

Northeast Mexico



Ignore the know-it-all cynics who tell you the northeast isn't the 'real' Mexico, whatever that's supposed to mean. The fact is, there are many good reasons to visit this region.

A great number of visitors who cross the border here limit their stays to just a break in an overnight journey as they travel further on at full throttle. True, there are no full-fledged beach resorts here (and that's a bad thing?) and the colonial towns and pre-Hispanic remains really are more impressive further south, but the northeast does nature like no other place, and it also has plenty of places of cultural interest to merit diversions off its excellent highways.

Economically, the northeastern states of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and Coahuila form one of Mexico's most prosperous and business-driven regions. Its biggest city, Monterrey, is a confident, progressive place with iconic modern architecture, terrific museums and some of the best bar-hopping in the country, while up in the mountains, the colonial charm of Saltillo and the atmospheric allure of Parras compete to impress.

Beyond the urban beat you can bird-watch in desert scrub and cloud forest at Reserva de la Biosfera El Cielo, one of Mexico's most biologically diverse corners, and soak away an afternoon in the ethereal waters of Cuatrociénegas, deep in the Chihuahuan desert. The coast has remote beaches, lagoons and wetlands, with a diverse and easily seen marine life.

And, perhaps best of all, those who do take time to explore here can expect a particularly warm welcome from the *norteño* locals, for there's simply no tourist trail in these parts.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Take a 12m leap of faith at **Matacanes** (boxed text, p411) in the mountains around Monterrey
- Snorkel through the sublime desert pools of **Cuatrociénegas** (p389)
- Discover the vibrant artistic scenes in **Monterrey** (p396)
- Hike through the birders' paradise of **Reserva de la Biosfera El Cielo** (p423)
- Feast on fresh fish after swimming in the warm Gulf waters around **Barra del Tordo** (p421)



■ MONTERREY JANUARY DAILY HIGH 23°C | 67°F

■ MONTERREY JULY DAILY HIGH 34°C | 94°F

History

It was the crown's search for silver and slaves, and the church's desire to proselytize, that brought the Spanish to this arid region.

The first explorers marched through the northeast as early as 1535, but the harsh conditions and incessant attacks by indigenous Chichimecs and, later, Apaches meant settlement and development came very slowly. Saltillo, the oldest town in northeast Mexico, was founded in 1577, and a few others took root before the end of the century, but widespread settlement didn't come until the early 1800s. Ranching was the main economic activity, and a few large landowners, some commanding private cavalries, dominated affairs here.

Though the northeast played little part in early Mexican history, it was a key area of conflict with the US, and several important battles (all Mexican defeats) of the Mexican-American War (1846–48) were fought here. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the war established the Río Bravo del Norte as the frontier between the two nations.

The discovery of petroleum, coal and natural gas and the arrival of the railroad accelerated development, and the region emerged as an industrial leader in the late 19th century.

Today this area is the most Americanized part of the country, with money and resources surging back and forth across the border. The Texas economy is particularly dependent on Mexican workers, while American investment was behind most of the *maquiladoras* (foreign-owned assembly-plant operations) that mushroomed here in the 1990s. Though cheap Asian labor has slowed the *maquiladora* march, the northeast's cities continue to thrive.

Climate

The geographic diversity of northeast Mexico (expansive deserts, remote coastal areas and the highlands of the Sierra Madre Oriental) produces tremendous climatic variation.

Coastal areas along the Gulf of Mexico experience the largest amounts of rain between June and October and are generally warm and humid all year round.

August is the hottest month, while winter can bring the occasional 'norte' with cold temperatures and sometimes even snow.

Parks & Reserves

The Área de Protección de Flora y Fauna Cuatrociénegas (p389) is a desert oasis with

a rich aquatic ecosystem. Further south the diverse forests of the Reserva de la Biosfera El Cielo (p423) are particularly rich in birdlife. Biologically speaking, both places are special, and they're very easy to visit.

There's fantastic rock-climbing, canyoneering, hiking, mountain biking and more in the mountains around Monterrey, most of it in Parque Nacional Cumbres de Monterrey (boxed text, p411).

Getting There & Around

The main highways running south from the Texas border are: Hwy 57, bypassing most mountainous areas from Piedras Negras to Saltillo and eventually reaching Mexico City; Hwy 85, also known as the Pan-American Hwy, beginning at Nuevo Laredo and passing through Monterrey and Ciudad Victoria; and Hwy 40, running southwest from Reynosa to Monterrey, Saltillo, Durango and eventually Mazatlán on the Pacific coast. Smaller Hwys 101 and 180 go south from Matamoros down the Gulf coast through Tampico and Veracruz. Hwy 2, the Carretera Ribereña, parallels the Río Bravo between Ciudad Acuña and Matamoros.

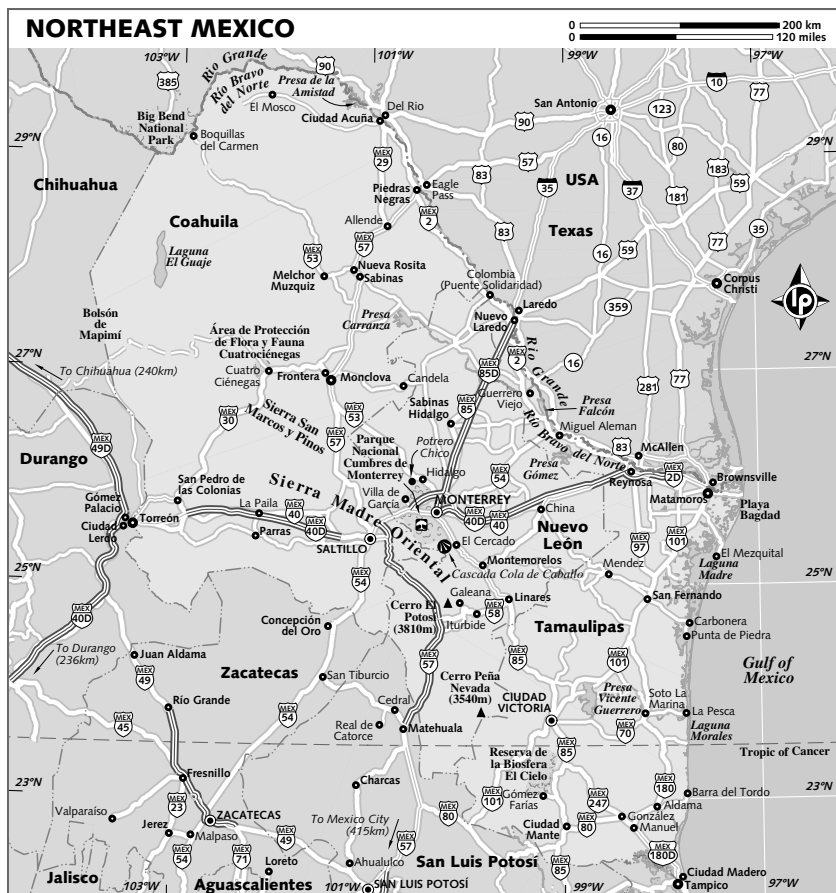
Very frequent buses leave the cities on the Mexican side of the border to virtually every town in the region and most major destinations further afield. Numerous international airlines service Monterrey.

COAHUILA

Coahuila is large, mostly desert and sparsely populated. If you spend much time in this state, Mexico's third largest, you'll pass a lot of it drifting down the highway, but the desert scenery is often so stunning you won't be in any hurry to reach your destination.

Border crossings into Coahuila from Texas are used less than those further southeast in Tamaulipas because the road connections are not as convenient for most travelers. Yet the remoteness and the harsh, arid landscape have a raw allure, and the state capital, Saltillo, is definitely worth a visit. For information about the western part of the state, including the city of Torreón and the Zona del Silencio, see the Central North Mexico chapter.

From 1821 to 1836, in the early years of independence, Coahuila and Texas were one state of the new Mexican republic with



Monclova and Saltillo each taking a turn as capital. In January 2007 Coahuila became the first state to follow Mexico City's lead and legalize civil unions for gay couples.

CIUDAD ACUÑA

☎ 877 / pop 126,000 / elevation 290m

Ciudad Acuña, a small frontier city just across from Del Rio, Texas, is a fairly busy but hassle-free border crossing, open 24 hours a day. It's a pleasant place and can be fun for an hour or two. The city's main claim to fame is that the movie *El Mariachi* and its big-budget sequel *Desperado* were filmed here.

The main drag, Hidalgo, running west from the border, is chock full of souvenir shops, bars and dentists. There are banks with

ATMs around the plaza, and the **tourist office** (☎ 772-16-00; Lerdo 110 Sur; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) is just off Hidalgo.

The rooms at the well-situated **Hotel San Jorge** (☎ 772-54-40; Hidalgo 165; r M\$300-350; (P) (♿)) are much cozier than you'd expect from looking at the exterior. Opened in 1923, the lovely dining room at **Crosby's** (☎ 772-20-20; Hidalgo 195; mains US\$4-18) is a near-mandatory stop for day-tripping gringos. For local flavors, just step off Hidalgo. The **Corona Club** (Hidalgo 200) is the bar Antonio Banderas shot up in *Desperado*.

The bus station is at Matamoros and Ocampo, just a few minutes' walk from the border. It's a seven-hour bus ride to Saltillo (M\$380/322 deluxe/1st-class, one daily/hourly) on good two-lane roads.

PIEDRAS NEGRAS

☎ 878 / pop 142,000 / elevation 250m

The border crossing between Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass, Texas, is a major commercial route. Piedras Negras is not an attractive city and not somewhere you'll want to linger long, but some of the historic buildings around the *plaza principal*, just over the Puente Internacional No 1, have been spruced up and you'll find plenty of Mexican leather goods, ceramics and crafts for sale in the Zaragoza Market just south of the plaza. The **tourist office** (☎ 782-13-54; www.piedrasnegras.gob.mx; Ocampo s/n; ☹ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) is at the foot of the bridge.

The city's newest attraction is the **Plaza de las Culturas** (Av Fausto Martínez) with sculpture, murals and pyramids representing Mexico's three main ancient cultures: Aztec, Olmec and Maya. The replica Pirámide del Sol has a small **natural history museum** (☹ 9am-9pm Mon-Thu, 11am-11pm Fri-Sun) inside. Sadly, the whole thing isn't nearly as neat as it sounds.

Legend has it that Piedras Negras is the birthplace of the nacho, said to have been invented in 1943 by bar-owner Ignacio (Nacho) Anaya. The town holds its three-day **International Nacho Festival** in early October.

There are many hotels on Av Carranza southwest of the bus station. With bright homey rooms, a good restaurant and even a playground for children, the **California Inn** (☎ 782-77-69; www.californiainn.piedras-negras.com; Carranza 1006; s/d/tr M\$430/509/755; P ♻️ 🚰 🚿 ♿) makes a very comfortable base.

Getting There & Away

The bus station is 1km from the bridge on Allende; a taxi between the two should cost M\$20. Autobuses Coahuilenses has a ticket office at the foot of the bridge – buy a ticket here and they'll transport you to the station.

First-class services from Piedras Negras run to many places in Mexico:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency (daily)
Cuatro Ciénegas	M\$228	6hr	3
Mexico City	deluxe M\$1221	17hr	3
	1st-class M\$940	17hr	4
Monterrey	deluxe M\$427	5hr	2
	1st class M\$350	5hr	7
Saltillo	M\$295	7hr	12

Buses also run to towns in Texas, including San Antonio, Austin, Dallas and Houston.

Heading south by road, Hwy 57 is in good condition and passes through Allende, Sabinas and Monclova on its way to Saltillo.

MONCLOVA

☎ 866 / pop 199,000 / elevation 615m

A large industrial city, Monclova is not a place for sightseeing unless you have a predilection for smoke stacks, but you'll probably pass through on your way to Cuatro Ciénegas. The city's Altos Hornos iron and steel works (Ahmsa) is one of the largest in Mexico. The **Monclova tourist office** (☎ 636-27-30; Blvd Harold Page 455 Nte; ☹ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) has maps of the city and helpful staff.

About the only thing worth your time while waiting for your bus connection is the **Museo El Polvorin** (☎ 633-17-45; cnr Hidalgo & Ocampo; admission free; ☹ 8:30am-7pm), with a room full of ancient objects from around Coahuila inside a 1781 building that the Spanish used to store gunpowder. It's four blocks west of the plaza.

There are several decent, inexpensive hotels near the bus station. **Hotel San Agustín** (☎ 633-11-04; Carranza 311; s/d M\$195/238; P ♻️ 🚰 🚿 ♿), right across the street, is well worn but clean and friendly. Rooms have fans and cable TV, and there's an internet café in the lobby. There are several cozier places for not much more money around the corner from the station on Cuauhtémoc. For more luxury, **Hotel Olimpia** (☎ 633-62-11; www.hotelolimpia.com.mx; Hidalgo 203 Nte; r M\$577; P ♻️ 🚰 🚿 ♿), just off the plaza, fills the bill nicely. Rooms have tiled floors and playful hand-carved wooden furniture around a tree- and flower-filled courtyard.

The main bus terminal is on Carranza, two blocks west of the plaza, with 1st-class service to and from the following destinations:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Ciudad Acuña	M\$228	4½hr	hourly
Monterrey	M\$135	3hr	hourly
Nuevo Laredo	M\$169	4hr	5 daily
Piedras Negras	M\$192	4½hr	hourly
Saltillo	M\$140	3hr	hourly
Torreón	M\$215	5hr	9 daily

Second-class buses to Cuatro Ciénegas depart hourly until 10:30pm (M\$46, two hours). Three luxury (M\$875, 12 hours) and six 1st-class (M\$673, 14 hours) buses serve Mexico City's Terminal Norte.

Hwy 57 runs south to Saltillo (192km) and north to Piedras Negras (256km). About

25km south of Monclova, Hwy 53 branches southeast to Monterrey (195km). Hwy 30 heads west for 82km to Cuatro Ciénegas, then southwest to Torreón. Gas stations are rare along these routes.

CUATRO CIÉNEGAS

☎ 869 / pop 9500 / elevation 747m

The tranquil town of Cuatro Ciénegas is the perfect base for exploring the Área de Protección de Flora y Fauna Cuatrociénegas. With hundreds of shimmering cerulean *pozas* (pools), some up to 18m deep, and streams in the middle of the Chihuahuan desert, the reserve is special. Fed by a network of over 500 underground springs, it's a desert habitat of both extraordinary beauty and biological diversity. Over 75 endemic species, including three turtles and eleven kinds of fish, thrive in this fragile environment, an 843-sq-km protected reserve.

Within the pellucid waters of these desert aquariums is a wide variety of small fish (who like to nibble on you harmlessly), as well as organisms called *stromatolitos* (stromatolites), found in only two other places on earth, which are similar to the first oxygen-producing life forms. A few of the pools have been set aside as recreational spots and are ideal for swimming and snorkeling (you can buy cheap gear at several stores in town).

The town of Cuatro Ciénegas is an agreeable place with some adobe buildings and a handful of hotels and restaurants. You'll find a bank (with ATM) on the corner of Zaragoza and Escobedo, one block north of the plaza, and an internet café a block and a half to the southeast on Morelos. The tiny **tourist office** (☎ 696-09-02; Carranza 100 Sur; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) is in the Presidencia Municipal.

Sights & Activities

A block east of the plaza is the interesting little **Acuario y Herpetario Minckley** (☎ 100-53-52; Morelos 112 Sur; adult/child M\$25/15; ☎ 10am-1pm & 4-8pm Tue-Sun), where many of the rare snakes, lizards, toads, turtles, fish, spiders and scorpions endemic to the reserve can be viewed. All the creatures in this education center are well looked after by a knowledgeable biologist.

The **Casa de la Cultura** (☎ 696-05-56; Hidalgo 401 Pte; adult/child & student M\$5/3; ☎ 3-7pm Mon, 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun), in the former home of Venustiano Carranza, a revolutionary leader involved in the overthrow of Porfirio

Díaz, has a small but excellent display of ancient objects unearthed in the area, including sandals made from the lechuguilla plant and jewelry made from bone. The house Carranza was born in, just north of the plaza, is now the **Museo Casa Carranza** (Carranza 107 Nte; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sun) with a hometown-proud display of photos and documents from his life plus a typical early 20th-century kitchen.

You could also visit a winery. **Bodegas Ferrigno** (☎ 696-00-33; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm), 1km north of the plaza along Carranza, pressed its first grapes in 1860. Staff at the neighboring **Vinos Vitali** (☎ 696-00-32; ☎ 9am-8pm) will gladly show you around their little operation.

ÁREA DE PROTECCIÓN DE FLORA Y FAUNA CUATROCIÉNEGAS

Most of the reserve's easily accessible sights are signed off Hwy 30 southwest of town. If you're exploring the area on your own, be aware that not all the desert tracks are sign-posted and they can turn to muck with even just a little rain. Summer temperatures can be extreme, so bring plenty of water and avoid midday excursions. Wearing suntan lotion is prohibited when swimming in the pools. You'll find much more tranquility if you visit on a weekday. Pay the M\$20 per person admission fee at the visitor center.

Using the services of a guide is a good idea, and mandatory if you want to see the Dunas de Yeso. Not only are there fascinating tales to tell about this giant oasis, but also most of the *pozas* and other sites left in a natural state are unmarked. English-speaking **Arturo Contreras** (☎ 100-53-52; acuario_minckley@yahoo.com.mx), the biologist who directs the Acuario y Herpetario Minckley, knows the local fauna and environment well, and is highly recommended. He charges M\$350 for a four-hour tour, plus another M\$300 if he drives. The tourist office and hotels can also connect you with guides and drivers for about the same price.

The **Poza Azul visitor center** (adult/child & student M\$15/10; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), 8km out of town on Hwy 30, has illustrated displays about the reserve's ecology in Spanish and English. The little **Poza Las Tortugas**, a good spot for spotting turtles, is right behind the center, and 1.5km further back is the aptly named **Poza Azul** (Blue Pond), one of the reserve's most photographed sites.

Just before the visitor center there's a turnoff on the left for **Río Los Mezquites** (☎ 696-04-08; ☹ 9am-7pm). Follow the rough track for 2km past salt flats (*salinas*) until you see a sublime stretch of slow-flowing blue water. Swimming and snorkeling here with the fish and turtles amid the desert landscape is a surreal, revitalizing experience. There's an overabundance of *palapas* (they ruin many lovely views) for shade, plus toilets and barbecue spots. It's usually deserted during the week but it's popular with families at weekends, when you may be charged M\$35 per adult to use the area. **Sertuco** (☎ 696-05-85; www.sertuco.com; Carranza 305 Nte; ☹ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) rents two-person kayaks (per hour Monday to Friday M\$100, Saturday and Sunday M\$150) here; it's best to arrange this at their office in town.

Poza La Becerra (☎ 696-05-74; adult/child M\$40/20, camping per adult M\$40), 7km further on from the visitor center and just off the highway, is the busiest and most developed (bathrooms, showers, snack shop) recreational facility. The water temperature here is a balmy, constant 32°C, but there are cooler areas where springs feed the pools.

Three kilometers past La Becerra is the quieter **Poza del Churince**, also good for snorkeling, where you'll almost certainly have a wonderful, shallow pool to yourself during the week. Entry and camping cost M\$5. If the gate is closed, you're allowed to just climb through it.

For something completely different, get up close with the **Dunas de Yeso** (☹ 10am-6pm; per car M\$50), also called Las Arenales, where blinding-white gypsum sand dunes contrast superbly with the six mountain ranges that ring the valley. They can be seen from Hwy 30, but to visit properly you must stop by the visitor center first.

Buses to Torreón will drop you off at the entrances to any of these sites, but they usually won't stop to pick people up. Hitching a ride isn't too difficult, but there isn't a whole lot of traffic on this road.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping is permitted at Poza La Becerra, Poza del Churince and Río Los Mezquites. The latter is away from the highway, and thus the best option, but the owner allows only people he likes to spend the night; call ahead or stop by the Acuario y Herpetario Minckley (p389) to arrange permission.

Hotel Ciénegas (☎ 696-06-93; Hidalgo 205 Ote; s/d M\$150/200; P) The cheapest hotel in town isn't exactly good, but it's good for the price. The rooms lack hot water.

Hotel Ibarra (☎ 696-01-29; Zaragoza 200 Nte; r M\$300; P ☹) The next step up in quality comes at this very ordinary place north of the plaza. It has large clean rooms (with two double beds and cable TV) but could use some TLC.

Hotel Plaza (☎ 696-00-66; www.plazahotel.com.mx; Hidalgo 202 Ote; s/d incl breakfast M\$430/615; P ☹ ☹ ☹) This hotel, a well-run and attractive place, a block from the plaza and built in colonial style, is highly recommended. All rooms face a slim, grassy patio and pool and have warm colors, high ceilings, comfy beds and wi-fi. The only negative is that the rooms are small.

Hotel Misión Marielena (☎ 696-11-51; www.hotel.misionmarielena.com.mx; Hidalgo 200 Ote; s/d/tr incl breakfast M\$485/615/715, ste incl breakfast M\$950-1200; P ☹ ☹) Directly opposite the Hotel Plaza, this competitor has much larger but less cozy rooms, all with two double beds and wi-fi, set around two rear courtyards.

Los Generales (☎ 696-01-40; Morelos 110 Sur; breakfast M\$35, lunch incl drink M\$48, dinner M\$38; ☹ 7:30am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-4:30pm Sun; ☹) With buffets and set meals, this pleasant little café is a good place to push your pesos.

La Casona (☎ 696-00-73; Zaragoza 109 Sur; mains M\$30-120) The Hotel Plaza's restaurant, serving *antojitos*, steaks, salads, pastas, crepes and breakfasts, matches its parent for ambience and quality. It's a good place to start or end your day.

Getting There & Away

The bus terminal occupies the southwest corner of the plaza. Hourly 2nd-class services go to and from Monclova (M\$46, two hours). First-class buses run to Torreón (M\$137, 3½ hours, six daily), Saltillo (M\$167, five hours, one each morning) and Piedras Negras (M\$228, six hours, three daily).

SALTILLO

☎ 844 / pop 634,000 / elevation 1600m

Set high in the arid Sierra Madre Oriental, Saltillo is growing fast on the outskirts, but the quiet central area maintains something of a small-town feel. The city also boasts a number of fine colonial buildings, a temperate climate and some good restaurants, while a large student population adds energy. All

of this makes it a popular weekend day trip for people from Monterrey. It's also on the main routes between the northeast border and central Mexico, making it an ideal spot to break a journey.

History

The Spanish first settled Saltillo in 1577, making it the northeast's oldest town. In 1591 the Spanish brought native Tlaxcalans from near Mexico City to help stabilize the area, and they set up a colony alongside the Spanish one.

In the late 17th century, Saltillo was the capital of an area that included Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and Texas. The city was occupied by US troops under Zachary Taylor during the Mexican-American War in 1846. The next year, at Buena Vista, south of Saltillo, the 15,000-strong army of General Santa Anna was repulsed by Taylor's 5000-man force in the war's decisive battle for control of the northeast.

During the Porfiriato period, agriculture and ranching prospered in the area, and the coming of the railway brought industry to the city, but Monterrey overtook Saltillo in both size and importance.

Orientation

Saltillo spreads over a large area, but most places of interest are right around the central plazas. The junction of Hidalgo and Juárez, at the southeast corner of Plaza de Armas, serves as a dividing point for Saltillo's street addresses, with those to the south suffixed 'Sur,' those to the east 'Ote' (Oriente), and so on.

The bus station is on the south side of town (a 10-minute bus ride from the center) on Periférico Echeverría Sur, a ring road that lets traffic bypass the inner city.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Libros y Arte (☎ 481-63-51; Instituto Coahuilense de Cultura, Juárez 109) Has a terrific selection of art, history and other Mexico titles.

CULTURAL CENTERS

Alianza Franco-Mexicana (☎ 414-91-05; Hidalgo 140) Shows French films and hosts occasional exhibitions on French culture.

EMERGENCY

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 065)

INTERNET ACCESS

Conexión (Zaragoza 229; per hr M\$12; ☎ 9am-8:30pm Mon-Fri, 10:30am-8pm Sat & Sun)

Cyberbase (Padre Flores 159; per hr M\$8; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Universitario de Saltillo (☎ 412-30-00; Madero 1291)

MONEY

HSBC (Allende 203 Nte; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) Changes traveler's checks.

POST

Post office (Victoria 203 Pte)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Módulo de Información (cnr Juárez & Hidalgo; ☎ 10am-8pm) This kiosk is conveniently located in the Plaza de Armas.

State tourist office (☎ 416-48-80; Av Universidad 205; www.secturcoahuila.gob.mx; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) Across from Instituto Tecnológico de Saltillo, the office has brochures for Coahuila and many other states.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Travel Center (☎ 410-91-25; Aldama 666 Pte; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-8pm, 9am-1pm Sat) Plane, bus and hotel reservations.

Sights

CATEDRAL DE SANTIAGO

Built between 1745 and 1800, Saltillo's **cathedral** (☎ 9am-1pm & 4-7:30pm), arguably the most beautiful in the north, dominates the Plaza de Armas and has one of Mexico's finest Churrigueresque facades, with columns of elaborately carved pale-gray stone. The central dome features carvings of Quetzalcóatl, the Aztec rain god, and the carved wooden doors are also fantastic. Inside, the transepts are full of gilt ornamentation: look for the human figure perched on a ledge at the top of the dome. Ask at the tourist kiosk in Plaza de Armas about climbing the bell tower.

MUSEO DEL DESIERTO

Deserts cover about half of Mexican territory, and this excellent **museum** (☎ 986-90-00; www.museodeldesierto.org; Pérez Treviño 3745; adult/child & student M\$65/35; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun, last ticket sold 5pm) will teach you a lot about this biome even if you don't speak Spanish. Illuminating exhibits

SALTILLO

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To Hospital Universitario de Saltillo (850m)
 Parque Alameda Zaragoza
 To State Tourist Office (1km); La Canasta (1.2km); Quinta Real (6km); Airport (15km); Monterrey (83km); Parras (160km); Monclova (132km)
 To Museo de las Aves de México (150m)
 To Museo del Desierto (3km)
 To Bus Station (2.5km)

reveal why sea currents can create deserts and how sand dunes are formed. Children will also enjoy the collection of dinosaur fossils. There's also a reptile house with rattlesnakes and lizards, and a botanical garden with over 400 species of cactus. Bus 18, running east down Aldama in the center, will drop you 1km downhill from the entrance.

MUSEO DE LAS AVES DE MÉXICO

Mexico ranks tenth in the world in terms of avian diversity, and this **museum** (Museum of Mexican Birds; ☎ 414-01-67; www.musedelasaves.org; cnr Hidalgo & Bolívar; adult/child & student M\$10/5; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, 11am-7pm Sun), a few blocks south of the plaza, displays over 760 stuffed and mounted species (names are given in English), some in convincing dioramas of their natural habitat. There are special sections on feathers, beaks, migration and similar subjects.

ART MUSEUMS

Saltillo's leading cultural center, the beautiful **Instituto Coahuilense de Cultura** (☎ 410-20-33; Juárez 109; admission free; 🕒 10am-7pm Tue-Sun), on the south side of the plaza, often features good

temporary exhibits by artists from Coahuila and beyond. It also hosts occasional concerts and has a terrific bookstore and café.

Casa Purcell (☎ 414-50-80; Hidalgo 231; admission free; 🕒 10am-7pm Tue-Sun) is located in a wonderful 19th-century mansion. Built in an English neo-Gothic style with handsome gray stone, many of its rooms have stately fireplaces, stained-glass windows and parquet floors. Besides temporary art exhibits, Casa Purcell hosts semi-regular rock concerts and art-house films.

The book collection of the eponymous historian, now numbering 14,000 volumes from the 17th to 19th centuries, anchors the modest **Centro Cultural Vito Alessio Robles** (☎ 412-84-58; cnr Hidalgo & Aldama; admission free; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). Come to see the striking mural of the city's history splashed across the courtyard, and since you're here take a look at the temporary art exhibits to the right.

Tours

Aventúrate Coahuila (☎ 139-03-32; www.aventuracoahuila.com; Hidalgo 268 Sur; 🕒 9am-2pm & 4-7pm) Mónica Silva leads bird-watching tours around Coahuila.

Warthen sparrows and maroon-fronted parrots are two highly sought species.

Ruta Tranvía (adult/child M\$30/25; ☎ 10am, 12:30pm, 3pm, 5:30pm) You can take a narrated, 1½-hour tour of the city on this historic-looking trolley, which departs the Plaza de Armas daily. Buy tickets at the tourist kiosk.

Festivals & Events

Aniversario de Saltillo This cultural festival over the second week of July commemorates the city's foundation.

Día del Santo Cristo de la Capilla In honor of Saltillo's patron saint, this festival takes place in the week leading up to August 6. Dance groups from around Coahuila perform in front of the cathedral.

Festival Internacional de las Artes (Coahuila Festival of the Arts) Artistic and musical events in towns and cities throughout the state in October. Saltillo gets most of the high-profile acts.

Sleeping

There are few budget and midrange places in central Saltillo. There are a few more across from the bus station. Several four- and five-star hotels line the highways heading north and east from Saltillo.

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Hotel Bristol (☎ 154-01-34; Aldama 405 Pte; s/d/tr/q M\$150/180/240/260) This old building, surrounding a two-story sky-lit courtyard, has aged fairly gracefully, which makes the rooms a bit of a let-down, especially the rock-hard mattresses. Still, they're pretty clean and have fans and cable TV.

Hotel Jardín (☎ 412-59-16; Padre Flores 211; s/d/tr M\$150/200/250) A block over from the Bristol, right on Plaza Acuña, this ugly blue building with garish green rooms lacks the character of the Bristol, but it's quieter and more comfortable.

ourpick Hotel Urdiñola (☎ 414-09-40; Victoria 251; s/d M\$354/387; P ☎ ☎) Initial impressions are excellent at the Urdiñola, which has a stately lobby with a sweeping marble stairway and a stained-glass window. The rooms are mostly set around a long, narrow courtyard; those on the upper floor enjoy more natural light. The remodeled rooms are the best value in the city, and even the older ones have character.

San Jorge Hotel (☎ 412-22-22; Acuña 240 Nte; s/d/tr M\$553/624/683; P ☎ ☎ ☎) Occupying a large concrete block that must have seemed modern in 1972, this hotel has large carpeted rooms with flowery bedspreads and garish fittings, some with great views. It also

boasts a small rooftop pool, a restaurant and a central location.

Hotel Colonial Alameda (☎ 410-00-88; www.hotelcolonialalameda.com; Obregón 222 Nte; s & d/tr/q M\$620/679/739; P ☎ ☎ ☎) The only fancy digs downtown, this fine Spanish colonial-style hotel has a plush lobby and elegant, tastefully presented rooms, each containing a pair of huge beds and smart furnishings plus wi-fi. Ask if weekend discounts are on offer.

TOP END

Quinta Real (☎ 438-84-50; www.quintareal.com; Blvd Sarmiento 1385; ste incl breakfast Mon-Fri from M\$2100, Sat & Sun from M\$1290; P ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Top of the heap in the top end, this highly impressive colonial-style place is a 15-minute drive north of the plaza off the highway to Monterrey. The spacious accommodations boast lovely furniture and virtually every conceivable amenity, including marble bathrooms with tubs. The hotel's facilities include fitness and business centers and a restaurant.

Eating

Central Saltillo has an excellent selection of cafés and restaurants within a short walk of Plaza de Armas. There are many cheap and popular *taquerías* around Plaza Acuña and some superb *fondas* on Mercado Juárez' 2nd floor.

Dulcería Tres Rojas (☎ 414-52-30; Victoria 701; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-8pm Mon-Sat) A good place to try *pan de pulque* (M\$22), a famous Saltillo food. It's kind of like a beer bread.

El Sorbito (Juárez 109; snacks M\$10-32; ☎ 10am-9pm) Tucked away inside the Instituto Coahuilense de Cultura, this civilized little café grinds its own beans for barista-perfect coffee and serves snacks like bagels and cake.

El Rincón Mexicano (☎ 481-51-91; Juárez 314; mains M\$15-65; ☎ 3pm-2am Fri, Sat & Mon-Wed, 3-10pm Sun) This likable and informal place specializes in southern Mexican cuisine like *empanadas* and *salbutes yucatecos* (corn tortillas with black beans, pork, cheese, chili and onion). There's live music Thursday and Friday.

El Vegetariano Feliz (☎ 410-08-75; Hidalgo 423 Sur; mains M\$35-55; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun; ☎) Although it only has three tables, the menu at this little restaurant-health food shop-internet café is fairly large.

Flor y Canela (☎ 414-31-43; Juárez 257; mains M\$40-50; ☎ 8:30am-9:30pm Mon-Fri, 4:30-9:30pm Sat & Sun) A stylish café ideal for breakfast, a snack, or a fine coffee or tea.

Restaurant San Antonio (☎ 410-81-15; Hidalgo 167 Sur; mains M\$50-210; ☎ 8am-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun) Saltillo has many contenders for loveliest restaurant, but we give the nod to this place, with dining in and around a bright-orange, sky-lit courtyard. Service could use a kick in the ass, but the kitchen, turning out a mix of Mexican and international flavors, meets expectations.

our pick La Canasta (☎ 415-80-50; Carranza 2485; mains M\$65-320; ☎ noon-midnight; ☒) One of Mexico's gastronomic greats, this famous place is decorated with art and antiques and warmed with a roaring fire. The menu is international with lots of meat and seafood selections. The signature dish is *arroz huérfano* (orphan's rice), which is loaded with ham, bacon, pecans, almonds and more.

Restaurant El Principal (☎ 414-33-84; Allende 702 Nte; mains M\$85-315) *Cabrito* (kid goat) is the specialty at this family restaurant. It offers assorted cuts of goat like *cabecita* (steamed baby goat's head) and traditional cuts of beef steak. There are two other, less centrally located Principals.

Drinking & Entertainment

our pick Dublin Irish Pub (Allende 324 Sur; ☎ 7pm-2am Tue-Sat) Not one of those by-the-numbers Irish pubs you so often find in foreign lands; this is a lovely 1855 house filled with real pub atmosphere. Quaff a pint of Guinness (M\$70) or sip something from the long mixed-drinks list. Rock bands rock the house on weekends.

The sociable **Cerdo de Babel** (Ocampo 324; ☎ 7pm-2am Tue-Sat), with jazz and other mellow music on the stereo, is an intimate bar on the pedestrianized part of Ocampo.

El Rincón Mexicano (☎ 481-51-91; Juárez 314; ☎ 3pm-2am Fri, Sat & Mon-Wed, 3-10pm Sun) has live music, mostly *música bohemia* and *trova* Thursday to Saturday nights.

Shopping

Saltillo is so famous for its sarapes that the local baseball team is known as the Saraperos. These days most items are woven in jarring combinations of colors, but some less garish wool ponchos and blankets are usually available.

El Sarape de Saltillo (☎ 414-96-34; Hidalgo 305 Sur; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat) Sells fine quality sarapes, rugs, ponchos and tablecloths plus a good choice of *artesanía* from the rest of Mexico. Wool is dyed and woven on treadle looms inside the shop.

Mercado Juárez (☎ 7am-8pm) Next to Plaza Acuña, this market is also worth a look for sarapes, as well as hats, saddles and souvenirs.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Mexicana (☎ 415-03-43) has three daily flights between Mexico City and Saltillo, usually for around M\$1700 one way, and **Continental Airlines** (☎ 488-13-14) flies daily to and from Houston, but most people fly from Monterrey. There are buses direct between Saltillo's bus station and Monterrey's airport.

BUS

Saltillo's busy bus station is on the ring road at Libertad, 2.5km south of the center. It has a left-luggage facility (M\$5 per hour).

Departures to the following leave at least hourly, except Cuatro Ciénegas, which has just one each evening:

Destination	Fare	Duration
Cuatro Ciénegas	M\$167	5hr
Durango	M\$346	7hr
Mexico City	deluxe M\$748	10hr
(Terminal Norte)	1st-class M\$575	10hr
Monclova	M\$140	3hr
Monterrey	deluxe M\$71	1¼hr
	1st-class M\$55	1¼hr
Nuevo Laredo	M\$238	5hr
Parras	M\$85	2½hr
San Luis Potosí	M\$27	5hr
Torreón	M\$192	3½hr
Zacatecas	M\$240	5hr

Buses also go to Ciudad Acuña, Ciudad Juárez, Guadalajara, Matamoros, Mazatlán, Morelia, Piedras Negras, Puerto Vallarta, Reynosa and Tijuana. **Autobuses Americanos** (☎ 417-04-96) has services to Chicago, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Saltillo is a junction of major roads. Hwy 40, going northeast to Monterrey, is a good four-lane road, with no tolls until the Monterrey bypass, though new tolls are planned. Going west to Torreón (262km), Hwy 40D splits off Hwy 40 after 30km, becoming an overpriced toll road. Hwy 40 is free and perfectly good.

The remote Hwy 57 runs north to Monclova (192km) through the dramatic Sierra San Marcos y Pinos while Hwy 54 crosses high, dry plains toward Zacatecas (380km).

of fruit trees (watch out for falling avocados!). It's not quite as atmospheric as Hostal El Faro; however, unlike El Farol (for the moment, anyway), it does have wi-fi. There's a decent restaurant here too.

Hostal El Farol (☎ 422-11-13; www.hostalelfarol.com; Arizpe 301; r M\$735-893, ste M\$1370; P ☒ 🚰) This excellent colonial-style hotel has spacious rooms with plenty of period character; the best are set off a flower-filled courtyard. Service is top-notch, and so is the restaurant. Rates drop to M\$620 Sunday to Thursday.

El Tiburón (Reforma 29 Sur; mains M\$20-50) A friendly place for *antojitos* and more.

La Paella (☎ 174-80-22; Madero 102; mains M\$25-75; ☞ noon-11pm Fri-Sun & holidays) You can guess the specialty of the house at this colorful place, run by a fun family from Saltillo in their spare time. There are also a few Mexican and Italian dishes.

Restaurant-Bar La Noria (☎ 422-05-47; Hostal El Farol, Arizpe 301; mains M\$45-159) This hospitable hotel restaurant has a courtyard with tables and makes a good choice for breakfast, steaks or seafood. Service is superb.

Parras is packed with *dulcerías*, all selling the region's famous *queso de higo* (fudgy candy made with figs).

Getting There & Away

Only 2nd-class buses serve Parras, but most have 1st-class comfort. There are nine daily to and from Saltillo (M\$85, 2½ hours) and five daily to and from Torreón (M\$105, three hours). If you want to head to Cuatro Ciénegas without backtracking to Saltillo, you can catch a bus to San Pedro Las Colonias (M\$75, 1½ hours, four daily) and then a bus from there to Cuatro Ciénegas (M\$119, two hours, nine daily). Parras is easy to reach by car; turn off the highway at La Paila and drive 27km south.

NUEVO LEÓN

With 85% of its 4.2 million residents living in and around the capital city of Monterrey, Nuevo León is one of Mexico's most sparsely populated states. Monterrey's industrial prowess, generating 7.4% of Mexico's GDP, makes the state a pillar of the national economy.

The earliest attempts by the Spanish to settle the area failed due to raids by hostile Chichimecs from the north. In 1596 the founding families of Monterrey finally held

on, though periodic attacks continued into the 18th century.

The silver the Spanish sought was never found, but they discovered ranching was viable here. By 1710 Nuevo León still had few human inhabitants, but there were an estimated 1.5 million sheep. Industry arrived with the railroads in the 19th century, and this set the state on its present course.

MONTERREY

☎ 81 / pop 3.6 million (metro area) / elevation 543m

Self-confident Monterrey is Mexico's third-largest city, second-largest industrial center and *numero uno* in per capita income. You may never have heard of it, but 'La Sultana del Norte' is bold enough to have made a bid for the 2016 Olympic Games.

With sprawling suburbs of gargantuan, air-conditioned malls, manicured housing estates and the nation's first new Taco Bells, Monterrey is one of Mexico's most Americanized cities, but those who bypass it in favor of the 'real' Mexico are missing a vital piece of the national puzzle.

Regardless of its station in modern Mexico, Monterrey is well worth a few days of your trip. Its historic heart, where most of the main attractions are clustered, has plenty of metropolitan élan: iconic modern architecture, world-class museums and urbane restaurants. The city is also a good place to party, with a dynamic live-music scene, flashy techno clubs and lovely lounge bars. Jagged mountains, including the distinctive saddle-shaped Cerro de la Silla (1288m), make a dramatic backdrop for the city and provide ample opportunities for outdoor adventures.

History

Though several previous attempts to found a city here failed, in 1596 12 families, led by Diego de Montemayor, settled where the Museo de Historia Mexicana now stands. It wasn't until after Mexican independence, however, that the city began to prosper as its proximity to the US gave it advantages in trade and smuggling.

In 1900 the first heavy industry in Latin America, a vast iron and steel works (now the site of the Parque Fundidora) rose to dominate the cityscape. More mills followed, and Monterrey became known as the 'Pittsburgh of Mexico.' Though many of the smokestacks

on the skyline are now idle, Monterrey still produces about 25% of Mexico's raw steel. The city also turns out around 75% of the nation's glass containers, 60% of its cement and half of its beer.

The city is famous for and fiercely proud of its entrepreneurial culture. *Fortune* magazine has rated it 'the best Latin American city to do business,' and over 500 US and Canadian firms base their regional operations here. Economic success and distance from the national power center have given Monterrey's citizens, called *regiomontanos* or *regios*, an independent point of view, and the city resents any 'meddling' in its affairs by the central government. Elsewhere in Mexico, people take umbrage at the city's arrogance, and anyone perceived as *codo* (cheap) is presumed to be from Monterrey.

Monterrey also commands an excellent international reputation for education, with six significant universities, including the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey, one of Latin America's best.

Orientation

Central Monterrey focuses on the Zona Rosa, an area of largely pedestrianized streets housing the more expensive hotels, shops and restaurants. The eastern edge of the Zona Rosa brushes the southern end of the Gran Plaza, a series of plazas and gardens studded with monuments. Across the Gran Plaza is the Barrio Antiguo, both the city's historic heart and nightlife nerve-center. San Pedro, 5km southwest of the city center, is Monterrey's most exclusive suburb. These areas are safe to walk around late into the night, as long as you use common sense.

The bus station is about 2.5km northwest of the city center, in a grimy traffic-blighted part of town, and there's cheap lodging around it. This is also a red-light district, though the sleaze largely skips Av Madero and it doesn't extend too far east where many midrange hotels are to be found. While robberies are not unheard of here, it's not a dangerous area overall. Colonia Independencia, around the Basílica de Guadalupe, on the other hand, is somewhere you should not walk through day or night.

Streets in the center follow a grid pattern. The corner of Juárez and Aramberri, roughly halfway between the Zona Rosa and the bus station, is the center of town – the zero point for addresses in both directions.

Information

EMERGENCY

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 065)

INTERNET ACCESS

Telephone access is available at these places too.

E Connection (Map pp400-1; Escobedo 831; per hr M\$20; ☎ 9am-10pm; 📠 Zaragoza)

SendeNet (Map pp400-1; Av Colón; per hr M\$20;

☎ 6am-midnight; 📠 Cuauhtémoc) In the bus station.

Web Time (Map pp400-1; cnr Morelos & Juárez; per hr M\$15; ☎ 10am-8:30pm; 📠 Padre Mier) On the 2nd floor of Interplaza Shoptown.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Muguerra (Map p398; ☎ 8399-3400; Hidalgo 2525 Pte)

Hospital San José (Map p398; ☎ 8347-1010; Av Prieto 3000 Pte)

MONEY

It's not much of an exaggeration to say there are banks and/or ATMs on every block of the Zona Rosa, and there are also many along Av Madero to the north. The most convenient ATMs for the Barrio Antiguo are under the Palacio Municipal. Exchange houses are most common along Ocampo west of Plaza Zaragoza and around the bus station.

POST

Post office (Map pp400-1; Washington 648 Ote)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Infotur (Map pp400-1; ☎ 2020-6789, in the US 866-238-3866; www.turismomonterrey.com; ☎ 9am-6:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) The friendly, English-speaking staff at this info center inside the Antiguo Palacio Federal on Washington have lots of information (much of it published in English and a bit in French) about sights and events across the state of Nuevo León.

Infotur kiosk (cnr Morelos & Zaragoza; ☎ 10am-8pm; 📠 Zaragoza) In the Zona Rosa.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Viajes Santa Rosa (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8344-9202; Galeana 940 Sur; 📠 Zaragoza) Reliable for plane tickets.

Sights & Activities

GRAN PLAZA

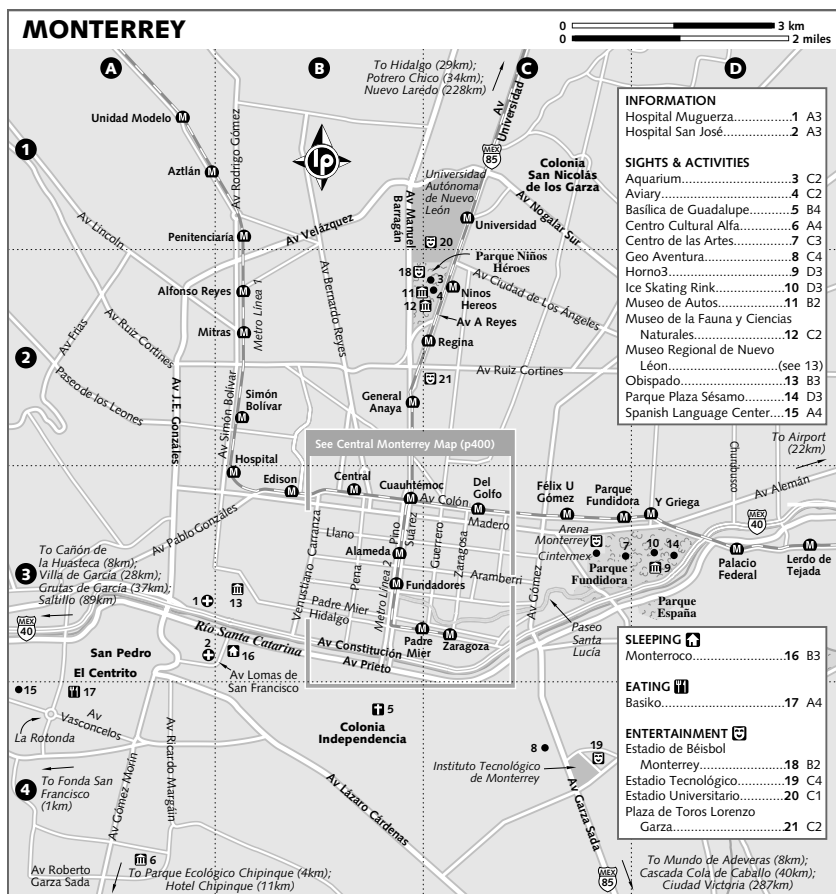
A monument to Monterrey's ambition, this city-block-wide series of interconnected squares, also known as the **Macroplaza** (Map pp400-1; 📠 Zaragoza), was created in the 1980s by

the demolition of a prime chunk of city-center real estate. A controversial, but ultimately successful, piece of redevelopment, its charm has increased over the years as once-naked urban space has been softened by parks, trees, fountains and pools, though it still feels like several parks rather than one. A roster of iconic edifices line the plaza, including many that no doubt seemed cutting-edge back in their day.

At the very southern tip, the **Monumento Homenaje al Sol** is a soaring sculpture designed by Rufino Tamayo on a traffic island. It faces the modern **Palacio Municipal**, a concrete building, which is raised on legs. The municipal band takes the stage underneath it on Sunday (11am to 2pm and 5pm to 9pm) and Thursday (7pm to 9pm), and elderly couples dance away

the day. Just north of this building there's a shady park, **Plaza Zaragoza**, which hosts many concerts and special events. The centerpiece of the plaza is a graceless, 70m-tall orange concrete slab known as the **Faro del Comercio** (Beacon of Commerce). A green laser beams off the top at night.

Facing the southeast corner of Plaza Zaragoza is the terrific **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo** (Marco; ☎ 8262-4500; www.marco.org.mx; cnr Zuazua & Raymundo Jardón; adult/child & student M\$50/30, free Wed; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue & Thu-Sun, 10am-8pm Wed), its entrance marked by Juan Soriano's gigantic black dove sculpture. Inside, its idiosyncratic spaces are filled with water and light and major temporary exhibitions. The Sala México, as you probably guessed, has



national works, while the other galleries could host just about anything else. Call in advance and you can get a tour in English. Marco also has a fine bookstore and restaurant.

Just north of Marco is the baroque facade of the **cathedral** (☎ 7:30am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat, 8am-8pm Sun), built in stages between about 1725 and the 1890s. The neon cross at the top just doesn't seem out of place in Monterrey. Facing the cathedral across the plaza is the 19th-century **Palacio Municipal**, which now houses the **Museo Metropolitano de Monterrey** (☎ 8344-1971; Zaragoza s/n Sur; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). There's a brief, Spanish-only summary of city history on the ground floor and lovely upstairs galleries featuring the work of contemporary painters and sculptors.

North of Padre Mier is the **Fuente de la Vida** (Fountain of Life) with Neptune riding a chariot and being chased by naked women. Across Zuazua to the east is Monterrey's smallest and, after the cathedral, its oldest church, the adorable 1830 **Capilla de los Dulces Nombres** (Matamoros; ☎ 3-5pm Thu-Sat).

Looming over the church to the north is the bunker-like presence of the concrete **Teatro de la Ciudad**, which sits opposite its brutalist cousin, the lofty **Congreso del Estado**. A concrete leg from the latter drops into a shimmering pool where kids splash about on hot days. Further north again, the **Biblioteca Central** (State Library) and the **Palacio de Justicia** (Courthouse) stand on either side of the **Parque Hundido** (Sunken Park), a favorite spot for courting couples.

North again and down some steps is the **Explanada de los Héroes** (Esplanade of the Heroes) with statues of national heroes in each corner. It's the most formal and traditional of the spaces in the Gran Plaza and has the 1908 neoclassical **Palacio de Gobierno** on its north side, with the **Museo del Palacio de Gobierno** (☎ 2033-9900; admission free; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Fri & 10am-8pm Sat & Sun) filling its ground floor. The displays survey the history of government in Nuevo León, but you'll want to visit just for a look at the building.

Behind the Palacio de Gobierno, little Plaza Cinco de Mayo faces the grand facade of the 1928 **Antiguo Palacio Federal**, now home to the post office and tourist office. The **Templo del Sagrado Corazón** (cnr Zaragoza & Calle 5 de Mayo; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3:30-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm & 4:30-8pm Sun), completed in 1903, is lovely inside and out, making it popular for weddings.

MONTERREY'S TOP PLACES TO SEE ART OUTSIDE MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

- **Centro Cultural Alfa** (p402)
- **Paseo Santa Lucía** (below)
- **Corredor del Arte** (p408)

PLAZA 400 AÑOS

Yet another wide-open space, this one just east of the Macroplaza, is graced with fountains and pools, and it serves as a grand entrance to the sleek modernist **Museo de Historia Mexicana** (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8345-9898; www.museohistoriamexicana.org.mx; adult/child M\$40/free, free Tue; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat & Sun; ☎ Zaragoza), which presents an exhaustive but easily manageable chronology of Mexican history. There's also an Earth section full of mounted animals and realistic-looking plants at its heart. All explanations are in Spanish only, but English tours can be arranged by phoning in advance.

Next door, looking like a giant Jenga game, is the impressive **Museo del Noreste**. Technically it's a separate institution, but practically speaking its galleries on the culture and history of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Coahuila and Texas, packed with video screens and artifacts, function as a new wing of the history museum with one ticket working for both. Begin on the bottom floor to follow the displays chronologically.

Plaza 400 Años is also the terminus of the **Paseo Santa Lucía**, a waterside promenade lined with fountains, flowers and strolling families stretching 2.4km to Parque Fundidora (p402). **Boat rides** (adult/child round trip M\$40/20; ☎ 10am-10pm) down the canal are very popular.

BARRIO ANTIGUO

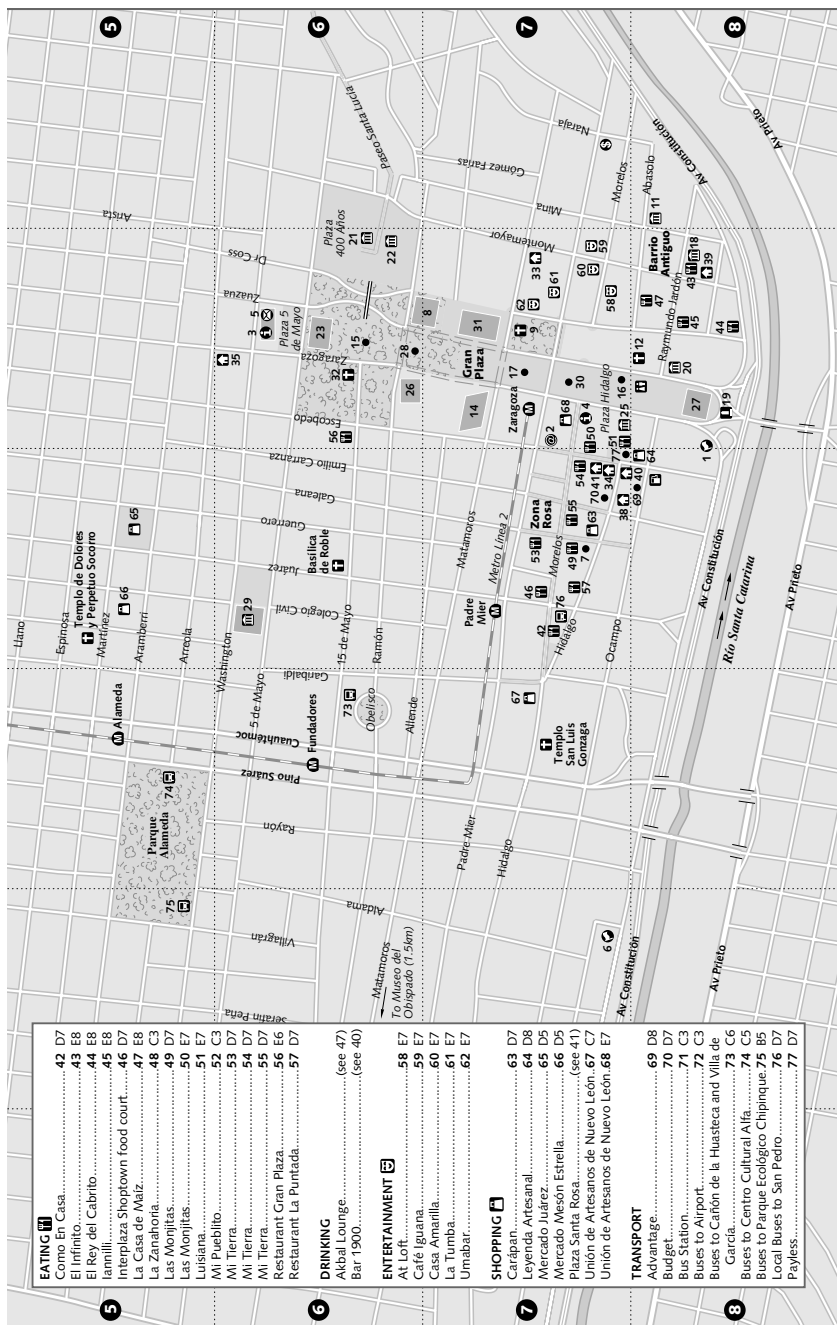
The most atmospheric part of town, Barrio Antiguo (Map pp400-1) has cobbled streets and fine colonial houses, many of which have been converted into cafés, restaurants and art galleries. Av Constitución to the south and east, Dr Coss to the west and Padre Mier in the north form its historic boundaries (note the old-style street lights and lack of electricity wires), though its vibe extends a few blocks further north. On Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights it becomes a major party zone with an excellent assortment of bars and clubs.

INFORMATION

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- 2 E7 E Connection.....
- 3 E6 Infotur.....
- 4 E7 Infotur Kiosk.....
- 5 E6 Post Office.....
- SendeNet..... (see 71)
- 6 B7 US Consulate.....
- 7 D7 Viajes Santa Rosa.....
- Web Time..... (see 46)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

- Antiguo Palacio Federal..... (see 3)
- 8 E7 Biblioteca Central.....
- 9 E7 Capilla de los Dulces Nombres.....
- 10 E3 Casa de la Cultura de Nuevo León.....
- 11 F8 Casa del Campesino.....
- 12 F8 Cathedral.....
- 13 C1 Convención Cuauhtémoc.....
- 14 E7 Congreso del Estado.....
- 15 E6 Explanada de los Héroes.....
- 16 E7 Fato del Comercio.....
- 17 E7 Fuente de la Vida.....
- 18 E8 La Casa de los Titeres.....
- 19 E8 Monumento Homenaje al Sol.....
- 20 E8 Museo de Arte Contemporáneo.....
- 21 E6 Museo de Historia Mexicana.....
- 22 E6 Museo del Noroeste.....
- 23 E6 Museo del Palacio de Gobierno.....
- 24 E3 Museo del Vidrio.....
- Populares..... (see 11)
- Museo Estatal de Culturas Populares..... (see 11)
- 25 E7 Museo Metropolitano de Monterrey.....
- 26 E6 Palacio de Justicia.....
- 27 E8 Hotel Colonial.....
- 28 E6 Hotel Del Centro.....
- 29 D6 Hotel Mundo.....
- 30 E7 Hotel Reforma.....
- 31 E7 Hotel Royalty.....
- 32 E6 La Casa del Barrio.....
- 33 E7 La Casa del Comercio.....
- 34 D7 Radisson Plaza Gran Hotel Andra.....
- 35 E6 Santa Rosa Suites.....
- 36 C3 Salón de la Fama..... (see 13)
- 37 E8 Teatro de la Ciudad.....
- 38 D7 Templo del Sagrado Corazón.....
- 39 E8 Santa Rosa Suites.....
- 40 D7 Santa Rosa Suites.....
- 41 D7 Santa Rosa Suites.....
- 42 D7 Santa Rosa Suites.....
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Don't miss **La Casa de los Títeres** (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8343-0604; www.baulteatro.com; Raymundo Jardón 910; admission M\$20; 🕒 2-6pm Sun-Fri; 📺 Zaragoza), which has an extensive collection of antique and modern puppets from all corners of the globe, including European marionettes and Vietnamese water puppets. An excellent puppet show (M\$50) is held on Sunday at 4pm.

One of Monterrey's oldest buildings, the 1750 **Casa del Campesino**, built as the governor's residence and later used at various times as a hospital, college and farmers' organization office, now houses the **Museo Estatal de Culturas Populares** (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8344-3030; cnr Abasolo & Mina; admission free; 🕒 11am-7pm Tue-Fri, noon-6pm Sat & Sun; 📺 Zaragoza) with various temporary cultural displays and occasional special events. There's a simple but good café.

ZONA ROSA

This upmarket area (Map pp400-1) just west of Plaza Zaragoza contains many of Monterrey's top hotels, and is also a prime shopping district. It extends toward Padre Mier in the north, Zaragoza in the east, Ocampo to the south and Garibaldi to the west. Many of the streets are pedestrianized and usually bustling with life. It's a pleasure to walk around here.

MUSEO DEL VIDRIO

At the back of the Vitro bottle factory (enter from Zaragoza), which has many glass walls so you can watch production, this wonderful **museum** (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8863-1000; www.museodelvidrio.com; Magallanes 517; adult/child & student M\$15/10, free Tue; 🕒 9am-6pm Tue-Sun; 📺 Del Golfo) focuses on the history, manufacturing and especially the artistic use of glass. The main museum has a bunch of old household objects and a reproduction of a 19th-century stained-glass workshop. The gallery hosts phenomenal temporary exhibitions of glass art in a restored warehouse and has artist workshops attached. You can buy some of the work in the gallery shop. Call ahead to schedule a tour in English.

PARQUE FUNDIDORA

Formerly a vast steel-factory complex, this once-blighted industrial zone has been transformed into a huge **urban park** (Map p398; ☎ 8345-4898; www.parquefundidora.org; 🕒 6am-11pm; 📺 Parque Fundidora) that encompasses a variety of attractions, including many that will appeal to children. Cleverly, the park designers retained rusting smoke stacks and other industrial rel-

ics, giving a postmodern, apocalyptic feel to parts of the place.

You could easily spend a day here taking in the exhibitions and galleries, enjoying a picnic lunch around the lake and finishing it off by attending a concert. Many special events are held here. A free trolley loops around the park, and there are bike rentals (M\$40 per hour) at the north end.

Blast Furnace No 3, which feels like it could start up production again any time, has been converted into **Horno3** (☎ 8126-1100; www.horno3.org; adult/child & student M\$80/50; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat & Sun), a high-tech, hands-on museum of steel and Mexico's steel industry. Don't miss the overly dramatic furnace show. Last tickets are sold one hour before closing.

Three other disemboweled redbrick factories compose the **Centro de las Artes** (☎ 8479-0015; www.cineteca.org.mx; admission free, films M\$40; 🕒 10am-9pm Tue-Sun), filled with rotating modern art exhibitions. Centro de las Artes I is known as Cineteca, because it also shows independent and foreign films.

Elsewhere across the park are an **ice skating rink** (pista de hielo; ☎ 8191-8000; ind rental M\$70), convention center with adjacent hotels, amphitheater, arena and the **Parque Plaza Sésamo** (Map p398; ☎ 8354-5400; www.parqueplazasesamo.com; admission M\$169, young child free; 🕒 3-7pm Wed-Fri, 11am-7pm Sat & Sun), a vast *Sesame Street* theme park with dozens of thrilling rides, a waterpark and shows with the famous characters.

The metro drops you right near the park, but the best way to get here is along Paseo Santa Lucía (p399).

PINACOTECA DE NUEVO LEÓN

This **art museum** (Map pp400-1; ☎ 1340-4358; cnr Washington & Colegio Civil; admission free; 🕒 10am-8pm Wed-Mon; 📺 Alameda), in the gorgeous Colegio Civil building, has gathered paintings and sculptures from most of the state's leading contemporary artists, including Julio Galán (1958-2006), once part of Andy Warhol's circle, while the temporary exhibitions come from the rest of Mexico and beyond.

CENTRO CULTURAL ALFA

Usually called **Planetario Alfa** (Map p398; ☎ 8303-0001; www.planetarioalfa.org.mx; Av Roberto Garza Sada 1000; museum & grounds/museum, grounds & theater M\$45/80; 🕒 3:30-8pm Tue-Fri, 11:30am-8pm Sat & Sun), the center is 7km south of the city center. Sponsored by the Alfa industrial group, its striking **museum**

MONTERREY FOR KIDS

Monterrey has plenty of attractions that will thrill children. On the east side of **Parque Fundidora** (opposite), **Parque Plaza Sésamo** (opposite) offers kids their *Sesame Street* fix.

Parque Niños Héroes (Map p398; Av Reyes; **M** Niños Héroes), about 5km north of the center, has several family-friendly attractions. Tops is the **Museo de la Fauna y Ciencias Naturales** (☎ 8351-7077; adult/child M\$5/free; 🕒 9am-6:30pm Tue-Fri, 10am-6:30pm Sat & Sun), with stuffed wildlife in dioramas of natural habitats from Saharan Africa to the Arctic. The park also holds a small **aviary** (admission free; 🕒 9am-4pm), a smaller **aquarium** (admission free; 🕒 9am-3:30pm) and two buildings full of old cars comprising the **Museo de Autos** (☎ 8331-3890; adult/child M\$10/free; 🕒 10am-7pm Tue-Sun).

Some 10km southwest of Monterrey, **Mundo de Adiveras** (☎ 1160-1160; www.deadeveras.com; Hwy 85 Km 262; admission M\$120, young child free; 🕒 hours vary) is a hands-on 'town' where kids can work at various jobs like firefighter and pilot. **Centro Cultural Alfa** (opposite), **Horno3** (opposite) and **La Casa de los Titeres** (opposite) are also guaranteed kid-pleasers.

If you have many mouths to please, consider the **Interplaza Shoptown food court** (cnr Morelos & Juárez; 🕒 10am-8:30pm) where options include pizza, sushi, Chinese, Cajun and, of course, Mexican.

building looks like a wonky water tank. Most floors are devoted to science and technology exhibits, but there are also superb Mexican antiquities hidden away on the 5th floor. All are labeled in Spanish only. In the center of the building, what was once the planetarium is now an **IMAX cinema**.

Outside are more hands-on science displays plus an aviary, observatory, replica Olmec heads and the striking **Pabellón El Universo**, specially built to showcase a superb stained-glass mural by artist Rufino Tamayo.

Special free buses leave from the southwest corner of Parque Alameda at 3:30pm, 4:30pm, 5:30pm and 6:30pm weekdays and hourly between 11:30am and 7:30pm Saturday and Sunday. The last bus back to central Monterrey departs at 8:45pm.

OBISPADO

The former bishopric palace, on a hill 2.5km west of the Zona Rosa, gives fine views of the city and surrounding mountains, smog permitting. Initiated in 1787 on the orders of the bishop of Linares, the building has an intricate yellow Churrigueresque facade. Now it houses the small **Museo Regional de Nuevo León** (Map p398; ☎ 8346-0404; adult/child M\$37/free; 🕒 museum 10am-7pm Tue-Sun, grounds 6am-11pm) which most people will find less intriguing than the views. No buses come here, but bus 4 heading west along Padre Mier turns left at 20 de Noviembre, from where it's a 10- or 15-minute uphill walk – head to the end of the road, up the stairs, turn left then take the first right. It's easier going back; just take any 'Centro' bus down Hidalgo.

CERVECERÍA CUAUHTÉMOC

The **Cuauhtémoc brewery** (Map pp400-1; Alfonso Reyes 2202 Nte; **M** General Anaya), the oldest brewery in Mexico (established in 1890), fills six million bottles of Bohemia, Dos Equis and Tecate and other beers every day. Free **brewery tours** (☎ 8328-5355; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) are given more or less hourly. Reservations are recommended (especially if you'd like a tour in English), but you can just show up and see if there's space. Tours start in front of the pleasant outdoor **beer garden** (🕒 10am-6pm) where they hand out free mugs of Carta Blanca.

Also on-site is the **Salón de la Fama** (☎ 8328-5815; www.salondelafama.com.mx; admission free; 🕒 9:30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10:30am-6pm Sat & Sun), a baseball hall of fame for players in the Mexican leagues and a museum about the game itself. You can test your throwing arm and batting skills.

CASA DE LA CULTURA DE NUEVO LEÓN

The lovely 1891 Gulf Line railroad station now houses twin **museums** (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8374-1128; Colón 400 Ote; admission free; **M** Del Golfo) and a stage that regularly hosts dance, theater and art-house films. The biggest display, appropriately enough, is a so-so **train museum** (🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) while the small **art museum** (🕒 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) has temporary displays that are usually good enough to warrant a stop on your way to or from the nearby Museo Del Vidrio.

PARQUE ECOLÓGICO CHIPINQUE

Stretched along a mountainside with a knife-like ridge at the south edge of the city, this **park**

(☎ 8303-0000; www.chipinque.org.mx; pedestrian/cyclist/vehículo M\$20/30/30; ☎ 6am-8pm) is the most accessible section of the **Parque Nacional Cumbres de Monterrey**, offering urbanites ample opportunities for hiking and mountain biking. The 36km of trail are well maintained, and it doesn't take long to get into some pretty dense pine and oak forest. Butterflies are particularly prolific here, with 174 species represented. Rappelling and 'mini-bungee' jumping are also offered.

Maps, snacks, trail advice and permits for those heading to any of the park's rocky peaks, including **Copete de Águilas** (2200m), the highest, are available at the visitor center near the entrance. A 7km drive further on brings you to La Meseta, where there's a four-star hotel, Hotel Chipinque (opposite) – eat at its restaurant and they'll validate your admission ticket – and several trailheads, including one for **El Empalme**, an easy walk with great views of the city and the mountains.

Free weekend and holiday buses to Chipinque leave from the southeast corner of Parque Alameda at 8am, 10am and noon; be sure to ask when the last bus returns.

Courses

COOKING

Roccatti (off Map p398; ☎ 8335-8478; www.cecroccatti.com; Río Mississippi 116 Ote, Colonia del Valle, San Pedro) A serious culinary school with some three-hour (M\$750) and three-day (M\$4200) classes available.

SPANISH

Posada El Potrero Chico (p412) Offers language classes along with rock-climbing instruction.

Spanish Language Center (Map p398; ☎ 8335-7546; www.swordvision.net/spanishcenter; Río Potomac 423, Colonia del Valle, San Pedro) Normally does private tutoring, but will try to match you with other students if you prefer small-group study.

Tours

Monterrey's **Paseo Cultural en Tranvía** (M\$20; ☎ 4-10pm Tue-Sun spring-summer, 2-8pm Tue-Sun fall-winter) zips around the Gran Plaza and Zona Rosa in a classic-style trolley. You can join the 45-minute narrated tours at several marked stops, including in front of the Marco art museum and on Padre Mier at Garibaldi.

Festivals & Events

Festival Internacional de Cine en Monterrey

Mexican and international art-house films. Held over two weeks in August.

Aniversario de Independencia Monterrey's biggest celebrations are held on Mexico's Independence Day, September 16, with fireworks, *musica norteña* and a parade.

Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe The second-largest celebration of this Mexican event, on December 12, begins as early as mid-November as thousands of pilgrims head for the Basílica de Guadalupe.

Sleeping

There are just two choices in the Barrio Antiguo, the best neighborhood to lay your head. The Zona Rosa, the next best address, has several midrange and luxury options, including international chain hotels. Most people who stay north of the center around the bus station do so to save money, but others enjoy the bustle. There are many more luxury options south of the center; these are mostly the haunt of business travelers.

See p409 for other options near Monterrey.

BUDGET

Budget hotels fill up fast, especially at weekends. Reservations are an especially good idea at the hostels because if you don't have one, there may be nobody around to check you in.

Monterroco (Map p398; ☎ 1365-4690; www.monterroco.com; Av Lomas de San Francisco 205, Colonia Lomas de San Francisco; dm M\$130, r M\$340; ☒ ☎ ☎ ☎) Though it's located far from the action, this hostel is clean and comfy, and hospitable host Mauricio goes out of his way to make sure guests have fun. Facilities include foosball, a swimming pool, barbecues in the garden, a full kitchen and free wi-fi. All the dorm rooms (four, six and eight beds) have lockers. From the bus station, take a Ruta 17 bus heading south on Pino Suárez; a taxi costs about M\$30.

Hotel Reforma (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8375-3268; Cuauhtémoc 1132 Nte; s/d M\$180/220; M Cuauhtémoc) These rooms, some of the cheapest to be found in town, aren't fancy, but they're clean. No other place at this price in this area is in the habit of renting rooms for a whole night.

our pick **La Casa del Barrio** (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8344-1800; www.lacasadelbarrio.com.mx; Montemayor 1221 Sur; dm M\$180, r with shared/private bathroom M\$310/415; M Zaragoza; ☒ ☎) This friendly, family-run hostel, ideally located in the heart of the Barrio Antiguo, is a quiet and casual place where guests tend to spend evenings chilling and chatting in the central patio. Dorm rooms range from four to seven beds, and

there are nine cozy privates. There's free wi-fi and a kitchen, and everyone is invited to free Sunday afternoon barbecues. Ask about cooking classes.

Hotel Mundo (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8374-6850; Reforma 736 Pte; s/d/tr/q M\$340/386/433/457; 📍 Cuauhtémoc; 📞 📺 📺 📺 📺) A well-maintained and efficiently run place just south of the bus station. The spotless rooms all have simple but attractive decor, reading lights, writing tables and cable TV (but no remote controls) and phones. It offers excellent value for Monterrey.

MIDRANGE

Few of Monterrey's midrange hotels offer good value, unless you head to out-of-the-way locations.

Fundador Hotel (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8343-0121; hotelfundador@prodigy.net.mx; Montemayor 802 Sur; s/d M\$351/409; 📍 Zaragoza; 📞 📺 📺) This rambling, slightly shabby, historic hotel in the Barrio Antiguo has real ambience with quirky wood-paneled rooms dotted around a warren of stairways and corridors. Room standards and sizes vary a lot so look around before handing over your pesos. Some have refrigerators, microwaves and antique furniture. Those in front can get loud when the Barrio's bars are busy.

Hotel Del Centro (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8340-8754; Zaragoza 208 Sur; r M\$450; 📞 📺 📺) An antique-filled lobby leads to simple but comfortable rooms that, by Monterrey standards, offer good value. Located just north of the Gran Plaza, it's convenient for sightseeing but not so much for nightlife.

Hotel Colonial (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8380-6800; www.hotelcolonialmty.com; Hidalgo 475 Ote; r incl breakfast M\$550-650; 📍 Zaragoza; 📞 📺 📺 📺) This well-situated place in the heart of the Zona Rosa tries for an air of sophistication, but fails. Still, the rooms aren't bad, especially the pricier remodeled ones, and there's free wi-fi in the lobby.

Hotel Royalty (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8340-2800; www.hotelroyalty.com.mx; Hidalgo 402 Ote; r incl breakfast M\$731; 📍 Zaragoza; 📞 📺 📺 📺) Fit for a king? Not a chance. But even though the rooms are ready for a remodel, it's a step up from the Colonial down the block. The pool is tiny.

Santa Rosa Suites (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8342-4200; www.santarosa.com.mx; Escobedo 930 Sur; ste incl breakfast from M\$819; 📍 Zaragoza; 📞 📺 📺 📺) Much more intimate than most of Monterrey's pricier hotels, the suites here are plush and quite large, each having a separate living area with sofa bed, DVD player, and a dining area with seating

for four. There's a restaurant and piano bar on the 3rd floor and wi-fi throughout.

TOP END

Radisson Plaza Gran Hotel Ancira (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8150-7000; www.hotel-ancira.com; cnr Hidalgo & Escobedo; r/ste M\$1200/1500; 📍 Zaragoza; 📞 📺 📺 📺) The classiest address in the Zona Rosa, this stylish hotel dates from 1912 and boasts an intricate baroque-style facade and imposing lobby with a sweeping staircase, shops and a grand piano. The ambience sweeps into the restaurant and the accompanying Bar 1900 (p407) but only dusts the rooms, which are standard business class. The gym is large, but the pool is very small. Promotional rates can reduce rates below M\$1000 a night.

Hotel Chipinque (off Map p398; ☎ 8173-1777; www.hotelchipinque.com; r M\$1250, 6-/8-person cabaña M\$2800/3000; 📞 📺 📺 📺) Besides a great setting, this hotel high up in Parque Ecológico Chipinque has attractive rooms and *cabañas* with fireplaces, massage service and tennis courts. If only the service could live up to the facilities.

Eating

Monterrey's signature dish is *cabrito al pastor* (roast kid), which, according to various legends, was created here. Supposedly there's none better because of the grass the young goats eat in the area. Another widely held belief among Mexicans is that this is where you'll find Mexico's best *machacado* (pulverized jerky).

A stroll around Barrio Antiguo is a good way to find a place to eat, though it pays to book ahead on Friday and Saturday nights. On the other hand, there are surprisingly few good places to eat in the Zona Rosa (except for pricey hotel restaurants), which is thick with international and Mexican fast-food places.

Although the privilege will usually cost you plenty of pesos, you can eat very well in the suburb of San Pedro. The good restaurants are pretty spread out, but El Centrito, a bustling little area just northeast of the traffic circle (La Rotonda), is a good place to poke around. Many international cuisines are represented there, including Japanese, Korean, French and Egyptian.

BUDGET

Las Monjitas (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8344-6713; Escobedo 903 Sur; mains M\$25-75; 📍 Zaragoza) The waitresses

are dressed as nuns and nearly every inch of space is covered in colorful tiles at this bizarre restaurant. The food is only so-so, but it's a fun experience. And, yes; they serve beer. There's another branch at the corner of Morelos and Galeana.

Mi Tierra (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8340-5611; Morelos 350 Ote; mains M\$27-62, set lunch M\$49; **M** Zaragoza) If you like *mole* you'll love this open-fronted place on the pedestrian mall, or its other locations around the Zona Rosa.

Mi Pueblito (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8375-3756; Madero 830 Pte; mains M\$30-75; ☎ 24hr; **M** Cuauhtémoc) Enjoy filling Mexican standards in this cute little place while using the free wi-fi.

Restaurant La Puntada (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8340-6985; Hidalgo 123 Ote; mains M\$30-89; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Sat; **M** Padre Mier) This large, simple place with a long list of Mexican items, plus steaks, at fair prices has had a loyal following since 1955. The food is fantastic.

Como En Casa (Map pp400-1; Hidalgo 137 Ote; complete lunch M\$35; ☎ 12:30-3:30pm; **M** Padre Mier) Popular for the price, of course, but the food isn't bad. You have a choice of eight mains plus soup, salad, beans, rice and a drink. Closing time can depend on when food runs out.

Restaurant Gran Plaza (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8342-0457; Escobedo 480 Sur; mains M\$36-95; ☎ 11am-10:30pm; **M** Zaragoza; ☒) If you get hungry exploring the Gran Plaza, this popular Chinese-owned Chinese restaurant a block off Explanada de los Héroes will fill you up fast.

ourpick La Casa de Maíz (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8340-4332; Abasolo 870; mains M\$40-60; ☎ 6pm-11:30pm Mon, 6pm-1am Tue-Thu, 2pm-1am Fri & Sat, 1-10:30pm Sun; **M** Zaragoza; **V**) A bohemian place specializing in corn-based comfort food from southern Mexico, including *memelas* (thick tortillas with black beans topped with cheese and more), plus *quesadillas* and *tostadas*, all served on hand-painted tables.

La Zanahoria (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8372-3258; Rayón 932 Nte; meals M\$52-57; ☎ 8am-6pm; **M** Cuauhtémoc; **V**) Simple little vegetarian place run by yoga fanatics serving food like *beregena gratinada* (eggplant baked with breadcrumbs and tomato and cheese) and mock-meat *milanesa*. All dishes include wholemeal bread, soup, salad and a drink.

MIDRANGE

ourpick El Infinito (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8989-5252; Raymundo Jardón 904; mains M\$60-135; ☎ 9am-1am; **M** Zaragoza; **V**) Highly enjoyable culture café

set inside colonial premises with gorgeous tiled floors, high beamed ceilings and walls adorned with art. Musically, things are kept tranquil with ambient and classical music on the hi-fi and Friday night live jazz on the rooftop terrace. It offers high-priced sandwiches, cheese plates, pizzas, fruit frappés, mango martinis and properly made espresso. There are books to browse and occasional art-house movies. Ask Pepe, the amiable owner, about his desert tours.

El Rey del Cabrito (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8345-3232; cnr Dr Coss & Av Constitución; mains M\$60-185; ☎ 11am-midnight; **M** Zaragoza) Huge landmark restaurant, complete with a revolving crown on its roof and hunting-lodge-kitsch interior. Your goat arrives at the table still sizzling on a bed of onions, with a large salad and tortillas. Start things off with the *principio de fritada* (fried blood). There's another location to the west of the center on Av Constitución.

TOP END

ourpick Fonda San Francisco (off Map p398; ☎ 8336-6706; Los Aldama 123 Sur, Centro; mains M\$60-300; ☎ 1-11:30pm Mon-Sat; **V**) Like nothing you've tried before, most of the recipes in this cozy little bistro are inspired by pre-Hispanic cooking. English-speaking chef Adrian Herrera will guide you through the menu, which is ripe with delights like *molito de hongos* (mushroom *mole* with chicken) and *pavo en pipian de cacao* (turkey with pumpkin-seed and chocolate sauce). It's located just south of Av Vasconcelos; if you take bus 130 get off by the Super Roma. A sister spot, which will keep the same general philosophy but offer a fancier experience, including proper wine pairings, will be opening down the street in Plaza Express (between De Gollado and Neil Armstrong).

Basiko (Map p398; ☎ 8128-9065; Río Colorado 226, Colonia del Valle; M\$180-220; ☎ 1-11pm Mon-Thu, 1pm-1am Fri & Sat) Another chef-driven place, this one is known for mixing in flavors from the owners' native Ensenada.

Iannilli (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8342-7200; Dr Coss 1221 Sur; mains M\$85-198; ☎ 1-11pm Mon-Sat, 1-10pm Sun; **M** Zaragoza) Seriously elegant and expensive Italian restaurant with intimate dining rooms and formal service. The extensive menu includes risotto with porcini mushroom, gnocchi, shrimp dishes and pizza. The attached Mexican restaurant, Madre Oaxaca, is also very good.

Luisiana (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8343-3753; Hidalgo 530 Ote; mains M\$165-412; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Sat, 5pm-midnight Sun; **M** Zaragoza) Tuxedoed waiters and all the trappings of high-end dining are available at this classic. The meat and seafood menu is a mix of old and new, Mexican and Continental, with choices like *cabrito*, beef stroganoff, Indian curried shrimp and *pato al hono al'orange* (duck à la orange).

Drinking

The best bar action is in the Barrio Antiguo, where stylish places are thick on the ground. El Infinito (opposite) is also a good place to spend some sipping time. Take care if you visit any of the *cantinas* around the bus station; many draw a rough crowd.

ourpick Akbal Lounge (Map pp400-1; ☎ 1257-2986; Abasolo 870 Ote; ☎ 9pm-late Tue-Sat; **M** Zaragoza) Enter this opium den—style mélange of red velvet, chandeliers and giant antique mirrors through La Casa de Maíz. Sip a cocktail and lose yourself in the mood music – ambient and lounge sounds during the week, revving up to sexy electro and deep house at weekends – or stargaze on the groovy deck. Sunday night is gay night, but every night is gay-friendly.

Bar 1900 (Map pp400-1; cnr Hidalgo & Escobeda; ☎ noon-1am, noon-2am Fri & Sat; **M** Zaragoza) Elegant and historic bar fronting Zona Rosa's Radisson Plaza Gran Hotel Ancira that, except for the big-screen TV, maintains much of its old-time ambience. Guitarists sing classic *nortño* tunes most nights, and there's a particularly good selection of whiskey.

Entertainment

Monterrey has numerous cinemas and an active cultural life including concerts, theater and art exhibitions. The best sources of what is happening are the daily Gente and Vida sections of *El Norte* newspaper and *Agenda Cultura*, which you can pick up for free at the tourist office and some museums. For the low-down on 'Montegay' scan www.gaymonterrey.net.

LIVE MUSIC & CLUBS

The Barrio Antiguo clubs frequented by Monterrey's affluent younger set are very much the place to get a groove on. Below are a few good places, but the best advice we can give you is to hit the streets and let your ears lead you. El Centrito, in San Pedro, also has a few good dance floors.

Café Iguana (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8343-0822; Montemayor 927 Sur; ☎ 9pm-3:30am Thu-Sat; **M** Zaragoza) The epicenter of alternative Monterrey, where the pierced, multi-tattooed tribe gathers en masse, both inside and on the street out front. The stereo rocks punk and metal bands in front and the same often take the stage; otherwise DJs tone things down a bit back there. Cover charge only for live bands.

Umabar (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8343-9372; Dr Coss 837 Sur; admission M\$100; ☎ 10pm-4am Thu-Sat; **M** Zaragoza) Shooting for style rather than fashion, this small, Asian-themed rooftop spot spins a fun mix of music, from Rancid to Maná to the Village People. If you're looking for a more traditional dance floor, head to the east end of Padre Mier.

La Tumba (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8345-6860; Padre Mier 827 Ote; admission Fri & Sat M\$25-60; ☎ 7pm-3am Mon-Sat; **M** Zaragoza) This lovely venue, dubbing itself a cultural bar, mostly features live *trova*, blues and singer-songwriters.

Casa Amarilla (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8129-0545; cnr Morelos & Montemayor; ☎ 8pm-2am Wed-Sun; **M** Zaragoza) Monterrey's artistic, wannabe trendsetters fill the various art-filled rooms of this converted house. The music runs from blues on Wednesday to jazz on Sunday with a wide range on the days in between. Cover charge only for the occasional live band.

At Loft (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8342-7031; Morelos 870 Ote; ☎ 8pm-2am Thu-Sat; **M** Zaragoza) The Dali-esque deer head and pulsing lights catch your eye at this uber-chic lounge bar. The weekend begins with a variety of groovy tunes and ends on Saturday with disco downstairs and hip-hop (admission men/women M\$80/30) upstairs.

SPORTS

There are professional soccer games on most weekends throughout the year. The Universidad de Nuevo León Tigres play at the **Estadio Universitario** (Map p398; ☎ 8158-6450; Universidad de Nuevo León; **M** Universidad), while the Monterrey Rayados play at the **Estadio Tecnológico** (Map p398; ☎ 8358-2000; Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey). When the two teams meet, it's a very important event for the city.

Monterrey's Sultanes baseball team plays at **Estadio de Béisbol Monterrey** (Map p398; ☎ 8351-0209; Parque Niños Héroes; **M** Niños Héroes) from March to August.

During the main bullfight season (May to November) *corridos* are held at the **Plaza de Toros Lorenzo Garza** (Map p398; ☎ 8374-0450; www

MEET THE CHEF: ADRIAN HERRERA

What got you started down your unique culinary path? I have been always interested in the roots of things. My country is a mysterious, exotic and enigmatic land. It is comprised of many ethnic groups, a varied geographical environment and an array of indigenous materials that make cuisine our universal cultural heritage. No matter how modern we become, or how strongly foreign cultures influence us, there will always be a basic flowing vein of identity within a society. I seek that essential fluid.

I used to be a sculptor, dealing with petroglyphs, fossils and primitive paintings. I sought our origins through ancient art and biology, but when I became interested in cooking, I changed one laboratory for another, where the materials used could be eaten and processed in a psychological fashion and, at the same time, have a cultural reaction. Cooking is a powerful tool to understand who people are, their identities, origins, the way they see themselves and others, and, in a way, their future. This was a radical idea that mesmerized me.

Where do you get your recipes and ideas from? Directly from the source. I travel to small towns and rustic places. I eat, smell, observe, ask many questions and cook with the people when possible. I also have an interest in home cooking, which is as important as indigenous cooking.

Some recipes I reproduce just as they are, but prepare them with professional techniques. Others I interpret, adding new materials and modern techniques. Some recipes I create freely, based on regional produce, the people I want to portray or a region I desire to understand. I also read a lot. Part of my passion is understanding the conceptual basis of cooking: the relationships between materials, traditions, evolution, etc. I do a lot of research.

A restaurant should not be a culinary museum. Food changes as societies do. Cooking – and eating – are ever-changing phenomena directly associated with culture. But certain basic recipes and principles must be observed, as they are the fundamental elements on which the whole of a society is built.

If you look, it's easy to visualize how the basic recipes that define a country's or region's cultural identity are carried within the newer preparations that, in appearance, seem too modern to have any relationship with rustic food. In essence these new foods carry it, transport it and protect it.

What is the typical reaction of first-time visitors to your restaurant? Customers react with caution, as most of the recipes are unfamiliar for them. But as soon as they taste the food, many of the flavors and aromas they know produce familiar sensations through memories of old recipes and places they've been in the past. For many, the food takes them momentarily away from themselves, on a curious and fulfilling little journey.

Adrian Herrera is the owner and head chef of Fonda San Francisco (p406).

.monumentallorenzozarza.com; Av Reyes 2401 Nte, Colonia del Prado; M\$140-1000; (M) General Anaya) at 4pm on Sunday.

Shopping

The **Unión de Artesanos de Nuevo León** (Map pp400-1) mini-malls on both ends of the Zona Rosa (Hidalgo 223 Pte, open 10am to 8pm, and Morelos 547 Ote, open 10am to 8:30pm) have the usual selection of crafts and schlock, as does the **Plaza Santa Rosa** (Map pp400-1; Escobedo 930 Sur; ☎ 10am-8pm; (M) Zaragoza) shopping arcade. **Leyenda Artisanal** (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8343-7490; Escobedo 1013 Sur; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun; (M) Zaragoza) has a higher-quality inventory.

our pick **Carápan** (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8345-4422; www.carapangaleria.com; Hidalgo 305 Ote; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat; (M) Padre Mier) is in a whole other class, and

is Monterrey's best outlet for *artesanía*. The genial owner, who is full of advice about what to see and do in Monterrey, stocks museum-quality work from across Mexico.

Mina St in the Barrio Antiguo becomes the **Corredor del Arte** (Art Corridor; ☎ 10am-6pm), a combination arts-and-crafts and flea market, on Sundays. Bands play too. Also on Sunday, painters also sell their works in the Zona Rosa's Plaza Hidalgo.

Mercado Juárez (Map pp400-1; Av Juárez; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, 8am-3pm Sun; (M) Alameda), the main downtown market, sells plenty of everyday items. **Mercado Mesón Estrella** (cnr Martínez & Méndez; ☎ 6am-8pm Mon-Sat, 6am-4:30pm Sun), a block west, is a large food market. Both are fun to browse, and Juárez has many *fondas* with good home cooking.

If you want big malls, small boutiques and trendy brand-name fashions, head to the suburb of San Pedro.

Getting There & Away

AIR

There are direct flights, usually daily, to all major cities in Mexico, plus direct international flights to Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Atlanta, Chicago, Madrid and Barcelona. Most international destinations are best routed via Mexico City, Houston or Dallas.

Airline offices include the following:

Aerobus (☎ 81-8215-0150)

Aero California (☎ 8345-9700)

Aerocaribe (☎ 8356-7201)

Aeroméxico (☎ 8343-5503)

Aeroméxico Connect (☎ 8369-8537)

Air France (☎ 8343-1129)

American Airlines (☎ 8369-0941)

Aviaca (☎ 8153-4305)

Continental Airlines (☎ 8345-2402)

Delta Airlines (☎ 8335-0912)

Lineas Azteca (☎ 8387-9249)

Mexicana (☎ 8340-5311)

United Airlines (☎ 8335-6117)

BUS

Monterrey's bus station, **Central de Autobuses** (Map pp400-1; Av Colón; M Cuahtémoc), is a small city unto itself, with restaurants, pharmacies, phones, an internet café and **left-luggage services** (per hr M\$5) – the office on the station's west side is open 24 hours. It's busy day and night with departures and arrivals from across Mexico and Texas (see the table on p410).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Monterrey airport is about 30km northeast of the city center, off Hwy 54. A taxi costs around M\$200 to M\$250, depending on traffic, from downtown. It's standard policy to fix a price rather than use the meter. From the airport you can purchase a ticket for an authorized taxi at a booth in the arrivals area, though you *might* save money if you walk out to the road and wave one down.

No public transportation serves the airport directly; however, if money is tight, Autobuses Amarillos has 2nd-class buses (M\$7.5, twice an hour from 5am to 8:45pm) from the bus station that pass about 1½km away, and you can easily flag down a taxi from here.

METRO

The **Metrorrey** (1/5 trips M\$4.5/20; ☎ 5am-midnight), Monterrey's modern, efficient metro system, consists of two lines. The elevated Línea 1 runs from the northwest of the city across to the eastern suburbs, passing the Parque Fundidora. Línea 2 begins underground at the Gran Plaza and runs north past Parque Niños Héroes up into the northern suburbs. The two lines cross right by the bus station at Cuahtémoc station.

BUS

Frequent buses (M\$6 to M\$9) will get you anywhere you need to go that you can't reach by metro, but often by circuitous routes. One noteworthy bus is Ruta 130, which goes from the corner of Juárez and Hidalgo in Zona Rosa through San Pedro passing La Rotonda (the traffic circle) then heading west along Av Vasconcelos. Other bus information is given in reviews.

TAXI

Taxis (all have meters) are ubiquitous in Monterrey and very reasonably priced. From the Zona Rosa to the bus terminal or Parque Fundidora is usually less than M\$30, and it's around M\$50 to San Pedro. Call ☎ 8372-8800 or ☎ 8130-0600 for radio taxi service.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

There are large parking lots, charging M\$15 per hour, underneath the Gran Plaza. Another lot, just east of the bus station off Av Colón, costs M\$64 for 24 hours.

Local and international car rental agencies cluster around the intersection of Ocampo and Carranza, including the following, which also have desks at the airport:

Advantage (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8345-7334; Ocampo 429 Ote)

Budget (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8369-4100; Hidalgo 433 Ote)

Payless (Map pp400-1; ☎ 8344-6363; Escobedo 1011 Sur)

If you'd rather get a car with a driver, either bargain with a taxi driver or call **Marcelino Hernández** (☎ 1218-3671) who typically charges M\$80 per hour in the city and M\$100 outside it.

AROUND MONTERREY

Part of what makes Monterrey such a wonderful city is that its boundless energy is countered by the restful villages and awe-inspiring natural attractions just outside it.

BUSES FROM MONTERREY

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency (daily)
Chihuahua	deluxe M\$675	10hr	2
	1st-class M\$546	10hr	12
Ciudad Acuña	deluxe M\$445	6½hr	1
	1st-class M\$385	6½hr	6
Ciudad Victoria	M\$194	4hr	frequent
Dallas	M\$550	12hr	8
Durango	deluxe M\$516	8hr	5
	1st-class M\$419	8hr	15
Houston	M\$440	10hr	7
Matamoros	deluxe M\$310	5hr	1
	1st-class M\$239	5hr	frequent
Mazatlán	deluxe M\$857	16hr	1
	1st-class M\$659	16hr	2
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	deluxe M\$829	11hr	8
	1st-class M\$638	11hr	frequent
Nuevo Laredo	deluxe M\$230	3hr	9
	1st-class M\$186	3hr	frequent
Piedras Negras	deluxe M\$427	5hr	2
	1st-class M\$350	5hr	7
Reynosa	deluxe M\$218	3hr	3
	1st-class M\$178	3hr	frequent
Saltillo	deluxe M\$71	1¾hr	10
	1st-class M\$55	1¾hr	frequent
San Luis Potosí	deluxe M\$438	6½hr	3
	1st-class M\$337	6½hr	frequent
Tampico	deluxe M\$465	7hr	3
	1st-class M\$358	7hr	hourly
Zacatecas	M\$293	6½hr	frequent

Cañón de la Huasteca

About 10km west of Monterrey's city center, this large **canyon** (☎ 8191-0664; per vehicle M\$10; 🕒 9am-6pm) has some dramatic 300m-tall rock formations and climbing routes reaching grade 5.13c. The picnic area and swimming pool in the middle get very busy at weekends, somewhat reducing its attraction as a wilderness area, but take a short walk and you'll likely have peace and quiet. Though few Huichol people (see the boxed text, p613) live around Monterrey, they believe life began in one corner of the canyon, called Guitarritas (Little Guitars; 15km from picnic area), and they come from all over Mexico during *Semana Santa* to perform sacred rituals at this spot.

The Huasteca also holds **La Ruta Vértigo**, Mexico's first *via ferrata*, a six-to-eight-hour fixed climbing route with zip-lines, overhanging ladders and rappels; no experience necessary. Geo Aventura and Mexplore (see the boxed text, opposite) are two of the companies that guide Vértigo trips.

Reach the mouth of the canyon by taking a Ruta 126 'Santa Catarina' bus (M\$7, 45 mintes) from Obelisco in Monterrey.

Cascada Cola de Caballo

Six kilometers uphill from El Cercado, a village 35km south of Monterrey on Hwy 85, you'll find lovely and aptly named **Horsetail Falls** (☎ 8347-1533; adult/child M\$30/20; 🕒 9am-7pm May-Oct, 9am-6pm Nov-Apr), which makes a wide, thin 25m-drop. It's most beautiful in August and September, but water flows year-round. You can take a horse (M\$30) or a horse-and-buggy ride (M\$20) the last 750m to the falls.

Near the entrance to the falls are Mexico's highest (70m) **bungee jump** (☎ 8376-7623; www.bungee.com.mx; M\$330; 🕒 3-8pm Fri, 11am-8pm Sat & Sun), a 200-foot **canopy tour** (run by the same company) with four zip-lines and three rappels, and **Hotel Hacienda Cola de Caballo** (☎ 2285-0260; www.coladecaballo.com; r Sun-Wed M\$750, Thu-Sat M\$1325; 🍷 🍷 🍷), a lovely luxury lodge with top-notch facilities.

Autobuses Amarillos runs frequent 2nd-class buses from the Monterrey bus station to El Cercado (M\$20, one hour, every 20 minutes) where you can catch minibuses to the falls (M\$15, 20 minutes, every 15 minutes) from the plaza.

If you're driving to the falls, consider a small detour to the nearby town of **Santiago**, across Hwy 85 from La Boca reservoir, for a look at its attractive *plaza principal* and some *tacos de cabrito* at **Las Palomas** (☎ 2285-3105; Abasolo 101; mains M\$65-215; 🕒 8am-11pm Sun-Thu, 8am-1am Fri & Sat), one of northern Mexico's most renowned restaurants. The adjoining luxury hotel shares the restaurant's owners and its colonial ambience.

Grutas de García

An illuminated, 2.5km route leads through 16 chambers in **García's Caves** (☎ 8347-1533; adult/child M\$60/45; 🕒 9am-5pm), located 1100m up in the Sierra El Fraile. The caves, reached by a spectacular ride in a *teleférico* (cable car), are 50 million years old, with lots of stalactites, stalagmites and petrified seashells. Admission includes the cable-car ride and a 50-minute tour.

From Monterrey, city buses 601 from Obelisco near Zona Rosa and 107 from Villagrán next to the bus station run frequently to Villa de García (M\$10.5, one hour), 9km from the caves; taxis (M\$60) go the rest of the way. The ticket office will call you a cab

for the return journey if none are waiting. This is a popular weekend outing so it's easy to join others for the taxi ride on those days. Driving from Monterrey, take Hwy 40 toward Saltillo; at 12km outside the city a sign points the way to the caves, another 25km to the north.

The town of **Villa de García**, which was founded before Monterrey (its historic center was getting a facelift at the time of research), has a pair of intriguing museums showcasing modern *artesanía* using or inspired by traditional styles and techniques. **Museo El Ojo** (☎ 8363-5515; Hidalgo s/n; admission free; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) near the plaza has a gorgeously presented collection of pottery, most of it massive and unlike anything you've seen, commissioned from leading artists of Oaxaca, Jalisco, Puebla, Mexico and Michoacán states while **Casa Roja** (☎ 8283-4662; Hidalgo 507; admission free; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) displays a more varied collection of styles and media. García has some good budget and midrange hotels if you'd like to soak up more of its spirit.

Potrero Chico

The towering limestone walls of Potrero Chico, 45 minutes northwest of Monterrey and just west of the town of Hidalgo, are an awe-inspiring sight from afar, but most people come here to see them up close; this is one of the world's top rock-climbing spots. The walls of the canyon currently support over 600 routes (most described in *The Whole*

MATACANES & MORE

The mountains around Monterrey, many of which are protected within the **Parque Nacional Cumbres de Monterrey**, are chock full of options for outdoor activities, but the world-class canyoneering is the most popular for the adventurous set. The main destination between April and September, when the rivers run high, is **Matacanes**, a moderately difficult canyon trip (six to eight hours) where you cross two caves, make two rappels and jump off 27 cliffs; the highest being 12m.

The ecotourism agencies listed below have solid reputations, English-speaking guides and regularly scheduled weekend outings (so there's no need to get your own group together to bring down prices) starting at around M\$750 per person. Canyoneering destinations that are less demanding than Matacanes are also available, as are rock-climbing, mountain biking and trekking trips. Check the calendars on the websites. Customized trips to these destinations and others are available at any time. The *Aire Libre* booklet, available free at the tourism office, can help you decide on where to go and what to do.

Geo Aventura (Map p398; ☎ 8989-4301; www.geoaventura.com; Río Amazonas 9, Colonia Roma) Has the biggest variety of outings and is the only one offering trips every weekend all year.

Matacanes.Net (☎ 8338-5211; www.matacanes.net)

Mexplore (off Map p398; ☎ 8115-1328; www.mexplore.com.mx; Río Madeira 435, Colonia Del Valle, San Pedro)

Enchilada, a climbing guidebook by Dane Bass) between grades 5.7 and 5.13d. Expert tuition for all levels is available on-site for US\$80 per person per day during the high season (October to April); low-season discounts can be substantial.

The area is also great for mountain biking and hiking, including a 2½-hour trek to the summit of El Toro, which overlooks the canyon.

Several places near the canyon rent rooms and tent space, with the modern and comfortable **Posada El Potrero Chico** (☎ 8362-6672; www.elpotrerochico.com.mx; campsites per person M\$55, tent rental from M\$30, r M\$290, cabañas M\$620-940; 📍 🚻 🚿 🚰) leading the pack. Facilities include hot-water bathrooms, free wi-fi, kitchen and laundry facilities, and a high-season restaurant. Whether or not you stay here, you can study Spanish (per hour M\$107), rent mountain bikes (per hour M\$43) and climbing gear, and even join a Nahua sweat lodge ceremony. Prefer US dollars to pesos.

In Monterrey, Autobuses Mina has hourly *directo* service to Hidalgo (M\$22, 1½ hours) and from there you'll have to pay a taxi driver the extortionate, fixed price of M\$50 to complete the trip. If you're driving, go to the cement factory in the heart of Hidalgo and follow the signs.

TAMAULIPAS

Tamaulipas is a diverse destination. It stretches from the Gulf coast, with several quiet but up-and-coming coastal towns, high into the Sierra Madre mountains, where the bird-watching is world-class, and then runs up the Río Bravo to grab the northeast's major border crossings. It's increasingly popular with Mexican tourists, but it remains off the radar of most foreigners, except for a few in-the-know Texans.

NUEVO LAREDO

☎ 867 / pop 348,000 / elevation 148m

Nuevo Laredo is Mexico's busiest border town (36% of all its international trade passes through here) but it's much more famous as 'Narco' Laredo, a reference to brazen violence between rival drug cartels that has sullied the city's reputation. But it isn't the fear of getting caught in the crossfire that should send you south as fast as you can (Nuevo Laredo is actually quite safe, and there's a heavy police

presence along Guerrero until very late in the evening); it's that the city has little offer other than the usual cheap trinkets, tequila and tricks found in most border towns.

Originally there was only one Laredo, north of the Río Bravo, but in 1848, following the end of the Mexican-American War, the city joined the USA. Over 100 families who didn't to give up Mexican citizenship crossed south, bringing all their belongings with them: including, according to legend, the dug-up caskets of their buried relatives. Today 'Los Dos Laredos' remain very close.

Orientation

Two international bridges link the Laredos. You can walk or drive over Puente Internacional No 1, for a toll of M\$3 (or US\$0.30) for pedestrians and M\$30 (or US\$3) for vehicles. This bridge leads you to the north end of Av Guerrero, Nuevo Laredo's main thoroughfare. Puente Internacional No 2 (M\$24) is vehicles only, and enables drivers to bypass Nuevo Laredo's center by taking Blvd Luis Colosio east around the city. Both bridges have Mexican immigration offices at the southern end.

A third international bridge, Puente Colombia-Solidaridad, crosses the border 32km northwest, enabling motorists to bypass the cities altogether.

Av Guerrero leads seven blocks south to Plaza Hidalgo, a pleasant, well-kept square with a bandstand, clock tower and the Palacio Federal. Most bar-hopping Texans stick to the large clubs on and east of Guerrero; the bars west of Guerrero tend to draw a rough local crowd.

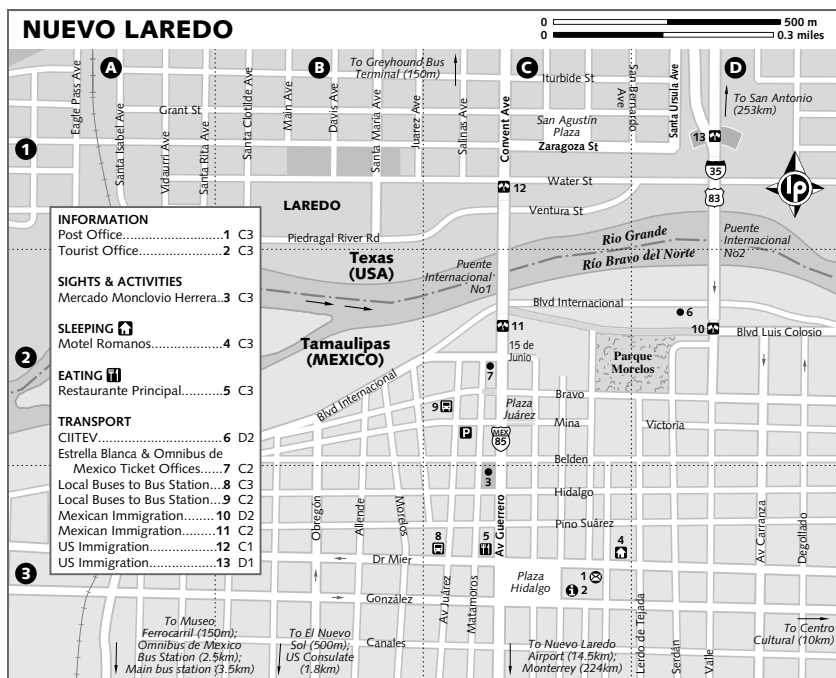
Information

Most services you might need are along Guerrero and Plaza Hidalgo, including *casas de cambio*, banks with ATMs, internet cafés, long-distance call centers, the **post office** (Plaza Hidalgo) and the **tourist office** (☎ 712-73-97; Palacio Federal; www.nuevolaredo.gob.mx; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri).

Sights

The colorful, open-air **Mercado Monclovia Herrera** (El Mercado; Av Guerrero; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-9pm Sat, 9am-7pm Sun), with the usual assortment of T-shirts, silver, sarapes, liquor and leather, is the main tourist magnet.

If you're desperate for something else, you could visit the **Museo Ferrocarril** (☎ 713-7228; López



de Lara 1106; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat), which has a few railroading relics and a small art gallery in the city's old train station, or see if anything is on stage at the city's shiny new **Centro Cultural** (☎ 717-59-59; Blvd Luis Colosio) on the outskirts of town.

Sleeping & Eating

Av Reforma south of Av Guerrero has several overpriced business-class hotels and some good-value midrangers. There are very cheap rooms, especially good for solo travelers, fronting the main bus station.

Motel Romanos (☎ 712-23-91; Dr Mier 2420; s & d from M\$289; P ☎) This gaudy Roman-themed hotel has a columned facade and gilded detailing. The 29 well-kept rooms are better, not just better value, than many of the pricier options in the center.

El Nuevo Sol (☎ 712-39-20; Obregón 1416; mains M\$9-54; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat; ☒) Take a booth in this bright, happy health-food store-café and you'll feel like you've left Nuevo Laredo. The breakfasts, salads and *antojitos* are made with fresh veggies, *soya* meats and whole-wheat breads. The *comida corrida* costs M\$70.

Restaurante Principal (☎ 712-13-01; Guerrero 630; mains M\$50-140; ☎ 10am-11pm) For a crash course in *norteño* food try some cuts of *cabrito* at this well-known restaurant near the plaza; or play it safe and order the grilled chicken.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Nuevo Laredo airport (☎ 718-12-70) is off the Monterrey road, 14km south of town. **Mexicana** (☎ 719-28-15) has direct flights twice a day to and from Mexico City. The airport at Laredo, Texas, has Continental and American Airlines flights every day to Houston and Dallas.

BUS

Nuevo Laredo's main bus station is about 5km south of Puente Internacional No 1 just off Anáhuac. Omnibus de México departs from a spot on López de Lara a bit closer to the center. You can also buy tickets for Estrella Blanca and Omnibus de México routes from offices right at the foot of the bridge: do so, and they'll pay your cab fare to the bus station.

There are daily buses to plus most major cities in northern Mexico, including Ciudad

Victoria, Durango, Guadalajara, Mazatlán, Reynosa, Saltillo and the following:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	deluxe M\$1061	14hr	3 daily
	1st-class M\$816	14hr	16 daily
Monclova	M\$169	4hr	5 daily
Monterrey	deluxe M\$230	3hr	9 daily
	1st-class M\$186	3hr	every 20 min
	2nd-class M\$151	6hr	13 daily
Tampico	M\$518	10hr	5 daily
Zacatecas	M\$475	10hr	9 daily

There are also similarly priced direct buses to various cities in Mexico from the **Greyhound bus terminal** (☎ 956-723-4324; 610 Salinas Ave) in Laredo, but because of often very thorough inspections at the border, these take much longer than services from Nuevo Laredo itself.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

For a vehicle permit, you must go to **CIITEV** (☎ 24hr) between the bridges: follow the blue 'car permits' signs.

The route south via Monterrey is the most direct to central Mexico, the Pacific coast and the Gulf coast. Hwy 85D is a fast, excellent toll road (M\$177), while the alternative free road (Hwy 85) is longer and slower.

Getting Around

A good network of city buses (M\$5) means getting around Nuevo Laredo is simple enough. Many bus stops have route maps. Frequent buses marked 'Mirador-Reforma' or 'Carretera' leave from the corner of Bravo and Juárez heading down Juárez to the main bus station. Buses labeled 'Puente-Centro' go from directly in front of the station to the Puente Internacional No 1 via the city center. Taxis between the bus station and the center officially cost M\$50, though drivers at the foot of the bridge will want much more; try walking a block down to Plaza Juárez.

REYNOSA

☎ 899 / pop 508,000 / elevation 36m

Reynosa, an important commercial border crossing, is one of northeast Mexico's most important industrial towns, with oil refineries, petrochemical plants, cotton mills and

maquiladoras. It's more attractive and less intimidating than Nuevo Laredo, but not quite as charming as Matamoros. The tourist trade is geared to short-term Texan visitors, many of whom are in town to visit the city's surfeit of dentists, doctors and pharmacists. Across the Río Bravo del Norte is the town of McAllen. There are good road connections into Mexico and Texas.

The city was founded in 1749 as Villa de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de Reynosa, 20km from its present location: flooding forced the move in 1802. Reynosa was one of the first towns to rise up in the independence movement of 1810, but little of historical interest remains.

Orientation & Information

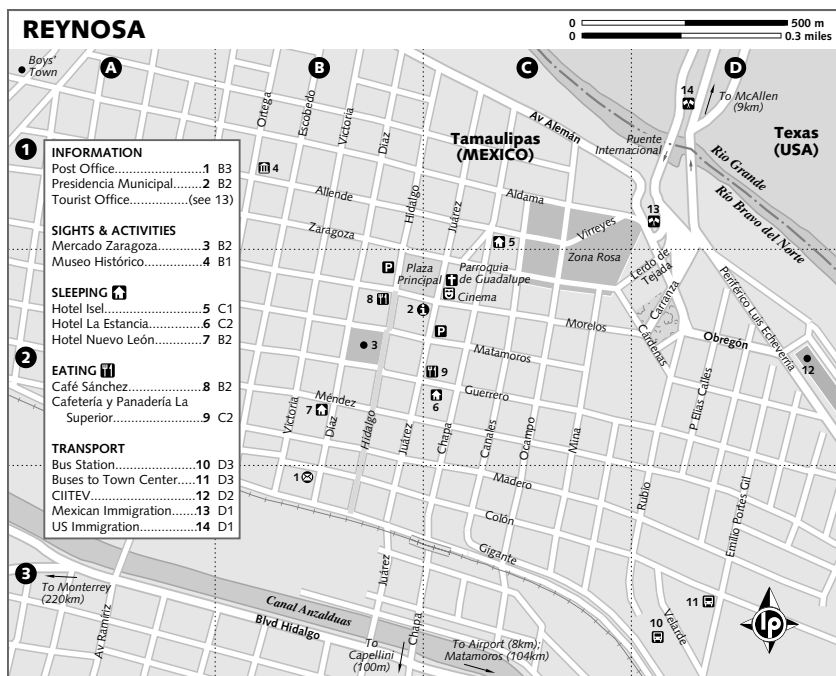
Reynosa's central streets are laid out on a grid pattern, between the Río Bravo del Norte and the Canal Anzalduas. The area just below the Puente Internacional is an unfortunate introduction to the city, but things get much nicer very quickly. The Plaza Principal, on a rise a few blocks southwest of the bridge, is the site of the town hall, banks, hotels and a modern cathedral. Extending south of the plaza, Hidalgo is a pedestrianized shopping lane. There are many *casas de cambio* and parking lots, and several internet cafés around the center.

There's a little **tourist office** (☎ 922-51-86; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) in the immigration building at the bridge and another hidden on the third floor of the **Presidencia Municipal** (☎ 932-32-73; Morelos 645; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri).

Between the bridge and the center lies the Zona Rosa, where underage Texans come to party on weekends. The bars here, concentrated on and just off Ocampo, aren't exactly family friendly, but it's not too sleazy a scene. Most of that action (exotic dancing and prostitution) takes place at Reynosa's famous 'Boys' Town' to the west.

Sights

Reynosa's modest little **Museo Histórico** (☎ 922-15-12; cnr Allende & Ortega; admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-8pm Tue-Fri, 10am-2pm & 4-8pm Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) may not offer any flash interactive displays, but it does have a curious combination of ancient pottery, old typewriters and historic city photos. In the rear room there's often a temporary exhibition of work by local artists.



Many of the stores inside **Mercado Zaragoza** (Hidalgo; ☎ 9am-6pm) sell Western wear and *artesanía*.

Sleeping

The city has many good hotels in all price categories, both in the center and on the highways leading into town. The cheap hotels fronting the bus station are fine, but most right by the Puente Internacional aren't meant for overnight guests.

Hotel Nuevo León (☎ 922-13-10; Díaz 580; s & d M\$190-240, tr M\$215-265, q M\$240-290; ☎) This place could sure use a paint job, but rooms are comfy and clean and full of furniture; some might even say they have character. All rooms have cable T, V and the more expensive have air-con.

Hotel Isel (☎ 922-10-59; Chapa 1005; s/d/tr/q from M\$330/470/580/680; P ☎ ☎ ☎) The good-sized rooms along the contorted hallways of this spotless, efficiently run hotel have fake plants and cheery pictures. There's a small gym and a 24-hour restaurant.

Hotel La Estancia (☎ 922-99-77; Guerrero 735; s/d/tr M\$400/450/600; P ☎) The unassuming but superb value La Estancia doesn't have the

amenities of the big boys, but it's still a great choice for a night. The 12 brightly decorated, cheerful rooms have attractive furniture and modern bathrooms and let you feel like you're sleeping in someone's guest bedroom rather than at a hotel.

Eating

You'll find standard-issue taco and fast-food joints on and around Hidalgo; Mercado Zaragoza in particular has some good ones. Calle Juárez south of Madero seems to be trying to corner the market in seafood restaurants.

Cafetería y Panadería La Superior (☎ 922-96-06; Guerrero 728; mains M\$25-60; ☎ 6am-10pm; ☎) No frills, but oodles of charm, from the bullfighter portraits to the locals lingering over mugs of coffee, this classic place draws crowds for *huevos con machacado*, chicken fajitas, quesadillas, and steak sandwiches.

Café Sánchez (☎ 922-57-22; Morelos 575; mains M\$25-145; ☎ 7am-8pm) This venerable place with black tie-wearing waiters serves *huevos rancheros* and *enchiladas suizas*, but it's really all about the meat: a two-person *parrillada* with *cabrito* and steak costs M\$250.

Capellini (☎ 922-09-00; Ejército Nacional 250; mains M\$49-157; 🍴 noon-midnight Mon-Sat, noon-9pm Sun) Authentic Italian restaurant using many imported ingredients, it's worth the trip south of the center.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Reynosa's **Aeropuerto General Lucio Blanco** (☎ 958-00-04), is 8km southeast of town, off the Matamoros road. **Aeroméxico** (☎ 922-52-37) has three daily direct flights to and from Mexico City and **Mexicana** (☎ 129 69 89) has two.

BUS

The bus station, just off Colón behind the Gigante supermarket, is walkable from the center. Buses run frequently to the following destinations:

Destination	Fare	Duration
Ciudad Victoria	M\$192	4½hr
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	deluxe M\$929 1st-class M\$715	13hr 13hr
Monterrey	deluxe M\$218 1st-class M\$178	3hr 3hr
Saltillo	M\$207	5hr
Tampico	M\$308	8hr
Zacatecas	M\$489	10hr

First-class buses also serve Chihuahua, Durango, Matamoros, Nuevo Laredo, San Luis Potosí and Veracruz in Mexico and Houston (US\$25), San Antonio (US\$25), Austin (US\$34) and Dallas (US\$46) in Texas.

The nearest Texas transportation center, McAllen, is 9km from the border. **Valley Transit Company** (in McAllen ☎ 956-686-5479) runs frequent buses between the two bus stations (M\$30, 5am to 9:45pm). In Reynosa, purchase tickets at the Greyhound counter.

US and Mexican immigration are at their respective ends of the bridge, and there's another Mexican post inside the Reynosa bus station, but it's open only 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The vehicle toll at the bridge is US\$2.50/M\$25. Southeast of the bridge (follow the signs) is the **CIITEV office** (🚗 24hr), which issues car permits. The Pharr Bridge, just east of Reynosa, lets you bypass the city altogether.

Going west to Monterrey (220km), the toll Hwy 40D is excellent, but costs (M\$194). The

less direct toll-free Hwy 40 follows roughly the same route and takes 30 minutes to an hour longer. Hwys 97 and 101 south to Tampico are fast and in good shape.

Getting Around

Peseros (as buses are called here) rattle around Reynosa. To get from the bus station to the town center, turn left after exiting the bus station and cross the Gigante parking lot to Colón. Just about all the local buses (M\$5) stopping here head to the plaza.

Most taxis have meters: the cost between the bus station and the center is around M\$20.

MATAMOROS

☎ 868 / pop 423,000 / elevation 8m

While Matamoros could hardly be described as a cultural mecca, it has the most to offer of all the gritty Mexican border towns that dot the frontier with Texas. With a cluster of historic buildings, a decent contemporary art museum and some stylish restaurants, it makes a relatively easygoing base, though most visitors here are day-trippers from *el otro lado* (the other side).

The city has a shady plaza dotted with a fine blue-tiled Mudéjar bandstand and fountains. Standing on the west side of the square is a Gothic-style cathedral with twin bell towers and a dusky pink facade. Some 150 *maquiladoras* sit west and south of the city.

The area was dubbed Los Esteros Hermosos (The Beautiful Estuaries) by Captain Juan José de Hinojosa, who explored the area in 1706, but it wasn't until 1765 that 13 families settled on the south side of the river. The city was later renamed after Padre Mariano Matamoros, who died during Mexico's battle for independence.

In 1846, Mexican forces in Matamoros attacked the Americans stationed in Fort Texas (later renamed Fort Brown) on the opposite side of the Río Bravo del Norte. In short order General Zachary Taylor's troops routed the Mexican army, took over Matamoros and marched south toward Mexico City.

Orientation

Matamoros lies across the Río Bravo from Brownsville, Texas. The most convenient crossing is the **Puente Nuevo** (International Gateway Bridge; 🚗 24hr) while the **Puente Zaragoza** (Veteran's Bridge; 🚗 6am-midnight), 3km to the east, offers a more direct route south into Mexico. Both have immi-

or a more frequent Tecnológico-Esperanza (usually abbreviated as 'Tec-Esp') bus heading east on Independencia or Lauro Villar.

PLAYA BAGDAD

The nearest beach to Matamoros is a scruffy settlement that clings to an expansive stretch of fairly clean sand 37km east of town. A large port prospered on the Mexican bank of the Río Bravo north of Matamoros and, according to local folklore, this town was given the name 'Bagdad' by Texans who were astounded by its wealth (mostly derived from smuggling). Hurricanes destroyed the settlement in 1889, and nobody seems to remember anymore how that name traveled over here. Playa Bagdad today consists of a small fishing settlement, a few aging *cabañas* and a seemingly endless row of wind-battered clapboard beach restaurants. During the June-to-September hot season and the Semana Santa holiday the sands are packed with parked cars, while the rest of the year you don't need to walk far from the bus stop to find a peaceful spot on the beach. There's talk of large luxury resorts but these seem more dreams than actual plans. Modern minibuses (M\$25, one hour) head here from Calle 10 on the west side of Plaza Allende, leaving hourly most of the year and more often during busy times. The last bus back to Matamoros is usually at 8pm.

Shopping

The 'new market,' **Mercado Juárez** (☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun), has all the usual Mexican crafts and tourist trinkets, but also a few stand-out craft shops.

Sleeping

Like most border towns in Mexico, accommodation is not great value in Matamoros. Cheap places tend to be very basic, but there are several decent midrange options.

Hotel Majestic (☎ 813-36-80; Abasolo 131; s/d M\$170/240) Clean, if slightly drab, rooms with hot water and cable TV and even a candy dish on the front desk. It's less dispiriting than the Hotel México down the street.

Casa de Huespedes Las Margaritas (☎ 813-40-24; Calle 4 No 179; s & d/tr M\$200/250; ☎) A well-worn but cheery and friendly place with 10 rooms (with hot water and cable TV) around a colorful, plant-filled courtyard.

Hotel Hernández (☎ 812-55-45; www.hotelhernandez.com; cnr Calle 6 & Laguna Madre; s/d from M\$395/505;

☎ ☎) Four floors of frumpy but comfy rooms (with wi-fi) stacked around a long narrow courtyard lined by massive palm trees: it almost looks like a Hollywood film set. The location is both convenient to the center and easy to reach by car.

Hotel Ritz (☎ 812-11-90; www.ritzhotel.org; Matamoros 612; s/d/tr M\$500/600/700; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The Ritz has a garish purple facade, but its rooms are much more sober, with attractive wooden beds, desks, safes and wi-fi. There's a business center, small gym and piano bar.

Hotel Colonial (☎ 816-66-06; www.hcolonial.com; Matamoros 603; s/d incl breakfast M\$553/598; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) From the wrought-iron light fixtures in the lobby to the decorative mirrors and wooden furniture in the cozy guestrooms, Matamoros's most gorgeous hotel has real Old World charm, plus modern conveniences like wi-fi.

Best Western Gran Hotel Residencial (☎ 813-94-40; www.bestwestern.com; Obregón 249; s & d/tr incl breakfast M\$997/1164; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The 115 fully equipped rooms at this low-rise hotel are cookie-cutter American-chain-hotel boring, but certainly comfortable. They ring a large leafy compound with two pools. There's a popular restaurant and cocktail bar.

Eating & Drinking

Matamoros has a smattering of fashionable restaurants as well as plenty of down-to-earth places where the emphasis is on substance over style. The budget-minded food stalls in Plaza Allende are good places to sample a variety of local fare. Bars kept in business by young Texans are spread out along Obregón.

Cafetería Tony's (Calle 6 No 171; mains M\$20-46; ☎) A mixture of good food (breakfasts, *antojitos*, tacos and sandwiches) and low prices keeps this simple place packed much of the day. And that's the only downside; you might have to wait for a seat.

Los Norteños (☎ 813-00-37; Matamoros 109; mains M\$30-95) A carnivore's delight: head to this simple but classy joint for *cabrito*, steak and chicken cooked over a huge charcoal pit.

Mi Pueblito (☎ 816-05-86; cnr Calle 5 & Constitución; mains M\$50-125; ☎ 7am-midnight, 7am-1am Fri & Sat) Positioned opposite MACT, this gorgeous restaurant is topped by a soaring thatched roof and has colorful textile tablecloths. It offers a menu of Mexican favorites, but its best value is the filling set lunch (M\$77, available noon to 4pm), which includes a drink and soup starter. Take your pick from over 200 tequilas.

ourpick Aromas (☎ 812-62-32; Calle 6 No 181; mains M\$62-180; 🕒 7am-midnight Sun-Thu, 7am-2am or later Fri & Sat) A second home for some of Matamoros' artists and intellectuals, the city's hippest venue has a ground-floor restaurant featuring avant-garde paintings on exposed brick walls and an intimate garden patio, where you can enjoy breakfasts (M\$14 to M\$58), filling salads, fruity crepes, and well-executed main dishes including pastas and good seafood. Prices are generally high, but the *comida corrida* (M\$49), which includes soup, drink and dessert, is a great deal. The bar area upstairs, with modern booths, is perfect cocktail-quaffing territory and has live *trova* at weekends and jazz and other chill sounds on the stereo weekdays.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Matamoros International Airport (☎ 812-24-67) is 17km out of town on the road to Ciudad Victoria. **Aeroméxico Connect** (☎ 922-52-37) has two daily direct flights to Mexico City. Continental Airlines services the airport in Brownsville through Houston.

BUS

The main **bus station** (anales) has an immigration office and left-luggage service (per hour M\$5). Daily services from Matamoros include the following:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Ciudad Victoria	M\$197	4	every half-hour
Mexico City (Terminal Norte)	deluxe M\$969	13	2 daily
	1st-class M\$710	14	14 daily
Monterrey	deluxe M\$310	5	1 daily
	1st-class M\$239	5	every 20 min
Tampico	deluxe M\$486	7	2 daily
	1st-class M\$305	7	hourly
Veracruz	deluxe M\$986	16	1 daily
	1st-class M\$740	18	4 daily
Zacatecas	M\$498	12	13 daily

Buses go to many other destinations including Chihuahua, Durango, Guadalajara, Reynosa, Saltillo and San Luis Potosí. Daily

buses also head all over the USA including Houston (M\$25), Dallas (M\$46) and Chicago (M\$120). Greyhound, which has an office here, is competitively priced with the Mexican companies.

If you're headed to Monterrey, Reynosa or San Luis Potosí consider using the **Terminal Noreste** (☎ 813-40-50; cnr Abasolo & Calle 12), which has a more convenient downtown location but far fewer departures.

You can also get buses direct to several cities inside Mexico from the **Brownsville bus station** (☎ 956-546-7171; 1134 E St Charles) in Texas, but because of border formalities it's usually quicker to walk across the bridge and take local transportation to the Matamoros bus station.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Driving across the bridge to or from Brownsville costs M\$24 (or US\$2.25). Be sure to get your temporary vehicle permit at the **CIITEV office** (Puente Nuevo 🕒 24hr, Puente Zaragoza 🕒 6am-9pm) on the Mexican side.

The main route into Mexico is Hwy 101 southwest to Ciudad Victoria and into the Bajo region and Hwy 180 branching off south to Tampico. These two-lane roads are both in good condition and free of tolls. Hwy 2D leads west to Reynosa, from where Hwys 40 and 40D continue to Monterrey.

Getting Around

In Matamoros, local buses are called *peseros*, and they cost M\$5. Catch a 'Juárez' bus on Louis Aguilar immediately east of the bus station to the center. Back to the station, wave down the same bus heading south on Calle 8. 'Puente' buses head north on Calle 1 from just west of the station to the border; in the opposite direction, take one marked 'Colonia 20 de Noviembre' (usually abbreviated 'Col 20') or 'Central de Autobuses' from behind the tourist office.

City buses marked 'Centro,' also starting behind the tourist office, will get you to or near Plaza Hidalgo, but it's easiest to hop aboard one of the free buses (departing roughly every 15 minutes between 9am and 5pm) that leave from García's crafts shop on Obregón just south of the bridge; these drop you off by Mercado Juárez.

Many taxi drivers ask for a hefty M\$100 (or more) from the border or the bus station to the center, though the official price at time of research was M\$50.

The city runs a **trolley** (M\$40) aimed at day-trippers between the border, Mercado Juárez, Plaza Hidalgo, Museo Casamata and the art museum. There are hourly departures between 9:40am and 4:40pm from the tourist office, and you can hop on and off as you like throughout the day.

NORTHERN GULF COAST

It's 500km from Matamoros to Tampico along Hwys 101 and 180. The route begins through checkerboard-flat cornfields, but eventually the land rises into the foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental, farming changes to ranching and the scenery turns scenic. The principal towns along the way are **San Fernando** (137km from Matamoros), **Soto La Marina** (267km) and **Aldama** (380km), each with budget and midrange hotels if you need to break your journey here. You may also want to stock up on cash in one of them since none of the coastal towns have banks or ATMs.

From these towns and others, side roads slip east to fishing villages on the coast, most of which consists of lagoons separated from the gulf by narrow sand spits. The largest lagoon is the 225km-long **Laguna Madre**, an ancient outlet of the Río Bravo del Norte. (This lagoon dried up in the mid-20th century, forcing many to leave. When a 1967 hurricane replenished it, the area was resettled by people from Veracruz.) The lagoons, sand dunes and coastal wetlands support a unique ecosystem with many bird species and excellent fishing. If you're lucky, you might spot some leaping whales out to sea.

Hotels in all classes are way overpriced on the coast, but bargaining is usually possible, especially at weekdays. Grills for cooking up the day's catch are a near-standard hotel amenity. Beach camping is generally permitted, but always get local advice before pitching your tent.

El Mezquital

About 20km south of Matamoros, just past the airport, a rough road crosses marshland for 60km before reaching this small fishing village on the long thin spit of land that divides the Laguna Madre from the Gulf. There's a lighthouse and beach, but this is mostly a place to come just to see a different side of Mexico; the wooden shops and houses here almost define ramshackle.

There are several simple places to eat, but the only place to sleep, **Hotel La Isla** (rM\$200; (P)), is very rough and very rarely used nowadays since the attached bar that used to provide most of its customers closed down.

Buses (M\$30, 2½ hours) to El Mezquital depart Plaza Allende in Matamoros at 6:30am and 3pm. You can also take a Pereño bus (M\$9.5, one hour) departing every six minutes from the same spot to the end of the line and then hop in one of the cars parked in front of the Super T that run shared taxi services (M\$50, one hour); they leave when full, and usually fill up quickly.

Carbonera & Punta de Piedra

From San Fernando a pretty good road leads to **Carbonera**, another small fishing village facing the Laguna Madre. The little lighthouse here resembles an Olympic torch. Dolphin sightings are almost guaranteed out by the barrier island from April to October, and fishermen are happy to take you out to see them. The price depends on how far you need to travel (you're mostly paying for the skipper's gas, rather than time) but expect to pay around M\$400. Between the entrance to town and the not-so-hot La Playita beach are a few simple restaurants and the basic **Hotel Delfín** (rM\$350; (P)), Carbonera's only overnight option.

Sixteen kilometers further on is the even smaller village of **Punta de Piedra** where **Hotel Playa Bonita** ((☎) 841-846-99-49; rM\$400; (P) (☺)) faces the lagoon. The eight simple rooms aren't fancy, but they're much newer and nicer than you'd expect from a first look at the exterior. The owners can arrange boats for fishing or dolphin watching and will cook dinner for you, which is a bonus since the village's only *comedor* is closed at night. The hotel has no sign; just drive as far south as you can and there it is.

To reach Carbonera and Punta de Piedra from San Fernando, turn left out of the bus station to the stoplight, then left again on Allende for half a block to the little yellow terminal where vans (Carbonera M\$30, one hour; Punta de Piedra M\$40, 90 minutes) depart about every two hours.

La Pesca

From Soto La Marina, Hwy 52 heads east for 50km to La Pesca, which has made the switch from fishing village to resort town. Families from Ciudad Victoria and Monterrey and even a fair number of Texans cruise in at

SAVING SEA TURTLES

One of the world's most endangered sea turtles, the Kemp's Ridley, known locally as the *tortuga lora* (parrot turtle) because of its beak-like nose, nests on this coastline from March to August. Virtually all that remain in the world lay their eggs between La Pesca and Tampico. Around 6000 nesting females were counted in 2007, up from 283 in 1985. The not-nearly-as-endangered green sea turtle nests here between June and October.

The Tamaulipas state environmental authority has a **turtle conservation center** (admission free; ☎ noon-4pm) 1km north of the main beach at La Pesca, and there are five more further south. The center in La Pesca has a little museum with photos and replicas of the Gulf's turtles. Employees at any of the conservation centers will explain the protection efforts and might take you out to see the turtles if they have time. They are often around earlier and later than official opening hours and can let you in.

Volunteers who can give at least a week can help retrieve Ridley eggs and release the hatchlings. Lodging and some food is provided. Contact ☎ 834-318-9474 or ilara_tam@hotmail.com for more information.

weekends for fun in the sun and often some fishing. The Río Soto La Marina and the Laguna Morales have abundant snook, redfish, kingfish and black bass while some of the fish offshore include king mackerel and red snapper. Most hotels can arrange boat rentals with fishing guides for around M\$800 a day. Many hotels also feature piers with lights for night casting.

The long, wide, sandy beach, **Playa La Pesca**, 5km east of town, is dotted with *palapa* shades, but you have to walk *very* far before you could call it clean. It's nearly empty much of the year, but packed during *Semana Santa* and summer months.

Most of La Pesca's lodging is in town or along the river west of town rather than out at the beach. The ordinary **Hotel Titanic** (☎ 835-327-06-04; s & d M\$250, tr & q M\$300; P ♻️) is typical of the town's cheapies. A room with just a fan costs M\$200. Among the fancier choices, the **Rivera del Río** (☎ 835-327-06-58; s/d M\$400/800; P ♻️ 🚰 🚿) makes an excellent base. The 37 rooms are large and rather plain but the well-maintained grounds are lovely, with a swimming pool perched over the river and a good restaurant. Weekday and slow-season discounts are common.

La Pesca's restaurants are mostly unremarkable. For something sort of special, unwind with drinks and seafood under the big thatched roof or out back along the river at **Restaurant Posada** (☎ 835-327-80-00; mains M\$30-70; ☎ 8am-8pm Sun-Thu, 8am-10pm Fri & Sat), next to the lighthouse at Playa La Pesca.

Transportes Tamaulipecos de la Costa runs 10 2nd-class buses a day between Ciudad

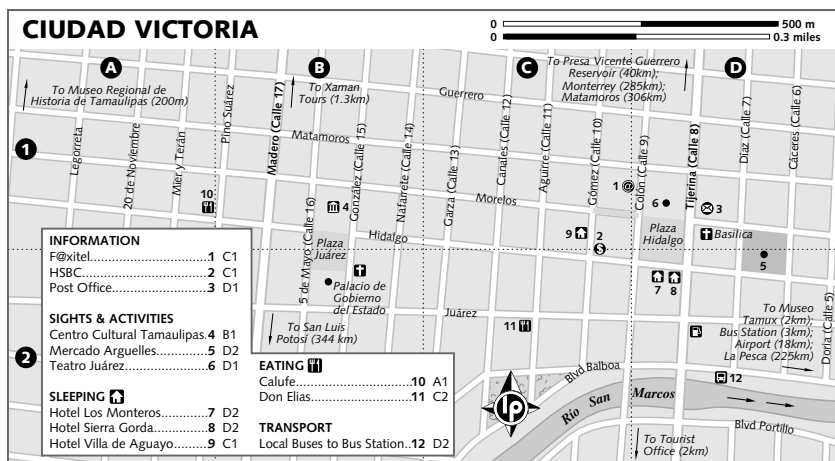
Victoria's bus terminal and Playa La Pesca (M\$105, three hours). You can catch any of these buses just off Soto La Marina's central plaza, an hour from La Pesca (M\$28).

Barra del Tordo

Scenically set on the Río Carrizal, tiny Barra del Tordo, with seemingly more boats than people, is as much of a charmer as you'll find on this stretch of coast. A major golf resort outside town is planned, but it's unlikely to change things much in the village itself.

Walk over the bridge on the east edge of town and in less than 10 minutes you'll be on a wide, clean and probably deserted stretch of sand. Down the shore, Playa No 2 (road access is 4km before town) has *palapas*, a few *comedores* and a turtle conservation center (see the boxed text, above).

The friendly and functional **Hotel La Esperanza** (☎ 833-192-95-29; r M\$300-500; P ♻️) will do for a base in town. It has a mix of closet-like bunks and some cozy, large quarters. The restaurant offers 2nd-floor views of a shallow lagoon. Across the street, on the river, **Hotel Jarocho** (☎ 836-274-18-58; r M\$350-500; P ♻️) is also fine. Though not cheap, **Villas del Tordo** (☎ 834-314-14-99; www.villasdeltordo.com; s & d/tr & q M\$1000/1200; P ♻️ 🚰 🚿 🚿), on the road into town, is one of the few places on the northern Gulf coast that is reasonably priced for what you get. The modern yellow buildings spread over expansive green grounds along a little lake. It's a good place to relax, or they'll keep you busy with horseback riding, fishing trips, a basketball court and more. Prices are discounted by M\$200



weekdays, and kitchenettes are available for M\$200 more.

Creaky old vans (M\$25, one hour, six daily) connect the village to the city of Aldama, 43km west. In Aldama they depart from in front of Supermercado Wendy's, southwest of the plaza at the corner of Constitución and Matamoros. A taxi from the highway to Wendy's should cost no more than M\$30.

CIUDAD VICTORIA

☎ 834 / pop 278,500 / elevation 230m

Despite its status as the state capital, Ciudad Victoria, founded in 1750 and later renamed after Mexico's first president, has a provincial feel. Though it's not exciting, its several historic buildings and tranquil atmosphere make it a pleasant place to wander around.

Orientation

The city center is laid out in a grid pattern. The north-south streets have both numbers (Calle 7, Calle 8 etc) and names (Díaz, Tijerina etc). The main shopping street is Hidalgo between Plaza Hidalgo, the old *plaza de armas*, and Plaza Juárez (aka Plaza de Gobierno and Plaza Hidalgo 15), where the hip kids hang out after school.

Information

F@xitel (Calle 9 No 226; per hr M\$7) Fast internet access.
HSBC (cnr Hidalgo & Calle 10; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) Changes traveler's checks.
Post office (cnr Calle 8 & Morelos; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) In the town hall.

Tourist office (☎ 315-60-97; <http://turismo.tamaulipas.gob.mx>; Hernán Cortes 129; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun) In the El Peñón building.

Xaman Tours (☎ 316-35-65; www.xaman.mx; Calle 14 No 1868; ☎ 9:30am-1:30pm & 4-8pm) Runs regular canyoneering, kayaking and rappelling trips on weekends, and can connect you with guides for anything else in the mountains around town and beyond.

Sights & Activities

The **Museo Tamux** (☎ 315-12-15; www.tamux.gob.mx; Blvd Fidel Velázquez; adult/child & student M\$30/15; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, ticket office closes 5pm) is an excellent interactive natural history museum covering everything from asteroids to cloning to dinosaurs, including some cool replica fossils. The big orange ball is a planetarium, and there's a **botanical garden** (admission free; ☎ 8am-4pm) down below. No buses come here, or even pass nearby.

The **Museo Regional de Historia de Tamaulipas** (☎ 315-14-56; cnr Calle 22 & Allende; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun), in a lovely yellow building formerly inhabited by nuns and the army, does a good job tracing the state's history. Even if you don't speak Spanish, stop by to see the large collection of Huastec figurines.

The art gallery in the **Centro Cultural Tamaulipas** (☎ 318-83-30; Calle 15; admission free; ☎ 11am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) brings in temporary exhibits from a variety of Mexican artists. Also worthy on the art front is the large mural showing the history of Tamaulipas in the lobby of the **Teatro Juárez** (Plaza Hidalgo; ☎ 8am-2pm).

You'll probably want to save your handicraft shopping for another city, but the **Mercado Arguelles** (🕒 7am-8pm Mon-Sat, 7am-4pm Sun) is fun to browse.

Sleeping & Eating

Victoria offers good value on the hotel front in all price categories. If you're just passing through there are several good cheapies around the bus station.

Hotel Villa de Aguayo (☎ 312-78-18; cnr Calle 10 & Morelos; s/d M\$200/240, r air-con M\$250-290; 📞 🚿) A hospitable place with plain but scrupulously clean, newly built rooms, all with firm beds and cable TV.

Hotel Los Monteros (☎ 312-03-00; Hidalgo 962; s & d M\$200-300, tr & q M\$350-400; 📞 🚿) The rooms at one of Victoria's oldest hotel are dated, but have the character Villa de Aguayo lacks, as well as free wi-fi. The tiled lobby and tall courtyard add a charming historic touch.

Hotel Sierra Gorda (☎ 312-20-10; Hidalgo 8; s/d/tr M\$520/580/640; 📞 🚿 🍷) The garish (in a good way) neo-colonial decor of the lobby spills into the restaurant and the hallways, but only a little into the rooms, which don't quite have all the extras of the international chain hotels in town but are just as comfortable. There are often discounts.

Calufe (☎ 134-09-17; cnr Calle 18 & Hidalgo; coffee & milkshakes M\$15-35; 🕒 7am-11pm Mon-Sat, 3-11pm Sun; 🍷) This stylish place with exposed rock walls and retro vinyl chairs roasts its own coffee on site. There's live music Thursday to Saturday at 8pm.

Don Elias (☎ 315-51-56; cnr Calle 11 & Juárez; mains M\$35-185; 🕒 7am-8pm Mon-Sat) A mix of tasty food, good service and lovely decor (fancy in the front and a fun log-cabin look in back) makes this place popular. The menu is heavy on steak and seafood, but you can eat lighter with the *enchiladas rojas* (enchiladas in red sauce) or salads. A guitar trio plays from 2:30pm to 4:30pm.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aeropuerto Nacional General Pedro Méndez (☎ 316-46-48) is 18km east of town off the Soto La Marina road. There are three daily flights to Mexico City with **Aeromar** (☎ 316-96-96) and one with **Click Mexicana** (☎ 800-122-54-25).

BUS

The bus station, 3km east of the center, has a left-luggage service (M\$5 per hour).

Frequent 1st-class buses run to the following destinations:

Destination	Fare	Duration
Ciudad Mante	M\$84	2hr
Matamoros	M\$197	4hr
Monterrey	M\$194	4hr
Reynosa	M\$192	4½hr
San Luis Potosí	M\$205	5hr
Tampico	M\$150	3½hr

For Mexico City (10 hours) there are eight 1st-class (M\$555) and four deluxe (M\$719) departures daily. Ten 2nd-class buses go to La Pesca (M\$110, three hours). For Reserva de la Biosfera El Cielo, take a Ciudad Mante-bound bus; see p425 for details.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Hwys 85 and 101 converge at Ciudad Victoria allowing easy access to and from Tampico, Monterrey and San Luis Potosí; Hwy 101 is an incredibly scenic route up into the mountains. The quickest route to Mexico City is through San Luis Potosí.

Getting Around

To get to the center from the bus station, turn right out the doors and take any bus (M\$4.5) labeled 'Centro.' In the other direction, minibuses labeled 'Central' run down Blvd Balboa along the river. Taxis charge M\$30 for the same trip, or from the center to the tourist office.

RESERVA DE LA BIOSFERA EL CIELO

An incredibly rich UN-listed biosphere reserve, El Cielo encompasses a 1445-sq-km chunk of steep-sided forested mountains ranging from 200m to 2320m. Marking a transition zone between tropical, temperate and semidesert ecosystems, its diversity is incredible. There are 97 species of reptile and amphibian and 430 bird species (255 resident, 175 migrant) including Tamaulipas pygmy owl and yellow-headed parrot. Though seldom seen, black bear and jaguar live in the reserve. There are also dozens of orchid varieties, mostly within the cloud-forest zone between 800m and 1400m. While it should go without saying, picking wild plants is prohibited: 22 species of orchids have become extinct in Mexico in the last decade.

The main jumping-off point for El Cielo is **Gómez Farias**, a one-road village clinging to a

ridge just outside the reserve, 11km up a side road off Hwy 85 between Ciudad Victoria and Ciudad Mante. The village is small and tranquil enough for you to do some decent backyard birding at your hotel. The **tourist office** (☎ 832-236-22-15; 🕒 9am-3:30pm Mon-Fri), just off the plaza, has little to offer.

Twelve kilometers out of Gómez (follow the signs for La Bocatomá) on the road heading back to the highway you can swim in **Pozo Azul**, a pond filled with cool blue water. It costs M\$30 for a boat across the narrow Río Frío and then it's an easy 500m walk. The restaurant here rents kayaks (M\$50 per half hour).

Sights & Activities

While it's possible to make your own way into El Cielo, few trails or natural attractions are labeled, so exploring is best done with a local guide, or at least a driver who knows their way around. If you do go on your own, we recommend you register your plans at the police commander's office behind the tourist office in Gómez Farías. This is remote territory.

The road through the reserve is very rough; it's suitable only for 4WD vehicles with high clearance. Motorcycles are prohibited. Most people visit in the covered, open-sided trucks you'll see parked all over town. These hold up to 10 passengers comfortably and cost between M\$1000 and M\$1600 per day; prices rise and fall with demand. There's a M\$100 fee for trucks from Gómez (just M\$20 for private vehicles) to enter or pass through the villages of Alta Cima and San José. Ask if this is included in the price. There's often nobody around to collect the money in San José.

The forest itself is the main attraction. The tall trees are strung with Spanish moss, and from June through November many are bursting with flowers. It teems with birds and butterflies year-round, and bird-watchers are some of El Cielo's principal visitors. The hotels can connect you to guides with ornithological expertise. There are also many caves and rainy season-only waterfalls.

The village of **Alta Cima** (900m) is just 12km from Gómez Farías, but it takes about 90 minutes to reach it, which tells you what you need to know about the condition of the road through the reserve. Behind La Fe restaurant in Alta Cima is a steep interpretive trail up **Cerro de la Cruz** (M\$5) where you can see orchids in a patch of cloud forest. A 40-minute walk away is **Cueva del Pino** with some lovely

stalactites, but few people visit because the entry is difficult; guides (M\$120) from the village are mandatory.

Six kilometers beyond Alta Cima is a large, vaguely house-shaped rock known as **Casa de Piedra** and about 800m below it is **El Salto**, a 70m waterfall. Camping is allowed here; pay M\$25 at La Fe restaurant in Alta Cima.

The best hiking within day-trip distance of Gómez Farías is around **San José** (1470m), another 7km and one hour deeper into the reserve from Alta Cima. **Cerro de Compañá**, just before the village, is topped by bizarre rock formations, and a clear trail to the top takes about 30 minutes. The large **Cueva del Agua** with three levels and the very wide **Cascada de Bellas Fuentes**, one of the most beautiful waterfalls in the reserve, are each a 1km walk away. A guide from the village to either destination will probably ask for about M\$15 per person to any place. The **Cascada de Canindo**, a smaller but also lovely waterfall, is just before San José, right behind Cabañas Canindo.

Beyond San José there are more waterfalls, caves and villages. Two of the top photo ops are **Piedra del Pollo** (4km away) and **Piedra El Elefante** (8.7km away), rocks shaped like a chicken and an elephant respectively. It's possible to get from Gómez Farías to El Elefante and back in a day, but there won't be much time for stops along the way. Most day-trippers don't travel beyond San José.

Sleeping & Eating

Gómez Farías has just three hotels. None are cheap, but all are good.

Nearly 2km north of the plaza, the casual family-run **Hotel Posada Campestre** (☎ 832-236-22-00; www.posadaenelcielo.com.mx; s & d M\$390, each additional person M\$100; 🍷 🍴) offers clean, orderly rooms with bunk beds and dim lighting. The leafy garden in back has a few hammocks, space for camping (M\$50 per person, including use of showers) and lots of birds.

Just 150m past the plaza, the relaxing **Hostal Casa de Piedra** (☎ 832-236-21-96; s & d/tr incl breakfast M\$500/600; 🍷 🍴) has seven beautifully built stone-and-timber rooms (try to reserve 'Magnolia,' which comes with a valley-view balcony) and a little outdoor lounge and restaurant. Air-con costs M\$100 extra.

Gómez's newest and fanciest hotel, **Cumbres Inn & Suites** (☎ 832-236-22-18; www.hotelcumbres.com.mx; r/ste from M\$780/1229; 🍷 🍴 📺 🚰 🚿), at the entrance to town, has stylish rooms (with

wi-fi) and a lovely, shady spot on the edge of the valley. Between dips in the two pools you can drop down the rappelling wall or ride the triple zip-line that brings you back to where you started. They also run kayaking trips and have mountain-bike rental (M\$50 per hour; daily rates negotiable). Rooms are 15% cheaper on weekdays.

All three hotels serve good food, but the tip of the hat goes to **Cumbres Inn** (mains M\$45-120; ☒) for its valley view (Casa de Piedra's view is good too) and broad selection, from salads to *fajitas de pollo a la plancha* (grilled chicken fajitas). There are also several *comedores* around the plaza.

To fully appreciate how isolated and pristine the reserve is, spend a night or two in the mountains. There's nothing nearly as fancy as what's in Gómez, but there are lots of options.

The two-storey **Hotel Alta Cima** (☎ 831-254-84-04; s/d M\$250/300, up to 6 people M\$600), with simple but agreeable rooms and hot water, is the best choice in the village of the same name. Just across from the hotel, **La Fe** (gorditas & tacos M\$4, mains M\$25-40; ☎ 9am-5pm), run by the local women's cooperative, has a large menu, but rarely has much of it available. Try the *tortas de nopalitos* (cactus sandwiches) if you can. They also sell bird embroidery and fruit preserves.

Just before the village of San José is a pair of rustic wooden lodges facing each other across the road. **Cabañas Canindo 'Hugo Lara'** (☎ 831-254-59-30; per person M\$200) on the left as you approach from Alta Cima and **Cabañas Canindo 'Javier Villegas'** (☎ 833-187-00-66; per person M\$250). Both have hot water and solar-powered lights; the only real difference is the price. Either bring your own food or let them know in advance you'd like them to cook for you.

Seemingly half the buildings in San José are tourist *cabañas*, some perched on rocky hilltops on the edge of the village; most cost around M\$100 per person. There are no restaurants, but some of the cabins have kitchens and all the families will cook dinner for you. The villages of La Gloria (1700m) and Joya de Manantiales (1600m), 3.2km and 10.4km further on from San José, also have simple *cabañas* at similar prices.

Getting There & Away

Six daily LUMX buses link Ciudad Mante to Gómez Farías (M\$30, one hour). From Ciudad Victoria, get off your bus at the turnoff for Gómez (called 'La Y de Gómez Farías') on Hwy 85. From here you can catch the bus from Mante or the minivan (M\$9) that shuttles people up to town about every two hours. Hitching on the road up to Gómez is easy.

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