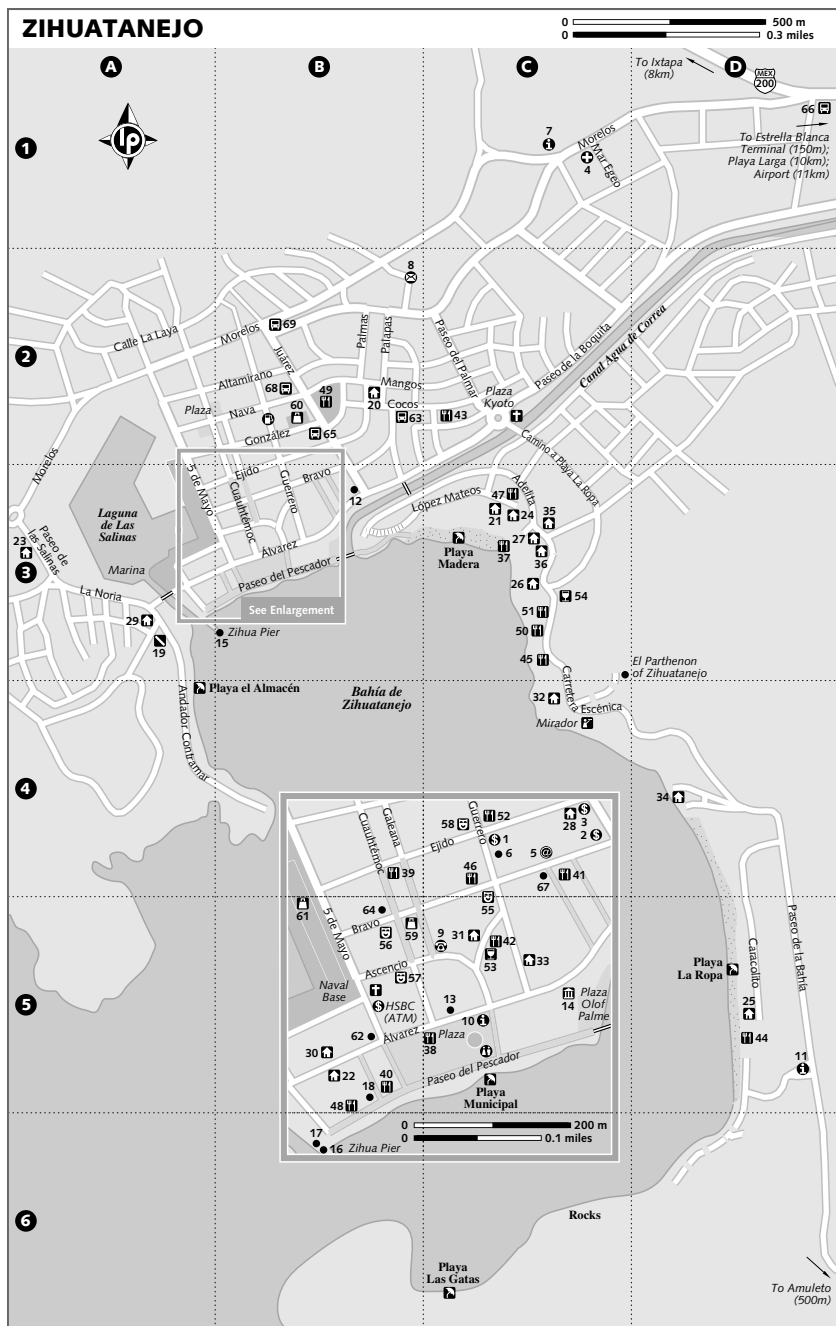
SNORKELING & SCUBA DIVING

Snorkeling is good at Playa Las Gatas and even better at Playa Manzanillo, especially in the dry season, when visibility is best. Marine life is abundant here due to a convergence of currents, and the visibility can be great – up to 35m. Migrating humpback whales pass through from December to February; manta rays can be seen all year, but you're most likely to spot them in summer, when the water is at its most clear, blue and warm. Snorkeling gear can be rented at Playa Las Gatas for around M\$50 per day.

Buseo Nautilus Divers (☎ 554-91-91; www.nautilus-divers.com; Álvarez 33; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Sat; 1/2 tanks M\$542/813) offers a variety of dives and NAUI courses and certification. **Zihua Dive Center**

THE PARTHENON OF ZIHUATANEJO

High on a hilltop above Playa Ropa, partially obscured by the encroaching forest, is a crumbling marble mansion that resembles a certain famous Greek temple. Known locally as 'El Parthenon,' it was built in 1982 by Arturo 'El Negro' Durazo Moreno, Mexico City's former police chief. His official salary was a paltry US\$400 per month, but Durazo lived like a king, collecting vintage cars and building gaudy houses across Mexico. He spared no expense on the Parthenon, fitting it with Italian marble, statuary, frescoes, an outdoor disco and a huge pool with priceless views of Zihua Bay. Durazo never got to enjoy his spoils. Shortly after its completion, Durazo came under investigation for extorting millions of dollars from his police officers. He fled the country but after a long manhunt was captured and imprisoned for six years. He died in 2000. As for the Parthenon, it's still there; languishing like an ancient Greek ruin while the government debates its future. *Technically*, it's closed to the public, but if you ask nicely, the guards might let you in for a peek at Mexico's unintended monument to corruption.



| | | | | | |
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(☎ 554-85-54; www.zihuatanejodivecenter.com; Av La Noria 1; M\$705/921), offers PADI courses & certification, plus snorkeling, snooba & kayak trips; the staff speak English, Spanish & French.

SPORTFISHING

Sportfishing is popular in Zihuatanejo. Sailfish are caught here year-round; seasonal fish include blue or black marlin (March to May), roosterfish (September to October), wahoo (October), mahi mahi (November to December) and Spanish mackerel (December). Deep-sea fishing trips cost anywhere from M\$1950 to M\$4335, depending upon the size of the boat. Trips run up to seven hours and usually include equipment.

Two fishing outfits near Zihuatanejo's pier are **Sociedad Cooperativa José Azueta** (☎ 554-20-56; Muelle Municipal) and **Sociedad de Servicios Turísticos** (☎ 554-37-58; Paseo del Pescador 20). English is spoken at **Whisky Water World** (☎ 554-01-47, in the US 800-214-9003; www.ixtapa-sportfishing.com; Paseo del Pescador 38).

Tours

Picante (☎ 554-26-94, 554-82-70; www.picantecruises.com), a 23m catamaran based in Bahía de

Zihuatanejo, offers a couple of different excursions. The 'Sail and Snorkel' trip (M\$813, from 10am to 2:30pm) sails south of Zihua to the prime snorkeling of Playa Manzanillo's coral reef. The 'Magical Sunset Cruise' (M\$542, from 5pm to 7:30pm) heads around the bay and out along the coast of Ixtapa. Prices include open bar, food and transportation to and from your hotel. Reservations required.

Sleeping

Zihuatanejo has a good selection of hotels for all budgets. Prices listed here are rack rates for high season, which generally runs from early December to early January, and Semana Santa. Outside of peak season, prices drop by up to 20%. You can often negotiate for rates, especially during slow periods or for extended days.

BUDGET

Our pick **Hostel Rincón del Viajero** (☎ 105-43-98; www.rinconviajerozihua.4t.com; rinconviajerozihua@gmail.com; Paseo las Salinas 50, La Noria; dm per person M\$110, d without/with bathroom M\$210/280) Part artists' colony, part botanical garden, Rincón del Viajero

(Traveler's Corner) was once a derelict bodega until owner-artist-surfer Malinalli got her creative hands on it. The colorful, comfy rooms and common areas are decorated with Mali's original artwork and Mexican handicrafts. There's also a communal kitchen, wading pool, rooftop terrace, hammocks, laundry area, bike rentals and a wonderful coffee shop with fruits picked right from the courtyard orchard. Mali speaks Spanish, English, French, Italian and some Portuguese.

Angela's Hotel & Hostel (☎ 112-2191; www.zihuatanejo.com.mx/angelas; Mangos 25; dm/d M\$150/250) This friendly hostel with helpful staff has private rooms, dorms, communal kitchen, lockers and luggage storage. It's located behind the municipal market, 15 minutes' walk from the zócalo.

Casa de Huéspedes Elvira (☎ 554-20-61; Álvarez s/n; r without/with air-con M\$250/350) A decent cheapie offers eight rooms on two floors surrounding an open courtyard. Upstairs rooms are much better, with more light and privacy.

Posada Citlali (☎ 554-20-43; Guerrero 4; s/d M\$300/400) This pleasant older posada has plain but clean rooms around a dark, leafy central courtyard. Keep to the front of the building; the primary school directly behind the hotel might result in an early-morning wake-up screams.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Raúl Tres Marías (☎ 554-21-91; r3marías noria@yahoo.com; La Noria 4; s/d M\$400/580) Across the lagoon footbridge, this economical, popular option comes with clean, spacious rooms. Its best features, however, are the large terraced patios that are dotted with chairs and hammocks and boast great views of the pier.

Hotel Raúl Tres Marías Centro (☎ 554-67-06; www.ixtapa-zihuatanejo.net/r3marías; Álvarez 52; r M\$680; (P) ☎) Rooms at this spot are good and unpretentious, and many come with balcony. There's a popular downstairs restaurant, and in the high season breakfast is included.

Hotel Zihuatanejo Centro (☎ 554-26-69; www.ixtapa-zihuatanejo.net/zihuacenter; Ramírez 2; s/d M\$850; (P) ☎) A fantastic choice right in the heart of downtown Zihua, this melon-colored hotel has 74 bright and sunny rooms with amenities normally found at more expensive resorts, including a popular bar and an internet café.

Hotel Palacios (☎ /fax 554-20-55; hotelpalacios@prodigy.net.mx; Adelita s/n; d M\$850-950; (P) ☎) Overlooking the east end of Playa Madera,

Hotel Palacios is a family-friendly facility with a small pool and beachfront terrace. Some rooms are small and not all have views, but the renovated rooms all have comfortable beds.

Hotel Irma (☎ 554-84-72; www.hotelirma.com.mx; hotelreserv@prodigy.net.mx; Playa de La Madera s/n; s/d M\$924/1041; (P) ☎) Like a reliable relative, Irma attracts regulars back year after year for the family-like atmosphere and service. Located just above Playa Madera, Irma has renovated rooms, some with great views of the bay and the huge pool and terrace below. It's a great moderate choice in low season.

Villas Miramar (☎ 554-2106; www.hotelvillasmiramar.com; r with garden view/ocean view M\$950/1050, ste M\$1800; (P) ☎) This laid-back complex is divided among two buildings: a tall beachfront hotel right on Playa Madera and a shorter garden-style building across the street. Both are bright orange and have their own pools and large comfortable rooms.

Bungalows Ley (☎ 554-40-87; www.zihua.net/bungalowsley; López Mateos s/n; 1-1/2-bedroom bungalows M\$975/1842; (P) ☎) Well-kept and spacious, with unbeatable views and beach access. The bungalows are not fancy, but all have thatched terraces with hammocks, room safes and kitchens or kitchenettes (some are outdoors). It's stumbling distance to Playa Madera.

TOP END

Villa Mexicana (☎ 553-36-36; www.hotelvillamexicana.com.mx; Playa La Ropa s/n; s/d from M\$1158; (P) ☎) This new hotel in orange and blue hues is one of the few Zihua lodgings located directly on a beach. The large tile and stucco rooms have cable TV, phone and safe. There's a popular pool and beachside bar and restaurant.

Hotel Brisas del Mar (☎ 554-21-42; www.hotelbrisasdelmar.com; López Mateos s/n; d from M\$1312; ☎) A cliff-hugging, red adobe village perched above Playa Madera, Brisas del Mar is perfect for a romantic getaway. The spacious rooms and grounds are decorated in traditional Mexican furnishings, tiles and handicrafts. All have private balconies with exquisite ocean views and a hammock. A steep staircase leads down to the beach and to its Bistrot del Mar, one of Zihua's finest restaurants.

Amuleto (☎ 544-6222, in the US 213-280-1037; www.amuleto.net; Escenica 9; from M\$3951; (P) ☎) A boutique hotel in the high hills above Playa La Ropa, Amuleto is the newest name in opulence. Each earthy room is decorated in stone, ceramic and woods and the suites have

private swimming pools with scrumptious views. Amuleto's restaurant is the hottest new thing in Zihua.

La Casa Que Canta (☎ 554-70-30, 800-710-93-45; www.lacasaquecanta.com; Carretera Escénica s/n; r M\$5039, ste M\$5961-M\$9104; P ♻️ 🗑️ 🚰) Regularly ranked as one of the finest hotels in the world, La Casa Que Canta – The House that Sings – is the epitome of luxury, exclusivity and customer service. Perched on the cliffs between Playas Madera and La Ropa, the thatched-roof hotel contains exquisitely decorated rooms, a restaurant, spa, fitness center and two swimming pools. But perhaps the most valuable amenity may be silence; there are no televisions, and children under 16 are banned.

Eating

Guerrero is famous for its *pozole*, a hearty meat and veg stew that's found on most menus in town (especially on Thursday). *Tiritas* (raw fish slivers marinated with red onion, lemon or lime and chili peppers, and served with soda crackers and spicy sauce) are Zihua's specialty, but you won't find them on many menus – look for them at carts near the bus stations, or request them at any beachfront *enramada*.

PASEO DEL PESCADOR

Seafood here is fresh and delicious; many popular (if touristy) fish restaurants run parallel to Playa Municipal. The following are the best options from west to east.

Café Marina (☎ 554-23-73; Paseo Pescador; mains M\$50-125; ☎ 8am-9pm) This tiny place on the west side of the plaza bakes up some good pizzas, along with spaghettis and sandwiches.

Casa Elvira (☎ 554-20-61; Paseo del Pescador 8; mains M\$60-160; ☎ 1pm-10:30pm) This old hand turns out some tasty food like oysters Rockefeller, jumbo steamed shrimp and broiled octopus with garlic. Vegetarians will appreciate the soup, salad and spaghetti choices. Order the coconut custard for dessert.

La Sirena Gorda (The Fat Mermaid; ☎ 554-26-87; Paseo del Pescador 90; mains M\$60-230; ☎ 8:30am-10:30pm Thu-Tue) Close to the pier, this place is a casual and popular open-air restaurant that's good for garlic shrimp, curry tuna and fish tacos, as well as burgers and traditional Mexican dishes.

CENTRAL ZIHUATANEJO – INLAND

Hearty inexpensive breakfast or lunch is available in the **market** (Juárez; ☎ 7am-6pm), at the

corner of Juárez and Gonzalez. Late-night taco stands are ubiquitous around town.

Tamales y Atoles Any (☎ 554-73-73; Guerrero 38; mains M\$20-90) This friendly place serves consciously traditional and excellent Mexican cuisine under its big *palapa* roof. For something different, try the *caldo de mi patrón* (my boss's soup), a soup made of chicken liver, heart, feet and gizzard. The real highlights are the to-die-for *tamales* and *atoles*, a flavored sweet hot drink made of corn flower.

Cafetería Nueva Zelanda (☎ 554-23-40; Cuauhtémoc 23-30; mains M\$20-60) Step back in time at this spotless diner, where you can order a banana split or chocolate malt with your shrimp taco and chicken fajitas. Everything is available *para llevar* (to go), it's a great place for breakfast, and you can get a decent cappuccino anytime. There are entrances on both Cuauhtémoc and Galeana.

Zihua Pancake House (☎ 554-20-87, 100-59-56; zihuapancake@yahoo.com.mx; cnr Galeana & Ejido; breakfast M\$30-50; ☎ 7am-2pm Tue-Sun) The best breakfast spot in town, this popular open-air restaurant with a prime people-watching spot serves American favorites like eggs Benedict, French toast, waffles and, of course, several types of pancakes. It also has a full cocktail bar pouring Mimosas, Bloody Marys and other hair-of-the-dog drinks.

Cenaduría Antelia (☎ 554-30-91; Bravo 14; meals under M\$50; ☎ 9am-2:30pm & 6pm-midnight) Antelia's popular and friendly eatery has been dishing out tasty *antojitos mexicanos* and desserts since 1975. Tuck into a *tamal de chile verde* or a bursting bowl of daily *pozole*, and top it off with *calabaza con leche* (squash in milk) for dessert.

Doña Licha (☎ 554-39-33; Cocos 8; mains M\$50-85; ☎ 8am-6pm) Licha is well known for its down-home Mexican cooking, casual atmosphere and excellent prices. There are always several *comidas corridas* from which to choose including one delicious specialty, *pollo en cacahuete* (chicken in a peanut sauce); all come with rice, beans and handmade tortillas. Breakfasts are huge.

Il Paccolo (☎ 559-08-38; Bravo 38; mains M\$60-110; ☎ 4pm-midnight) Aching for Italian? Il Paccolo has delicious pizzas, pastas, meats and seafood dishes. The atmosphere is dark and low-key, and the bar is friendly.

Coconuts (☎ 554-79-80; Ramírez 1; mains M\$90-265; ☎ noon-11pm) For a romantic dinner this upscale place is hard to beat. Fairy lights

fill the outdoor courtyard, service is attentive and dishes include garlic snapper, leg of duck, *chiles rellenos*, vegetable tart and herb chicken.

AROUND THE BAY

El Manglar (☎ 554-3752; Playa La Ropa s/n; 🕒 noon-9pm Thu-Tue; mains M\$45-148) One of several seafood restaurants on Playa La Ropa, El Manglar (the mangrove) is unique for its jungle setting in a protected reserve that's home to crocodiles, iguanas, birds and turtles. The menu features a blackened 27-spice tuna, mahi mahi and filet mignon. Out back, there's also an RV park with showers and bath (M\$200 per day).

our pick **La Casa Vieja** (☎ 557-08-37; www.restaurantcasavieja.com.mx; Josefá Ortiz de Domínguez 7; mains M\$45-155 ; 🕒 11am-11pm Mon-Sat, 9am-10pm Sun) A hidden gem located in a residential neighborhood near Playa Madera, Casa Vieja is popular with locals and in-the-know tourists for great, traditional Mexican food and hospitality. Go on Thursday for the two-for-one *pozole* specials and live music.

Puerta del Sol (☎ 554-83-42; Carretera Escénica s/n; mains M\$75-200; 🕒 5pm-midnight) This romantic restaurant perched on the cliffs between Playas Madera and La Ropa has spectacular bay and sunset views. And the international menu is on fire, literally. Start with a flambé steak, followed by flambé fruit desert and finish off with flambé coffee. Reservations are a must in high season.

Il Mare (☎ 554-90-67; Escénica a la Ropa 105; www.ilmareristorante.com; mains M\$80-225; 🕒 noon-10pm) A romantic Italian restaurant in the clouds, Il Mare is well regarded for its Mediterranean specialties like Linguine ai Frutti di Mare in spicy marinara sauce or bow-tie pasta with smoked salmon.

Bistro del Mar (☎ 554-2142; www.hotelbrisdeldelmar.com; Playa Madera s/n; mains M\$80-380; 🕒 7am-11pm) This beautiful, beachside bistro – part of the Hotel Brisas del Mar complex – exemplifies contemporary Mexican cuisine by fusing Latin, European and Asian flavors. Rotating specialties include original creations like jumbo shrimp marinated in a sweet and sour sauce, flambéed in tequila, on a bed of sweet-corn cake. With its landmark sail roof over candlelit beachside tables, Bistro del Mar is a romantic treat for the heart, soul and stomach.

Restaurant Kau-Kan (☎ 554-84-46; Carretera Escénica 7; mains M\$160-325; 🕒 5pm-midnight) High on the cliffs, this renowned gourmet restaurant en-

joys stellar views. Making a selection is exhausting when faced with choices like stingray in black butter sauce, marinated abalone or grilled lamb chops with couscous.

Drinking

Jungle Bar (cnr Ascencio & Ramírez; 🕒 7pm-2am) Bob your head to the kick-back bass pulsing at this streetside bar with fun staff and cheap drinks. It's a good place to meet locals and other travelers. The jungle murals were painted by local artist Malinalli of Hostel Rincón del Viajero fame.

Entertainment

If it's big-time nightlife you're after, head to Ixtapa (see p489); Zihuatanejo is all about being mellow.

our pick **Zihuablue** (☎ 554-48-44; www.zihuablue.com; Carretera Escénica La Ropa s/n; 🕒 5pm-3am) Opened in late 2006, Zihuablue has quickly become *the* place to see and be seen; it's a hot spot for Mexican celebrities. The huge club is spread over three levels, and includes a hookah bar and an outdoor terrace with canopied beds and comfy couches. The drinks are strong and the views are outstanding. Zihuablue also has an outstanding restaurant run by French chef and Zihua gastronomy pioneer Edmond Benloulou.

Sacbé (cnr Ejido & Guerrero; admission M\$50; 🕒 8pm-late Thu-Sun) The only true discothèque in town, Sacbé caters mainly to young Mexican college students and pumps out English and Spanish pop, dance, salsa and *reggaeton*.

Splash (Guerrero s/n; 🕒 7pm-late Mon-Sun) Behind the its sister club, Sacbé, Splash is a karaoke and video dance bar.

Black Bull Rodeo (☎ 554-11-29; cnr Bravo & Guerrero; 🕒 from 9pm) This corner country disco claims to have the best *norteño* band in town. There's also *cumbia*, merengue, salsa, electronica and reggae music on offer.

Rick's (☎ 554-2535; Cuahtémoc 5; 🕒 10am-10pm) A popular hole-in-the-wall in downtown Zihua features live music nightly and cold margaritas.

Cine Paraíso (☎ 554-23-18; Cuahtémoc; admission M\$25) Shows two films nightly, usually in English with Spanish subtitles. It's found near Bravo.

Shopping

Zihua offers abundant Mexican handicrafts, including ceramics, *típica* (characteristic of

the region) clothing, leatherwork, Taxco silver, wood carvings and masks from around the state of Guerrero.

El Jumil (☎ 554-61-91; Paseo del Pescador 9; ☎ 9am-2pm & 5-9pm Mon-Sat) This shop specializes in *guerrerense* masks. Guerrero is known for its variety of masks, and El Jumil stocks museum-quality examples. Many of these start at around M\$160, but there are also cheaper but delightful coconut-shell masks.

Mercado Turístico La Marina (Calle 5 de Mayo; ☎ 8am-9pm) Has many stalls selling clothes, bags and knickknacks.

Mercado Municipal de las Artesanías (González; ☎ 9am-8pm) Similar to La Marina, but smaller. It's found near Juárez.

A few shops along Cuauhtémoc sell Taxco silver. **Alberto's** (☎ 554-21-61; Cuauhtémoc 12 & 15; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun) and **Pancho's** (☎ 554-52-30; Cuauhtémoc 11; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat) have the best selection of quality pieces.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The **Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo international airport** (☎ 554-20-70) is 13km southeast of Zihuatanejo, a couple of kilometers off Hwy 200 heading toward Acapulco.

Carriers servicing the airport:

Aeroméxico Airport (☎ 554-22-37, 554-26-34); Zihuatanejo (☎ 554-20-18; Álvarez 34) Service to Mexico City, with many onward connections.

Alaska Airlines (☎ 554-84-57, 001-800-252-75-22; Airport) Service to Los Angeles and San Francisco.

American (☎ 800-904-60-00; Airport) Service to Dallas.

America West (☎ 800-235-92-92; Airport) Service to Phoenix and Las Vegas.

Continental (☎ 554-42-19; Airport) Service to Houston and Minneapolis.

Click Mexicana & Mexicana Airport (☎ 554-22-27); Zihuatanejo (☎ 554-22-08; cnr Bravo & Cuauhtémoc); Ixtapa (☎ 553-22-09; Dorado Pacifico, Blvd Ixtapa) Service to Mexico City.

Northwest (☎ 800-907-47-00; Airport) Service to Houston and Los Angeles.

BUS

Both long-distance bus terminals are on Hwy 200 about 2km northeast of the town center (toward the airport): the **Estrella Blanca terminal** (EB; Map p487; ☎ 554-34-76/77; Central de Autobuses) is a block east of the smaller **Estrella de Oro terminal** (EDO; Map p492; ☎ 554-21-75). The latter also serves several smaller bus lines including Autovías, La Línea, Via Plus and Parkihuni. See the table below for daily departures.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

There are several car rental companies in Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo:

Alamo Airport (☎ 554-84-29); Ixtapa (☎ 553-02-06; Centro Comercial Los Patios)

Budget Airport (☎ 554-48-37); Ixtapa (☎ 553-03-97; Centro Comercial Ambiente, Blvd Ixtapa)

EuroCar (☎ 553-10-32; Centro Comercial Los Patios, Ixtapa)

Hertz Airport (☎ 554-29-52); Zihuatanejo (☎ 554-22-55; Bravo 29)

BUSES FROM ZIHUATANEJO

| Destination | Fare | Duration | Frequency |
|------------------------------|------------------|----------|---------------------------|
| Acapulco | 1st-class M\$119 | 4hr | hourly 5am-7:30pm (EB) |
| | 2nd-class M\$86 | 4hr | hourly (EB) |
| | 1st-class M\$119 | 4hr | 5 daily (EDO) |
| | 2nd-class M\$99 | 4hr | 18 daily 5:30am-8pm (EDO) |
| Lázaro Cárdenas | 1st-class M\$65 | 1½hr | hourly 5am-7:30pm (EB) |
| | 2nd-class M\$54 | 2hr | hourly 9am-10pm (EB) |
| | 2nd-class M\$47 | 2hr | 15 daily (EDO) |
| Manzanillo (Estrella Blanca) | M\$324 | 8hr | 10am, 10:50am, 8pm |
| Mexico City (Terminal Sur) | premiere M\$550 | 8-9hr | 9:15pm (EDO) |
| | deluxe M\$541 | 8-9hr | 10:30pm (EB) |
| | deluxe M\$440 | 8-9hr | 9:55pm, 10pm & 11pm (EDO) |
| | 1st-class M\$454 | 8-9hr | 5 daily (EB) |
| | 1st-class M\$425 | 8-9hr | 8 daily (EDO) |
| Morelia | M\$328 | 5hr | 3 daily (EDO) |
| Puerto Escondido | M\$260 | 12hr | 7:20pm (EB) |

Thrifty Airport (☎ 553-70-20); Ixtapa (☎ 553-30-19; NH Krystal Ixtapa, Blvd Ixtapa)

If you're heading into the Michoacán highlands (to Uruapan or Pátzcuaro, for example) the scenic toll road Hwy 37D will save you hours (and cost you about M\$220 in tolls). Gas up before you leave town; there's a long Pemex-less stretch of road before Nueva Italia.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The cheapest way to get to the airport is via a public 'Aeropuerto' colectivo (M\$70) departing from Juárez near González between 6:20am and 10pm. Private colectivo vans provide transportation from the airport to Ixtapa or Zihua (M\$100 per person), but they don't offer service to the airport. Taxis from Zihua to the airport cost M\$80.

BUS

For details on buses to Ixtapa, see p489.

The 'Correa' route goes to the Central de Autobuses from 5:30am to 9:30pm (M\$4, 10 minutes). Catch it on Juárez at the corner of Nava.

'Playa La Ropa' buses go south on Juárez and out to Playa La Ropa every half-hour from 7am to 8pm (M\$4).

'Coacoyul' colectivos heading toward Playa Larga depart from Juárez near the corner of González, every five minutes from 5am to 10pm (M\$7).

TAXI

Cabs are plentiful in Zihuatanejo. Always agree on the fare before getting in. Approximate sample fares (from central Zihua) include: M\$50 to Ixtapa, M\$25 to Playa La Ropa, M\$50 to Playa Larga and M\$15 to the Central de Autobuses. Book a taxi in advance by calling **Radio Taxi UTAZ** (☎ 554-33-11).

SOUTH OF IXTAPA & ZIHUATANEJO

Barra de Potosí

☎ 755 / pop 400

Forty minutes drive south of Zihuatanejo is the small fishing village of Barra de Potosí at the end of an endless, palm-fringed sandy-white beach. The calm green-blue water is great for swimming but too cloudy for snorkeling. Several seafood *enramadas* line the beach; **La Condesa** is one of the best. Try their *pescado*

a la talla (broiled fish fillets) or *tiritas*, both local specialties, and don't pass up the savory handmade tortillas.

The south side of the beach empties into **Laguna de Potosí**, a saltwater lagoon about 6.5km long brimming with hundreds of species of birds. **Zoe Kayak Tours** (☎ 553-04-96; www.zoekayatours.com; M\$850) offers guided paddle tours of the lagoon catering to bird-watchers and kayakers. Horseback riding and canoeing are also popular diversions.

SLEEPING

There are a handful of guesthouses along the beachfront. During the low season (May to October), rates at the following places drop by between 20% and 40%.

Casa del Encanto (☎ 104-67-09; www.casadelencanto.com; d incl breakfast M\$974-1245) This is a knock-out B&B about 300m inland from the beach. Private yet open-air rooms blend interior with exterior to keep things as cool and relaxed as possible, aided by numerous hammocks and fountains.

ourpick Bernie's Bed & Breakfast (☎ 556-63-33; www.zihuatanejo.net/playacalli; Playa Calli; d incl breakfast M\$1300; 🍷) Located about 2km north of the village, Bernie's has four fantastic rooms set in a Spanish-style red-brick home and a welcoming swimming pool. All rooms face the surf and have king-sized beds and ceiling fans. Friendly host Bernie speaks English, German, Spanish and French, and exudes a tranquility over his home.

Solecito (☎ 100-59-76; www.bungalows-solecito.com; r M\$1245 & M\$1732; 🍷) This serene, beachfront retreat features nine contemporary rooms and suites (some with kitchens) in white adobe buildings with Spanish red-tiled roofs. Each oversized room has a terrace overlooking the lush courtyard garden of tall palms and tropical flowers.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

By car from Zihuatanejo, drive southeast on Hwy 200 toward Acapulco. The well-marked turnoff is near Km 225 just south of the Los Achotes River bridge; drive another 9km to Barra de Potosí. By bus, any Petatlán-bound bus will get you here. They depart from both of Zihua's main terminals, and from the stop a couple of blocks east of Zihua's market. Tell the driver to let you off at the Barra de Potosí *crucero*; from there you can catch a *camioneta* (pickup truck) going the rest of the way. The

total trip by bus takes about 90 minutes and costs about M\$30. By taxi from Zihua costs M\$400/500 one-way/round-trip (negotiable).

Soledad de Maciel

☎ 755 / pop 350

The tiny hamlet of Soledad de Maciel, known locally as 'La Chole,' is a small farming and fishing village that hasn't changed much in 3000 years. The town would be easily dismissed if not for its recently uncovered secret: it's built on top of what may be the largest, most important archeological ruin in the state of Guerrero. La Chole was first discovered in 1930 but remained largely untouched until 2007, when the National Institute of Anthropology and History conducted its first formal excavation of the 10 sq km site. So far, archaeologists have discovered three pyramids – one of which is crowned by five temples – a plaza and a ball court. The area has been continuously occupied for three millennia by different cultures including Tepoztecos, Cuiclatecos and Tomiles.

A few relics are on display in the small **museum** located in a private home in the village center. The most important local artifact is the Chole King, a 1.5m-tall statue depicting deities of life and death; it's on display in the courtyard of the village church. The museum and the archaeological dig depend on donations for their work; please give generously.

Soledad de Maciel is located about 40 minutes' drive south of Zihuatanejo off Hwy 200. The well-marked turnoff is located near Km 214, just south of the town of San Jeronimito. From there, a gravel road leads 8km to the archaeology site and continues another kilometer to the village. Any bus heading south to Petatlán or Acapulco will get you here; ask to be dropped at the intersection for 'La Chole,' where you can hop a *camioneta* (pick-up truck with seats along the sides) into town.

La Barrita

☎ 758 / pop 60

La Barrita (Km 187) is a shell-sized village on an attractive, rocky beach an hour southeast of Zihua (off Hwy 200). Not many tourists stop at this village, but experienced surfers may want to check the beach breaks here and 3km north at **Loma Bonita**. Several restaurants have very basic rooms for rent. Second-class buses heading south from Zihua or north from Acapulco will drop you at La Barrita.

One of the more dramatic stretches of highway in Guerrero starts about 4km south of La Barrita; the road runs along cliff tops above beaches and crashing surf. Several roadside restaurants offer opportunities to enjoy the view.

PIE DE LA CUESTA

☎ 744 / pop 200

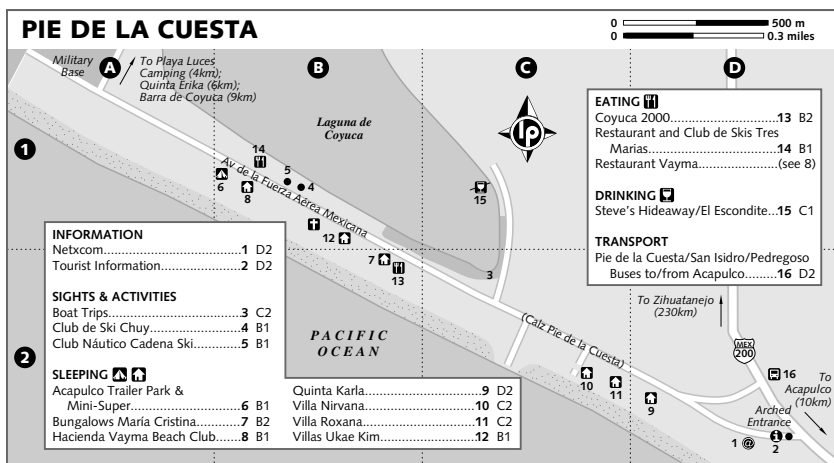
Just 10km – and 100 years – from Acapulco is the tranquil seaside suburb of Pie de la Cuesta, a rustic beach town occupied by some terrific guesthouses and seafood restaurants. But it's the dramatic sunset views from the wide, west-facing beach that have made Pie de la Cuesta famous. The town sits on a narrow, 2km strip of land bordered by the Pacific Ocean and the Laguna de Coyuca (where Sylvester Stallone filmed *Rambo: First Blood Part II*). The large freshwater lagoon contains several islands including Pájaros, a bird sanctuary. Pie de la Cuesta is much quieter, cheaper and closer to nature than Acapulco, but still close enough for those who want to enjoy the city's attractions and nightlife.

Information

The single main road through town has two names: Av de la Fuerza Aérea Mexicana and Calzada Pie de la Cuesta. The long road runs through Pie de la Cuesta, past an Air Force base, then continues on to Playa Luces. Near the arched intersection of the main road and Hwy 200 is a small tourist office with maps and brochures. Just up the street, **Netxcom** (per hr M\$10; ☎ 9am-10pm) offers cheap, fast Internet connections. The town also has a pharmacy, telephones and a few *mini-super* grocery stores; other services are located in Acapulco.

Activities

The surf here can be dangerous due to a riptide and the shape of the waves; the lagoon is better for swimming. **Waterskiing** on the lagoon is one of the most popular pastimes; there are several waterskiing clubs on the lagoon side including **Club de Ski Chuy** (☎ 460-11-04; Calzada Pie de la Cuesta 74; per hr M\$600). **Wakeboarding** is another possibility; try **Club Náutico Cadena Ski** (☎ 460-22-83; cademax@yahoo.com; Calzada Pie de la Cuesta s/n; per hr M\$600). Several establishments offer **boat trips** on the lagoon for about M\$80 per person including food and drinks; eager captains await your business down by the boat launches along the southeast corner of the lagoon. **Horseback**



riding on the beach costs about M\$150 per hour; book from a hotel or directly from the galloping cowboys on the beach.

Sleeping

The room prices listed here can be significantly cheaper outside of peak season, which runs from mid-December to early January and during Easter Week.

BUDGET

Acapulco Trailer Park & Mini-Super (☎ 460-00-10; acatrailerpark@yahoo.com.mx; Calz Pie de la Cuesta s/n; campsites M\$216, RV sites M\$270; (P) (☎)) The nicest campground in the Acapulco area has palm-shaded, beachside spaces, clean bathrooms with showers, a pool and a small shop with groceries and camping supplies.

Quinta Karla (☎ 460-12-55; quintakarla@hotmail.com; Calz Pie de la Cuesta 288; r M\$250-500; (P) (☎)) This friendly hotel has 18 clean and comfy rooms; more expensive rooms have a TV and fridge. There's also a good beachfront restaurant with fresh seafood meals for under M\$80.

MIDRANGE

Bungalows María Cristina (☎ 460-02-62; Av de la Fuerza Aérea s/n; s/d/bungalows M\$300/400/900; (P)) Run by English-speaking Enrique and his friendly family, this is a clean, well-tended, relaxing place with hammocks overlooking the beach. The large, four-to-five-person bungalows have kitchens and ocean-view balconies.

Villa Roxana (☎ 460-32-52; Calz Pie de la Cuesta 302; d without/with terrace M\$300/400; (P) (☎)) This re-

cently renovated hotel features 15 comfortable rooms with fan and hot water, all surrounding a lovely courtyard with a relaxing pool and garden.

Villa Nirvana (☎ 460-16-31; www.lavillanirvana.com; Av de la Fuerza Aérea 302; d without/with ocean view M\$500/700, q M\$900; (P) (☎) (☎)) Villa Nirvana's friendly American owners have lovingly landscaped this cheerful property. It has a variety of accommodations, some with ocean views, and all are comfortable and decorated with local crafts.

our pick Quinta Erika (☎ /fax 444-41-31; www.quintaerika.com; Playa Luces s/n; r incl breakfast M\$600; (P) (☎)) For those who just want to get away from it all, Quinta Erika is a hidden, jungle-like retreat located 6km northeast of Pie de la Cuesta in Playa Luces. The estate sits on 1.2 hectares of lagoonside property with more than 200 palm and tropical fruit trees. The six colorful rooms and one bungalow are simple but tastefully decorated with traditional Mexican handicrafts. Stuttgart-born owner Helmut speaks German, Spanish and English and takes great pride in his hideaway.

Villas Ukai Kim (☎ 460-21-87; Av de la Fuerza Aérea 356; r M\$600-1000, villa M\$1200; (P) (☎) (☎)) A small boutique hotel that exudes a friendly, tranquil atmosphere. The sandy-colored complex features lovely rooms, a beachside pool and an open-air bar-restaurant that extends onto a wooden pier over the beach. The pricier rooms, some with air-con, have ocean views; the villa also has Jacuzzi, private terrace and TV.

Hacienda Vayma Beach Club (☎ 460-28-82; www.vayma.com.mx; Calz Pie de la Cuesta 378; r with fan/air-con

M\$750/850, ste M\$2000; (P) (♿) (♿) This fun yet relaxing Mediterranean-style resort has something for everyone, from the awesome beach with private cabanas and lounge chairs built for two, to the huge pool with islands and swim-up bar. The whitewashed hotel has 25 contemporary, charming rooms, some with canopied beds; splurge for a suite with hot water and Jacuzzi.

Eating & Drinking

Steve's Hideaway/El Escondite (Laguna de Coyuca; mains M\$25-90; (♿) 9am-midnight) A local favorite since 1968, this hole-in-the-wall sits on stilts over the lagoon with great views over the water. Esteban serves drinks, steaks and fresh catches like red snapper and fish quesadillas. It's located down a dirt road on the southeast side of the lagoon.

Coyuca 2000 (☎ 460-56-09; Playa Pie de la Cuesta; mains M\$30-130; (♿) 8am-10pm) Pull up a chair on the sand, watch the waves and enjoy good fish *al mojo de ajo* (sautéed minced garlic) or in fajitas, plus other tasty seafood and meat dishes. Great mixed drinks enhance the casual atmosphere.

Restaurant and Club de Skis Tres Marias (☎ 460-00-11; Fuerza Aérea s/n; breakfast M\$40-60, lunch & dinner M\$80-120; (♿) 8am-7pm; ♿) This popular lagoonside gem is located underneath a huge thatched-covered roof and especially popular for its American-style breakfasts.

our pick Restaurant Vayma (☎ 460-28-82; www.vayma.com.mx; Calz Pie de La Cuesta 378; mains M\$80-180) Located at Hacienda Vayma, this beachfront restaurant has an extensive international menu. Highlights include calamari tacos, Thai shrimp, *mole poblano* chicken and several tasty varieties of pizza. At night, the restaurant and hotel grounds are bathed in the glow of candles and tiki torches; the perfect spot for a romantic sunset dinner.

Getting There & Away

From Acapulco, catch a 'Pie de la Cuesta' bus on La Costera across the street from the Sanborns near the *zócalo*. Buses go every 15 minutes from 6am until around 8pm; the trip costs M\$4.50 and takes 30 to 60 minutes, depending on traffic. Buses marked 'Pie de la Cuesta-San Isidro' or 'Pie de la Cuesta-Pedregoso' stop at the fork of Hwy 200 and Pie de la Cuesta's arched entrance; those marked 'Zona Turística: Pie de la Cuesta-Playa Luces' continue through town and travel 6km fur-

ther to Playa Luces, terminating just before Quinta Erika.

Colectivo taxis to Pie de la Cuesta operate 24 hours along La Costera and elsewhere in Acapulco's old town, and charge M\$15. A taxi from Acapulco costs between M\$70 and M\$125 one-way, depending on your bartering skills, time of day and point of origin.

ACAPULCO

(☎ 744 / pop 616,400

Before Cancún and Ixtapa, Acapulco was Mexico's original party town. With stunning yellow beaches and a 24-hour nightlife, it was dubbed the 'Pearl of the Pacific.' During its heyday, Acapulco was the playground for the rich and famous including Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, Elizabeth Taylor, Judy Garland; John F. Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline honeymooned here. It was immortalized in films like Elvis's *Fun in Acapulco* and TV's *The Love Boat*.

Acapulco's gorgeous arc of beaches that sweep around Bahía de Acapulco can be a relaxing place to soak up the sun – if you can ignore the pesky beach vendors. But step off the sands and you'll soon be hit by a harsh reality: terrible traffic, crowded sidewalks, smoggy fumes, aggressive touts, poverty, homelessness and a significant crime wave.

Bustling Acapulco does offer pockets of calm: romantic cliffside restaurants, the impressive 17th-century fort, a world-class botanical garden and the old town's charming shady *zócalo*. And when you tire of the crowds, secluded beaches and seaside villages like Pie de la Cuesta and Barra Vieja are just a short drive away.

History

The name Acapulco is derived from ancient Náhuatl words meaning 'place of giant reeds.' Archaeological finds show that when the Spanish discovered the Bahía de Acapulco in 1512, people had already been living in the area for some 2000 years.

The Spanish, eager to find a commercial route to Asia, built a port and shipbuilding facilities in Acapulco, taking advantage of its naturally protected, deepwater harbor. In 1565, Friar Andrés de Urdante discovered Pacific tradewinds that allowed ships to quickly and safely reach the Orient. For more than 250 years, *naos*, or Spanish trading galleons, made the annual voyage from

Acapulco to the Philippines. Gold, silks and spices were unloaded in Acapulco, carried overland to Veracruz, then onto waiting ships for the transatlantic voyage to Spain. Meanwhile, Dutch and English privateers such as Sir Francis Drake were busy looting the ships of their valuable cargo. To protect their investment, the Spanish built the Fuerte de San Diego. But it was the Mexican War of Independence (1810–1822), not pirates, that abruptly killed the trade route.

For the next century, Acapulco declined and remained relatively isolated from the rest of the world until a paved road linked it with Mexico City in 1927. Prosperous Mexicans began vacationing here, Hollywood came calling and by the '50s, Acapulco was becoming a glitzy, jet-set resort. But by the 1970s, overdevelopment and overpopulation had taken their toll, and the bay became polluted with raw sewage. Foreign tourists took their cash to the newer resorts of Cancún and Ixtapa. Once again, Acapulco's heyday was over.

In the late 1990s, the city launched ambitious revitalization programs, pouring millions into cleaning up the bay. The big break came in 2002, when American college students, attracted by cheap rooms and a welcoming hotel industry, began coming to Acapulco in droves, replacing Cancún as Mexico's top Spring Break hot spot. Today, Acapulco is experiencing something of a renaissance, investing in luxury resorts, condos, spas, boutique hotels and restaurants to cater to a more upscale clientele in hopes of reclaiming its title as the 'Pearl of the Pacific.'

Orientation

Acapulco borders the 11km shore of the Bahía de Acapulco ('The Bay'). Street signs are as scarce as safe crosswalks, and building numbers are erratic and often obscured or unused, but inquiring on the street will eventually lead you to your destination. As with most Spanish colonial cities, the cathedral and adjacent *zócalo* dominate the heart of the old central commercial district.

Old Acapulco (sometimes called 'Acapulco Náutico,' meaning Maritime Acapulco) comprises the western part of the city; Acapulco Dorado heads around the bay east from Playa Hornos; and Acapulco Diamante is a newer luxury resort area southeast of Acapulco proper, between the Bahía de Acapulco and the airport.

At the Bahía de Acapulco's west end, the Península de las Playas juts south and east from Old Acapulco. South of the peninsula is Isla de la Roqueta. From Playa Caleta on the south edge of the peninsula, Av López Mateos climbs west and then north to Playa La Angosta and La Quebrada before curling east back toward the city center.

Playa Caleta also marks the beginning of Acapulco's principal bayside avenue, Av Costera Miguel Alemán – often called 'La Costera' or 'Miguel Alemán' – which traverses the peninsula and then hugs the shoreline all the way around the bay to Playa Icacos and the naval base at the bay's eastern end. Most of Acapulco's hotels, restaurants, discos and points of interest are along or near La Costera, especially near 'La Diana' traffic circle. Past the naval base, La Costera becomes Carretera Escénica, which rejoins the main branch of Hwy 200 after 9km, at the turnoff to Puerto Marqués. Hwy 200 then leads southeast past ritzy Playa Revolcadero, the airport and Barra Vieja.

Information

EMERGENCY

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 445-59-12) Provides ambulance service.

Locatel (☎ 481-11-00) A 24-hour hotline for all types of emergencies.

Tourist police (☎ 440-70-22)

INTERNET ACCESS

Acapulco has hundreds of cybercafés around town. Competition keeps prices down; most charge about M\$10 per hour.

Big M@sternet (Hidalgo 6; ☎ 9am-midnight; ☎) Family-run with air-con.

Internet (Galeana 13; ☎ 10am-11pm) Fifteen computers and loud music.

Vig@net (Hidalgo 8; ☎ 8am-midnight) Keeps more reliable hours than some.

LAUNDRY

Lavandería Azueta (Azueta 14A; per kg M\$12;

☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri)

Lavandería Lavadín (☎ 482-28-90; cnr La Paz & Iglesias; per kg M\$12; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat) There's a 3kg minimum.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Magallanes (☎ 485-61-94; Massieu 2) A well-established private hospital with English-speaking doctors and staff, offering a wide range of medical services.

MONEY

Omnipresent banks (many with ATMs) give the best exchange rates, and many will change US-dollar traveler's checks and euro banknotes. *Casas de cambio* pay a slightly lower rate, but are open longer hours and are less busy than banks; shop around, as rates vary. Banks and *casas de cambio* cluster around the *zócalo* and line La Costera. Hotels will also change money, but their rates are usually extortionate.

POST

Main post office (☎ 483-53-63; La Costera 125, Palacio Federal; ☎ 8am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

PUBLICATIONS

English-language books, magazines and newspapers can be found at **Sanborns**, which has several locations along La Costera including near the *zócalo* (☎ 482-61-67, on the corner of Escudero and La Costera) and Playa Condesa (☎ 484-20-44; La Costera 3111).

TELEPHONE & FAX

You can make long-distance calls from the many Telmex card and coin phones throughout the city, or from private *casetas* (with signs saying '*larga distancia*').

Caseta Alameda Telephone and fax services, on the west side of the *zócalo*.

Telecomm (☎ 484-69-76; Main post office, La Costera 125, Palacio Federal) Fax, telephone and limited internet services.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Be aware that many of the kiosks around town offering 'tourist information' are actually time-share schemes.

Municipal tourist kiosk (☎ 8:30am-10pm) On the marina across from the *zócalo*, mostly dispensing brochures.

Casa Consular (☎ /fax 481-25-33; La Costera 4455; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Located at the Centro de Convenciones, provides consular assistance to visitors of all nationalities.

Procuraduría del Turista (☎ /fax 484-45-83; La Costera 4455, Centro de Convenciones; ☎ 8am-11pm) This government office will try to resolve complaints and problems with documents.

State tourist office (Sefotur; ☎ 484-24-23; sefotur@yahoo.com; La Costera 4455, Centro de Convenciones; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Fri)

Dangers & Annoyances

Acapulco has suffered unprecedented levels of violence in recent years, mainly related to the

illicit drug trade, and now ranks fifth among Mexican cities for the number of crimes committed per capita, surpassing Mexico City. Rival cartels have been battling for the area's lucrative drug corridor; smugglers use the Guerrero coast as a drop point for Colombian cocaine, which then passes through Acapulco on its way to the United States.

In 2006, things went from bad to worse when the rival Sinaloa and Gulf cartels turned Acapulco into their battleground, carrying out grisly, high-profile murders, including the decapitation of several policemen; one head infamously washed up on Playa Condesa. In 2007 the violence spilled over into the tourist district. Two Canadian visitors were grazed by bullets when they were caught in a crossfire outside their hotel lobby. In Spring 2007, Mexico's new president Felipe Calderón declared war on the drug cartels, deploying more than 7000 soldiers to crime-ridden cities, including Acapulco. For now, the military campaign appears to be working. Violence has subsided, and heavily-armed soldiers and police now regularly patrol the city in Humvees and on foot.

Petty crime is more common. The Casa Consular receives many reports from visitors who have suffered theft from their hotel rooms. Petty thieves trawl the beaches, looking for unattended items. Secure your valuables at all times!

All that said, tourists who avoid Acapulco's inland neighborhoods probably have more to fear from the rough surf at Playa Revolcadero, crazy drivers and crowds. More than one million people now live in the region, and sometimes it can seem as if they are all on the beach at the same time. It's almost impossible to relax on the downtown beaches due to the roar of Jet skis and the endless parade of hawkers selling shells, *tamales*, hair braids and temporary tattoos. A simple 'no, gracias' and smile works wonders.

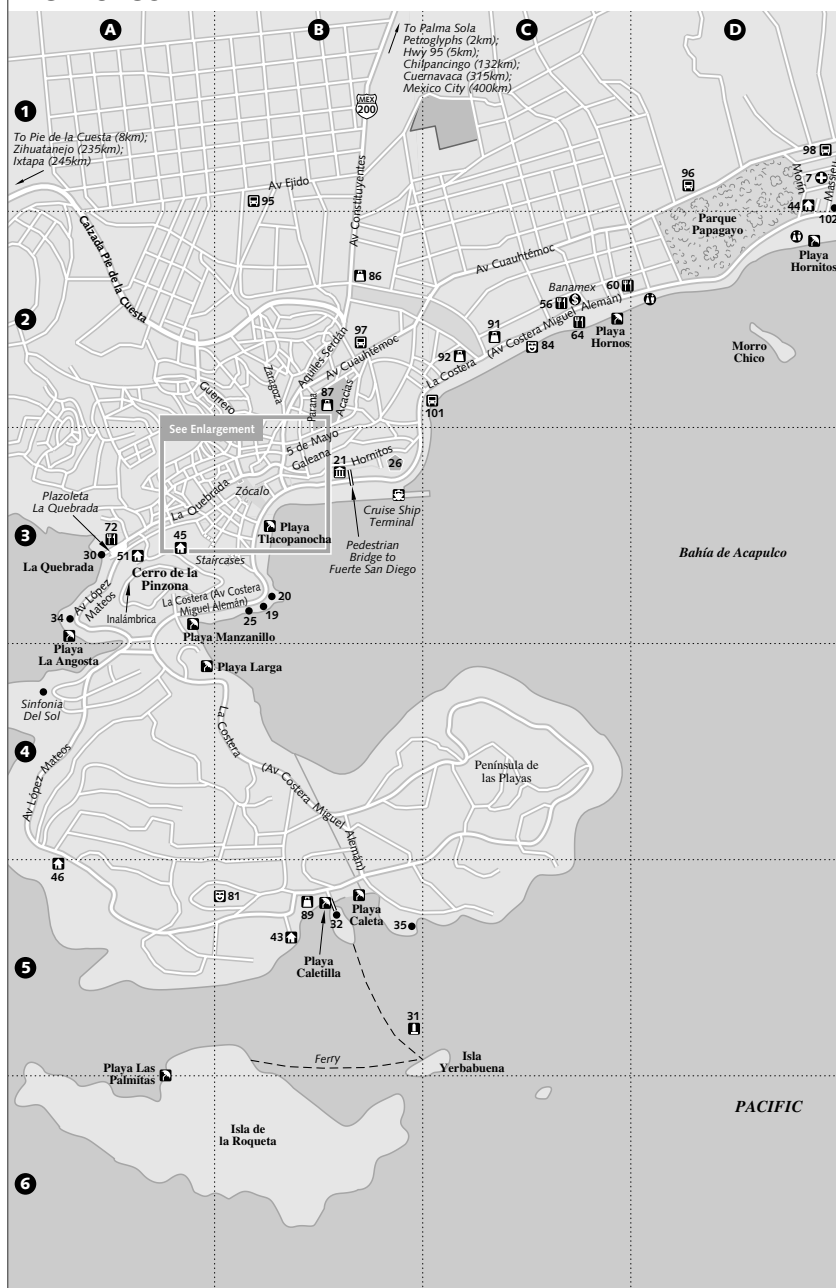
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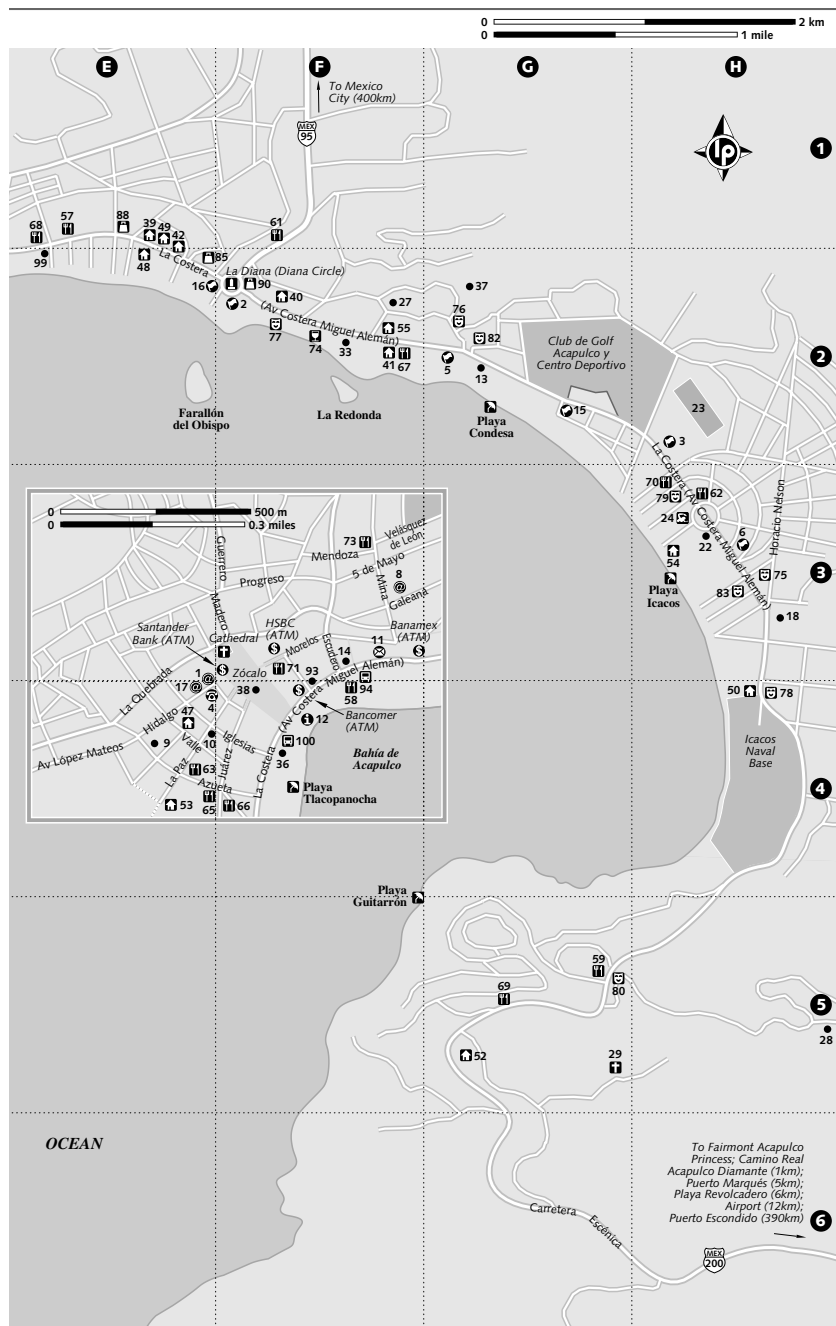
There's more to Acapulco than just beaches and all-you-can-drink bars.

LA QUEBRADA CLAVADISTAS

Acapulco's most popular tourist attraction, the famous cliff divers of **La Quebrada** (adult/child M\$35/M\$10; ☎ shows 1pm, 7:30pm, 8:30pm, 9:30pm & 10:30pm) have been dazzling audiences since 1934, diving with fearless finesse from heights of 25m

ACAPULCO





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| Main Post Office..... | 11 F3 | Hotel Monaco..... | 48 E2 | Tropicana..... | 84 C2 |
| Municipal Tourist Kiosk..... | 12 F4 | Hotel Sands Acapulco..... | 49 E1 | SHOPPING 🛍 | |
| Procuraduría del Turista..... | (see 3) | Hyatt Regency Acapulco..... | 50 H4 | Galerías Diana..... | 85 E2 |
| Sanborns..... | 13 G2 | La Torre Eiffel..... | 51 A3 | Mercado Central..... | 86 B2 |
| Sanborns..... | 14 F3 | Las Brisas..... | 52 G5 | Mercado de Artesanías..... | 87 B2 |
| Spanish Consulate..... | 15 G2 | María Acela..... | 53 E4 | Mercado de Artesanías Dalia..... | 88 E1 |
| State Tourist Office..... | (see 23) | Suites Selene..... | 54 H3 | Mercado de Artesanías La Caletilla..... | 89 B5 |
| Telecomm..... | (see 11) | Youth Hostel K3..... | 55 F2 | Mercado de Artesanías La Diana..... | 90 F2 |
| US Consulate..... | 16 E2 | EATING 🍴 | | Mercado de Artesanías Noa Noa..... | 91 C2 |
| Vig@net..... | 17 E4 | 100% Natural Condesa..... | 56 C2 | Mercado de Artesanías Papagayo..... | 92 C2 |
| Wal-Mart..... | 18 H3 | 100% Natural Magallanes..... | 57 E1 | TRANSPORT | |
| SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES | | 100% Natural Zócalo..... | 58 F4 | Aeroméxico..... | (see 92) |
| Acapulco Scuba Center..... | 19 B3 | Baikal..... | 59 G5 | Agencia de Viajes Zócalo..... | 93 F4 |
| Bonanza Ticket Booth..... | 20 B3 | Bodega Aurrera..... | 60 C2 | Alamo..... | (see 83) |
| Casa de la Máscara..... | 21 B3 | Bodega Gigante..... | (see 102) | American Airlines..... | (see 55) |
| Centro Cultural Acapulco..... | 22 H3 | Comercial Mexicana..... | 61 F1 | Budget..... | (see 16) |
| Centro de Convenciones..... | 23 H2 | Comercial Mexicana..... | 62 H3 | Bus Stop for Pie de la Cuesta & Puerto Marqués..... | 94 F3 |
| CICI..... | 24 H3 | Comercial Mexicana..... | (see 92) | Estrella Blanca 1st-Class Bus Station (Central Ejido)..... | 95 B1 |
| Club de Tenis Hyatt..... | (see 50) | Die Bratwurst..... | 63 E4 | Estrella Blanca 1st-Class Bus Station (Central Papagayo)..... | 96 D1 |
| Fiesta Ticket Booth..... | (see 20) | El Amigo Miguel..... | 64 C2 | Estrella Blanca 2nd-Class Bus Station..... | 97 B2 |
| Fish-R-U.s..... | 25 B3 | El Amigo Miguel I..... | 65 E4 | Estrella de Oro Bus Station..... | 98 D1 |
| Fuerte de San Diego..... | 26 B3 | El Amigo Miguel II..... | 66 F4 | Hertz..... | 99 E2 |
| Hawaiano Ticket Booth..... | (see 12) | El Cabrito..... | (see 70) | Local Bus Stop..... | 100 F4 |
| Hotel Panoramic..... | 27 F2 | El Gaucho..... | 67 F2 | Local Bus Stops..... | 101 C2 |
| Jardín Botánico De Acapulco..... | 28 H5 | El Zorrito..... | 68 E1 | Mexicana & Click Mexicana..... | 102 D1 |
| La Capilla de la Paz..... | 29 G5 | Kookaburra..... | 69 G5 | Thrifty..... | (see 99) |
| La Quebrada Clavadistas (Cliff Divers)..... | 30 A3 | Mariscos Pipo's..... | 70 H3 | | |
| La Virgen de los Mares..... | 31 B5 | Restaurant Charly..... | 71 F3 | | |
| Mágico Mundo Marino..... | 32 B5 | Restaurant La Perla..... | 72 A3 | | |
| Museo Histórico de Acapulco..... | (see 26) | Taquera Los Pioneros..... | 73 F3 | | |
| Paradise Bungy..... | 33 F2 | DRINKING 🍺 | | | |
| Sinfonía del Mar..... | 34 A3 | Barbarroja..... | 74 F2 | | |
| Swiss Divers Association..... | 35 B5 | Señor Frogs..... | (see 59) | | |
| Victoria Ticket Booth..... | 36 F4 | | | | |

to 35m into the narrow ocean cove below. The last show usually features divers making the plunge holding torches. Tip the divers when they come through the crowd. La Perla restaurant-bar (see p512) provides a great but pricey view of the divers from above. There's also the magical **Sinfonía del Mar** (Symphony of the Sea), an outdoor stepped plaza that occasionally hosts concerts, but mainly serves as an amazing place to view sunsets.

FUERTE DE SAN DIEGO

This beautifully restored pentagonal fort was built in 1616 atop a hill east of the *zócalo*. Its mission was to protect the Spanish *naos* conducting trade between the Philippines and

Mexico from marauding Dutch and English buccaners. The fort was destroyed in a 1776 earthquake and rebuilt in 1783. It remains basically unchanged today. The fort is home to the **Museo Histórico de Acapulco** (☎ 482-38-28; admission M\$37; 🕒 9:30am-6pm Tue-Sun), which has fascinating exhibits detailing the city's history, with Spanish and English captions. The fort also puts on regular evening **sound-and-light shows**, in Spanish and English. Call the fort to confirm times and dates.

CASA DE LA MÁSCARA

This enchanting **mask museum** (admission by donation; 🕒 10am-4pm Tue-Sun) is near the fort on the pedestrian portion of Morelos. It has an amaz-

ing collection of masks from around Mexico, including some by Afro-Mestizos from the Costa Chica (p515), as well as masks from Cuba, Italy and Africa. A central room displays modern creations. The scant signage is in Spanish.

JARDÍN BOTÁNICO DE ACAPULCO

Located on the campus of Loyola del Pacífico University, the **Jardín Botánico de Acapulco** (☎ 446-52-52; www.acapulcobotanico.org; Av Heroico Colegio Military s/n; suggested donation adult/student M\$30/10; 🌅 dawn to dusk) houses an impressive collection of flora and fauna. The well-marked footpath climbs from 204m to 411m above sea level through a shaded tropical forest, with plenty of benches to stop and smell the flowers. At the top, there's an education center and an adventure area where visitors can scale borders and explore a virgin forest. Got a green thumb and itching to volunteer? Call ahead and the staff will gladly put you to work.

PALMA SOLA PETROGLYPHS

Located deep in a forest high above Acapulco, the **Palma Sola Archaeological site** (☎ 486-15-14; admission free; 🌅 8am-4pm daily) is one of 12 known

petroglyphs sites in the Acapulco area. Palma Sola is the most accessible and contains 18 petroglyphs dating from 200 BC to AD 600. Little is known about the people who created the drawings, which range from simple stick figures to elaborate scenes of ancient life in Acapulco. A steep, sturdy trail winds 400m uphill past the petroglyphs, all marked by Spanish and English signs, and ending at a rewarding view of Acapulco Bay. Bring good hiking shoes and water.

THE ZÓCALO

Every night, Acapulco's old town **zócalo**, or plaza, comes alive with street performers, mariachis, sidewalk cafés and occasional festivals. It's especially popular on Sunday nights with multiple generations of Mexican families. The **Nuestra Señora de la Soledad cathedral**, built in 1930 dominates the square and is unusual for its blue-domed, Byzantine architecture.

LA CAPILLA DE LA PAZ

Perched on a hilltop high above Acapulco, **La Capilla de la Paz** (Vientos Galermos s/n; free admission; 🌅 10am-1pm, 2-6pm daily), or Chapel of Peace, is a beautiful, quiet spot for reflection and

ACAPULCO IN...

Two Days

Acapulco may seem like a daunting destination, but you can easily hit the highlights in just a few days if time is an issue.

Start your tour in the heart of Acapulco life and culture, the **zócalo** (above), a good place for a cheap, traditional lunch. From here, walk to the **Fuerte de San Diego** (opposite) for a fantastic view over Acapulco Bay. If time permits, check out the **Casa de la Máscara** (opposite) next door. No trip to Acapulco is complete without watching the cliff divers of **La Quebrada** (p503), especially at night. Consider dining at **Restaurant La Perla** (p512), where you can watch the divers from your table.

Spend the second day exploring the sights and sounds of La Costera. Hit the sands early to beat the crowds at **Playa Condesa** (p508) or **Playa Icacos** (p508), with lunch on the beach. After sunset, take a 2.5km walking tour east from La Diana traffic circle, past the bar area around the bungee tower and finishing for dinner at the landmark **El Cabrito** (p512). Clubbers can keep the party going at one of the famous discos like the **Palladium** (p512).

Four Days

Follow the itinerary for two days, then escape the crowds with a day trip on the third day to **Pie de la Cuesta** (p499) to enjoy the empty beaches, romantic restaurants and unbeatable sunset views from this still-rustic seaside village.

Begin the fourth morning with a visit to **Jardín Botánico de Acapulco** (above), a tropical forest botanical garden. Afterward, head to the opposite end of Acapulco to the beautiful **Isla de la Roqueta** (p508) for a late lunch on the beach. Cap the trip with a sunset dinner and drinks at **Hotel Los Flamings** (p510).

TOP PLACES TO WATCH THE SUNSET

Acapulco Bay faces south, making it difficult to enjoy a good sunset. But there are a few vantage points in and around town.

- The bar at Hotel Los Flamingsos (p510)
- Sinfonía del Mar (p506)
- La Capilla de la Paz (p507)
- Playa La Angosta (below)
- Pie de la Cuesta (p499)

meditation. The minimalist, open-air chapel features cascading water, gardens and benches to savor the beautiful aerial view of Acapulco. The chapel's giant white cross is visible from miles across the bay. Sunset is the best time to visit, when tourists jockey for positions to capture the sun setting within the sculpture of clasped hands. Silence is golden here.

BEACHES

Acapulco's beaches tops the list of must-dos for most visitors. The beaches heading east around the bay from the *zócalo* – **Playa Hornos**, **Playa Hornitos**, **Playa Condesa** and **Playa Icacos** – are the most popular, though the west end of Hornos sometimes smells of fish. The high-rise hotel district begins on Playa Hornitos, on the east side of Parque Papagayo, and sweeps east. City buses constantly ply La Costera, making it easy to get up and down the long arc of beaches.

Playas Caleta and **Caletilla** are two small, protected beaches blending into each other in a cove on the south side of Península de las Playas. They're both backed by a solid line of seafood *palapa* restaurants. The area is especially popular with families who have small children, as the water is very calm. All buses marked 'Caleta' heading down La Costera arrive here. The Mágico Mundo Marino aquarium (see opposite) sits on an islet just offshore, forming the imaginary line between the two beaches; boats go regularly from the islet to Isla de la Roqueta.

Playa La Angosta is in a tiny, protected cove on the west side of the peninsula. From the *zócalo* it takes about 20 minutes to walk here. Or you can take any 'Caleta' bus and get off near Hotel Avenida, on La Costera, just one short block from the beach.

The beaches on **Bahía Puerto Marqués**, about 18km southeast of the *zócalo*, are very popu-

lar, and its calm waters are good for waterskiing and sailing. You get a magnificent view of Bahía de Acapulco as the Carretera Escénica climbs south out of the city. Frequent 'Puerto Marqués' buses run along La Costera every 10 minutes from 5am to 9pm.

Beyond the Puerto Marqués turnoff and before the airport, **Playa Revolcadero** is a long, straight beach that has seen a recent explosion in luxury tourism and residential development. Waves are large and surfing is popular here, especially in summer, but a strong undertow makes swimming dangerous; heed lifeguards' instructions. Horseback riding along the beach is popular.

ISLA DE LA ROQUETA

This island offers a popular (crowded) beach, and snorkeling and diving possibilities. You can rent snorkeling gear, kayaks and other water-sports equipment on the beach. From Playas Caleta and Caletilla, boats make the eight-minute trip (M\$40 round-trip) every 20 minutes or so. Alternatively, glass-bottomed boats make a circuitous trip to the island (M\$60), departing from the same beaches but traveling via **La Virgen de los Mares** (Virgin of the Seas), a submerged bronze statue of the Virgen of Guadalupe – visibility varies with water conditions. The trip takes about 45 minutes, depending on how many times floating vendors accost your boat.

Activities

As one might expect, Acapulco's activities are largely beach-based. There are nonbeach things to do, but generally everything is in the spirit of mega-vacation with once-in-a-lifetime adventure and/or adrenaline rush promised.

WATER SPORTS

Just about everything that can be done on or below the water is done in Acapulco. On the Bahía de Acapulco, waterskiing, boating, banana-boating and parasailing are all popular activities. To partake in any of these, walk along the Zona Dorada beaches and look for the (usually) orange kiosks. These charge about M\$70 for snorkeling gear, M\$300 for a five-minute parasailing flight, M\$350 for a Jet-ski ride and M\$650 for one hour of waterskiing. The smaller Playas Caleta and Caletilla have sailboats, fishing boats, motorboats, pedal boats, canoes, snorkeling gear, inner tubes and water bicycles for rent.

Though Acapulco isn't really a scuba destination, there are some decent dive sites nearby. **Acapulco Scuba Center** (☎ 482-94-74; www.acapulcoscuba.com; Paseo del Pescador 13 & 14) and **Swiss Divers Association** (☎ 482-13-57; www.swissdivers.com; La Costera 100) both charge about M\$750 for a two-tank dive.

The best **snorkeling** is off small Playa Las Palmitas on Isla de la Roqueta (opposite). Unless you pony up for an organized snorkeling trip you'll need to scramble over rocks to reach it. You can rent gear on the isla or on Playas Caleta and Caletilla, which also have some decent spots. Both scuba operations above take half-day snorkeling trips for around M\$350 per person, including boat, guide, gear, food, drink and hotel transportation.

Sportfishing is very popular. Acapulco Scuba Center (see above) and **Fish-R-Us** (☎ 487-87-87, 482-82-82; www.fish-r-us.com; La Costera 100) offer half-day fishing trips from around M\$2700 (for the entire eight-person boat, gear and bait). The captain can often combine individuals into a group large enough to cover the cost of the boat, for M\$750 to M\$850 per person.

OTHER SPORTS

For golfers, **Club de Golf Acapulco** (☎ 484-07-81; Costera Miguel Alemán s/n; 9/18 holes M\$500/800) has a 9-hole course downtown. The **Fairmont Acapulco Princess** and **Fairmont Pierre Marques** share two championship courses (see p511).

For tennis, try **Club de Golf Acapulco** (☎ 484-07-81; Costera Miguel Alemán s/n), **Club de Tenis Hyatt** (☎ 469-12-34; www.acapulco.hyatt.com; La Costera 1), **Villa Vera Racquet Club** (☎ 484-03-34; Lomas del Mar 35) or **Hotel Panoramic** (☎ 481-01-32; Av Condesa 1).

The 50m-high bungee tower at **Paradise Bungy** (☎ 484-75-29; www.paradisebungy.com; La Costera 107; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Thu, to 2am Fri-Sun) is easy to spot on the Costera, and for M\$600 you can throw yourself (bungee included) from its platform while crowds cheer you from the street.

CRUISES

Various boats and yachts offer cruises, most of which depart from around Playa Tlacopanocha or Playa Manzanillo near the *zócalo*. Cruises – from M\$120 for 1½ hours to over M\$250 for four hours – are available day and night. They range from glass-bottomed boats to multilevel craft (with blaring salsa music and open bars) to yachts offering quiet sunset cruises around the bay. The **Victoria** (☎ cell phone 744-5162494), **Hawaiano** (☎ 482-21-99),

Fiesta (☎ 482-20-55) and **Bonanza** (☎ 482-20-55) cruise operations are all popular; you can make reservations directly from the eager captains at the marina or through travel agencies and most hotels.

Acapulco for Children

Acapulco is very family friendly, with many fun options designed especially for kids.

PARQUE PAPAGAYO

This large, shaded **children's park** (La Costera; admission free; ☎ 8am-8pm), between Morín and El Cano near Playa Hornitos, is popular with Mexican families. Attractions include a lake with paddleboats, a children's train, a restaurant-bar, an aviary and a small zoo and petting zoo. The 1.2km circuit trail is a good place for a morning jog. Sadly, the neighboring amusement park closed in 2006 and is now a rusting ghost town.

CICI

The family water-sports park, **CICI** (☎ 484-19-60; www.cici.com.mx; La Costera 101; admission adults & children over 3 M\$100; ☎ 10am-6pm), is on the east side of Acapulco. Dolphins perform several shows daily, and humans occasionally give diving exhibitions. You can also enjoy an 80m-long water toboggan; a pool with artificial waves and the **Sky Coaster** (M\$150 per person) giant swing ride. Any local bus marked 'CICI', 'Base' or 'Puerto Marques' will take you there.

MÁGICO MUNDO MARINO

This **aquarium** (☎ 483-12-15; adult/child M\$60/30; ☎ 9am-6pm) stands on a small islet off Playas Caleta and Caletilla. Highlights include a sea lion show, swimming pools, water toboggans and crocodile, turtle and piranha feedings.

Festivals & Events

Semana Santa Probably the busiest time of year for tourism in Acapulco. There's lots of action in the discos, on the beaches and all over town.

Festival Francés (French Festival) This festival, which began in 2004, is held in March/April and celebrates French food, cinema, music and literature.

Festivales de Acapulco (Acafest) Held for one week in May, features Mexican and international music stars at venues around town.

Acapulco Fair This annual holiday festival runs from mid-December to early January at the convention center and features carnival rides, games, vendors and festive decorations.

Sleeping

Acapulco has more than 30,000 hotel rooms. Rates vary widely by season; the high season is roughly from mid-December to mid-January, Easter Week and during the July and August school holidays. In low season, you can often bargain for a better rate, especially for extended stays. During *Semana Santa* or between Christmas and New Year's Day (at which times all bets are off on room prices) it's essential to book ahead. The prices listed here are for high season.

BUDGET

Most of Acapulco's budget hotels are concentrated around the *zócalo* and on La Quebrada.

María Acela (☎ 481-06-61; La Paz 20; r per person M\$100) The blue and white hotel is a reliable inn located on a quiet street just three blocks west of the *zócalo*. Rooms are basic and lack hot water, but they are clean and have TV and fan.

Youth Hostel K3 (☎ 481-31-11; www.k3acapulco.com; La Costera 116; dm/r incl continental breakfast M\$150/400; ☑) It's shared bathrooms only here, and the rooms have almost a Japanese capsule-hotel feel, but there's air-con and the terrace, bar and game room provide ample space for socializing. There's also a shared kitchen. Most importantly, it's right across the highway from the beach.

our pick La Torre Eiffel (☎ 482-16-83; hoteltorreeiffel@hotmail.com; Inalámbrica 110; s M\$150, d from M\$250; (P) ☑ ☑) Perched on a hill above La Quebrada, the popular Eiffel has a small swimming pool, huge shared balconies and spectacular sunset views. It's a bit out of the way, but the friendly helpful staff and comfortable beds make the climb worth it.

Hotel Misión (☎ 482-36-43; hotelmision@hotmail.com; Valle 12; r per person M\$250; (P)) Acapulco's oldest hotel is a charming colonial building with 28 rooms around a leafy, relaxing courtyard. The basic rooms are decorated in colorful tiles, heavy Spanish-style furniture and comfortable beds. Some toilets lack seats.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Etel Suites (☎ 482-22-40/41; etelsuites@terra.com.mx; Av La Pinzosa 92; r/ste/apt from M\$450/600/900; (P) ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑) High atop the hill overlooking Old Acapulco, the Etel is renowned for the good value and friendly service. The spotless suites and apartments all sleep at least three

people, and most have expansive terraces with views of La Quebrada and the Pacific to one side and the bay to the other. Amenities include full kitchens, well-manicured gardens, a children's play area and a swimming pool.

Hotel Monaco (☎ 485-64-67; La Costera 137; r M\$491; (P) ☑ ☑ ☑) This great value-for-money motel is located on the beach side of La Costera in the middle of the action. The dated but clean rooms have a TV, air-con, fridge and phone, all surrounding a courtyard pool and patio. The highway and courtyard can get noisy, especially on weekends.

Hotel Sands Acapulco (☎ 484-22-60; www.sands.com.mx; La Costera 178; bungalows/r M\$650/875; (P) ☑ ☑ ☑ ☑) An excellent choice for families, Sands is located across the highway from the beach and has a large children's playground, mini-golf, pools and a water slide. Bungalows are small but cozy; the larger rooms sleep up to four people. All have cable TV, air-con, fridge and safes.

Suites Selene (☎ 484-29-77; suiteselene@hotmail.com; Colón 175; d without kitchen M\$702, d/q with kitchen M\$819/1287; (P) ☑ ☑ ☑) Just steps to Playa Icacos, Selene is a great option, especially for long-stay self-caterers. Though a little worn, it has fine firm beds, good air-con (though only fans in the dining room/kitchens), a nice deep pool and cable TV throughout.

Hotel del Valle (☎ 485-83-36/88; cnr Morín & Espinoza; r with fan/air-con M\$702/877; (P) ☑ ☑ ☑) On the east side of Parque Papagayo, near La Costera and popular Playa Hornitos, the del Valle has reasonably comfortable rooms, a small swimming pool and communal kitchens (M\$60 surcharge per day).

our pick Hotel Los Flamíngos (☎ 482-06-90; www.hotellosflamingos.com; Av López Mateos s/n; r from M\$703; (P) ☑ ☑ ☑) Once owned by John Wayne, Johnny 'Tarzan' Weissmuller and their pals, Los Flamíngos is a living museum to Acapulco's heyday. Perched on a cliff 135m above the ocean, this classic boasts one of the finest sunset views in town and a popular bar and restaurant. Images of Hollywood's golden age grace the walls. The rooms are modest and comfortable with great bathrooms.

Bali-Hai Hotel (☎ 485-6622; www.balihai.com.mx; La Costera 186; r from M\$800; (P) ☑ ☑ ☑) A Polynesian-themed motel in the heart of Acapulco Bay and across the street from the beach is a good moderate choice, but overpriced during high season. Rooms are decorated with lots of bamboo and marble. The onsite restaurant has a popular breakfast buffet.

Hotel Boca Chica (☎ 483-67-41; www.bocachicahotel.com; Playa Caletilla, r from M\$811; (P) (☎) (♿) (♿)) This famous hotel is tucked into the rocks at the end of Playa Caletilla and has a virtually private ocean cove for snorkeling, diving and boating. At the time of research, the Boca Chica was undergoing a major renovation that should be complete by the time you read this.

Fiesta Inn (☎ 435-05-00; www.fiestainn.com; La Costera 2311; r from M\$830; (P) (☎) (♿) (♿) (♿)) This centrally located, 220-room high-rise has recently-remodeled rooms with contemporary furnishings, flat-screen TV, and private balconies with ocean views. Hotel amenities include a large pool, gym and kids' club.

Hacienda María Eugenia (☎ 511-15-97; www.haciendamariaeugenia.com; La Costera 176; s/d/ste M\$850/950/1250; (P) (☎) (♿)) A modern hotel built in colonial architecture style has 65 spacious, nicely-decorated rooms with kitchenettes, air-con, cable TV and safes. The onsite Maria Bonita restaurant serves traditional Chiapas cuisine, as well as local seafood specialties.

TOP END

The original high-rise zone stretches from the eastern end of Parque Papagayo and curves east around the bay; a new luxury 'strip' is springing up on Playa Revolcadero, east of Puerto Marqués. Prices listed here are the high-season rack rates. Package rates and online bookings can end up providing substantial savings.

Hyatt Regency Acapulco (☎ 469-12-34, in Mexico 800-005-00-00, in the US 800-233-1234; www.acapulco.hyatt.com; La Costera 1; r from M\$1894; (P) (☎) (♿) (♿) (♿)) The beachfront Hyatt has 640 plush rooms and suites with marble bathrooms, and most have private balconies. Amenities include two inviting swimming pools, a bevy of bars and restaurants, a fitness center and a new spa. It's also the only kosher hotel in Acapulco, featuring kosher cuisine and an onsite synagogue.

Camino Real Acapulco Diamante (☎/fax 435-10-10, in the US 800-722-6466; www.caminoareal.com/acapulco; Carretera Escénica, Km 14; r from M\$2450; (P) (☎) (♿) (♿) (♿)) This secluded resort sits directly above its own small, rocky stretch of Playa Pichilingüe on the calm bay of Puerto Marqués. Each of the 157 luxuriously appointed rooms have a terrace or balcony looking out over the bay. This well-designed multilevel hotel has a spa, a gym, three shallow swimming pools and several bars and restaurants.

our pick Las Brisas (☎ 469-69-00, in the US 800-223-6800; www.brisas.com.mx; Carretera Escénica 5255; casitas incl breakfast from M\$2850; (P) (☎) (♿) (♿) (♿)) Romantic, lovely Las Brisas commands amazing views from its vantage point high above the bay. Built in the late 1950s, the place has great bones, including a lot of lovely stonework and tile floors. Each of the 236 casitas has a private terrace or balcony and either a private swimming pool or one shared with, at most, two other casitas. Service gets high ratings (room prices include tips). The hotel's beach club is nestled far below in a rocky cove.

Fairmont Acapulco Princess (☎ 469-10-00, in the US 800-441-1414; www.fairmont.com; Playa Revolcadero s/n; r from M\$2900; (P) (☎) (♿) (♿) (♿)) Towering above Playa Revolcadero, this famous hotel was built in 1971 in the shape of a giant Aztec pyramid. The 1017 recently-renovated rooms are divided among three towers; all rooms are spacious and luxurious with marble and contemporary furnishings. The resort sits on 162 acres of lush, landscaped grounds with five freshwater and saltwater swimming pools, waterfalls, a fitness center, a spa, 11 tennis courts, a golf course, seven restaurants, four bars and a nightclub.

Eating

Stock up on groceries, supplies and pre-made meals at the several megastores along La Costera including Comercial Mexicana, Bodega Aurrera, Bodega Gigante and Wal-Mart.

OLD ACAPULCO

our pick Taquería Los Pioneros (☎ 482-23-45; cnr Mendoza & Mina; 5 tacos M\$20, mains M\$35-45; ☎ 9am-3am) The tacos are tiny but their various fillings are tasty, plus you can load up on accompaniments: jalapeños, pickled carrots, onions, cilantro etc.

Restaurant Charly (Carranza s/n; 4 tacos M\$20, mains M\$35-50) Just steps east of the *zócalo*, on the pedestrian alley of Carranza, economical Charly has shady sidewalk tables and offers up *barbacoa de chivo* (spiced, slow-cooked goat meat surrounded by roasted maguey plants) as both a main dish and in taco form.

El Amigo Miguel (☎ 483-69-81; mains M\$40-90) Juárez 16 (☎ 10am-9pm); Juárez 31 (☎ 10am-9pm); La Costera s/n (☎ 11am-8pm) This chain features cheery, busy open-air restaurants with cheap and delicious seafood. Miguel has two restaurants opposite one another, on the same corner, with other branches around town.

Die Bratwurst (☎ 127-15-23; José Azueta 10; mains M\$50-75; ☎ noon-8pm Mon-Sat). When you tire of tacos, head for this traditional German restaurant whose motto is 'real German food made the Mexican way.' Owner Wilde Hilde came from the Bavarian village of Garmisch-Partenkirchen for a vacation 35 years ago and never left. She serves up great sausage with sauerkraut, potatoes, salad, bread and flan, all for M\$60.

Restaurant La Perla (☎ 483-11-55; Hotel El Mirador, Plazoleta La Quebrada 74; dinner M\$117; ☎ 7-11pm) First-rate views of the death-defying *clavadistas* almost justify the high price of a meal at this restaurant-bar; candlelit terraces and sea breezes are a bonus. The three-course menu is meat-heavy but includes several fish choices and a couple each of chicken and pasta dishes.

LA COSTERA

El Zorrito (☎ 485-79-14; La Costera s/n; mains M\$30-150; ☎ 24hr) This popular, always-packed restaurant serves up Mexican comfort foods like tasty tacos, *pozole*, shrimp, fish and an extensive dessert menu.

ourpick El Cabrito (☎ 484-77-11; www.elcabrito-acapulco.com; La Costera 1480; M\$60-170; ☎ 2pm-midnight) A local tradition since 1963, this reader-recommended restaurant has some of the finest traditional Mexican food in town like Oaxaca-style black *mole* made of 32 ingredients. For those who like to eat on a dare, the house specialty is *Cabecita de Cabrito* – broiled head of baby goat. The outdoor tables offer prime people-watching prospects, but avoid sitting too close to the blazing-hot BBQ grill!

El Gaucho (☎ 484-17-00; Hotel Presidente, La Costera 8; mains M\$60-200; ☎ 5pm-midnight) The Gaucho is upscale but not stuffy, and one of the top spots in town for a steak (though you pay dearly for it). All the meat is grilled in true Argentine style, and less carnivorous or extravagant folk can choose from an assortment of pasta dishes. The short but decent wine list includes selections from Mexico, Chile, Spain and Argentina.

ourpick 100% Natural (☎ 485-52-79; www.100.natural.com.mx; mains M\$60-275; ☎) *zócalo* (La Costera s/n); Condesa (La Costera 112); Magallanes (La Costera 200) This health-conscious chain has several branches along La Costera and elsewhere in town, all with a mellow ambience and good, friendly service. The food is consistently good, mostly vegetarian fare, including wholegrain breads

and rolls and a large variety of fruit and veggie juices and shakes. Some locations are open 24 hours.

Mariscos Pipo's (☎ 484-17-00; cnr La Costera & Nao Victoria; mains M\$75-205; ☎ 1-9pm) Pipo's has a varied menu that includes baby shark quesadillas, freshwater bass, grilled crawfish and scallop cocktail, all served in a large dining area with a simple, nautical theme.

Kookaburra (☎ 446-60-20, 446-60-39; Carretera Escénica s/n; mains M\$140-315) One of Acapulco's finest and most exclusive restaurants, the thatched Kookaburra has great views and even better food, including such specialties as spaghetti with caviar or filet mignon with *chipotle*. It's a perfect place for a romantic dinner. Reservations required

Baikal (☎ 446-6845; www.baikal.com.mx; Carretera Escénica 22; mains M\$200-500) Baikal is not just a restaurant; it's an experience for all five senses. Step down the unusual spiral staircase entrance and you emerge into a cliffside wonderland with stunning views over Acapulco Bay. The cuisine is a fusion of French, Asian and Mediterranean and presented like a masterpiece while live jazz music plays in the background. This is Acapulco's place to see and be seen. Reservations are mandatory.

Entertainment

NIGHTCLUBS

Most clubs open around 10:30pm but don't get rolling until midnight or later. Cover charges vary by the season, night and the doorman's mood. Dress to impress; shorts and sneakers are not permitted.

Palladium (☎ 446-54-90; www.palladium.com.mx; Carretera Escénica s/n; admission incl open bar women/men M\$350/450) Hailed by many as the best disco in town, Palladium attracts a 20- to 30-something crowd with its fabulous views from the floor to ceiling windows. DJs pump out hip-hop, house, trance and techno from an ultraluxe sound system. Around 3am, the famous 'Silver Aztec' entertains the screaming crowd with fire and dance. Dress up, and expect to wait in line.

Baby0 (☎ 484-74-74; La Costera 22; admission M\$100-400) Very popular with the upscale crowd, the cave-like club has a laser light show and Wednesday theme nights, and spins rock, pop, house and 'everything but electronica.' Drinks are not included in the cover charge.

Los Alebrijes (☎ 484-59-02; La Costera 3308; admission incl open bar women/men M\$250/350) This massive

club is usually packed with a young Mexican crowd. The music is a middle-of-the-road mix of mostly Latin rock and pop; open bar hours are 1am to 5am.

Disco Beach (☎ 484-82-30; La Costera s/n; admission incl open bar women/men M\$250/300; ☎ Wed-Sat) Right in the heart of Playa Condesa, Disco Beach attracts a fairly young crowd. The dress policy and atmosphere are more relaxed than at other clubs. Music is house, disco, techno, hip-hop, '70s and '80s; women get in (and drink) for free on Wednesday; Friday foam parties can be wild. Check out Ibiza Lounge and Thai Bar next door, too.

LIVE MUSIC & BARS

Barbarroja (☎ 484-59-32; La Costera s/n; ☎ noon-5am) Ahoy Matey! From a boat-shaped bar to girls in sexy pirate costumes dancing on tables, this over-the-top, pirate-themed pub is one of several beachfront bars near the bungee tower. But it's the only one where a 30-year-old can walk in and not feel like the oldest person in the world.

Nina's (☎ 484-24-00; La Costera 41; admission incl open bar M\$200-250; ☎ 10pm-4am) Nina's is one of the best places in town for live *música tropical* (salsa, *cumbia*, cha-cha, merengue etc); it has a smokin' dance floor, variety acts and impersonators.

Salon Q (☎ 484-32-52, 481-01-14; La Costera 23; admission M\$180, with open bar M\$240; ☎ 10:30pm-6am) This '*catedral de la salsa*' hosts first-rate salsa singers and bands, celebrity impersonators and a *Carnaval* atmosphere.

Tropicana (La Costera s/n, Playa Hornos; admission M\$50; ☎ 10pm-4am) Like Nina's, Tropicana has a full spectrum of live *música tropical*, only without the bells and whistles.

Hotel Los Flamíngos (☎ 482-06-90; López Mateos s/n) The one quiet spot in this rowdy bunch, the cliff-top bar of Hotel Los Flamíngos has the hands-down best sunset-viewing/drink-ing spot in Acapulco. Not a car or hustler in sight, and you can sip *cocos locos* (cocktails made with rum, tequila, pineapple juice and coconut crème) to your heart's content.

Hard Rock Cafe (☎ 484-00-47; La Costera 37; ☎ noon-2am) It's hard to miss the Hard Rock. Just northwest of CICI, this chain's Acapulco branch has live music from 10pm to 2am.

Señor Frogs (☎ 446-57-34; www.senorfrogs.com; Carretera Escénica 28; ☎ 10am-1am). Yes, it's a chain. Yes, it's cheesy and touristy. But dammit, it's still a lot of fun! The zany antics attract

families by day, and the cheap beer and far-party atmosphere brings in the college kids at night.

GAY VENUES

Acapulco has an active gay scene with several gay bars and clubs, mostly open from 10pm until about 4am.

Demas (☎ 484-13-70; Piedra Picuda 17) is open only to men and has shows on Friday and Saturday; **Picante** (Piedra Picuda 16) is found behind Demas, with a minuscule dance floor, the occasional drag or stripper show, and a mostly male clientele; and **Relax** (☎ 484-04-21; Lomas del Mar 4; ☎ Thu-Sat) welcomes men and women. Acapulco's unofficial **gay beach** is the rocky section of Playa Condesa by the Fiesta Americana hotel. **Casa Condesa** (☎ 484-1616; www.casacondesa.com; Bella Vista 125; r from M\$960) is a B&B that caters to gay men.

SPORTS

Bullfights take place at the Plaza de Toros, southeast of La Quebrada and northwest of Playas Caleta and Caletilla, every Sunday at 5:30pm from January to March; for tickets, try your hotel, a travel agency or the **bullring box office** (☎ 482-11-81; Plaza de Toros; ☎ 10am-2pm). The 'Caleta' bus passes near the bullring.

Shopping

Mercado de Artesanías (cnr Parana & Velasquez de Leon) Bargaining is the standard at this 400-stall *mercado*, especially as sellers often find suckers among the many cruise-ship passengers. The market is located between Av Cuauhtémoc and Vicente de León and is Acapulco's main craft market. It's paved and pleasant, and an OK place to get better deals on everything that you see in the hotel shops including hammocks, jewelry, clothing and T-shirts.

Other handicraft markets include the **Mercados de Artesanías Papagayo**, **Noa Noa**, **Dalia** and **La Diana** (all on La Costera), and the **Mercado de Artesanías La Caletilla** at the western end of Playa Caletilla.

Mercado Central (Diego H de Mendoza s/n) This truly local market, a sprawling indoor-outdoor bazaar, has everything from *atole* to *zapatitos* (shoes) – not to mention produce, hot food and souvenirs. Any eastbound 'Pie de la Cuesta' or 'Pedregoso' bus will drop you here; get off where the sidewalk turns to tarp-covered stalls.

Galerías Diana (☎ 481-40-21; La Costera 1926; ☎ 7:30am-midnight Sun-Thu, to 2am Fri & Sat) Shop until you drop at this mammoth mall with American and European brand shops such as Zara, Nine West, Puma and, yes, Starbucks. This mall also has a casino, a video arcade and the Cinepolis VIP movie theater featuring bartender service and comfy leather lounge chairs; most flicks are in English with Spanish subtitles.

Getting There & Away

Acapulco is accessible via Hwy 200 from the east and west, and by Hwy 95 and Hwy 95D from the north. It's 400km south of Mexico City and 235km southeast of Zihuatanejo.

AIR

Acapulco's small but busy airport, **Juan Álvarez International Airport** (☎ 466-94-34), has many international flights, most connecting through Mexico City or Guadalajara (both are short hops from Acapulco). All flights mentioned here are direct; some are seasonal.

Aeroméxico (☎ 485-16-25/00; La Costera 286) Service to Guadalajara, Mexico City and Tijuana.

America West (☎ 466-92-75; Airport) Service to Los Angeles and Phoenix.

American Airlines (☎ 481-01-61; La Costera 116, Plaza Condesa, Local 109) Service to Dallas and Chicago.

Aviaca (☎ 466-92-09; Airport) Service regularly to Oaxaca, Mexico City and Tijuana.

Azteca (☎ 466-90-29; Airport) Service to Ciudad Juárez, Guadalajara and Tijuana.

Continental Airlines (☎ 466-90-46; Airport) Service to Houston, Minneapolis and Newark.

Delta Airlines (☎ 800-902-2100; Airport) Service to Atlanta and Los Angeles.

Mexicana & Click Mexicana (☎ 486-75-70; La Costera 1632, La Gran Plaza) Service to Mexico City and Guadalajara.

Northwest (☎ 800-900-08-00; Airport) Service to Houston.

BUS

There are two major, 1st-class long-distance bus companies in Acapulco: Estrella de Oro and Estrella Blanca. The modern, air-conditioned **Estrella de Oro terminal** (EDO; ☎ 800-900-01-05; Av Cuauhtémoc 1490), just east of Massieu, has free toilets, a Banamex ATM and a ticket machine that accepts bank debit cards (and luggage can also be left for M\$2 per hour, per piece). **Estrella Blanca** (EB; ☎ 469-20-80) has two 1st-class terminals: **Central Papagayo** (Av Cuauhtémoc 1605), just north of Parque Papagayo,

and **Central Ejido** (☎ 469-20-28/30; Av Ejido 47). The **Estrella Blanca 2nd-class terminal** (☎ 482-21-84; Av Cuauhtémoc 97) sells tickets for all buses, but only has departures to relatively nearby towns. Estrella Blanca tickets are also sold at a few agencies around town, including **Agencia de Viajes Zócalo** (☎ 482-49-76; La Costera 207, Local 2).

Both companies offer frequent services to Mexico City, with various levels of luxury. See the table opposite for daily services.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Many car rental companies rent out 4WDs as well as cars; several have offices at the airport as well as in town, and some offer free delivery to you. Shop around to compare prices.

Rental companies in Acapulco:

Alamo (☎ 484-33-05, 466-94-44; La Costera 2148)

Avis (☎ 462-00-75; Airport)

Budget (☎ 481-24-33, 466-90-03; La Costera 93, Local 2)

Hertz (☎ 485-89-47; La Costera 137)

Thrifty Airport (☎ 466-92-86); La Costera 139 (☎ 486-19-40)

Drivers heading inland on Hwy 95D need to have some cash handy. The tolls to Chilpancingo, about 130km north, total M\$279.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Acapulco's airport is 23km southeast of the *zócalo*, beyond the junction for Puerto Marqués. Arriving by air, you can buy a ticket for transportation into town from the *colectivo* desk at the end of the domestic terminal; it's about M\$75 per person for a lift to your hotel (a bit more if it's west of the *zócalo*).

Leaving Acapulco, phone **Móvil Aca** (☎ 462-10-95) 24 hours in advance to reserve transportation back to the airport; the cost varies depending on where your pick-up is (from M\$150 to M\$400 per person or M\$300 to M\$400 for the whole vehicle holding up to five passengers). Taxis from the center to the airport cost around M\$230 to M\$330, depending on the amount of luggage.

BUS

Acapulco has a good city bus system (especially good when you get an airbrushed beauty with a bumping sound system). Buses operate from 5am to 11pm and cost M\$5.50 with aircon, M\$4.50 without. From the *zócalo* area, the bus stop opposite Sanborns department store

DAILY BUSES FROM ACAPULCO

| Destination | Fare | Duration | Frequency |
|------------------------------|---------------------|----------|---|
| Chilpancingo | 1st-class M\$76 | 1¾hr | several from Central Ejido (EB) |
| | 1st-class M\$76 | 1¾hr | frequent (EDO) |
| | 2nd-class M\$59 | 3hr | every 30 min, 5am-7pm, from 2nd-class terminal (EB) |
| Cuernavaca | 1st-class M\$261 | 4-5hr | 3 daily from Central Papagayo (EB) |
| | 1st-class M\$220 | 4-5hr | 7 daily |
| | M\$206 | 5hr | very frequent semi-directo (EDO) |
| Mexico City (Terminal Norte) | deluxe M\$450 | 6hr | 1 daily from Central Papagayo (EB) |
| | 1st-class M\$315 | 6hr | several from Central Papagayo (EB) |
| | 1st-class M\$315 | 6hr | 7 daily (ED00) |
| | 1st-class M\$272 | 6hr | 2 from Central Ejido (EB) |
| Mexico City (Terminal Sur) | deluxe M\$467 | 5hr | 4 daily from Central Papagayo (EB) |
| | deluxe M\$456 | 5hr | 6 (ED0) |
| | 1st-class M\$315 | 5hr | frequent from Central Papagayo (EB) |
| | 1st-class M\$315 | 5hr | 8 daily from Central Ejido (EB) |
| | 1st-class M\$315 | 5hr | frequent (ED0) |
| Puerto Escondido | 1st-class M\$239 | 7hr | 5 daily from Central Ejido (EB) |
| | 2nd-class M\$195 | 9½hr | 5 daily from Central Ejido (EB) |
| Taxco | 1st-class M\$163 | 4hr | 3 daily from Central Ejido (EB) |
| | 1st-class M\$163 | 4hr | 2 daily (ED0) |
| Zihuatanejo | 1st-class M\$125 | 4-5hr | 10 daily from Central Ejido (EB) |
| | Primera Plus M\$125 | 4-5hr | 13 daily from Central Ejido (EB) |
| | 1st-class M\$125 | 4-5hr | 3 daily (ED0) |
| | 2nd-class M\$92 | 4-5hr | 12 hourly 5am-5:30pm (ED0) |

on La Costera, two blocks east of the *zócalo*, is a good place to catch buses – it's the beginning of several bus routes (including to Pie de la Cuesta) so you can usually get a seat.

Useful city routes include the following:

Base–Caleta From the Icacos naval base at the southeast end of Acapulco, along La Costera, past the *zócalo* to Playa Caleta.

Base–Cine Río–Caleta From the Icacos naval base, cuts inland from La Costera on Av Wilfrido Massieu to Av Cuauhtémoc, heads down Av Cuauhtémoc through the business district, turning back to La Costera just before reaching the *zócalo*, continuing west to Playa Caleta.

Puerto Marqués–Centro From opposite Sanborns, along La Costera to Puerto Marqués.

Zócalo–Playa Pie de la Cuesta From opposite Sanborns, to Pie de la Cuesta.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

If you can possibly avoid doing any driving in Acapulco, do. The streets are in poor shape and the anarchic traffic is often horribly snarled.

TAXI

Hundreds of zippy blue-and-white VW cabs scurry around Acapulco like cockroaches, maneuvering with an audacity that borders on

the comical. Drivers often quote fares higher than the official ones. Local rates are about M\$20 to M\$50 depending on your destination. Always agree on a price with the driver before getting into the taxi.

BARRA VIEJA

About 40km southeast of central Acapulco lies the small fishing village of Barra Vieja, a rustic beach where the ocean meets Tres Palos lagoon. The beach has a few *enramada* seafood restaurants and a seasonal turtle sanctuary. Other activities include massages, boat rides, horseback riding. The main attraction is the virgin beach, free of Acapulco crowds or pesky vendors.

To get here by car, take the road to the airport and continue 20km further to Barra Vieja. By bus from Acapulco, take a bus to Playa Marques, then change to a *combi* heading to Barra Vieja. A round-trip taxi ride from Acapulco will set you back about M\$500.

COSTA CHICA

Guerrero's 'Small Coast,' extending south-east from Acapulco to the Oaxacan border, is much less traveled than its bigger brother

to the northwest, but it does have at least one spectacular beach.

Afro-Mestizos (people of mixed African, Indigenous and European descent) make up a large portion of the population. The region was a safe haven for Africans who escaped slavery, some from the interior, others (it's believed) from a slave ship that sank just off the coast.

From Acapulco, Hwy 200 traverses inland past small villages and farmlands. **San Marcos**, about 60km east of Acapulco, **Cruz Grande**, about 40km further east, are the only two towns of significant size before **Cuajinicuilapa** near the Oaxaca border. Both provide basic services including banks, gas stations and simple hotels.

Playa Ventura & Around

☎ 741 / Pop 200

About three hours' drive southeast of Acapulco, **Playa Ventura** (labeled Juan Álvarez on most maps) is a pristine beach with soft white and gold sands and clear, calm water. A town extends inland for about three blocks and features a small village **museum**, simple seafood restaurants and a few beachfront hotels.

The positively pink **Hotel Doña Celsa** (☎ 101-30-69; d/q M\$200/350; P 🚿) has 20 simple, clean rooms, a nice pool, a seafood restaurant and grocery store.

our pick **La Caracola** (☎ 101-30-47; www.playaventura.com; r M\$400 & 650; P 🚿), 1.5km north (right) of the church, is the nicest place in town. This thatched tree-house-on-stilts has several rooms with basic beds, mosquito netting, hammocks, fans and a communal kitchen. Tiny adobe pyramids on the beach house cheaper rooms.

To get here by car, take Hwy 200 to the village of Copala (Km 124) and follow the signs to Playa Ventura. By bus from Acapulco, take a southeast-bound bus to Copala (M\$60, 2½ hours, 120km). From there, *camionetas* and microbuses depart for Playa Ventura about every half-hour (M\$15, 30 minutes, 13km) from just east of the bus stop.

About 13km southeast of Copala on Hwy 200 (Km137) is the market town of **Marquelia**. The town offers access to an immense stretch of beach backed by coco palms – the beach follows the coastline's contours for many kilometers in either direction. From Marquelia's center you can take a *camioneta* to a section of the beach known as **Playa La Bocana**, where

the Río Marquelia meets the sea and forms a lagoon. La Bocana has some *cabañas*, as well as *comedores* (small food stalls) with hammocks where you can spend the night. Another portion of the beach, **Playa Las Peñitas**, is reached by a 5km road heading seaward from the east end of Marquelia. Las Peñitas has two small hotels and some *cabañas* that also offer camping spaces.

Ometepec

☎ 741 / Pop 20,800

Nestled 600m above sea level in the Sierra Madre mountains, the city of Ometepec is well worth a detour to visit the amazing **Catedral de Santiago Apóstol**. Construction of the imposing blue and white, colonial-style church began in 1981 and continues to this day. Ometepec also has a popular Sunday market where indigenous people come to sell their handmade leather goods. Ometepec is located about 50km northeast of Marquelia, and 175km southeast of Acapulco. From Hwy200, a well-marked turnoff near Km174 winds another 15km to town.

Cuajinicuilapa

☎ 741 / pop 9400

About 200km southeast of Acapulco, Cuajinicuilapa, or Cuaji (*kwah-hee*), is the nucleus of Afro-Mestizo culture on the Costa Chica. The **Museo de las Culturas Afromestizas** (Museum of Afro-Mestizo Cultures; ☎ 414-03-10; cnr Manuel Zárate & Cuauhtémoc; admission M\$10; 🕒 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun) is a tribute to the history of African slaves in Mexico and, specifically, to local Afro-Mestizo culture. Behind the museum are three examples of *casas redondas*, the round houses typical of West Africa that were built around Cuaji until as late as the 1960s. The museum is a block inland from the Banamex that's just west of the main plaza.

Buses for Cuaji (M\$119, five hours) depart Estrella Blanca's Central Ejido station in Acapulco hourly from 5am, and Estrella Blanca has several buses daily from Pinotepa Nacional (M\$30, 1½ hours) in Oaxaca state.

Punta Maldonado (also known as El Faro) is the last worthwhile beach before the Oaxaca border. The swimming is good and the surfing, on occasion, is excellent; the break is a reef/point favoring lefts. The village (population 1100) has some seafood restaurants on the beach and one small, unattractive hotel.

To reach Punta Maldonado take a *camioneta* from Cuajinicuilapa (M\$20, 45 minutes); they depart half-hourly from just off the main plaza.

CHILPANCINGO

☎ 747 / pop 165,000 / elevation 1360m

Chilpancingo, capital of the state of Guerrero, is a university city and agricultural center. It lies on Hwys 95 and 95D, 130km north of Acapulco and 270km south of Mexico City. It's an administrative center and a rather nondescript place, located between the much more compelling destinations of Taxco and Acapulco.

The former **Palacio Municipal**, on the *zócalo*, has murals showing the city's important place in Mexico's history. In the spring of 1813, rebel leader José María Morelos y Pavón encircled Mexico City with his guerrilla army and demanded a congress in Chilpancingo. The congress issued a Declaration of Independence and began to lay down the principles of a new constitution. But Spanish troops eventually breached the circle around Mexico City, and Morelos was tried for treason and then executed.

Sleeping & Eating

The best eateries and lodgings are around the bus terminal and the *zócalo*.

Hotel El Presidente (☎ 472-97-31; cnr Calle 30 de Agosto & Insurgentes; s M\$330-380 d M\$400-480; (P)) A block from the bus station, El Presidente has gaudy grandmotherly decor but is fine in a pinch. The Green Café downstairs serves good breakfast.

Del Parque Hotel (☎ 472-30-12; Colón 5; r M\$470) A block from the *zócalo*, the modern Del Parque has clean, spacious, carpeted rooms. Windows are double-glazed to minimize street noise,

and the beds and bathrooms are good. The ground floor contains the popular Taco Rock restaurant, where you can get decent pizzas and sandwiches.

Getting There & Away

Chilpancingo bus station is 1.5km away from the *zócalo*. It is served by the bus companies **Estrella Blanca** (☎ 472-06-34) and **Estrella de Oro** (☎ 472-21-30). Among the services offered are frequent buses to Acapulco (M\$70, 1½ hours), Mexico City (M\$180 to M\$230, 3½ hours), and at least two daily buses to Taxco (M\$100, three hours).

OLINALÁ

☎ 756 / pop 5200 / elevation 1350m

The cobble-stoned, isolated village of Olinalá is famous throughout Mexico for its beautiful, hand-painted lacquered boxes, chests and other woodcraft. Traditionally, the pieces were made with fragrant linaloe wood that grows here; the scarce tree is now often substituted with pine. Several artisan shops are located along Av Ramon Ibarra behind the *zócalo*; one of the best is Artesanías Ayala. The town's two lovely churches – the **Iglesia de San Francisco de Asís** in the *zócalo* and the magnificent hill-top **Sanatorio de la Virgen Guadalupe** – are both decorated in traditional Olinalá style with lacquered-wood ornamentation and murals. Looking to stay? **Hotel Coral** (☎ 473-06-69; Ramon Ibarra 4; s/d M\$150/170) has 35 simple rooms with TV and private bath.

Second-class buses from Chilpancingo to Tlapa will drop you at the crossroads for Olinalá (4½ hours); then catch a 3rd-class bus (one hour) to Olinalá. By car, getting here is half the fun on the winding, rollercoaster road from Chilpancingo (3½ hours). Don't attempt this drive in the dark!

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