

Tabasco & Chiapas



Mismatched siblings, the neighboring states of Tabasco and Chiapas are almost a study in contrasts. Smaller Tabasco – between central Mexico and the Yucatán Peninsula – is less diverse than Chiapas, and prone to flooding, as demonstrated by the catastrophic flood of October 2007. A largely flat, steamy, well-watered lowland, it has fewer visitors, but those who do drop in discover a place with fascinating pre-Hispanic heritage from the Olmec and Maya civilizations, a relaxed tropical lifestyle, an entertaining capital city in Villahermosa, and a unique environment of enormous rivers, endless wetlands and good beaches heading out into the Gulf of Mexico.

In Chiapas, pine forest highlands, wildlife-rich rainforest jungles and well-preserved colonial architecture highlight a region of incredible variety. Palenque and Yaxchilán are evocative vestiges of powerful Maya kingdoms, and the presence of modern Maya a constant reminder of the region's rich and uninterrupted history. The colonial hubs of San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Chiapa de Corzo give way to fertile plots of coffee and cacao in the Soconusco, and for outdoor adventurers, excursions to Laguna Miramar and the Cañón del Sumidero are unmissable.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Scale the jungly hills and soaring Maya temples of **Palenque** (p833)
- Stroll the high altitude cobblestone streets of **San Cristóbal de Las Casas** (p811)
- Cruise through the waterway and sheer high rock cliffs of the spectacular **Cañón del Sumidero** (p810)
- Hike in and laze away a few splendid days at the mountain-ringed **Laguna Miramar** (p829)
- Admire the mysterious art of the ancient Olmecs at **Villahermosa** (p790) and **La Venta** (p792)



■ SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS
JANUARY DAILY HIGH: 29°C | 84°F

■ SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS
JULY DAILY HIGH: 31°C | 88°F

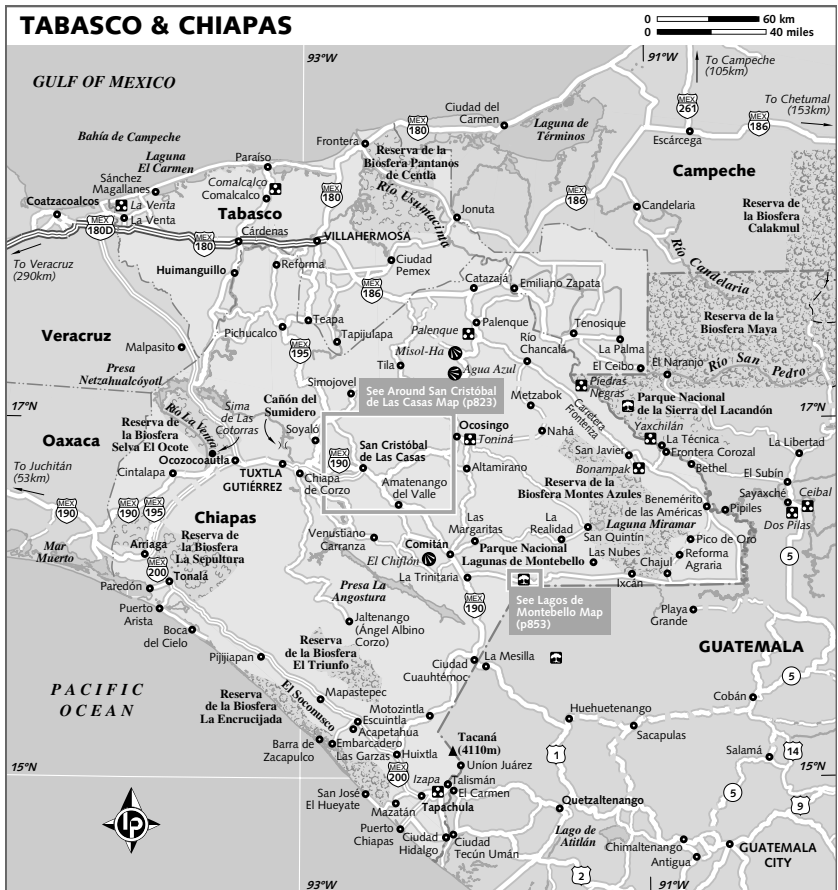
History

Tabasco and Chiapas have hosted as rich a procession of cultures as anywhere in Mexico. It was at La Venta in western Tabasco that Mesoamerica's 'mother culture,' the Olmec, reached its greatest heights of development between about 800 and 400 BC, after first emerging in San Lorenzo, Veracruz. Olmec religion, art, astronomy and architecture deeply influenced all of Mexico's later civilizations.

Low-lying, jungle-covered eastern Chiapas gave rise to some of the most splendid and powerful city-states of another great civilization, the Maya, during the Classic period (approximately AD 250–900), places such as Palenque, Yaxchilán and Toniná. Dozens of lesser Maya powers – including Bonampak,

Comalcalco and Chinkultic – prospered in eastern Chiapas and Tabasco during this time, as Maya culture reached its peak of artistic and intellectual achievement. The ancestors of many of the distinctive indigenous groups of highland Chiapas today appear to have migrated to that region from the lowlands after the Classic Maya collapse around AD 900.

Pre-Hispanic Tabasco was the prosperous nexus of a far-reaching trade network extending round the Yucatán coast to Honduras, up the rivers to the jungles and mountains of Guatemala, and westward to highland central Mexico. And it was near Frontera, Tabasco, in 1519 that Hernán Cortés and his conquistadors fought their first battle against native Mexicans, afterwards founding a set-



tlement called Santa María de la Victoria. In 1641, Santa María was moved inland to escape pirate attacks, and renamed Villahermosa de San Juan Bautista. However, Tabasco remained an impoverished backwater until recent decades; now the development of its mineral riches, particularly petroleum, has brought widespread prosperity.

Central Chiapas was brought under Spanish control by the 1528 expedition of Diego de Mazariegos, and outlying areas were subdued in the 1530s and '40s, though Spain never gained full control of the Lacandón Jungle. New diseases arrived with the Spaniards, and an epidemic in 1544 killed about half Chiapas' indigenous population. Chiapas was ineffectively administered from Guatemala for most of the colonial era, with little check on the colonists' excesses against its indigenous people, though some church figures, particularly Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566), the first bishop of Chiapas, did fight for indigenous rights.

In 1822, a newly independent Mexico unsuccessfully attempted to annex Spain's former Central American provinces (including Chiapas), but in 1824 Chiapas opted (by a referendum) to join Mexico, rather than the United Provinces of Central America. From then on, a succession of governors appointed by Mexico City, along with local landowners, maintained an almost feudal control over Chiapas. Periodic uprisings bore witness to bad government, but the world took little notice until January 1, 1994, when Zapatista rebels suddenly and briefly occupied San Cristóbal de Las Casas and nearby towns by military force. The rebel movement, with a firm and committed support base among disenchanting indigenous settlers in eastern Chiapas, quickly retreated to remote jungle bases to campaign for democratic change and indigenous rights. The Zapatistas have failed to win any significant concessions at the national level (see boxed text, p826), although increased government funding steered toward Chiapas did result in noticeable improvements in the state's infrastructure, development of tourist facilities and a growing urban middle class.

Climate

The rainy season is between May and October, with the heaviest rainfall mostly in June, September and early October. During the

rainy season the days often start dry and fairly bright, and there's usually a heavy downfall in the afternoon. Tabasco receives particularly heavy rainfall (about 1500mm annually).

Between November and April, warm sunny days are the norm. The hottest months are April and May, when the fields turn a dusty brown before the onset of the rains.

Temperatures in Tabasco and Chiapas don't vary much according to the season – altitude is a much more influential factor. All lowland areas (most of Tabasco, the Lacandón Jungle, Palenque, the Usumacinta area and the Pacific coast) are hot and sticky all year, with punishing humidity and daily highs above 30°C. In the more elevated center of the region, the climate is less enervating.

Parks & Reserves

Several large areas have been declared biosphere reserves in an effort to combine conservation with sustainable human use. Vital wetlands are protected by Tabasco's Reserva de la Biosfera Pantanos de Centla (p802) and the Reserva de la Biosfera La Encrucijada (p856) in Chiapas. The Reserva de la Biosfera Montes Azules (p829) and the Reserva de la Biosfera Lacan-tun (see p844) in eastern Chiapas battle to preserve what's left of the Lacandón Jungle, while the Reserva de la Biosfera El Triunfo (p854) includes rare cloud forests. There are also three national parks here: Cañón del Sumidero (p810), Lagos de Montebello (p852) and Palenque (p833).

Dangers & Annoyances

Drug trafficking and illicit northbound immigration are concerns along the border regions with Guatemala, and military checkpoints are frequent from the Carretera Fronteriza along the Guatemalan border from Palenque to the Lagos de Montebello. These checkpoints generally increase security for travelers, though it's best to be off the Carretera Fronteriza before dark. For similar reasons the border crossings with Guatemala near Tapachula are places you should aim to get through early in the day.

Indigenous villages are often extremely close-knit, and their people can be suspicious of outsiders and particularly sensitive about having their photos taken. In some villages cameras are, at best, tolerated – and sometimes not even that. You may put yourself

in physical danger by taking photos without permission. If in any doubt at all, ask first.

There have been no Zapatista-related incidents affecting travelers for some time, though occasional flare-ups occur between Zapatista communities and the army or anti-Zapatista paramilitaries. If you plan to travel off the main roads in the Chiapas highlands, the Ocosingo area and far eastern Chiapas, take local advice about where to avoid going. Unknown outsiders might also be at risk in these areas because of local political or religious conflicts. Travelers to Villahermosa and coastal Tabasco should note the region is subject to seasonal floods. In 2007, catastrophic damage occurred (see boxed text, right) and some areas are still recovering.

Getting There & Around

A toll autopista (expressway) between Coatzacoalcos (Veracruz state) and Ocozocoautla (Chiapas) translates to an average 10-hour driving time from Mexico City to Tuxtla Gutiérrez (the Chiapas state capital), and a new autopista between Ocozocoautla and Arriaga on Chiapas' coastal plain is currently being built.

A fast new toll autopista now flies between Tuxtla Gutiérrez and San Cristóbal de Las Casas, joining the Pan-American Hwy (190) to enter Guatemala at Ciudad Cuauhtémoc/La Mesilla (p854), 84km from Huehuetenango, Guatemala. The other main route to Guatemala is Hwy 200 along Chiapas' coastal plain, leading to two border crossings near the city of Tapachula (p861). It's also possible to cross direct into Guatemala's northern Petén region, using boat services on the Río Usumacinta (Frontera Corozal to Bethel; p845) or Río San Pedro (El Ceibo to El Naranjo; p803).

The airports at Villahermosa (p796), Tuxtla Gutiérrez (p808) and Tapachula (p859) all have direct daily flights to and from Mexico City.

Bus links within the region and to other states are very good; for regional routes, minibuses, combis and *colectivo* taxis often offer a speedier (though less spacious) alternative.

TABASCO

They say that Tabasco has more water than land, and looking at all the lagoons, rivers and

wetlands on the map you can certainly believe that's true – at least during the rainy season. It's always hot and sweaty here, marginally less so when you catch a breeze along the Gulf of Mexico or if you venture into the southern hills. Few travelers linger in Tabasco longer than it takes to see the outstanding Olmec stone sculpture in Villahermosa's Parque-Museo La Venta, but it can be a very rewarding slice of the real Mexico, with few other tourists, some intriguing pre-Hispanic sites (both the Olmecs and the Maya flourished here), a large and lively capital city, a beautiful natural environment and a relaxed populace with an insatiable love for *música tropical*. Thanks to onshore and offshore oil exploitation by Mexico's state oil company (Pemex), Tabasco has emerged from poverty to become one of Mexico's more prosperous states.

In late October and early November 2007, prolonged heavy rainfall led to major floods here, submerging a whopping 80% of the state. The federal government quickly mobilized food distribution and emergency shelters, and relief donation centers sprouted up nationwide, as people pitched in to head off the humanitarian crisis. Though the floodwaters have receded, full economic recovery is expected to take years. By early 2008, most infrastructure, attractions and travelers' services were already up and running.

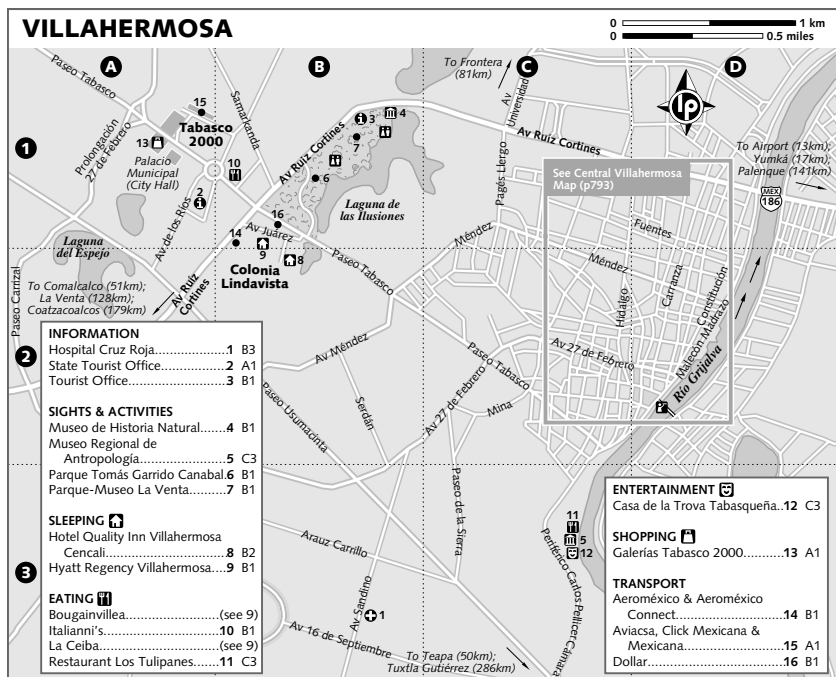
VILLAHERMOSA

☎ 993 / pop 673,000

This sprawling, flat, hot and humid city, with over a quarter of Tabasco's population, was never the 'beautiful town' its name implies, but it takes advantage of its position on the winding Río Grijalva, with a welcome river-

TABASCO FLOODS OF 2007

Due to the severe flooding that hit the state of Tabasco during the time of this book's research, making all routes nearly impassable, our author could not access the state. Our research for this section consisted of personal contacts by phone and internet, and input from local citizens and fellow travelers. At the time this book went to press, the state was still in recovery. While we've tried our best to ensure the text is current and useful to travelers, some of these listings may be out of date.



side leisure development a couple of blocks from the pedestrianized city center. Still, when the river burst its banks and engulfed the city in 2007, the result looked like New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Villahermosa's main visitor attraction is the open-air Parque-Museo La Venta, a combined Olmec archaeological museum and zoo in an attractive lakeside park. There's also a regional anthropology museum and an improving cultural and entertainment scene that may tempt you to hang around longer than a single day or night.

Oil money has pumped modernity and commerce into some of the outer districts, where you'll find glitzy malls, imposing public buildings and luxury hotels.

Orientation

In this sprawling city you'll find yourself walking some distances in the sticky heat, and occasionally hopping on a minibus (combi) or taking a taxi. The central area, known as the Zona Luz, extends north-south from Parque Juárez to the Plaza de Armas, and east-west from the Río Grijalva to roughly Calle 5 de

Mayo. The main bus stations are between 750m and 1km to its north.

Parque-Museo La Venta lies 2km northwest of the Zona Luz, beside Av Ruíz Cortines, the main east-west highway crossing the city. West of Parque-Museo La Venta is the Tabasco 2000 district of modern commercial and government buildings.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Cybercafés are plentiful. Rates are M\$7 to M\$10 per hour.

Milenium (Map p793; Sáenz 130; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun)

Multiservicios (Map p793; Aldama 621C; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun)

LAUNDRY

Lavandería Top Klean (Map p793; ☎ 312-28-56; Madero 303A; next-day/same-day service per kg M\$18/25; ☎ 8:30am-8pm Mon-Sat)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Cruz Roja (Map p791; ☎ 315-55-55; Av Sandino s/n) A short ride southwest of the Zona Luz.

Unidad Médica Guerrero (Map p793; ☎ 314-56-97/98; 5 de Mayo 444; 🕒 24hr) Emergency service.

MONEY

Most banks have ATMs and exchange currency.

Bancomer (Map p793; cnr Zaragoza & Juárez;

🕒 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Santander Serfin (Map p793; Madero 584; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)

POST

Main post office (Map p793; Sáenz 131; 🕒 9am-3pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

State tourist office (Map p791; ☎ 316-36-33, 800-216-08-42; www.tabasco.gob.mx/turismo; Av de los Ríos s/n; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) At the Tabasco 2000 complex.

From the Zona Luz, take a 'Fracc Carrizal' combi (M\$5) from Madero, just north of Parque Juárez, get off at the big traffic circle surrounded by banks after you cross Av Ruíz Cortines, and walk one block to the left along Av de los Ríos.

Tourist office (Map p791; 🕒 8am-4pm, Tue-Sun) In the Parque-Museo La Venta.

Sights

Apart from Parque-Museo La Venta, the pedestrianized Zona Luz is an enjoyable place to explore, and its busy lanes – full of hawkers' stalls and salsa-blasting clothes stores and dotted with cafés and galleries – buzz with tropical atmosphere.

PARQUE-MUSEO LA VENTA

This fascinating outdoor **park and museum** (Map p791; ☎ 314-16-52; Av Ruíz Cortines; admission M\$40; 🕒 8am-5pm, last admission 4pm, zoo closed Mon; ♿) was created in 1958, when petroleum exploration threatened the highly important ancient Olmec settlement of La Venta in western Tabasco (p799). Archaeologists moved the site's most significant finds, including three colossal stone heads, to Villahermosa.

Plan two to three hours for your visit, and take mosquito repellent (the park is set in humid tropical woodland). Snack stands and a little cafeteria provide sustenance. Inside, you come to the **zoo** first. This is devoted to animals from Tabasco and nearby regions: cats include jaguars, ocelots and jaguarundi, and there are white-tailed deer, spider monkeys, crocodiles, boa constrictors, peccaries and plenty of colorful birds, including scarlet macaws and keel-billed toucans.

There's an informative display in English and Spanish (like most information here) on Olmec archaeology as you pass through to the **sculpture trail**, whose start is marked by a giant *ceiba* (the sacred tree of the Olmec and Maya). This 1km walk is lined with finds from La Venta. Among the most impressive, in the order you come to them, are Stele 3, which depicts a bearded man with a headdress; Altar 5, depicting a figure carrying a child; Monument 77, 'El Gobernante,' a very sour-looking seated ruler; the monkey-faced Monument 56; Monument 1, the colossal head of a helmet-wearing warrior; and Stele 1, showing a young goddess (a rare Olmec representation of anything female). Animals that pose no danger (such as coatis, squirrels and black agoutis) roam freely around the park.

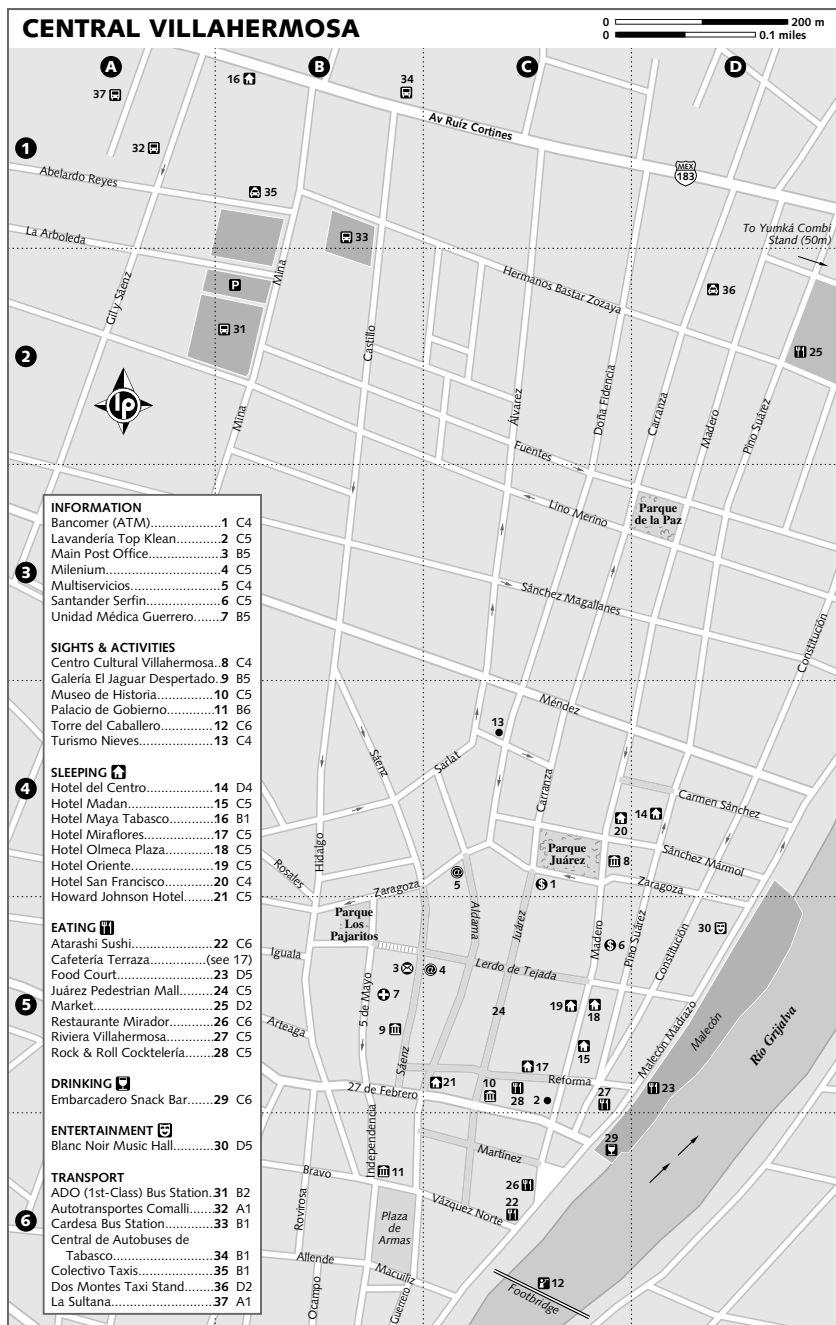
After dark, a **sound-and-light show** (admission M\$100; 🕒 hourly 7-10pm Tue-Sun) takes you around 13 of the most interesting archaeological items, with video sequences and passages of poetry by Carlos Pellicer Cámara (1897-1977), the Tabascan scholar and poet responsible for salvaging the artifacts of La Venta. If you have enough Spanish, it's an atmospheric experience.

Next to the park entrance, the **Museo de Historia Natural** (Map p791; ☎ 314-21-75; admission M\$15; 🕒 8am-4pm Tue-Sun) has quite well set-out displays on dinosaurs, space, early humanity and Tabascan ecosystems (all in Spanish).

Parque-Museo La Venta is 3km from the Zona Luz. A 'Fracc Carrizal' combi from Madero, just north of Parque Juárez in the Zona Luz, will drop you on Paseo Tabasco just short of Av Ruíz Cortines; then walk 1km northeast across Parque Tomás Garrido Canabal and along the Malecón de las Ilusiones, a lakeside path, to the entrance.

MUSEO REGIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGÍA

This **regional museum** (Map p791; ☎ 312-63-44; Periférico Carlos Pellicer; admission M\$25; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a little dilapidated and poorly labeled (in Spanish only), but still holds some interesting exhibits. It's best to begin on the upper level, which outlines Mesoamerica's many civilizations with the aid of a pretty good sculpture collection. After you've brushed up on the broad picture, the middle floor concentrates on Olmec and Maya cultures in Tabasco, with second-grade sculptures from La Venta, and Classic Maya urns from Tapijulapa and Tacotalpa. Finally, on the ground floor is one



of the smaller Olmec heads from La Venta and some large Classic Maya steles from Reforma and Tortuguero.

The museum is 1km south of the Zona Luz. You can walk (about 20 minutes), or catch a 'CICOM' combi or microbus heading south on Constitución.

MUSEO DE HISTORIA

Housed in a striking 19th-century building known as La Casa de los Azulejos (House of Tiles), this **museum** (Map p793; ☎ 314-21-72; Juárez 402; admission adult/child & senior M\$15/5; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) has sparse exhibits on Tabasco history, but the Spanish *azulejos* (painted ceramic tiles) themselves, which cover the facade and most of the interior, are gorgeous.

GALLERIES

Central Villahermosa has several art and photo galleries, staging varied exhibits of Tabascan and other Mexican work, with free admission. **Galería El Jaguar Despertado** (Map p793; ☎ 314-12-44; Sáenz 117; 🕒 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun), the modernist concrete-and-glass **Centro Cultural Villahermosa** (Map p793; ☎ 312-61-36; cnr Madero & Zaragoza; 🕒 10am-8pm Tue-Sun) and the gallery in the **Palacio de Gobierno** (Map p793; Independencia 2; 🕒 10am-2pm & 5-8pm) have some of the best shows.

TORRE DEL CABALLERO

This **lookout tower** (Map p793; admission free; 🕒 8am-6pm), on a footbridge over the Río Grijalva, affords good panoramas over the city and river.

TABASCO 2000

The Tabasco 2000 complex (Map p791), with its modern government buildings, convention center, fountains, restaurants and Galerías Tabasco 2000 shopping mall, is a testimony to the prosperity oil has brought to Villahermosa. It's convenient to come here for a browse and a bite after visiting the Parque-Museo La Venta, or take a 'Fracc Carrizal' combi from Madero just north of Parque Juárez.

Tours

Turismo Nieves (Map p793; ☎ 314-18-88; reservaya@turismonieves.com.mx; Sarlat 202; 🕒 8am-7pm Mon-Sat) offers a range of comprehensive tours around Tabasco, including an eight-hour 'Ruta del Cacao' day trip northwest of Villahermosa

(M\$890 per person, minimum two people), which packs in a turtle farm, two cacao haciendas, Comalcalco ruins and a boat trip on Laguna Mecoacán.

Sleeping

As an oil town, Villahermosa is well supplied with comfortable midrange and top-end hotels with good amenities; some accommodations offer heavily discounted weekend rates. Inviting budget options are scarcer. Air-conditioning is standard in the midrange and top-end places.

BUDGET

Hotel del Centro (Map p793; ☎ 312-25-65; Pino Suárez 209; r with fan M\$200-300, r with air-con M\$350-400; 📺) A slightly shambolic, but acceptable, basic budget hotel, where all the rooms have TV.

Hotel Oriente (Map p793; ☎ 312-01-21; fax 312-11-01; Madero 425; s/d/tr with fan M\$220/250/360, with air-con M\$300/330/420; 📺) The Oriente is a well-run downtown hotel where the comfortable rooms are kept spick-and-span, and the bathrooms even have a little sparkle. All rooms have TV.

Hotel San Francisco (Map p793; ☎ 312-31-98; Madero 604; s & d M\$280, tr/q M\$360/400; 📺) The lobby is gloomy, but the rooms are decent enough, and all come with air-con and TV. There's an elevator to the upper floors.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Madan (Map p793; ☎ 314-05-18, 800-543-47-77; www.bestwestern.com; Madero 408; r M\$586; 📺 📺 📺 📺) Representing excellent value for money, the Best Western Madan has 40 bright, spacious rooms with nice wooden furniture, coffeemakers and attractive bathrooms; the king-size beds are ample enough for a sumo wrestler. The in-house restaurant and bar are good too.

Howard Johnson Hotel (Map p793; ☎ 314-46-45, 800-780-72-72; www.hojo.com.mx; Aldama 404; s/d M\$591/652; 📺 📺 📺 📺) The Howard Johnson is comfortable and in the heart of town, but some rooms suffer a degree of traffic noise – ask for one overlooking the pedestrian streets Aldama or Reforma.

Hotel Miraflores (Map p793; ☎ 358-04-70, 800-234-02-29; www.miraflores.com.mx; Reforma 304; s/d/tr/ste M\$617/672/755/838; 📺 📺 📺) Set on a traffic-free street, the Miraflores provides large, bright rooms with ample bathrooms, telephones, cable TV, tile floors and in some cases bal-

conies. Downstairs is a café, a restaurant and two bars. Not a bad deal.

Hotel Maya Tabasco (Map p793; ☎ 358-11-11, 800-237-77-00; www.bestwestern.com; Av Ruíz Cortines 907; r M\$687; (P) (X) (W) (A) (B)) One kilometer north of the Zona Luz, this business-orientated Best Western hotel has good-sized, well-equipped, modern rooms, most with bathtub. Add the attractive gardens, large pool, good restaurant, two bars with evening entertainment, ATM and free transportation to the airport and Parque-Museo La Venta, and it's a pretty good package.

Hotel Olmeca Plaza (Map p793; ☎ 358-01-02, 800-201-09-09; www.hotelolmecaplaza.com; Madero 418; r M\$750, Fri-Sun M\$590; (P) (X) (W) (A) (B)) The classiest downtown hotel also has an open-air pool and well-equipped gym. Rooms are modern and comfortable, with writing desks and good large bathrooms, and there's a quality onsite restaurant.

Hotel Quality Inn Villahermosa Cencali (Map p791; ☎ 313-66-11, 800-112-50-00; www.qualityinnvillahermosa.com; Av Juárez 105, Colonia Lindavista; r M\$874; (P) (X) (W) (A) (B)) The Cencali boasts an excellent quiet location not far from Parque-Museo La Venta, and 160 good-size rooms with balconies, bathtubs and, in many cases, views of the Laguna de las Ilusiones. There's a great swimming pool in tropical gardens beside the lake. The rate comes down to M\$787 on some weekends.

TOP END

Hyatt Regency Villahermosa (Map p791; ☎ 310-12-34; www.villahermosa.regency.hyatt.com; Av Juárez 106, Colonia Lindavista; r M\$1350; (P) (X) (W) (A) (B)) Villahermosa's smartest hotel has amenities that include a large swimming pool, a smaller kids' pool, tennis courts, two restaurants, two bars and one restaurant-bar. All 207 bright, luxuriously appointed rooms and suites come with modem connections and glass-walled hydromassage showers. On weekends, breakfast is included in the room rate.

Eating

Villahermosa's eclectic collection of hotel restaurants, chain restaurants and seafood, Tabascan, Japanese and Italian specialists will keep you happy for the duration of your stay.

ZONA LUZ & MALECÓN

Hotel Madan (Map p793; ☎ 314-05-24; Madero 408; breakfast M\$30-50, mains M\$55-80) It's nothing glam-

orous, but this is a very reliable and popular hotel restaurant, with mainly Mexican dishes and efficient, friendly service.

Food Court (Map p793; Malecón Madrazo; mains M\$50-100; ☎ 10am-11pm) This open-air eating and drinking area on the deck beside the river has the greatest location in town. Several of the city's best eateries have branches here.

Rock & Roll Cockeria (Map p793; ☎ 312-05-93; Reforma 307; seafood cocktails M\$65-80; ☎ 9am-11pm) A maelstrom of heat, swirling fans, a thumping jukebox and garrulous punters. Everyone's here for the *cocteles* (fish or seafood, tomato sauce, lettuce, onions and a lemon squeeze) and the cheap beer.

Restaurante Mirador (Map p793; ☎ 314-34-95; Madero 105; mains M\$70-150; ☎ noon-8pm) A smart, air-conditioned, upstairs restaurant, specializing in fish and seafood.

Riviera Villahermosa (Map p793; ☎ 312-44-68; Constitución 104; mains M\$75-160; ☎ 1pm-2am Mon-Sat, noon-6pm Sun) The Euro-Mex menu is pretty good, and the air-conditioned 4th-floor setting with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the river is spectacular. Steaks, seafood and pasta are all good here.

Atarashi Sushi (Map p793; ☎ 314-70-26; Vázquez Norte 203; mains M\$90-150; ☎ noon-midnight Sun-Fri, to 1am Sat) Air-conditioned Atarashi presents a tasty Mexican angle on Japanese food, offering all sorts of tantalizing – and satisfying – seafood, meat, vegetable and sauce combinations.

Also recommended are the following:

Cafetería Terraza (Map p793; ☎ 358-04-70; Hotel Miraflores, Reforma 304; mains M\$70-120; ☎ 7am-11pm) A reliable hotel café-restaurant, with filling portions of well-priced Mexican staples.

Hotel Olmeca Plaza (Map p793; ☎ 358-01-02; Madero 418; mains M\$70-125) A quality hotel restaurant with good service.

Juárez pedestrian mall (Map p793) Several cafés have indoor and outdoor tables; good for breakfast or a drink and snacks, though you may be serenaded by a marimba team.

Market (Map p793; Hermanos Bastar Zozaya s/n; ☎ 5am-7pm) Fresh vegetables, chilies, fish, meat and big dollops of local atmosphere.

OTHER AREAS

Italianni's (Map p791; ☎ 317-72-57; Prolongación Paseo Tabasco 1404; mains M\$80-140; ☎ 1-11pm Mon-Wed, to 1am Thu-Sat, to 10pm Sun) This quality Italian restaurant serves well-prepared pasta, pizzas, salads, chicken and steaks, and plenty of Italian

wine, amid classic check tablecloths and even Mediterranean-style window shutters. Don't miss the half-price specials Monday through Thursday after 6pm.

Restaurant Los Tulipanes (Map p791; ☎ 312-92-09; Periférico Carlos Pellicer 511; mains M\$80-170; 🕒 8am-9pm) Overlooking the Río Grijalva, near the Museo Regional de Antropología, Los Tulipanes is the best place in town for Tabascan specialties, including seafood-filled corn tortillas, and empanadas of *pejelagarto*, the tasty freshwater 'lizard fish' that is a symbol of Tabasco. It also serves steaks, chicken, *róbalo* (snook) and other fish – and on Sundays a Tabascan buffet (M\$180) that's the perfect opportunity to gorge yourself silly.

Hyatt Regency Villahermosa (Map p791; ☎ 310-12-34; Av Juárez 106, Colonia Lindavista) The top hotel in town has two of the best restaurants, both serving a big choice of Mexican and international dishes: the Bougainvillea (mains M\$90 to M\$140, open 1pm to midnight Monday through Saturday), with live jazz in the evenings, and La Ceiba (sandwiches and salads M\$50 to M\$70, mains M\$130 to M\$180, open 6:30am to midnight daily), which also serves some buffet meals.

Drinking

A cluster of bars with and without music is strung along the riverside Malecón Madrazo, and some hotels have good bars too.

For cooling beers, the Malecón's **Food Court** (Map p793; Malecón Madrazo; 🕒 10am-11pm) and **Embarcadero Snack Bar** (Map p793; ☎ 314-46-44; Malecón Madrazo Kiosco 1; snacks M\$15-50; 🕒 10am-3am) are fine, breezy, open-air spots. The Embarcadero also provides rock music, big-screen TV and good snacks.

Entertainment

To find out what's on in the way of performances, check the website of **Tabasco's culture department** (<http://iec.tabasco.gob.mx>).

Blanc Noir Music Hall (Map p793; ☎ 314-51-76; Malecón Madrazo 645; admission M\$30; 🕒 8am-3pm Tue-Sat) A two-level club with big windows facing the river, Blanc Noir often has local bands playing after 10pm Thursday to Saturday (the M\$30 admission to see bands includes one beer).

Riviera Villahermosa (Map p793; ☎ 312-44-68; Constitución 104; admission free; 🕒 1pm-2am Mon-Sat, noon-8pm Sun) A trendy 5th-floor electro-pop bar with great views.

Casa de la Trova Tabasqueña (Map p791; ☎ 314-21-22; Periférico Carlos Pellicer Cámara s/n; admission free) *Trova* artists play once or twice most weeks, usually at 8pm Wednesday, Thursday or Friday, at this café-style venue next to the Museo Regional de Antropología.

Shopping

You might find something you like among the Tabascan baskets, wickerwork, hats, gourds and pottery at **Artesanías de Tabasco** (☎ 316-28-22) in the **Galerías Tabasco 2000 mall** (Map p791; 🕒 10am-9pm). Galerías Tabasco 2000 also has fashion, jewelry, shoe and music stores, coffee bars and places to eat – all in air-con comfort.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Villahermosa's **Aeropuerto Roviroa** (☎ 356-01-57) is 13km east of the center, off Hwy 186. Nonstop or one-stop direct flights to/from Villahermosa include the following:

Cancún Click Mexicana, daily.

Houston, Texas Continental, daily.

Merida Aviacsa and Click Mexicana, both daily.

Mexico City Aeroméxico, Aviacsa and Mexicana; total eight or more daily.

Monterrey Aeroméxico Connect and Aviacsa; both with one daily nonstop.

Oaxaca Click Mexicana, daily.

Tuxtla Gutiérrez Click Mexicana, daily.

Veracruz Aeroméxico Connect, daily.

AIRLINE OFFICES

Aeroméxico & Aeroméxico Connect (Map p791;

☎ 315-27-77; cnr Av Ruíz Cortines & Sagitario)

Aviacsa (Map p791; ☎ 800-284-22-72; Local 8, Plaza D'Atocha Mall, Tabasco 2000)

Continental Airlines (☎ 356-02-67; Aeropuerto Roviroa)

Mexicana & Click Mexicana (Map p791; ☎ 316-31-33; Locales 5 & 6, Plaza D'Atocha Mall, Tabasco 2000)

BUS & COLECTIVO

Deluxe and 1st-class UNO, ADO and OCC buses run from the **ADO bus station** (Map p793; ☎ 312-84-22; Mina 297), 750m north of the Zona Luz, as do a few 2nd-class services, but many are *de paso* (buses which have started their journeys elsewhere, but are stopping to let off and take on passengers), so buy your onward ticket in advance if possible. It's possible to do this at the Ticket Bus *cajero automático* (ticket machine) on Madero between the Madan and Olmecca Plaza hotels. Departures from the

ADO terminal (most in the evening) include the following:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency (daily)
Campeche	M\$278-318	6-7hr	17
Cancún	M\$550-960	12-14hr	21
Mérida	M\$390-608	8-9hr	19
Mexico City (TAPO)	M\$550-998	10-12hr	26
Oaxaca	M\$448	12hr	3
Palenque	M\$95	2½hr	13
San Cristóbal de las Casas	M\$204	7hr	2
Tenosique	M\$130	3-3½hr	13
Tuxtla Gutiérrez	M\$200-240	4-8hr	13
Veracruz	M\$324-522	6-8hr	24

Transportation to most destinations within Tabasco leaves from other terminals north of the ADO. The 2nd-class **Cardesa bus station** (Map p793; cnr Bastar Zozaya & Castillo) has the following services:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Comalcalco	M\$25	1½hr	vans every 30 min 5am-9pm
Frontera	M\$30	1½hr	hourly buses 5am-9pm
Palenque	M\$50	2½hr	8 buses daily
Paraíso	M\$30	2hr	18 buses daily

The main 2nd-class bus station is the **Central de Autobuses de Tabasco** (Map p793; ☎ 312-29-77; cnr Av Ruíz Cortines & Castillo) on the north side of Av Ruíz Cortines. Departures include the following:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Comalcalco	M\$25	1½hr	every 30-60 min 5am-9pm
Frontera	M\$27	1½hr	every 30 min 4:30am-9pm
Jonuta	M\$50	2½hr	5 daily
La Venta	M\$50	2hr	every 30 min 4:30am-11pm
Paraíso	M\$30	2hr	every 30-60 min 5am-9pm
Tenosique	M\$70	3½hr	11 daily

For Teapa, **La Sultana** (Map p793; ☎ 314-48-82; Av Ruíz Cortines 917) runs comfortable 2nd-class buses (M\$30, one hour) every 30 minutes, 5am to 10:30pm. Further vans for Comalcalco (M\$25, one hour) are operated by **Autotransportes Comalli** (Map p793; Gil y Sáenz) every 20 minutes, 5:30am to 10pm.

Colectivo taxis to Paraíso (M\$45, 1½ hours) and Frontera (M\$40, 1¼ hours) go from a yard on Reyes (Map p793), north of the ADO bus station.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Most rental companies have desks at the airport.

Dollar (Map p791; ☎ 315-80-88; Torre Empresarial, Paseo Tabasco 1203)

Getting Around

A taxi from the airport to the city costs around M\$180 (M\$150 from the city to the airport) and takes about 25 minutes. Alternatively, go to the road outside the airport parking lot and pick up a *colectivo* taxi for M\$15 per person. These terminate at the **Dos Montes taxi stand** (Map p793; Carranza), about 1km north of the Zona Luz. You can catch them at the same stop to return to the airport.

Any taxi ride within the area between Av Ruíz Cortines, the Río Grijalva and Paseo Usumacinta costs M\$15. Combi rides within the same area are M\$5. From the ADO bus station to the Zona Luz, it's best to take a taxi, as you have to walk halfway to the Zona Luz to reach a combi route. From the Zona Luz to the ADO, take a 'Chedraui,' 'ADO' or 'Cardesa' combi north on Malecón Madrazo.

YUMKÁ

This Tabascan **safari park** (☎ 356-01-07; www.yumka.org; Ranchería Las Barrancas; over/under-11 M\$50/25, lake extra M\$20; ☎ 9am-5pm; ♿), 17km east of Villahermosa (4km past the airport), is hardly a Kenyan game drive, but the space and greenery do offer a break from the city. Yumká is divided into jungle, savanna and lake zones, representing Tabasco's three main ecosystems. Visits take the form of guided tours of the three areas (30 minutes each). In the jungle zone you see regional Mexican species such as howler monkeys, jaguars, scarlet macaws and toucans. The savanna, viewed from a tractor-pulled trolley, has an African section with elephants, giraffes, zebras and hippos, and an Asian section with axis deer, antelope, buffalo and gaur (the largest ox in the world). You tour the lake by boat and should see plenty of birds, including herons and pelicans.

Combis to Yumká (M\$9, 40 minutes) go every 15 to 20 minutes from 9am from Amado Nervo, beside Villahermosa market. The last one back leaves Yumká at 5pm.

WESTERN TABASCO

Comalcalco

☎ 933 / pop 40,000

Comalcalco, 51km northwest of Villahermosa, is typical of the medium-sized towns of western Tabasco – hot, bustling, quite prosperous and spread around a broad, open central plaza (Parque Juárez).

What makes it especially worth visiting are the impressive ruins of **ancient Comalcalco** (admission M\$35; ☎ 10am–4pm), 3.5km north. This Maya site is unique because many of its buildings are constructed of bricks and/or mortar made from oyster shells. Comalcalco was at its peak between AD 600 and 1000, when ruled by the Chontals. It remained an important center of commerce for several more centuries, trading in a cornucopia of pre-Hispanic luxury goods: cacao, salt, feathers, deer and jaguar skins, wax, honey, turtle shells, tobacco, chilies, manta-ray spines, cotton, polychrome ceramics, copal, jade and greenstone *hachas* (flat, carved-stone objects associated with the ritual ball game).

The museum at the entrance has a fine array of sculptures and engravings of human heads, deities, glyphs and animals such as crocodiles and pelicans.

The buildings within the site have information panels in both Spanish and English. The first building you encounter is the great brick-built, tiered pyramid, **Templo 1**. At its base are the remains of large stucco sculptures, including the feet of a giant winged toad. Further temples line Plaza Norte, in front of Templo I. In the far (southeast) corner of the site rises the **Gran Acrópolis**, with views from its summit over a canopy of palms to the Gulf of Mexico. The Acrópolis is fronted by **Templo V**, a burial pyramid that was once decorated on all sides with stucco sculptures of people, reptiles, birds and aquatic life. At Templo V's western foot is **Templo IX**, with a tomb lined by nine stucco sculptures showing a Comalcalco lord with his priests and courtiers. Above Templo V is the crumbling profile of **El Palacio**, with its parallel 80m-long corbel-arched galleries, probably once Comalcalco's royal residence.

The site is 1km (signposted) off the Comalcalco–Paraíso road. Vans to the turnoff (M\$5) stop outside Comalcalco's ADO terminal (see right). A taxi to the site costs around M\$20.

Hacienda La Luz (☎ 334-11-29; Blvd Rovirosa; 1hr tour per person M\$35; ☎ 10am–4pm), one of several local plantations making chocolate from home-grown cacao, is just 300m from Comalcalco's central Parque Juárez: walk 250m west along Calle Bosada to its end at Blvd Rovirosa, turn right and you'll see the hacienda's white gateposts across the road. The tour (minimum two people) takes you round the beautiful house, gardens and cacao plantation, and shows traditional methods of turning cacao beans into chocolate.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Santander (☎ 334-44-58; Escobedo 103; s/d M\$345/375; (P) ☎) The Santander, just off the main street (Juárez), offers clean, tile-floored, air-conditioned rooms, free morning coffee and a neat little café.

Hotel Copacabana (☎ 334-19-33, 800-224-77-77; www.hotelcopacabana.com.mx; cnr Juárez & Serdán; s/d M\$595/712; (P) ☎) The best hotel in town, the Copacabana has large, very clean, pink rooms with quality air-conditioning. The staff is professional, and the restaurant (mains M\$57 to M\$135) here is one of Comalcalco's best, with well-prepared seafood and meat dishes.

Bariloche (☎ 334-63-73; 5 de Mayo 109; mains M\$70-130; ☎ 9am-2am) A fine variety of local and other dishes is on offer at this air-conditioned, art-print-hung restaurant on the plaza, and there's live tropical music from 8pm Wednesday to Saturday. Try the prawns with tequila and *chipotle* (chili) mayonnaise for starters.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Comalcalco's **ADO terminal** (☎ 334-00-07; cnr López Mateos & Monserrat) by the clock tower (El Reloj) is on the main road, 300m east of the center. It has 1st- and 2nd-class buses to Villahermosa (M\$54, 1½ hours, seven daily), Paraíso (M\$15, 20 minutes, 25 daily), Frontera (M\$66, 2½ hours, three daily) and more distant destinations.

Paraíso & Around

☎ 933 / pop (Paraíso) 25,000

Twenty kilometers north of Comalcalco, Paraíso is doing very nicely from the economic spin-offs of Pemex oil installations on the nearby coast at Dos Bocas, and is something of a recreation center for western Tabasco. Wide, sandy beaches front the warm, clean

waters of the Gulf of Mexico north of town: Playa Varadero (7.5km from town), Playa El Paraíso (9km) and Balneario Palmar (10.5km) all have simple beach restaurants but only El Paraíso (where parking costs M\$70) normally has midweek service.

At Puerto Ceiba, 6km northeast of Paraíso, the **Parador Turístico Puerto Ceiba** (5 de Febrero s/n; mains M\$70-80; ☎ noon-7pm or later) is an enjoyable waterfront restaurant where you can take **boat rides** (up to 14 people M\$300; 1½hr; ☎ 10am-6pm) along the palm-lined Río Seco and into Laguna Mecoacán, with its mangroves and bird life. It's also possible to rent kayaks here. Follow the Puente del Bellote bridge over the lagoon's mouth and you'll reach several more restaurants serving fresh seafood. The first, popular **Restaurant La Posta** (☎ 335-40-92; mains M\$65-85; ☎ 9am-8pm), serves seafood on a deck right over Laguna Mecoacán, and offers more boat rides (M\$100 for 20 minutes on the *laguna*, or hour-long mangrove trips for M\$250, both for up to 10 people). The road continues, through several villages and over many, many *topes* (speed bumps), to Frontera, 75km east.

Westward from Paraíso, a wonderful road makes its way along the **Barra de Tupilco**, a palm-covered sandspit strung between the Gulf of Mexico and a succession of lagoons, all the way to scruffy Sánchez Magallanes, 80km from Paraíso. The spectacular trip passes an endless succession of palm-lined, sandy beaches, with ospreys, pelicans and frigate birds cruising overhead. Where stretches of road have been washed away by the sea, vehicles have to detour through the property of enterprising locals who charge unofficial tolls (adding up to about M\$50).

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Sabina (☎ 333-24-83; Ocampo 115; r with fan M\$250, with air-con M\$300-380; (P) ♻) A cheaper hotel on the plaza; avoid the dank ground-floor singles.

Hotel Solimar (☎ 333-28-72; Ocampo 114; s/d M\$532/631; (P) ♻) Half a block north of Paraíso's plaza, the Solimar has comfortable, pretty, air-conditioned rooms with alpine prints to help you feel cooler, and also one of the best eateries in town, the spick-and-span Restaurant Costa Carey (mains M\$50 to M\$110).

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Paraíso's **ADO terminal** (☎ 333-02-35; Av Romero Zurita), 1.5km south of the center, has 2nd-

class buses to Comalcalco (M\$15, 20 minutes, three or four hourly) and Villahermosa (M\$68, two hours, every half-hour) and two 1st-class buses to Frontera (M\$52, two hours).

A taxi to Puerto Ceiba or any of Paraíso's beaches costs M\$20 to M\$30. From Paraíso's 2nd-class bus station, **Central Camionera** (Serdán s/n), eight blocks north of the central plaza then four blocks east, Transportes Pancho Villa (TPV) runs four daily buses along the Barra de Tupilco to Sánchez Magallanes (M\$50, two hours). TPV also runs buses from Sánchez Magallanes to La Venta.

La Venta

☎ 923 / pop 9000

Most of the monuments from La Venta are at Villahermosa's Parque-Museo La Venta (p792), but this ancient Olmec ceremonial center still has the fascination of being the largest and most important 'capital' of Mexico's mother culture. The **site** (admission M\$30; ☎ 8am-4pm) is at the small town of La Venta, 128km west of Villahermosa. La Venta flourished between about 800 and 400 BC, on a natural plateau rising about 20m above an area of fertile, seasonally flooded lowlands. Matthew Stirling is credited with discovering, in the early 1940s, four huge Olmec heads sculpted from basalt, the largest more than 2m high. A lot of other fascinating sculpture has been found here too. It's thought that the Olmecs brought the stone for their monuments from hills 100km east and west, using systems of sledges and river rafts.

The museum at the site entrance holds three badly weathered Olmec heads, recovered since the founding of Parque-Museo La Venta in 1958, plus replicas of some of the finest La Venta sculptures that are no longer here. Further replicas are arranged decoratively around the site itself. The heart of the site is the 30m-high Edificio C-1, a rounded pyramid constructed out of clay and sand. Ceremonial areas and more structures stretch to the north and south of this, today mostly defined by low mounds and cleared vegetation. Those to the south stretch far into the jungle area beyond the plaza of Complejo B. At the north end of the site, Complejo A was once an important ceremonial area and many sculptures and rich offerings were found here in the 1940s and '50s – before oil exploitation modified the area.

La Venta town is 4km north of Hwy 180. The **ADO terminal** (☎ 232-03-97; Juárez 37), on the main street, has services to Villahermosa (M\$59, two hours) every 30 minutes, 5am to 11pm. The archaeological site is 800m north from the bus station.

Malpasito

pop 360 / elevation 200m

Up in Tabasco's beautiful and mountainous far southwestern corner, tiny Malpasito is the site of mysterious ancient Zoque ruins, and one of several *ejidos* (communal landholdings) in this district with ecotourism activities (promoted under the name Agua Selva). Malpasito is just 1km west of the Caseta Malpasito tollbooth and intersection on the Coatzacoalcos–Ocozocoautla autopista.

Malpasito's **ruins** (admission M\$25; ☎ 10am–5pm) are 600m (signposted) above the village. Apart from the beautiful setting, what's remarkable about this little-visited site dating from AD 700–900, is its petroglyphs (rock carvings). Over 100 petroglyphs showing birds, deer, monkeys, people, and temples with stairways are scattered around the Malpasito area, of which about 10 are at the archaeological site.

The site is arranged in a series of stepped platforms on the forested hillside. On the main plaza level is a ball court and a steam bath, which was probably used for pre-game purification rituals. Steps lead up to the Patio Sur, which was the main ceremonial area, dominated by the stepped Structure 13 on its top side. A small path leading half-right from the top of these steps leads to petroglyph groups after 100m and 150m. Past the second group, the path goes through the site's perimeter fence after 30m, and turns sharp right 80m later. After another 200m (downhill), a barely visible side path leads 40m through trees to the large, flat Petroglyph 112, unmarked and partly moss-covered, but with unmistakable temple and stairway carvings. Back on the main path, 100m past the Petroglyph 112 turning, you reach a forest waterfall with an inviting swimming hole at its foot.

More petroglyphs and swimming holes are to be found in Malpasito's **Parque Eco-Arqueológico** (admission M\$100; ☎ 8am–5pm), also just above the village, a beautiful slice of jungle, rivers and waterfalls with a rich variety of flora. The admission charge includes a guided walk of about two hours, and you can also

rappel down a waterfall (M\$140) or ride a 160m zip-line (M\$50).

Malpasito's **Albergue** (☎ in Mexico City 55-5151-5229; cabaña per person M\$100; meals M\$40-70) provides meals and simple but well looked-after wooden cabins with private cold-water bathroom, concrete floors and tile roofs. Here you can hire guides (M\$100 per day) for day walks up some of the dramatic-looking nearby hills.

TRT buses from Villahermosa's 2nd-class bus station (see p796), heading to Tuxtla Gutiérrez by the old Hwy 187, will drop you at the Malpasito turnoff (M\$60, three hours, six daily), from which it's 5km west to the village, crossing over the autopista en route. Second-class buses from Tuxtla Gutiérrez' OCC terminal (see p808) will drop you at the Caseta Malpasito (M\$50, two hours, eight daily), on the autopista just 1km from Malpasito.

SOUTHERN TABASCO

Teapa

☎ 932 / pop 26,000 / elevation 50m

This bustling town, 50km south of Villahermosa, is a good base for exploring southern Tabasco's natural attractions.

At the **Grutas del Coconá** (☎ 322-05-45; admission M\$20; ☎ 10am–5pm), 4km northeast of the center, a well-made concrete path leads 500m into a subtly lit cavern, with pools, bats, plenty of stalactites and stalagmites, and a small museum contain pre-Hispanic ritual items found in the cave. Combis marked 'Mercado Eureka Coca Florida' (M\$5, 10 minutes) will take you there every few minutes from Bastar beside Teapa's central church (and are not part of an international cocaine-trafficking route).

The **Balneario Río Puyacatengo** is a collection of popular riverside restaurants and bathing spots, 3km from town on the Tacotalpa road (M\$15 by taxi).

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Quintero (☎ 322-00-45; Bastar 108; s/d/tr M\$300/330/360; 🍴) This central hotel provides reasonably sized, clean, air-conditioned rooms, around a rather antiseptic concrete courtyard.

Hacienda Los Azufres (☎ 327-58-06; Carretera Teapa-Pichucalco Km 5.5; r M\$400, f M\$600, with private thermal bath M\$700; 🍴 🚿 🚿) This hotel-cum-thermal spa is in the countryside, 8km west of central Teapa, on Hwy 195 to Tuxtla Gutiérrez. Public

admission to the large, open-air, sulfurous swimming pools is M\$30. The rooms are reasonably attractive, with cheery tiling, and some have their own little thermal bathroom open to the sky. Relaxation and exfoliant massages are also available for around M\$300.

La Galería (☎ 322-18-37; Méndez 157; 2-person pizzas M\$70-80; 🕒 5-11pm) Try juicy pizzas amid a dizzying array of kitsch murals and photographs of local beauty queens. It also serves a good selection of thirst-quenchers.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The **OCC terminal** (☎ 322-23-11; Méndez 218) is 300m from the plaza, along the main street. Buses leave for Tuxtla Gutiérrez (M\$142, six hours) twice daily. **La Sultana** (☎ 322-19-23; Damián Pizá 17), near the market and 600m from the plaza, runs comfortable 2nd-class buses to Villahermosa (M\$32, one hour) every 30 minutes, 4am to 9:30pm.

Tapijulapa

☎ 932 / pop 2800 / elevation 200m

This pretty riverside village of red-tile-roof white houses, presided over by a 17th-century church, sits among the lushly forested hills of far southern Tabasco, 36km from Teapa. Several shops sell local wicker and wood crafts.

The beautiful jungle park **Villa Luz** (admission free; 🕒 8am-5pm) is a five-minute boat ride (per person one-way/round-trip M\$15/25) along the Río Oxolotán from the village's *embarcadero* (boat landing) – you may have to get local boys to whistle a boat up for you. From the landing, it's a 1km walk to the park's Casa Museo, the former country villa of Tomás Garrido Canabal, the rabidly anticlerical governor of Tabasco in the 1920s and '30s (he demolished Villahermosa's 18th-century baroque cathedral, banned alcohol and gave women the vote). From here other paths lead 600m to the *cascadas* (beautiful waterfalls tumbling into a river, with pools for a refreshing dip) and 900m to the Cueva de las Sardinias Ciegas (Cave of the Blind Sardines), named for the sightless fish that inhabit the sulfurous river inside the cave. You're only permitted to go a few steps down into the cave because of the strong odors. You need about two hours to walk the 5km required to see the waterfalls, house and cave.

Kolem-Jaa' (☎ in Villahermosa 993-314-31-92; www.kolemjaa.com; day package M\$270-585, 2-day/1-night pack-

age M\$1150-1399; 📍 🚰) is a jungle eco-adventure tourism center, adjacent to Villa Luz and 6km by road from Tapijulapa. The excitements include commando trails, zip-lines across a river and through the jungle canopy, and horseback and mountain-bike riding. Accommodations are in comfortable duplex cabins.

On Tapijulapa's central plaza, **Restaurant Mariquito** (Parque Carlos Pellicer; dishes around M\$40; 🕒 7am-8:30pm) cooks up local specialties, such as *mone de pollo* (chicken steamed with hierba santa) and *caldo de shote* (a stew made with a type of river mollusk).

To reach Tapijulapa by bus from Teapa, first take a bus to Tacotalpa (M\$8, 30 minutes, every 30 minutes 6am to 8pm) from Teapa's OCC terminal. Buses to Tapijulapa (M\$8, 45 minutes, hourly until 6pm) leave from Tacotalpa's Mercado Faustino Méndez Jiménez, across the street from the stop where buses from Teapa arrive. The last bus back leaves Tapijulapa at 7pm.

EASTERN TABASCO Frontera

☎ 913 / pop 29,000

This somewhat rough-and-ready fishing port and oil town sits on the east bank of the vast Río Grijalva, 81km northeast of Villahermosa. The river here, just 8km from its mouth on the Gulf of Mexico, is in fact a combination of the Grijalva and the Usumacinta, Mexico's most voluminous river, whose main branch joins the Grijalva 15km upstream. Between them, these two rivers drain most of Tabasco and Chiapas and about half of Guatemala. Frontera unfortunately fails to make anything of its stunning location, with no public access to the riverfront anywhere near the town center, but you get a great sense of the river's might from the 1km-plus bridge that carries Hwy 180 over it, 4km south of town. In 1519 the Spanish conquistadors under Cortés scored their first military victory near here, defeating the local inhabitants somewhere among the nearby marshes in what's become known as the Battle of Centla. The locals fled in terror from the mounted Spaniards, thinking horse and rider to be one single mighty beast. Afterwards the natives made Cortés a gift of 20 women, one of whom, Doña Marina or La Malinche, became his indispensable interpreter, and lover. In the 20th century, Frontera was probably the setting for Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory*. The main reason to stop

here today is to visit the Reserva de la Biosfera Pantanos de Centla (below).

The modernized **Hotel Marmor Plaza** (☎ 332-00-01; Juárez 202; s/d/tr M\$375/420/500; ☎ ☎), on Frontera's central plaza, is quite a find: beautiful, good-sized, sparkling-clean rooms come with spot lighting, silent air-conditioning and gleaming bathrooms. **Hospedaje Star** (☎ 332-50-57; Obregón 506; r M\$280-330; ☎ ☎), just round the corner, is an acceptable alternative, with good big rooms holding up to four.

For eating, the bright, air-conditioned **Café del Puerto** (cnr Madero & Aldama; breakfasts, salads & antojitos M\$20-60; ☎ 8:30am-midnight), on the plaza, has the best ambience, and well-prepared food.

From the **ADO terminal** (☎ 332-11-49; Zaragoza 609), six blocks from the plaza, 1st-class buses leave for Villahermosa (M\$32, 1½ hours, 25 daily), Paraíso (M\$52, two hours, three daily) and Campeche (M\$168 to M\$204, 4½ hours, three daily).

Reserva de la Biosfera Pantanos de Centla

This 3030-sq-km biosphere reserve protects a good part of the wetlands around the lower reaches of two of Mexico's biggest rivers, the Usumacinta and the Grijalva. These lakes, marshes, rivers, mangroves, savannas and forests are an irreplaceable sanctuary for countless creatures, including the West Indian manatee and Morelet's crocodile (both endangered), six kinds of tortoise, tapir, ocelots, jaguars, howler monkeys, 60 fish species (including the *pejelagarto*), and 230 bird species – not to mention 15,000 people scattered in 90 small waterside villages.

A paved (and in parts rough) road follows the broad winding Río Usumacinta, right across the reserve from the Grijalva bridge near Frontera, eventually reaching the town of Jonuta (from which other roads lead to the major east-west Hwy 186). Ten kilometers along this road, **Punta Manglar** (☎ 913-403-97-63; Hwy Frontera-Jonuta Km 10; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun) is an embarkation point for boat-and-foot **excursions** (☎ 913-403-98-42; up to 7 people M\$500; ☎ 6am-7pm) into the mangroves, where you should see crocodiles, iguanas, birds and, with luck, howler monkeys.

The reserve's visitors center, the **Centro de Interpretación Uyotot-Ja** (☎ 993-313-93-62; Carretera Frontera-Jonuta Km 12.5; admission M\$25; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun), is a further 2.5km along the road.

Here, a 20m-high observation tower overlooks the awesome confluence of the Grijalva, the Usumacinta and a third large river, the San Pedrito – a spot known as Tres Brazos (Three Arms). Guides lead you round a nature trail and displays on the wetlands, and boat trips (two hours, up to seven people M\$500) are available – March to May is the best birding season.

Next door, **El Negro Chon** (mains M\$40-80; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) serves tasty fish and prawn dishes under a *palapa* (thatched roof) that catches delicious breezes off the river.

Gray combis and *colectivo* taxis from Calle Madero in Frontera (combis half a block south of the plaza, and *colectivos* 1½ blocks south of the plaza) charge M\$10 for the 15-minute trip to Punta Manglar or Uyotot-Ja. Some continue to Jonuta (M\$50, three hours), where buses leave for Villahermosa, Palenque and other destinations.

Tenosique

☎ 934 / pop 31,500

On the voluminous Río Usumacinta, amid farmland in far southeastern Tabasco, Tenosique is, for travelers, primarily a halt on a route into Guatemala. From the small border town of El Ceibo, 60km southeast of Tenosique, boats head along the Río San Pedro to El Naranjo, Guatemala, where you can catch onward transportation to Flores. A new road between El Ceibo and El Naranjo might be open by the time you get there.

The mighty Usumacinta issues from jungle-clad hills at **Boca del Cerro**, 8km southwest of Tenosique on Hwy 203. *Lancha* (fast, open, outboard boat) operators, at the *embarcadero* on the west side of the bridge, charge around M\$400 per boat for a 1½-hour trip up the river to the start of the rapids-strewn San José canyon and back.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Hacienda Tabasqueña (☎ 342-27-31; Calle 26 No 512; s/d with fan M\$200/222, with air-con M\$300/339; ☎ ☎) On the main street, this is a large central hotel that is less cared for than nearby La Casona (below) but still acceptable. It has a small, onsite restaurant.

Hotel La Casona (☎ 342-11-51; Calle 27 No 8; r M\$300; ☎ ☎) Friendly La Casona, two blocks off the main street (Calle 26, also called Blvd Pino Suárez), has just nine rooms on two floors around a pretty courtyard adorned with lov-

able ceramic frogs. Rooms have cable TV, air-con, fan and pretty tiled bathrooms.

Restaurant Los Tulipanes (cnr Calles 27 & 22; mains M\$40-80; ☎ 7am-5pm) The best place to eat, one block off the main street, spreads under a large palm-thatch roof, with live marimba music from 2pm. A good range of fish, steaks and seafood is served.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The **ADO bus station** (☎ 342-14-41; Prolongación Calle 20 s/n) is on the southwest edge of town, about 2.5km from the center. Seventeen daily 1st- and 2nd-class services go to Emiliano Zapata (M\$25 to M\$38, one hour) and Villahermosa (M\$70 to M\$130, three to 3½ hours). If you're heading for the Yucatán Peninsula, it's usually quickest to get a bus to Emiliano Zapata and change there. Buses (M\$5) and *colectivo* taxis (M\$15) run from the bus station to the center.

To Guatemala

Buses to the border at El Ceibo (M\$30, one hour, hourly 6am to 5pm) leave from the corner of Calles 16 and 45, beside the market two blocks off the main Calle 26. From the border, pickups (M\$10 to M\$20, 10 minutes) take passengers to the *embarcadero* for frequent *lanchas* up the Río San Pedro to El Naranjo (per person M\$30, 30 minutes) until around 5pm. El Naranjo has money-changers, a bank and places to stay, and minibuses and buses (M\$35, two to three hours) leave for Flores at least hourly until about 6pm. You can get from Tenosique to Flores in around six hours total.

CHIAPAS

Chilly pine forest highlands, sultry rainforest jungles and attractive colonial cities exist side by side within Mexico's southernmost state, a region awash with the legacy of Spanish rule and the remnants of the ancient Maya civilization. The state has the second-largest indigenous population in the country, and the modern Maya of Chiapas form a direct link to the past, with a traditional culture that persists to this day. Many indigenous communities rely on subsistence farming and have no running water or electricity, and it was frustration over

lack of political power and their historical mistreatment that fueled the Zapatista rebellion, putting a spotlight on the region's distinct inequities.

Chiapas contains swathes of wild green landscape that have nourished its inhabitants for centuries. From the Lacandón Jungle to the reserves of El Triunfo and Selva El Ocote, Chiapas offers incredible opportunities for outdoor adventures. But a rich trove of natural resources also makes it a contentious prize in the struggle for its water, lumber and oil and gas reserves.

TUXTLA GUTIÉRREZ

☎ 961 / pop 490,000 / elevation 530m

In Chiapas, Tuxtla Gutiérrez is as close to the big city as you're going to get. A busy modern metropolis and transportation hub, the state capital doesn't overwhelm with style, though it makes up for it with lots of amenities and nightlife. Most travelers pass through either the shiny new airport or bus station on the way to somewhere else, but it's a comfortable, worthwhile and warm place to spend a day or two.

Orientation

The city center is Plaza Cívica, with the always-busy main east-west street, Av Central, running across its south side. West of the center, Av Central becomes Blvd Dr Belisario Domínguez; many of the Tuxtla's best hotels and restaurants are strung along this road. Eastward, Av Central changes names to Blvd Ángel Albino Corzo.

MAPS

Inegi (☎ 618-72-74; www.inegi.gob.mx; 6a Av Sur Pte 670; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri), southwest of the center, sells 1:25,000 and 1:50,000 topographic maps of many parts of Chiapas and other Mexican states.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Ciber Center (1a Av Sur Ote 445; per hr M\$7;

☎ 9:30am-10:30pm)

El Chi@p@neco (4a Calle Ote Sur 115; per hr M\$5;

☎ 8:30am-11pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun)

LAUNDRY

Lavandería Zaac (2a Av Nte Pte 440; per 3kg M\$30;

☎ 8am-2pm & 4-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat)

TUXTLA GUTIÉRREZ

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0 500 m
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MONEY

Many banks exchange currency and have ATMs. An ATM at the airport (departure level) is accessible until 8:30pm.

Bancomer (Av Central Pte 314; ☎ 8:30am–4pm Mon–Fri)
HSBC (Calle Central Nte 137; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Sat)

POST

Post office (1a Av Nte Pte; ☎ 9am–4pm Mon–Fri, 8:30am–1pm Sat) In the Palacio Federal.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Airport kiosk (☎ 9am–6pm) In the arrivals level; free city maps.

Information kiosks (☎ 9am–2pm & 4–8pm) At the Jardín de la Marimba and Plaza Cívica.

Municipal Tourist Office (☎ 614-83-83, ext 111; Edificio Valanci, Av Central Pte 554, 4th fl; ☎ 8am–4pm Mon–Fri, until 1pm Sat)

Secretaría de Turismo (☎ 617-05-50, 800-280-35-00; www.turismochiapas.gob.mx; Blvd Belisario Domínguez 950; ☎ 8am–8pm Mon–Sat, 9am–2pm Sun) Chiapas' state tourism department has excellent maps and booklets, and English- and French-speakers are available on its toll-free phone number. The office is in a building marked Secretaría de Desarrollo Económico, 1.6km west of Plaza Cívica.

Sights

The pulse of the city is around the Plaza Cívica, the liveliest area during the daytime, though the main attractions are scattered around the suburbs.

PLAZA CÍVICA

Bustling and broad, Tuxtla's main plaza occupies two blocks flanked by an untidy array of concrete civic and commercial structures. At its southern end, across Av Central, you'll find nice hill views in front of the white-washed modern **Catedral de San Marcos**. The cathedral's clock tower tinkles out a tune on the hour to accompany a kitsch merry-go-round of apostles' images that emerges from its upper levels.

ZOOLOGÍCO MIGUEL ÁLVAREZ DEL TORO

Chiapas, with its huge range of natural environments, has the highest concentration of animal species in North America – including several varieties of big cat, 1200 butterfly species and over 600 birds. About 180 of these species, many of them in danger of extinction, are to be found in relatively spacious enclosures at Tuxtla's excellent **zoo** (☎ 614-47-65; Calz Cerro Hueco s/n; admission M\$20, free before 10am &

Tue; ☎ 8:30am–5pm Tue–Sun; ♿). The Zoológico Miguel Álvarez del Toro (Zoomat) has several innovative features, including a 'museum' about itself with information about the life of its pioneering conservationist founder Dr Miguel Álvarez del Toro. Beasts you'll see here include ocelots, jaguars, pumas, tapirs, red macaws, toucans, three species of crocodile, snakes and spider monkeys. To get to the zoo take a 'Cerro Hueco, Zoológico' *colectivo* (M\$4, 25 minutes) from the corner of 1a Calle Ote Sur and 7a Av Sur Ote. A taxi is M\$30.

PARQUE MADERO

The **Museo Regional de Chiapas** (☎ 612-04-59; Calz de los Hombres Ilustres s/n; admission M\$37; ☎ 9am–6pm Tue–Sun), an imposing modern building, has a sampling of lesser archaeological pieces from Chiapas' many sites, and a slightly more interesting history section, running from the Spanish conquest to the revolution, all in Spanish only. Parque Madero also contains the lush oasis of the **Jardín Botánico** (Botanic Garden; admission free; ☎ 9am–6pm Tue–Sun) – a nice respite from the city heat – and a children's park, the **Centro de Convivencia Infantil** (admission free, rides each M\$8–18; ☎ 9am–8pm Tue–Sun; ♿), with a mini train, carnival games, pony rides and other diversions for the (approximately) under-sevens. A lot of rides don't open weekdays.

Tours

Viajes Kali (☎ 611-31-75; Av Central Ote 507) In the Hotel María Eugenia, organizes trips throughout Chiapas, including day trips to the Sima de Las Cotorras (p810); private tour M\$1100, group tour Saturday or Sunday M\$120 and the Cañón del Sumidero (M\$400 per person).

Sleeping

Budget hotels cluster in the city center, while most midrange and luxury hotels are strung out along Av Central Pte and Blvd Belisario Domínguez, up to 4km west of the center. Cable TV and free parking are standard at these places. The larger hotels have desks at the airport.

BUDGET

our pick **Hotel Casablanca** (☎ 611-0305, 800-560-4422; www.casablancachiapas.com; 2a Av Nte Ote 251; s M\$155–215, d/tr M\$214–258, d/tr/q with air-con M\$401/467/550; ♿) Funky-fabulous abstract murals in brilliant lime green, hot pink and electric blue give these hotel rooms a dash of unexpected pizzazz. A tranquil open courtyard blooms with

palms, and the terrace is a comfy place to survey street life. The upstairs rooms have air-con and more light.

Hotel San Antonio (☎ 612-27-13; 2a Av Sur Ote 540; r M\$180, tw & tr M\$250; (P)) Though in a busy part of town, Hotel San Antonio is run by friendly people and has clean, good-value rooms with pretty prints.

Hotel Catedral (☎ 613-08-24; 1a Av Nte Ote 367; s/d/tr M\$230/280/330; (P)) One of the best-value budget options, the well-run Catedral has neat, clean rooms with bathroom, fan and free drinking water. The psychedelic turquoise steps and red velvet sofas in the foyer areas are a nice touch.

Hotel Regional San Marcos (☎ /fax 613-19-40; sanmarcos@chiapas.net; 2a Calle Ote Sur 176; s/d with fan M\$249/285, s/d with air-con M\$313/359; (P) (♿)) Centrally-located, with very friendly staff, a good restaurant and free wi-fi, the San Marcos has medium-sized rooms with phone just a minute's walk from Plaza Cívica and Av Central.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Santa María (☎ /fax 614-65-77; 8a Calle Pte Nte 160; s/d/tr M\$445/550/600; (P) (♿)) Right on the pretty Jardín de la Marimba and near a number of good coffeehouses, this small hotel has rooms with folksy decorations and nice bathrooms with mosaic tiling.

Hotel Bonampak (☎ 602-59-16/21, 800-50-771-77; www.hotelbonampak.com.mx; Blvd Belisario Domínguez 180; s/d/tr/q M\$500/572/615/662; (P) (♿) (🚰) (♿)) A comfy middle-class hotel 1.6km west of Plaza Cívica, the Bonampak has good-sized rooms with archaeological prints as well as three excellent restaurants. Avoid the noisier streetside rooms. In the lobby, a vibrant copy of a Bonampak site mural adds a spark to the décor. A small outdoor play structure entertains the kids.

Hotel María Eugenia (☎ 613-37-67; www.mariaeugenia.com.mx; Av Central Ote 507; s/d M\$700/800; (P) (♿) (🚰)) This is easily the most comfortable hotel in the center, with a reliable restaurant and good in-house travel agency (see p805) to boot. All 83 airy, bright and spacious rooms have either two double beds or a huge king-size bed, and many have great views. There's also a small garden with pool and free wi-fi.

Hotel Maya Sol (☎ 617-50-60; www.hotelmayasol-chiapas.com; Blvd Belisario Domínguez 1380; r M\$800-850, ste M\$1300; (P) (♿) (🚰) (♿)) Colorful prints enliven modern, white air-conditioned rooms,

with large mirrors and ample writing desks. A restaurant and small pool fill in the rest of the creature comforts you might need. Located 3km west of Plaza Cívica.

TOP END

Crowne Plaza (☎ 617-22-00, 800-507-79-07; www.crowneplaza.com; Blvd Belisario Domínguez Km 1081; r M\$1038, r ind breakfast M\$1347-1450; (P) (♿) (🚰) (♿)) A new luxury hotel ensconced within the already-cushy Holiday Inn, 4km west of the center, its contemporary earth tone rooms have large desks, easy chairs and lots of executive-oriented amenities. Their website posts significantly lower rates.

Hotel Camino Real (☎ 617-77-77, 800-901-23-00; www.caminoreal.com; Blvd Belisario Domínguez 1195; r M\$2106-2457; (P) (♿) (🚰) (♿)) Lording over all it surveys from a spectacular hillside perch 3km west of Plaza Cívica, the 210-room Camino Real feels more like a feudal castle. A spectacular interior features a pool and waterfall in a large, verdant atrium-courtyard, full of free-flying tropical birds. Corner rooms have especially far-reaching views. Modern rooms trimmed with tasteful Mexican textiles come with green marble bathrooms, and some are fully wheelchair accessible. Other amenities include a spa, tennis courts and a 24-hour restaurant.

Eating

Most upscale and international options are west of the center, along Blvd Belisario Domínguez.

Restaurante Imperial (☎ 612-06-48; Calle Central Nte 263; mains M\$24-38, comida corrida M\$36; ☎ 8am-6pm) This busy, efficient place beside Plaza Cívica offers a wholesome two-course *comida corrida* (set lunch) with plenty of choice. There's a full breakfast menu too, and good drinking chocolate.

Restaurante La Casona (☎ 612-75-34; 1a Av Sur Pte 134; breakfast M\$30-45, mains M\$40-60; ☎ 7am-11pm) Beyond stately carved wooden doors, high ceilings, columns and interior arches frame a dramatic tableclothed dining room in a century-old building. Dine on regional dishes like *pollo juchi* (fried chicken with pickled vegetables and potatoes) or *tasajo en salsa de chirmol* (sliced beef in tomato sauce) and listen to marimba performances from 2pm to 6pm.

Naturalísimo (breakfast M\$37-53, antojitos M\$27-45, mains M\$45-68; (V); 6a Calle Pte Nte 124 ☎ 613-53-43;

☎ 7am-10:30pm Mon-Sat, 8am-10:30pm Sun; Av Central Pte 648 ☎ 613-36-16; ☎ 7am-10pm; Av Central Ote 523 ☎ 611-12-47; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat) Keeping thankful vegetarians afloat, Naturalísimo offers healthy breakfasts, whole-wheat bread, *tortas* and veggie *hamburgesas*, as well as thirst-quenching fruit juices and *licuados*, yogurts and ice cream. Their fake meat dishes aren't super-inspiring, but do the trick if you need protein.

Cafeteria Bonampak (☎ 602-59-33, ext 127; Hotel Bonampak, Blvd Belisario Domínguez 180; mains M\$45-80) For a satisfying meal at any time of day you can't beat this air-conditioned hotel restaurant with bright ambience and good service. The long menu runs from prawn cocktails and *antojitos* (corn- and tortilla-based snacks) to beef, chicken, pasta and some yummy *pasteles* (cakes).

Las Pichanchas (☎ 612-53-51; www.laspichanchas.com.mx; Av Central Ote 837; mains M\$45-85; ☎ noon-midnight; ♿) This courtyard restaurant specializes in Chiapas food with live marimba music and, from 9pm to 10pm every night, a show of colorful traditional Chiapas dances that whips up quite a party atmosphere. Try the tasty *tamales*, or *pechuga jacuané* (chicken breast stuffed with beans in a hierba santa sauce), and leave room for *chimbos*, a dessert made from egg yolks and cinnamon.

El Fogón Norteño (☎ 612-95-01; cr 1a Av Nte Pte & 9a Calle Pte Nte; mains M\$50-70; ☎ 7am-1am) A bustling open air grill house overlooking the Jardín de la Marimba (see right), with well-prepared meat dishes at excellent prices. Most come with tasty *frijoles charros* (beans cooked with bacon or pork).

Cafetería del Parque (☎ 612-6000; 8a Calle Pte Sur 113; antojitos M\$40-45, mains M\$50-95; ☎ 8am-10:30pm) Nice wraparound windows make this one of the better people-watching eateries around the Jardín de la Marimba. With air-conditioning reinforced by an Arctic-blue décor, it's definitely a blissful place to cool off.

Maquay (☎ 602-59-16, ext 224; Hotel Bonampak, Blvd Belisario Domínguez 180; breakfast M\$85, mains M\$55-150; ☎ 7am-5pm) Cacti and floral murals scale a Victorian rotunda of white wainscoting and peach walls, making a cheerful backdrop for a sunny breakfast. Its Sunday brunch (M\$90), with live *ranchera* music, is very popular.

Le Chat de la Nuit (☎ 639-63-98; Blvd Belisario Domínguez 2475; mains M\$90-245; ☎ 2pm-midnight daily, plus 7am-1pm Sun) Fancy French food meets Argentine steakhouse for a culinary collision

of *caracoles* (snails) and prime *bistek*. It works delightfully, as does the elegant adjoining bar, with a speakeasy atmosphere and live *trova*, salsa and merengue from 9:30pm till late.

Entertainment

Jardín de la Marimba, a leafy plaza eight blocks west of Plaza Cívica, is fun in the evening, especially at weekends. Popular free marimba concerts are held nightly from 6:30pm to 9:30pm, often with people dancing around the central bandstand. Several places to eat and drink surround the plaza.

Teatro de la Ciudad (☎ 613-13-49; Calz de los Hombres Ilustres, Parque Madero) The City Theater stages everything from opera and folkloric dance to film seasons.

CLUBS

There's no shortage of decent bars and raucous dance spots in the 'Zona Dorada,' 2km to 4km west of the center along Blvd Belisario Domínguez. Most places fill up around 11:30pm on Friday and Saturday (when they generally charge M\$25 to M\$50), and party till late. Clubs open and close here at a breakneck pace, but most of the following are within walking distance of others.

Baby Rock (☎ 615-91-20; Callejón Emiliano Zapata 207; ☎ from 9pm Thu-Sat) Inside a huge faux cave is Tuxtla's headquarters of *gruperia* music, or 'Tux-Mex' as they call it here.

Bypass (☎ 616-53-69; Blvd Belisario Domínguez 1849; ☎ 9pm-3am Thu-Sat) A retro lounge-bar with a futuristic aura, they play electronica and house music from the '80s and '90s. A well between the two levels lets you spy on everyone shakin' it. Located between the parking garage and Sanborns at the Plaza Cristal mall.

Habana Cafe (☎ 121-49-89; Blvd Las Fuentes 110; ☎ 9pm-5am Thu-Sat) *Salseros*, take your places! Tucked next door to the Hotel Camino Real, the city views from this hilltop dance club are as hot as the moves. Stop in from 9pm to 11pm for free salsa classes so you can warm up for the live music starting at midnight.

Live (☎ 149-33-16; Blvd Belisario Domínguez Km 1081; ☎ 10pm-5am Thu-Sat) Just west of the Holiday Inn (see Crown Plaza opposite), you'll find the locals dancing on the seats of this pulsing, packed nightclub. DJs spin a blend of pop, rock and electronica, and there's usually a band playing in the wee margarita-soaked hours. Men cough up a M\$120 cover on Fridays and Saturdays.

Santa Diabla (☎ 602-68-62; Blvd Belisario Domínguez 2138; 8pm-4am Wed-Sat) A schizophrenic nightclub: there's an angelic bar lit by tin stars, and a devilish red disco with live rock and salsa starting at 1:30am. Garden of Eden murals round out the ladies' room. It's about 2.5km from Plaza Cívica.

Shopping

Instituto de las Artesanías (☎ 602-65-65; Blvd Belisario Domínguez 2035; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-9pm Sat, 10am-3pm Sun) The Chiapas Crafts Institute, 2km west of Plaza Cívica, sells a great range of the state's *artesanías* (handicrafts), from Amatenango 'tigers' and funky Cintalapa ceramic suns to colorful highland textiles.

La Boutique del Café (☎ 614-78-97; cnr 8a Calle Pte Nte & 1a Av Nte Pte; ☎ 10am-9pm Tue-Fri, 4-9pm Sat-Mon) Selling the aromatic gold of 2000 small-scale *chiapeneco* farmers, this friendly coffee exchange can make a killer cappuccino or send you packing with bags of heady organic ambrosia. Try the Café Mam (M\$90 per kilogram), produced by an indigenous cooperative in the remote Motozintla area.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Tuxtla's small and gleaming new **Aeropuerto Ángel Albino Corzo** (☎ 153-60-68) is 35km south-east of the city center and 18km south of Chiapa de Corzo. From Tuxtla, a private taxi will set you back M\$150, and **Monarca Viajes** (☎ 132-81-91; 4a Calle Pte Nte 145) has seven daily *colectivos* for M\$100. From the airport, pre-pay taxis (for one to three passengers) meet all flights and go to central Tuxtla (M\$180, 40 minutes), Chiapa de Corzo (M\$200, 30 minutes) and San Cristóbal (M\$500, 1½ hours).

Click Mexicana (☎ 800-112-54-25; www.clickmx.com) flies direct to Mexico City six times daily, with connecting flights to Villahermosa, Mérida and Cancún. **Aviaca** (☎ 800-284-22-72; Av Central Pte 160) has four daily flights to Mexico City and one to Tapachula.

BUS, COLECTIVO & COMBI

A modern new **OCC terminal** (☎ 125-15-80, ext 2433; 5a Av Nte Pte 318) northwest of the Plaza Cívica now houses all the 1st-class buses (including ADO and deluxe UNO) and the 2nd-class *Rápidos del Sur* line. More 2nd-class buses and combis depart from the **Terminal de Transporte Tuxtla** (cnr 9a Av Sur Ote & 13a Calle Ote Sur), with frequent destinations including San Cristóbal, Ocosingo and

Ocozacoautla. Daily departures from the OCC terminal include the following:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency (daily)
Cancún	M\$650-806	20hr	1 deluxe, 1 1st-class
Comitán	M\$70	3hr	4 deluxe, 10 1st-class
Mérida	M\$494-686	14-15hr	2 deluxe, 2 1st-class
Mexico City (most to TAPO)	M\$702-834	12hr	3 deluxe, 3 1st-class
Oaxaca	M\$306-368	10hr	1 deluxe, 3 1st-class
Palenque	M\$150-180	6hr	1 deluxe, 7 1st-class
Puerto Escondido	M\$324	11hr	2
San Cristóbal de Las Casas	M\$33-36	1-1¼hr	3 deluxe, 21 1st-class
Tapachula	deluxe M\$226-416	6-7hr via Tonalá, 8hr via Comitán	6 deluxe, 12 1st-class, 25 2nd-class
Tonalá	M\$60-120	3hr	2 deluxe, 13 1st-class, 26 2nd-class
Villahermosa	M\$200-240	4-7½hr	2 deluxe, 4 1st-class, 6 2nd-class

Other more frequent options to San Cristóbal de Las Casas (M\$35, 1½ hours):

Corazón de María (cnr Av Central Ote & 12a Calle Ote Sur) Combis from 5am to 9pm.

Omnibus de Chiapas (☎ 611-26-56; cnr 15a Calle Ote Sur & 4a Av Sur Ote) Minibuses every 10 minutes from 5am to 10pm.

Combis for Chiapa de Corzo (M\$9, 30 minutes) leave every few minutes between 5am and 10:30pm from 1a Av Sur Ote.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

In addition to companies at the airport, in-town rental agencies include the following:

Alamo (☎ 602-1600; 5a Av Nte Pte 2260) Near the OCC bus station.

Hertz (☎ 615-53-48; Hotel Camino Real, Blvd Belisario Domínguez 1195)

Getting Around

Ruta 1 *colectivos* (M\$4) ply Blvd Belisario Domínguez-Av Central-Blvd Albino Corzo running as far as the 'Zona Dorada' clubs to the west, and the Soriana taxi stand to the east.

Stops are marked by blue bus signs, and service ends around 10:30pm. Taxi rides within the city cost M\$25 to M\$30.

AROUND TUXTLA GUTIÉRREZ

Chiapa de Corzo

☎ 961 / pop 38,000 / elevation 450m

An overlooked jewel set 12km east of Tuxtla Gutiérrez on the way to San Cristóbal, Chiapa de Corzo is a small and attractive colonial town with an easygoing, provincial air. Set on the north bank of the broad Río Grijalva, it's the main starting point for trips into the Cañón del Sumidero (p810).

Chiapa de Corzo has been occupied almost continuously since about 1500 BC. Before the Spaniards arrived, the warlike Chiapa tribe had their capital, Nandalumí, a couple of kilometers downstream, on the opposite bank of the Grijalva. When Diego de Mazariegos invaded the area in 1528, the Chiapa apparently hurled themselves by the hundreds to their death in the canyon rather than surrender.

Mazariegos founded a settlement called Chiapa de Los Indios here, but quickly shifted his base to San Cristóbal de Las Casas, where he found the climate and natives more manageable.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Buses from Tuxtla stop on the north side of central Plaza Ángel Albino Corzo, or just past it on Av 21 de Octubre. The *embarcadero* for Cañón del Sumidero boat trips is two blocks south of the plaza down 5 de Febrero.

BBVA Bancomer (☎ 616-06-53; Plaza Ángel Albino Corzo 5; ☎ 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri) On the east side of the plaza, it has an ATM.

Tourist office (☎ 616-10-13; Av Domingo Ruíz 1; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Just off the west side of the plaza.

SIGHTS

Impressive arcades frame three sides of the plaza, and a beefy tree called **La Pochota** bucks the sidewalk as it flexes its centuries-old roots. Venerated by the indigenous people who founded the town, it's the oldest ceiba tree along the Río Grijalva. But the focal point of the plaza and the image on all state license plates, **La Pila** (also called the Fuente Colonial) is a handsome brick fountain completed in 1562 in Mudejar-Gothic style. It's said to resemble the Spanish crown.

The large **Templo de Santo Domingo de Guzmán**, one block south of the plaza, was built in the late 16th century by the Dominican order. Its adjoining convent is now the **Centro Cultural** (☎ 616-00-55; Mexicanidad Chiapaneca 10; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), home to an exposition of the wood and lino prints of talented Chiapan-born Franco Lázaro Gómez (1922-49) as well as the **Museo de la Laca**, dedicated to the local craft specialty: lacquered gourds. The museum holds pieces dating back to 1606 and samples of lacquerwork from other centers in Mexico, China, Japan and Thailand.

COURSES

Dunham Institute (☎ 616-14-98; www.dunhaminstitute.com; Zaragoza 23) Has multiweek Spanish classes with homestay available from US\$600.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The **Fiesta de Enero** (January 9-21) is one of Mexico's liveliest and most extraordinary festivals, including nightly dances involving cross-dressing young men, known as Las Chuntá. Women don the highly colorful, beautifully embroidered *chiapaneca* dress, and blond-wigged, mask-toting *Parachicos* (impersonating conquistadors) parade on January 15, 17 and 20. A canoe battle and fireworks extravaganza follow on the final evening.

SLEEPING

Hotel Los Ángeles (☎ 616-00-48; www.losangeleschiapas.com; Grajalas 2; r with fan/air-con M\$250/300; (P) (♿)) This hotel at the southeast corner of the plaza has spotless rooms with hot-water bathroom, cable TV and fan. Upstairs rooms lack air-con, but are bigger and catch more breeze.

Hotel La Ceiba (☎ 616-07-73; www.laceibahotel.com; Av Domingo Ruíz 300; s/d/tr/q M\$579/643/708/585; (P) (♿ ♿)) Also a full-service spa, La Ceiba has an inviting pool, a lush garden and 91 simple but well-kept air-conditioned rooms with cable TV. It's two blocks west of the plaza.

EATING

Restaurant Jardines de Chiapa (☎ 616-01-98; Madero 395; mains M\$40-80; ☎ 9am-7:30pm summer, 8am-6:30pm fall-spring) Not too far from the plaza, this large place is set around a garden patio with atmospheric brick columns. The long menu includes tasty *cochinito al horno* (oven-baked pork).

Restaurant Los Corredores (☎ 616-07-60; www.loscorredores.com.mx; Madero 35; mains M\$50-80; ☎ 9am-7pm) Facing the southwest corner of the plaza,

brightly-painted Los Corredores does a bit of everything: good breakfasts, reasonably priced fish plates and a few local specialties including *pepita con tasajo* (beef with a spicy pumpkin-seed sauce). It displays a fascinating collection of historical town photos.

D'Avellino (☎ 616-12-43; Calz Grajales 1103; mains M\$50-90, pizza M\$85-120; 🕒 1pm-1am Mon-Sat, to 11pm Sun) A cute Italian restaurant with a rustic old-world dining room and patio seating, it serves fresh pastas and good pizza. It's an easy five- to 10-minute stroll northwest of the plaza, along the main Tuxtla-bound road.

Restaurants on the *embarcadero* have near-identical, and equally overpriced, menus. The river views are nice, though battling marimba players tend to amp up the noise level.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Combis from Tuxtla Gutiérrez (M\$9, 30 minutes), leave from 1a Av Sur Ote (between Calles 5a & 7a Ote Sur), every few minutes from 5am to 10:30pm.

Going from Chiapa de Corzo to San Cristóbal is a bit inconvenient. Option one is to backtrack to Tuxtla and take a bus or combi via the fast new autopista. Option two is to catch a microbus to San Cristóbal (M\$25, 1½ hours) from a stop across from the gas station on Hwy 190, on the northeast edge of town. Departures at 6:45am, 10am, 1pm, 3:30pm and 6pm take the slower (and *very* serpentine) old highway. *Colectivos* to this stop (M\$4) run from the east side of the plaza; taxis cost M\$20.

From San Cristóbal, most people go to Tuxtla Gutiérrez and catch a combi back, but you can also take a Tuxtla-bound van and ask to be let off at the Chiapa de Corzo stop on the highway. From there, it's a M\$8 taxi ride to the town center.

Cañón del Sumidero

The Sumidero Canyon is a spectacular fissure in the earth, found east of Tuxtla Gutiérrez. In 1981 the Chicoasén hydroelectric dam was completed at its northern end, damming the Río Grijalva which flows through the canyon, and creating a 25km-long reservoir. Traveling between Tuxtla and Chiapa de Corzo, the road crosses the Grijalva just south of the canyon mouth.

The canyon can be viewed from above at five *miradores* (lookout points); bus tours to these (adult/child M\$75/37, 3½ hours) leave

Tuxtla's cathedral at 9am and 1pm daily (except Monday) if a minimum of five people show up. However, the most impressive way to see the canyon is from a **lancha** (return trip M\$120; 🕒 8am-4pm) that speeds between the canyon's towering rock walls. It's about a two-hour return trip, starting at either Chiapa de Corzo or the Embarcadero Cahuaré, 5km north of Chiapa along the road to Tuxtla. You'll rarely have to wait more than half an hour for a boat to fill up. Bring a drink, something to shield you from the sun and, if there's any chance of bad weather, some warm clothing or a waterproof jacket.

It's about 35km from Chiapa de Corzo to the dam. Soon after you pass under Hwy 190, the canyon walls tower an amazing 800m above you. Along the way you'll see a variety of birds – herons, cormorants, vultures, kingfishers – plus probably a crocodile or two. The boat operators will point out a few odd formations of rock and vegetation, including one cliff face covered in thick hanging moss, resembling a giant Christmas tree. *Lanchas* sometimes have to plow through a sheen of floating plastic garbage when wet-season rains wash in trash from Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

Sima de Las Cotorras

Located inside the Reserva de la Biosfera Selva El Ocote, the **Sima de Las Cotorras** (Abys of the Parrots; admission adult/child over 9 M\$20/10) is a dramatic sinkhole punching 160m-wide and 140m-deep into the earth. In the early morning, a green cloud of screeching parrots spirals out for the day, trickling back before dusk. With binoculars you can see a series of red pre-Hispanic rock paintings decorate one side of the cliff face, and you can also hike or rappel down inside this intriguing subterranean hole. **Lodging** (☎ 968-689-02-89; simacotorras@hotmail.com; camping M\$100, cabaña M\$300-400; 📞 📺) is available, as well as a good **restaurant** (breakfast M\$15-40, lunch/dinner M\$25-50; 🕒 8am-6pm) serving scrumptious *tamales* and handmade tortillas.

From Tuxtla's Terminal de Transporte Tuxtla, take a combi to Ocozacoatlá (also called Coita; M\$90, 30 minutes); then call the lodging number to arrange a ride (M\$150 per carload) or take a taxi (M\$250, 50 minutes). Drivers will need to stop and ask for directions, as the 18km road from Ocozacoatlá isn't well signed. Scheduled tours (M\$120) from Tuxtla Gutiérrez (see

p805) leave Saturday and Sunday mornings, but don't visit during prime parrot-watching hours.

SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

☎ 967 / pop 142,000 / elevation 2160m

Set in a gorgeous highland valley surrounded by pine forest, the colonial city of San Cristóbal (cris-toh-bal) has been a popular travelers' destination for decades. It's a pleasure to explore San Cristóbal's cobbled streets and markets, soaking up the unique ambience and the wonderfully clear highland light. This medium-size city also boasts a comfortable blend of city and countryside, with restored century-old houses giving way to grazing animals and fields of corn.

Surrounded by dozens of traditional Tzotzil and Tzeltal villages, San Cristóbal is at the heart of one of the most deeply rooted indigenous areas in Mexico. A great base for local and regional exploration, it's a place where ancient customs coexist with modern luxuries.

The city is a hotspot for sympathizers (and some opponents) of the Zapatista rebels, and a central location for organizations working with Chiapas' indigenous people. In addition to a solid tourist infrastructure and a dynamic population of artsy and politically

progressive foreigners and Mexicans, San Cristóbal also has a great selection of accommodations, and a cosmopolitan array of cafés, bars and restaurants.

History

Diego de Mazariegos founded San Cristóbal as the Spanish regional base in 1528. Its Spanish citizens made fortunes from wheat, while the indigenous people lost their lands and suffered diseases, taxes and forced labor. The church afforded some protection against colonist excesses. Dominican monks reached Chiapas in 1545, and made San Cristóbal their main base. The town is now named after one of them, Bartolomé de Las Casas, who was appointed bishop of Chiapas and became the most prominent Spanish defender of indigenous people in colonial times. In modern times Bishop Samuel Ruiz, who retired in 1999 after a long tenure, followed in Las Casas' footsteps, defending the oppressed indigenous people and earning the hostility of the Chiapas establishment.

San Cristóbal was the Chiapas state capital from 1824 to 1892, but remained relatively isolated until the 1970s, when tourism began to influence its economy. Recent decades have seen an influx of indigenous villagers into the 'Cinturón de Miseria' (Belt of Misery), a series

SAN CRISTÓBAL IN...

Two Days

Start the day inhaling the rich aroma of a locally-roasted cup of Chiapan **coffee** (p820) and then limber up with a Posada Ganesha **yoga class** (p816). Put on some comfortable walking shoes and set out to explore the colonial churches of **Templo de Santo Domingo** (p813) and the **cathedral** (p813), and then get lofty, climbing the twin hills of **Cerro de San Cristóbal** and **Cerro de Guadalupe** (p813) to survey the city.

Spend the second day visiting the traditional indigenous villages of Zinacatán and San Juan Chamula by **horseback** (p825) or **bicycle** (p824) and in the evening, drop by a **cinema** (p821) to catch a movie on local history or current events.

Four Days

With more time, build on the itinerary above and refresh your sagging Spanish with a few days of **language classes** (p816). Dig deeper into the local culture with visits to the **Museo de la Medicina Maya** (p816), the ethno-history landmark of **Na Bolom** (p813) and the contemporary **Centro Cultural El Carmen** (p816).

Browse for the best of local *artesanías* at the amazing weaving cooperative of **Sna Jolobil** (p821) and the paper- and book-making workshop of **Taller Leñateros** (p822). Wander the cacophony of sights and smells at the **Mercado Municipal** (p813) and make a date for some hearty **homemade tamales** (p820). Last but not least, dance through the night and bring in the morning, sampling the city's wild **nightlife** (p821).

of impoverished, violence-ridden, makeshift colonies around San Cristóbal's *periférico* (ring road). Many of these people are here because they have been expelled from Chamula and other communities as a result of internal politico-religious conflicts. Most of the craft sellers around Santo Domingo church and the underage hawkers around town come from the Cinturón de Miseria.

San Cristóbal was catapulted into the international limelight on January 1, 1994, when the Zapatista rebels selected it as one of four places in which to launch their revolution, seizing and sacking government offices in the town before being driven out within a few days by the Mexican army. Political and social tensions remain, but San Cristóbal continues to attract travelers, real estate investment and a growing middle class.

Climate

San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Los Altos de Chiapas – the state's central highlands, mostly 2000m to 3000m high – have a very temperate climate. Daytime temperatures are usually warm, but evenings can get incredibly cold between November and February, when you'll want a good jacket to ward off chills.

Orientation

San Cristóbal is very walkable, with straight streets rambling up and down several gentle hills. The Pan-American Hwy (Hwy 190, Blvd Juan Sabines, 'El Bulevar') runs through the southern part of town, and nearly all transportation terminals are on it or nearby. From the OCC bus terminal, it's six blocks north up Insurgentes to the central square, Plaza 31 de Marzo. Calle Real de Guadalupe, heading east from the plaza, has a concentration of places to stay and eat. A long pedestrian mall, the Andador Turístico (or Andador Eclesiástico), runs up Avs Hidalgo and 20 de Noviembre from the Arco de El Carmen in the south to the Templo de Santo Domingo in the north, crossing Plaza 31 de Marzo en route. The Cerro San Cristóbal and Cerro de Guadalupe lord over the town from the west and east, respectively.

Information

BOOKSTORES

La Pared (☎ /fax 678-63-67; lapared9@yahoo.com; Hidalgo 2; ☹ 10am-2pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat, 3-7:30pm Sun) Stocks a great choice of new and used books in Eng-

lish, including Lonely Planet guides. It's run by a friendly American, who also trades used books.

Librería Chilam Balam (☎ 678-04-86; Utrilla 33; ☹ 9am-8pm)

Libros Soluna (☎ 678-68-05; Real de Guadalupe 13B; ☹ 9:30am-9pm Tue-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun, 9am-1pm & 4-9pm Mon) Selection includes maps and Lonely Planet guides in Spanish.

INTERNET ACCESS

San Cristóbal has dozens of inexpensive cybercafés.

Centro Cultural El Puente (Real de Guadalupe 55; per hr M\$6; ☹ closed Sun) Free wi-fi.

Fast-Net Cyber Café (Real de Guadalupe 15D; per hr M\$6)

LAUNDRY

Lavandería La Rapidita (☎ 678-80-59; Insurgentes 9; self-service per 5kg M\$25, service wash per 3kg M\$45; ☹ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat)

Lavandería Las Estrellas (Real de Guadalupe 75; per kg M\$10; ☹ 9am-7pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Amigo del Niño y de la Madre (☎ 678-07-70; Insurgentes) General hospital with emergency facilities.

Sanatorio Dr Bonilla (☎ 680-80-50; Juárez 60) Dr Renato Zárate here is an English-speaking doctor.

MONEY

Most banks require a photocopy of your passport if you want to change cash or traveler's checks. There are also handy ATMs at the OCC bus station.

Banamex (Plaza 31 de Marzo; ☹ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Has an ATM and a dedicated exchange counter.

HSBC (Mazariégos 6; ☹ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2:30pm Sun) Also has an ATM and is open the longest hours.

Lacantún Money Exchange (Real de Guadalupe 12A; ☹ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm & 4-9pm Sun) Open outside bank hours but rates are worse.

POST & TELEPHONE

El Locutorio (☎ 631-60-63; Rosas 7C; ☹ 8am-10pm) Offering inexpensive international calls, there are also branches at Belisario Domínguez 6A and Calle 20 de Noviembre 20A.

Main post office (☎ 678-07-65; Allende 3; ☹ 8:30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-1pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Municipal tourist office (☎ 678-06-65; Palacio Municipal, Plaza 31 de Marzo; ☹ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, to

8pm Sat & Sun) Staff are generally knowledgeable about the San Cristóbal area.

State tourist office (☎ 678-14-67; Hidalgo 1B; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat, 9am-2pm Sun) Has English-speaking staff and plenty of leaflets; one floor up but no signs. It may be moving to the Centro Cultural El Carmen (p816).

Sights

PLAZA 31 DE MARZO

The leafy main plaza is a fine place to take in San Cristóbal's unhurried highland atmosphere. Shoe-shiners, newspaper sellers and *ambulantes* (itinerant vendors) gather around the elaborate iron bandstand.

On the north side of the plaza, the **cathedral** was begun in 1528 but wasn't finally completed till 1815 because of several natural disasters. Sure enough, new earthquakes struck in 1816 and 1847, causing considerable damage, but it was restored again in 1920-22. The gold-leaf interior has five gilded altarpieces featuring 18th-century paintings by Miguel Cabrera.

The Hotel Santa Clara (see p818), on the plaza's southeast corner, was built by Diego de Mazariegos, the Spanish conqueror of Chiapas. His coat of arms is engraved above the main portal. The house is a rare secular example of plateresque style in Mexico.

CERRO DE SAN CRISTÓBAL & CERRO DE GUADALUPE

Want to take in the best views in town? Well, you'll have to work for them, because at this altitude the stairs up these hills can be punishing. Churches crown both lookouts, and the Iglesia de Guadalupe becomes a hotspot for religious devotees around the Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe (December 12).

TEMPLO & EX-CONVENTO DE SANTO DOMINGO

Located just north of the center, the 16th-century **Templo de Santo Domingo** (admission free; ☎ 630am-2pm & 4-8pm) is San Cristóbal's most beautiful church, especially when its facade catches the late-afternoon sun. This baroque frontage, with its outstanding filigree stucco work, was added in the 17th century and includes the double-headed Hapsburg eagle, symbol of the Spanish monarchy in those days. The interior is lavishly gilded, especially the ornate pulpit.

Around Santo Domingo and the neighboring **Templo de La Caridad** (built in 1712),

Chamulan women and bohemian types from around Mexico conduct a colorful daily **crafts market** (see p821). The ex-monastery attached to Santo Domingo contains two interesting exhibits: one is the weavers' showroom of **Sna Jolobil** (see p821); the other is the **Centro Cultural de los Altos** (☎ 678-16-09; Calz Lázaro Cárdenas s/n; admission M\$33, free Sun & hols; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) with a reasonable Spanish-language museum on the history of the San Cristóbal region.

NA BOLOM

An atmospheric **museum-research center** (☎ 678-14-18; www.nabolom.org; Guerrero 33; view house only M\$35, 1½ hr tour in English or Spanish regular/student M\$45/20; ☎ 10am-6pm, Spanish tour 11:30am & English tour 4:30pm, no tours Mon), for many years Na Bolom was the home of Swiss anthropologist and photographer Gertrude Duby-Blom (Trudy Blom; 1901-93) and her Danish archaeologist husband Frans Blom (1893-1963).

They bought the 19th-century house in 1950, and while Frans explored and surveyed ancient Maya sites all over Chiapas (including Palenque, Toniná and Chinkultic), Trudy studied, photographed and fought to protect the scattered Lacandón people of eastern Chiapas and their jungle environment. Since Trudy's death, Na Bolom has continued the thrust of the Bloms' work, with the house operating as a museum and research center for the study and support of Chiapas' indigenous cultures and natural environment, and as a center for community and environmental programs in indigenous areas. The library of more than 9000 books and documents here is a major resource on the Maya.

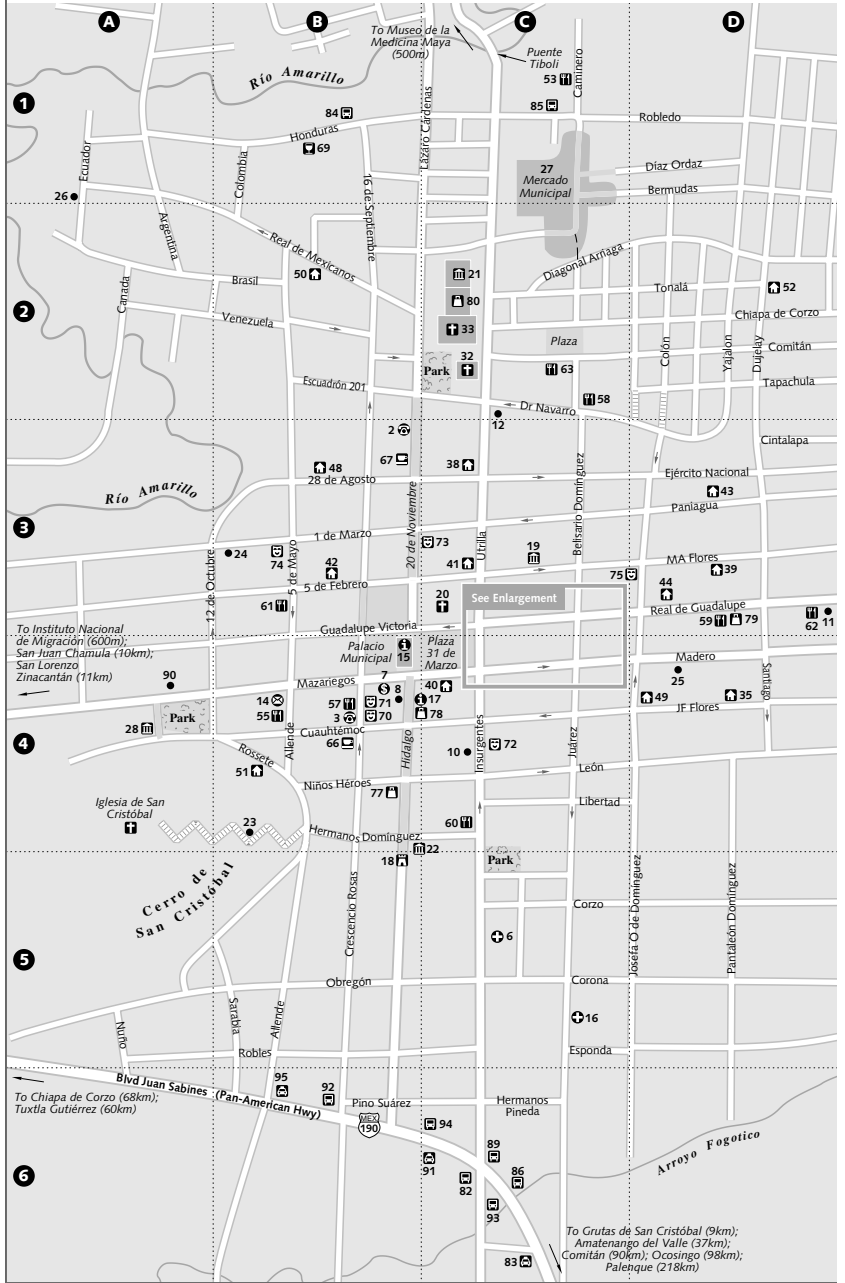
Na Bolom means 'Jaguar House' in the Tzotzil language (as well as being a play on its former owners' name). It's full of photographs, archaeological and anthropological relics and books. The house tour provides a revealing insight into the lives of the Bloms and the Chiapas of half a century and more ago – though the picture presented of the Lacandones does dwell more on their past than their present.

Na Bolom also offers guest rooms (see p818) and meals made with organic vegetables grown in its garden.

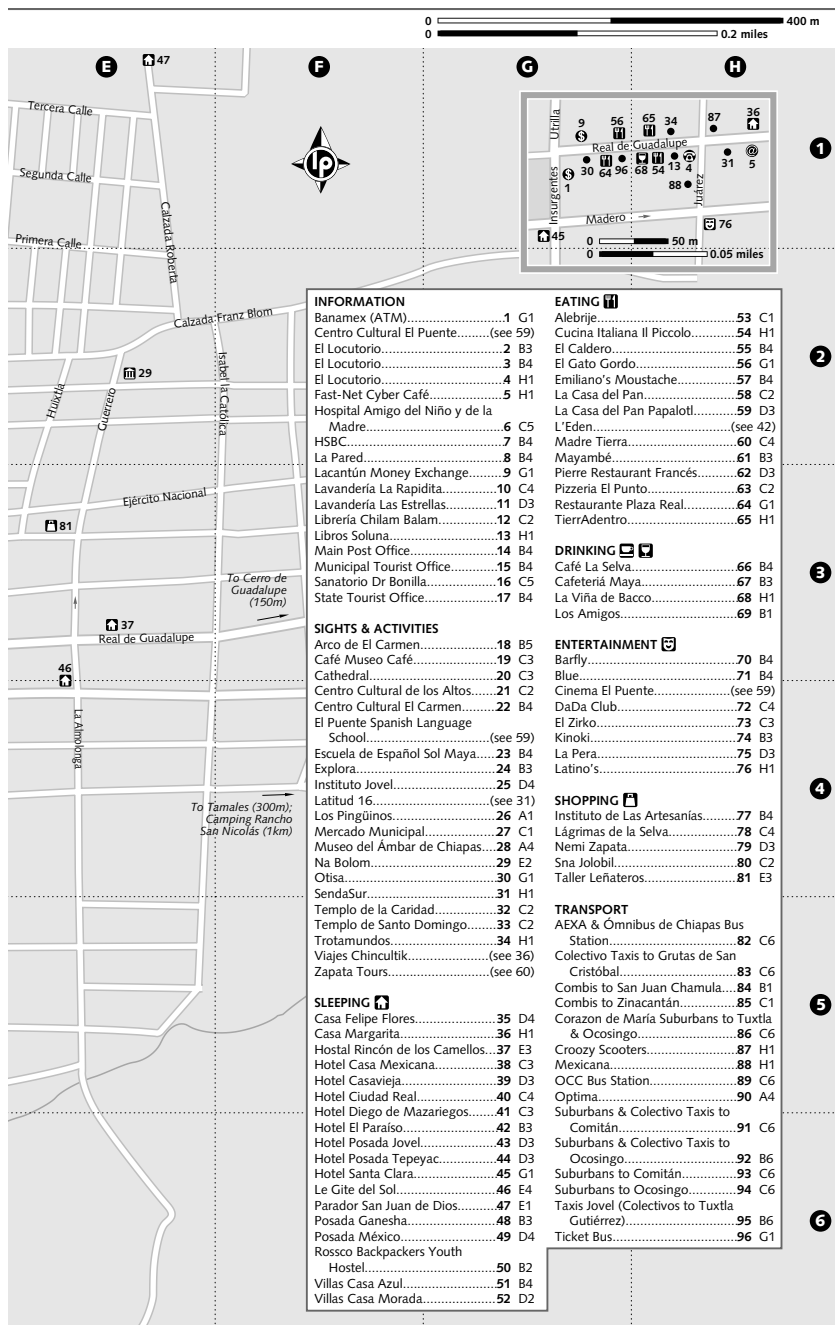
MERCADO MUNICIPAL

For a closer look at local life – and an assault on the senses – visit San Cristóbal's busy municipal **market** (☎ approx 7am-5pm), eight blocks

SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS



To Grutas de San Cristóbal (9km); Amatenango del Valle (37km); Comitán (90km); Ocosingo (98km); Palenque (218km)



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Hotel Posada Tepeyac.....	44	D3
Hotel Santa Clara.....	45	G1
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AEXA & Ómnibus de Chiapas Bus Station.....	82	C6
Colectivo Taxis to Grutas de San Cristóbal.....	83	C6
Combis to San Juan Chamula.....	84	B1
Combis to Zinacantán.....	85	C1
Corazon de María Suburbans to Tuxtla & Ocosingo.....	86	C6
Croozy Scooters.....	87	H1
Mexicana.....	88	H1
OCC Bus Station.....	89	C6
Optima.....	90	A4
Suburbans & Colectivo Taxis to Comitán.....	91	C6
Suburbans & Colectivo Taxis to Ocosingo.....	92	B6
Suburbans to Comitán.....	93	C6
Suburbans to Ocosingo.....	94	C6
Taxis Jovel (Colectivos to Tuxtla Gutiérrez).....	95	B6
Ticket Bus.....	96	G1

north of the main plaza between Utrilla and Belisario Domínguez. Vendors peer from behind pyramids of tomatoes and mangoes, and you'll find dozens of varieties of chilies, as well as bloody butchers' stalls and fly-plagued dried-shrimp stands.

MUSEO DE LA MEDICINA MAYA

This award-winning **museum** (☎ 678-54-38; www.medicinamaya.org; Av Salomón González Blanco 10; admission M\$20; 🕒 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun) introduces the system of traditional medicine used by many indigenous people in the Chiapas highlands. Traditional Maya medicine is a matter of praying to the spirit of the earth, listening to the voice of the blood and expelling bad spirits from the soul, with the aid of candles, bones, pine needles, herbs and the occasional chicken sacrifice. This museum, on the northern edge of town, is run by Organización de Médicos Indígenas del Estado de Chiapas (OMIECH), a group of 600 indigenous healers, midwives, herbalists and prayer specialists. Exhibits include displays of a ritual scene inside a church and a midwife assisting at a birth, and a video about the work of traditional midwives. Information is available in English, Spanish, French and German. Also on the site is a medicinal plant garden, a herbal pharmacy and a *casa de curación*, where treatments are done. It's a 15-minute walk north from Real de Guadalupe or M\$18 by taxi.

ARCO, TEMPLO & CENTRO CULTURAL EL CARMEN

The **Arco de El Carmen**, at the southern end of the Andador Turístico on Hidalgo, dates from the late 17th century and was once the city's gateway. The ex-convent just east is a wonderful colonial building, with a large peaceful garden. It's now the **Centro Cultural El Carmen** (Hermanos Domínguez s/n; admission free; 🕒 9am-6pm Tue-Sun), hosting art and photography exhibitions and the occasional musical event.

CAFÉ MUSEO CAFÉ

This combined **café and coffee museum** (☎ 678-78-76; MA Flores 10; admission M\$25; 🕒 9am-10pm) is a venture of Coopcafé, a grouping of 17,000 small-scale, mainly indigenous, Chiapas coffee growers. The museum covers the history of coffee and its cultivation in Chiapas, from highly exploitative beginnings to the community-based indigenous coffee production that's increasingly well marketed today. The

information is translated into English and you can taste some of that flavorful organic coffee in the café.

MUSEO DEL ÁMBAR DE CHIAPAS

Chiapas amber – fossilized pine resin, around 30 million years old – is known for its clarity and diverse colors. Most is mined around Simojovel, north of San Cristóbal. The **Museo del Ámbar de Chiapas** (Chiapas Amber Museum; www.museodelambar.com.mx; Plazuela de la Merced; admission M\$2; 🕒 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun) explains all things amber (with information sheets in English and other languages) and displays and sells some exquisitely carved items and insect-embedded pieces.

Courses

Several good language schools offer instruction in Spanish, with flexibility to meet most level and schedule requirements. Weekly rates given below are for three hours' tuition five days a week, with seven nights' homestay accommodations and three meals a day, but variations are available.

El Puente Spanish Language School (☎ 678-37-23; www.elpuenteweb.com; Real de Guadalupe 55; individual/group per week M\$2300/1900) Housed in the Centro Cultural El Puente, which also has a vegetarian café, internet café, cinema, gallery and an alternative therapy center that gives fabulous massages. Classes are offered for any period from one day.

Escuela de Español Sol Maya (☎ 674-67-20; www.solmaya.org; Hermanos Domínguez 25A; individual/group per wk M\$2391/2068) A new language school with a number of good community-based volunteer opportunities for students. Classes in Mexican cooking (M\$98 to M\$163), backstrap loom weaving (M\$163), and group salsa lessons (M\$54 per hour) are also available.

Instituto Jovel (☎ /fax 678-40-69; www.institutojovel.com; Madero 45; individual/group per wk M\$2495/2195, classes-only individual/group per hr M\$110/80) Instituto Jovel is professional and friendly, and has a top-class reputation among students. Most tuition is one-to-one, and they have a beautiful new location. Classes in Mexican cooking (US\$9 per hour) and jewelry-making with amber and silver (US\$22 per hour) are also offered.

Posada Ganesha (☎ 678-02-12; www.ganeshaposada.com; 28 de Agosto 23) Yoga sessions three times daily Monday through Friday (M\$30) and twice on Saturdays (M\$50); papier mâché classes (M\$50) upon request.

Tours

Many agencies in San Cristóbal offer a variety of tours, often with guides who speak

English, French or Italian (for tours of indigenous villages around San Cristóbal, see p824). Following are typical day-trip prices per person (usually with a minimum of four people):

Chiapa de Corzo & Cañón del Sumidero (M\$150-250, 6-7hrs)

Lagos de Montebello, Grutas de San Cristóbal, El Chiflón waterfalls (M\$200-300, 9-10hrs)

Palenque, Agua Azul, Misol-Ha (M\$250-350, 14hrs)

Recommended tour agencies (open approximately 8am to 9pm) include the following:

Otisa (☎ 678-19-33; www.otisatravel.com; Real de Guadalupe 3)

Trotamundos (☎ /fax 678-70-21; Real de Guadalupe 26C)

Viajes Chincultik (☎ 678-09-57; agchincultik@hotmail.com; Casa Margarita, Real de Guadalupe 34)

Zapata Tours (☎ /fax 674-51-52; www.zapatatours.com; Insurgentes 19) Above Madre Tierra restaurant.

The following agencies specialize in more active trips:

Explora (☎ 678-42-95; www.ecochiapas.com; 1 de Marzo 30; ☎ 9:30am-2pm & 4-8pm Mon-Fri, 9:30am-2pm Sat) Adventure trips to the Lacandón Jungle (four/five days M\$3600/4540, minimum four people) including river kayaking and rafting; also spelunking tours in north-western Chiapas, and day trips to rappel the Sima de Las Cotorras (p810).

Latitud 16 (☎ 674-69-15; www.latitud16.com; Real de Guadalupe 23)

Los Pinguinos (☎ 678-02-02; Ecuador 4B; www.bikemexico.com/pinguinos; bike hire 4/6/9 hrs M\$100/130/150; ☎ office 10am-2:30pm & 3:30-7pm Mon-Sat) Bicycle tours from half a day to two weeks.

SendaSur (☎ 678-39-09; www.sendasur.com; Real de Guadalupe 23) A partner-based ecotourism network in Chiapas, it can arrange group tours to places like Laguna Miramar (see p829), or help with independent travel.

Festivals & Events

Semana Santa The crucifixion is acted out on Good Friday in the Barrio de Mexicanos in the northwest of town.

Feria de la Primavera y de la Paz (Spring and Peace Fair) Easter Sunday is the start of the week-long town fair, with parades, musical events, bullfights and so on.

Festival Cervantino Barroco In late October and early November, this is a lively cultural program with music, dance and theater.

Sleeping

San Cristóbal has a wealth of budget accommodations, but also a number of appealing

and atmospheric midrange hotels, often set in colonial or 19th-century mansions, along with a smattering of top-end luxury. The high seasons here are during Semana Santa and the following week, the months of July and August, plus the Día de Muertos and Christmas–New Year holidays. Most prices dip about 10% outside the high season.

BUDGET

Camping Rancho San Nicolás (☎ 678-00-57; Prolongación León s/n; campsites per person M\$50, r with shared bathroom per person M\$60, rustic cabaña per person M\$60, villa d M\$350) Past cornfields and grazing horses, this grassy spot on the edge of town is a tranquil dose of *el campo* in the city. Bring a tent or trailer, or choose from a spectrum of options, including basic rooms and modern apartments with kitchens and fireplaces. Communal kitchen usage is M\$10 per day, and bathrooms have hot water.

Hostal Rincón de los Camellos (☎ 116-00-97; loscamellos@hotmail.com; Real de Guadalupe 110; dm M\$60, s/d/tr/q with shared bathroom M\$140/180/230/270, with private bathroom M\$200/220/270/330) ‘Camels’ Corner’ is a clean, tranquil little spot run by welcoming French folk. The brightly-painted rooms are set round two patios, with a grassy little garden out back. A small purple kitchen has free drinking water and coffee, and a shisha café clad in psychedelic fabrics is a pleasant low-key hangout.

Posada México (☎ 678-00-14; www.hostellingmexico.com; Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez 12; dm M\$70, r with shared/private bathroom M\$180/250, all incl full breakfast; ☎ ☑) A large courtyard compound with stunning mountain views, this HI hostel has pretty gardens, good bright rooms and dorms (one for women only), a kitchen and free internet, and tons of comfy terraces, patios and lounges. A 10% discount available for HI card-holders.

Rosco Backpackers Youth Hostel (☎ 674-05-25; www.backpackershovel.com.mx; Real de Mexicanos 16; dm M\$85-100, s/d/tr with private bathroom M\$200/280/390, all incl breakfast; ☑) Backpackers is a friendly, sociable and well-run hostel with good dorm rooms (one for women only), a guest kitchen and a grassy garden. Upstairs rooms have nice skylights but not much privacy, as the wall doesn’t reach the ceiling. Free wi-fi access and computers are available.

ourpick Posada Ganesha (☎ 678-02-12; www.ganeshaposada.com; 28 de Agosto 23; s/d/tr/q with shared bathroom M\$100/160/240/320; ☑) A new incense-

infused posada trimmed in Indian fabrics, it's a friendly and vibrant place to rest your head, with yoga and papier mâché classes (see Courses p816) and a guest kitchen. The free-standing *cabaña* room is especially nice.

Hotel Posada Jovel (☎ 678-17-34; www.mundociapas.com/hotelposadajovel; Paniagua 28; posada s/d without bathroom M\$150/200, with bathroom M\$250/350, 'hotel' s/d/tr/q M\$480/500/600/700; (P) (X) (Q)) Most rooms in the original 'posada' building have stripped wooden floors, bedside lights and highland blankets, while those in the 'hotel' section across the street, surrounding a pretty garden, are larger and brightly decorated, with cable TV and a wonderful terrace with views. Check the website for lowest prices.

Hotel Posada Tepeyac (☎ 678-01-18; Real de Guadalupe 40; s/d/tr/q M\$200/300/350/400; (Q)) A neat small hotel in the heart of the Real de Guadalupe travelers' scene. The 33 clean rooms, around a couple of pretty little patios and a lovely stained-glass foyer, sport zingy color schemes. Number 117 has great views from the balcony.

Le Gîte del Sol (☎ 631-60-12; www.legitedelsol.com; Madero 82; s/d/tr/q incl full breakfast M\$220/250/330/400; (P) (X) (Q)) Free computer usage and a bountiful breakfast complement simple rooms with floors of radiant sunflower yellow and bathrooms that look a bit like oversized shower stalls. The friendly owners, a Quebecois-Mexican couple, speak French and English. Guests may use the sunny kitchen and a small roof terrace offers great views. Parking costs M\$20.

MIDRANGE

Casa Margarita (☎ 678-09-57; agchincultik@hotmail.com; Real de Guadalupe 34; s/d/tr/q M\$350/450/550/650; (Q)) This popular and well-run travelers' haunt offers tastefully presented, impeccably clean rooms with reading lights, and a pretty courtyard at the center of things. Rates can go down by M\$50 to M\$100 off-season. There's free internet, an in-house travel agency and a good restaurant.

Hotel Santa Clara (☎ 678-11-40; www.travelbymexico.com/chis/santadara; Insurgentes 1; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast M\$450/550/700/800; (P) (Q) (Q)) An atmospheric historic building on the main plaza, the Santa Clara has a number of sizable rooms, though they vary in quality, so ask to look before you check in. Wooden bedsteads, pretty tiling and antique religious art maintain an old-world air. There's a restaurant, a bar-lounge, a court-

yard with caged red macaws and another with a kidney-shaped swimming pool.

Hotel El Paraíso (☎ 678-00-85; www.hotelposada-paraiso.com; 5 de Febrero 19; s/d/tr M\$450/650/850) Combining colonial style with a boutique hotel feel, El Paraíso has a bright wood-pillared patio and courtyard garden, and loads of character. The high-ceilinged rooms are not huge, and some have limited natural light, but several are bi-level with an extra bed upstairs. The in-house restaurant, L'Eden (p820), is excellent.

Villas Casa Azul (☎ 678-81-81; www.travelbymexico.com/chis/casaazul; Rossete 4; s/d/tr M\$520/722/843, per wk 1-4 people M\$3500) If you don't mind hoofing up some stairs, these spacious one-bedroom apartments with kitchens have some of the best views in the city. And the higher you climb, the better the payoff.

Na Bolom (☎ 678-14-18; www.nabolom.org; Guerrero 33; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast M\$660/880/1045/1100, ste M\$1210; (P) (Q)) This famous museum/research institute (p813), about 1km from the plaza, has 16 stylish guest rooms, all loaded with character and all but one with log fires. Meals are served in the house's stately dining room. Room rates include a house tour and wireless internet.

Hotel Diego de Mazariegos (☎ 678-08-33; www.diegodemazariegos.com; 5 de Febrero 1; s/d/tr/q M\$730/780/850/920, ste M\$1250-1500; (P)) This classy, long-established hotel occupies two 18th-century mansions built around beautiful, wide courtyards. The 76 rooms are large and decked out with traditional fabrics and fittings, but also have modern comforts including cable TV. Some have fireplaces (M\$15 per load of wood), and suites have spa tubs. The hotel has a lively tequila-and-mariachi-theme bar.

Villas Casa Morada (☎ 678-44-40; www.casamorada.com.mx; Dugelay 45; studio/villa M\$750/1200; (P)) These are tasteful, modern apartments with kitchen, phone, cable TV, fireplaces, daily cleaning and wi-fi access. Rooms face a tranquil fruit tree garden.

Hotel Casa Mexicana (☎ 678-06-98; www.hotelcasamexicana.com; 28 de Agosto 1; s/d M\$750/850, ste M\$1400-1700; (P) (Q)) A gallery as well as charming colonial hotel, the stylish and inviting Casa Mexicana displays modern art alongside traditional fabrics and solid wood pillars and furnishings. The main patio is filled with a lush tropical garden, the 55 attractive rooms are equipped with cable TV, and there's a restaurant, bar and sauna.

Hotel Casavieja (☎ /fax 678-68-68; www.casavieja.com.mx; MA Flores 27; s/d/tr M\$800/850/900, ste 950-1000; (P) (Q)) Set in a beautifully renovated 18th-century house with lots of wooden pillars, balustrades and old-world atmosphere, Casavieja also boasts modern comforts. The large comfortable rooms, arranged around flowery courtyards, all have two double beds, heater, cable TV and phone. Service is attentive and friendly, and a neat restaurant serves traditional Mexican dishes.

Hotel Ciudad Real (☎ 678-44-00; www.ciudadreal.com.mx; Plaza 31 de Marzo 10; s/d M\$900, tr/ste M\$1050/1420; (P) (S)) A modern upscale hotel fashioned from an early 20th century building, it's located right on the main plaza and has 31 clean, if somewhat characterless, rooms arranged around a large courtyard restaurant. Families will enjoy the indoor children's play room.

TOP END

Casa Felipe Flores (☎ 678-39-96; www.felipeflores.com; JF Flores 36; r incl full breakfast US\$92-118; (X)) A dreamy colonial guesthouse decorated with outstanding Mexican and Guatemalan art, crafts and furnishings, the 200-year-old building contains five fireplace rooms set off two flowery courtyards. The fireplace lounge is a wonderful place to have a glass of wine and leaf through some of their terrific library. Room 5 is a cozy rooftop hideaway, with a private terrace looking out over tiled rooftops and clusters of bougainvillea.

Parador San Juan de Dios (☎ /fax 678-11-67; www.sanjuan Dios.com; Calz Roberta 16; ste M\$1400-3700; (P)) A stunning boutique hotel on the northern edge of town, the Parador San Juan de Dios offers voluminous and luxurious suites furnished with fascinating antique and modern art. The hotel occupies the former Rancho Harvard, which dates from the 17th century and has lodged many anthropologists and archaeologists. It has beautiful gardens, vast lawns and a top-class restaurant with an inventive, expensive Chiapas/Mediterranean menu and herbs and vegetables grown in its organic garden.

Eating

The foodie jackpot of Chiapas, San Cristóbal has more tantalizing food options than any other place in the state. If you can verbalize a culinary craving, chances are some restaurant exists here to fulfill it.

Vegetarians are embarrassingly spoiled for choice. ¡Provecho!

REAL DE GUADALUPE AREA

El Gato Gordo (☎ 678-83-13; Real de Guadalupe 20; mains M\$25-49; (V) 1-11pm Wed-Mon; (V)) Gato Gordo attracts travelers in droves for its excellent, well-prepared food at terrific prices. There's an unbeatable set lunch (M\$28), and excellent pasta, crepes, Mexican snacks and meat dishes, plus a great choice of drinks.

TierrAdentro (☎ 674-67-66; www.tierradentro.org.mx; Real de Guadalupe 24; menú M\$30-70; (X) 8am-11pm) A popular gathering center for political progressives and coffee-swigging, laptop-toting locals (not that they're mutually exclusive), this large indoor courtyard restaurant and café is a comfortable place to while away the hours. It's run by Zapatista supporters, who hold frequent cultural events and conferences on local issues. A simple *menú compa* (M\$30), with rice and beans and handmade tortillas, is hearty and delicious. Also inside are a good (Spanish-only) bookstore and an indigenous women's weaving co-op.

Pierre Restaurant Francés (☎ 678-72-11; Real de Guadalupe 73; mains M\$35-165; (X) 1:30-10:30pm Wed-Mon, 7-10:30pm Tue) A super French restaurant whose perfectionist owner makes his own pasta, butter, cheese and bread. Favorites include the *cailles en raisin* (quail with raisins) and the *canard aux pêches* (duck with peaches), though there are vegetarian mains as well.

La Casa del Pan Papatlotl (☎ 678-72-15; Centro Cultural El Puente, Real de Guadalupe 55; mains M\$40-50; (X) 8:30am-10:30pm Mon-Sat; (V)) This excellent courtyard vegetarian restaurant does a particularly filling buffet lunch from 2pm to 5pm (M\$65). Fresh bread and locally-grown organic ingredients are staples here.

Restaurante Plaza Real (☎ 678-09-92; Real de Guadalupe 5; mains M\$46-100; (X) 7am-11pm; (V)) The well-prepared meat, poultry and vegetarian dishes at this classy eatery have international appeal, but also authentic Mexican flavor. It's set in the tranquil, wood-pillared and warm sunlit courtyard of what was once Chiapas' state congress building, surrounded by upmarket craft and jewelry shops.

Cucina Italiana Il Piccolo (☎ 115-27-26; Real de Guadalupe 13C; mains M\$55-95; (X) 2-10:30pm Tue-Sun) Originally from Milan, chef Angelo Vinetti makes Italian comfort food that's simple yet downright delectable. Dig into a bowl of house-made tagliatelle, with a big choice of

savory sauces, and chase away the San Cris chills with a glass or two of wine. Save room for the heavenly tiramisù.

PLAZA 31 DE MARZO & WEST

El Caldero (Allende 5A; soups M\$40; ☎ 10am-10pm Thu-Tue) Simple, friendly little El Caldero specializes in delicious, filling Mexican soups – *pazole* (shredded pork in broth), *mondongo* (tripe), *caldo* (broth) – with avocados, tortillas and various salsas. Great for an authentic and inexpensive local meal.

Mayabé (☎ 674-62-78; 5 de Mayo 10; mains M\$45-80; ☎ 9:30am-11pm; ♿) This superb courtyard restaurant boasts a wonderful Asian, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean menu, including plenty of vegetarian options. Tuck into delicious Indian and Thai curries, Greek and Lebanese treats including great hummus and falafel, and to-die-for lassis and juices. There's mellow live music some evenings, and a fireplace to warm things up on those cool highland nights.

L'Eden (☎ 678-00-85; Hotel El Paraíso, 5 de Febrero 19; mains M\$45-110; ☎ 7am-noon & 1-11pm) This quality restaurant's tempting European and Mexican menu includes *fondue suiza*, *sopa azteca* and succulent meat dishes. There's a lengthy wine list too, including French and Spanish vintages.

SOUTH OF PLAZA 31 DE MARZO

Emiliano's Moustache (☎ 678-72-46; Rosas 7; breakfasts & snacks M\$20-50, mains M\$22-60; ☎ 8am-1am) This large, enjoyable place specializes in tacos filled with combinations of meat, vegetable or cheese. The meat *filetes* are also excellent, and vegetarian possibilities exist too (including veggie tacos).

Madre Tierra (☎ 678-42-97; Insurgentes 19; mains M\$30-65; ☎ 8am-10pm; ♿) A long-time travelers' favorite, Madre Tierra serves an eclectic and mainly vegetarian menu on a tranquil patio or in an atmospheric dining room. Breakfasts are superb, but perhaps sliding by on its reputation, other meals can be hit-or-miss.

NORTH OF PLAZA 31 DE MARZO

Alebrije (☎ 678-28-56; Caminero 9; mains M\$15-25; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) A fun, economical and busy *cocina popular* across from the Mercado Municipal, it serves freshly-prepared food like *enfrijoladas con pollo* (tortillas with bean sauce, cheese and chicken), *chilaquiles* and *pollo con verduras* (chicken

RED LIGHT SPECIAL

On Wednesday and Saturday evenings, starting around 7pm, head toward Camping Rancho San Nicolás (p817) and look for a makeshift red light on the left-hand side of León, just before the bridge. Seated next to an enormous steaming caldron, the *señora* sells fresh homemade tamales for M\$2.50 apiece, luring hungry patrons from the neighborhood and beyond. Try the *chipilín con queso* (a regional legume, mixed with cheese) or the *mumo y frijolitos* (hierba santa with spicy beans).

and vegetables) to a dedicated local clientele. Vegetarian dishes can be prepared upon request, and the yummy fruit *aguas* are made with purified water.

La Casa del Pan (☎ 678-58-95; Dr Navarro 10; snacks & mains M\$32-55; ☎ 8am-10pm Tue-Sun; ♿) This relaxed restaurant-bakery emphasizes local organic ingredients, offering great breakfasts and lots of vegetarian fare through the day: whole-wheat sandwiches, salads, *hojaldres* (vegetable strudels) and pizzas. The three types of empanadas are great for lunch to go.

Pizzería El Punto (☎ 678-79-79; Comitán 13; pizzas M\$60-100; ☎ 2-11pm Tue-Sun) Forget the cardboard crap that passes for pizza in some parts, these crispy pies are the best in town, bar none. The brick oven, adorned with a mosaic of change, keeps diners warm on chilly highland nights, though the glass door looking out onto the plaza seems to crack every other week – close it gently.

Drinking COFFEE

The aroma of roasted highland-grown coffee beans wafts through the streets of San Cristóbal, and a strong dose is never far. Along with the Café Museo Café (p816), try any of these courtyard places for the good stuff – organic, indigenous-grown and delicious:

Café La Selva (☎ 678-72-43; Crescencio Rosas 9; ☎ 8:30am-11pm)

Cafetería Maya (☎ 678-91-46; 20 de Noviembre 12C; ☎ 12:30-10:30pm) The patio has a permanent photo exhibition on the Zapatista movement.

TierrAdentro (☎ 674-67-66; Real de Guadalupe 24; ☎ 8am-11pm)

BARS

La Viña de Bacco (☎ 119-19-85; Real de Guadalupe 7; ☎ 1pm-midnight Mon-Sat) San Cristóbal's first wine bar was so successful that it quickly outgrew its first dollhouse-size location. Now located on the main drag, it's still a cozy place to chat, pouring a large selection of Mexican options (among others) starting at a reasonable M\$15 per glass.

Los Amigos (Honduras 4; ☎ 10am-8pm) A popular but reasonably unraucous cantina, the two-for-one beers and tasty *botanas* (free snacks) keep it hopping and fun, as do the wander-in mariachi bands.

Entertainment**CLUBS & LIVE MUSIC**

Barfly (☎ 124-52-74; Crescencio Rosas 4; ☎ 8am-3pm Tue-Sat) Stained glass lamps light the bar and a graffiti-style mural splashes across the wall in this dark and funky club. It's a popular space for local musicians, with electronica on Saturdays and reggae, funk and salsa bands at other times.

Blue (☎ 678-22-00; Rosas 2; admission after midnight Thu-Sat M\$30; ☎ 9pm-3am Mon-Wed, to 4am Thu-Sat) With tell-tale blue lights outside, Blue features DJs hauling out rock, ska, punk, reggae and electronica grooves in a large dance space. A candle-lit front room is good for chilling out and chatting.

DaDa Club (☎ 631-32-93; www.dadajazz.com; Insurgentes 16A; ☎ 1pm-midnight Mon-Sat) There's never a cover, and live jazz bands wail nightly starting around 9:30pm. Earthy and intimate and dressed up in red, this new club is cozy and inviting.

El Zirko (20 de Noviembre 7; admission Fri & Sat M\$20-30; ☎ 8pm-3am) A hip venue that's packed on the weekends. Salsa and Latin rock bands often play the front bar, while a larger back dance floor ringed with red couches opens with a wider range of sounds (including *cumbia* and pop) on Friday and Saturday.

La Pera (☎ 678-12-09; MA Flores 23; ☎ 1-11pm Mon-Sat) An artsy and relaxed café-gallery-bar showing work by local artists, La Pera often stages live music late in the week. It could be blues, jazz, *trova*, hip-hop or tango lessons, but it's always fun.

Latinos' (☎ 678-99-27; Madero 23; admission Thu-Sat M\$25; ☎ 8pm-3am Mon-Sat) A bright restaurant and dance spot where the city's *salseros* gather to groove. A salsa/merengue/*cumbia* band plays nightly, with the crowds getting thick by 10:30pm or so.

Madre Tierra (☎ 678-42-97; Insurgentes 19; ☎ 8-3pm) A San Cristóbal institution, Madre Tierra's smoky Bar Upstairs presents live reggae and ska bands.

CINEMA

San Cristóbal is a fine place to immerse yourself in Mexican- and Latin American-themed cinema, political documentaries and arthouse movies. The following places show two films a day (usually at 6pm and 8pm), charging M\$25 per movie:

Cinema El Puente (☎ 678-37-23; Centro Cultural El Puente, Real de Guadalupe 55) Closed Sunday.

Kinoki (☎ 678-0495; 1 de Marzo 22; ☎ 5:30-11pm) Art space and cooperatively-run café, with two smaller private cinema rooms available as well.

Shopping

Real de Guadalupe and the Andador Turístico have some craft shops, but the busy daily crafts market around Santo Domingo and La Caridad churches are also good places to check out. The outstanding indigenous *artesanías* of the Chiapas highlands are textiles such as *huipiles* (sleeveless tunics), blouses and blankets; Tzotzil weavers are some of the most skilled and inventive in Mexico. Another Chiapas specialty is amber, sold in numerous jewelry shops. When buying amber, beware of plastic imitations: the real thing is never cold and never heavy, and when rubbed should produce static electricity and a resinous smell.

Instituto de Las Artesanías (☎ 678-11-80; cnr Niños Héroes & Hidalgo; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-9pm Sat, 10am-3pm Sun) Sells a good range of Chiapas crafts.

Lágrimas de la Selva (☎ 674-63-48; Hidalgo 1C) A lovely jewelry store where you can watch them work with amber.

Nemi Zapata (☎ 678-74-87; Real de Guadalupe 57A) A fair trade store that sells products made by Zapatista communities – weavings, embroidery, coffee and honey, EZLN cards, posters and books.

Sna Jolobil (☎ 678-26-46; Calz Lázaro Cárdenas s/n; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Sat) Next to Santo Domingo, Sna Jolobil exhibits and sells some of the very best *huipiles*, blouses, skirts, rugs and other woven items, with prices ranging from a few dollars for small items to over M\$10,000 for the best *huipiles* (the fruit of many months' work). Sna Jolobil is a cooperative of 800 indigenous women weavers from the Chiapas highlands, founded in the 1970s

to foster the important indigenous art of back-strap-loom weaving. It has revived many half-forgotten techniques and designs.

Taller Leñateros (☎ 678-51-74; www.tallerlenateros.com; Paniagua 54; ☎ 8:30am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-2pm Sat) A society of Maya artists, the 'Woodlanders' Workshop' crafts exquisite handmade books, posters and fine art prints from recycled paper infused with local plants, using images inspired by traditional folk art. An open workshop, you can watch their art in progress.

Getting There & Away

Instituto Nacional de Migración (☎ 678-02-92; Diagonal El Centenario 30) is on a corner with the Pan-American Hwy, 1.2km west of the OCC bus station.

From Tuxtla Gutiérrez you'll most likely travel here on the fast new toll *autopista* (M\$33 for cars). An increased military and police presence has reduced the number of highway holdups on Hwy 199 between Ocosingo and Palenque, but it's still probably best to travel along this stretch of road during daylight hours.

AIR

San Cristóbal's airport, about 15km from town on the Palenque road, has no regular passenger flights; the main airport serving town is in Tuxtla Gutiérrez. To get there, take

a Tuxtla-bound *colectivo* to Soriana (M\$35, 1¼ hours) in Tuxtla's eastern suburbs; from the stand at the *colectivo* stop, hire a taxi to the airport (M\$150, 30 minutes). A number of tour agencies, including Viajes Chincultik and Otisa (see Tours, p816), run shuttles to the Tuxtla airport for M\$150 to M\$160 per person, but scheduled service is generally at 9am only. Reserve in advance, especially if you want to leave at another time.

Mexicana (☎ 678-93-09; Belisario Domínguez 2B) sells flights from Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

BUS, COLECTIVO & VAN

There are around a dozen terminals, mostly on or just off the Pan-American Hwy. Most important is the 1st-class **OCC terminal** (☎ 678-02-91; cnr Pan-American Hwy & Insurgentes), also used by ADO and UNO 1st-class and deluxe buses, and 2nd-class Transportes Dr Rodulfo Figueroa (TRF) and Rápidos del Sur. Tickets for all these lines are sold at **Ticket Bus** (☎ 678-85-03; Real de Guadalupe 5A; ☎ 7am-10pm) in the center of town.

1st-class **AEXA** (☎ 678-61-78) and 2nd-class Ómnibus de Chiapas share a terminal on the south side of the highway; and various Suburban-type vans and *colectivo* taxi services have depots on the highway in the same area. Daily departures (from the OCC terminal unless otherwise stated) are listed in the box below.

BUSES FROM SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency (daily)
Campeche	M\$314	11hr	1
Cancún	M\$606-724	16-18hr	4
Ciudad Cuauhtémoc (Guatemalan border)	M\$100	3½hr	4
Comitán	M\$25-30	1¾hr	12 from OCC, vans and <i>colectivos</i> leave from the south side of the Pan-American Hwy
Mérida	M\$448	13hr	1
Mexico City (TAPO)	M\$750-896	13-14hr	8
Oaxaca	M\$334-412	11hr	3
Ocosingo	M\$30-45	2¼hr	11 from OCC, 4 AEXA, <i>colectivos</i> and vans leave every few minutes 3am-9pm from the north side of the Pan-American Hwy
Palenque	M\$75-134	5hr	9 from OCC, 3 AEXA
Pochutla	M\$332	10-14hr	2
Puerto Escondido	M\$372	11-15hr	2
Tuxtla Gutiérrez	M\$30-40	1-1¼hr	22 from OCC, 4 AEXA, Ómnibus de Chiapas every 5 min, 5am-10pm, Taxis Jovel <i>colectivos</i> operate 24hr and Corazón de María vans leave 5am-11pm
Villahermosa	M\$194	7-8hr	2

See *Getting There & Away*, p810, for connections to Chiapa de Corzo. For Guatemala, most agencies offer daily van service to Quetzaltenango (M\$260, eight hours), Panajachel (M\$260, 10 hours) and Antigua (M\$360, 12 hours) and Flores (via Palenque, M\$400).

CAR

Optima (☎ 674-54-09; optimacar1@hotmail.com; Mazariegos 39) rents VW Beetles for M\$400 per day and M\$2400 per week, including unlimited kilometers, insurance and taxes. Sizeable discounts given for payment in cash.

Getting Around

Combi go up Rosas from the Pan-American Hwy to the town center. Taxis cost M\$18 within town.

Friendly Los Pingüinos (p817) rents good-quality mountain bikes with lock and maps and can advise on good and safe routes. You'll need to deposit your passport or credit card.

Under new ownership, **Crooz Scooters** (☎ 631-43-29; www.prodigyweb.net.mx/croozscooters; Belisario Domínguez 7; scooter hire 1/5/9/24hr M\$75/200/250/350;

☎ 9am-7pm) rents well-maintained 80cc scooters. The price includes maps and helmets; passport and deposit required.

AROUND SAN CRISTÓBAL

The inhabitants of the beautiful Chiapas highlands are descended from the ancient Maya and maintain some unique customs, costumes and beliefs (see p824).

Markets and festivals often give the most interesting insight into indigenous life, and there are lots of them. Weekly **markets** at the villages are nearly always on Sunday. Proceedings start as early as dawn, and wind down by lunchtime. Occasions like **Carnaval** (late February/early March), for which Chamula is particularly famous, **Semana Santa**, and **Día de Muertos** (November 2) are celebrated almost everywhere. During Carnaval, groups of minstrels stroll the roads in tall, pointed hats with long, colored tassels, strumming guitars and chanting. Much *pox* (pronounced posh), an alcoholic drink made from sugarcane, is drunk.

It's particularly important to be respectful of local customs in this part of Mexico (see p789). During the day, walking or riding



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF CHIAPAS

Of the 4.2 million people of Chiapas, approximately 1.25 million are indigenous, with language being the key ethnic identifier. Each of the eight principal groups has its own language, beliefs and customs, a cultural variety that makes Chiapas one of the most fascinating states in Mexico.

Travelers to the area around San Cristóbal are most likely to encounter the Tzotziles and the Tzeltales. Their traditional religious life is nominally Catholic, but integrates pre-Hispanic elements. Most people live in the hills outside the villages, which are primarily market and ceremonial centers.

Tzotzil and Tzeltal clothing is among the most varied, colorful and elaborately worked in Mexico. It not only identifies wearers' villages but also continues ancient Maya traditions. Many of the seemingly abstract designs on these costumes are in fact stylized snakes, frogs, butterflies, birds, saints and other beings. Some motifs have religious-magical functions: scorpions, for example, can be a symbolic request for rain, since they are believed to attract lightning.

The Lacandonese dwelt deep in the Lacandón Jungle and largely avoided contact with the outside world until the 1950s. They now number 800 or so and live in three main settlements in that same region, with low-key tourism being one of their major means of support. Lacandonese are readily recognizable in their white tunics and long black hair cut in a fringe. Most Lacandonese have now abandoned their traditional animist religion in favor of Presbyterian or evangelical forms of Christianity.

Traditionally treated as second-class citizens, indigenous groups mostly live on the least productive land in the state, with the least amount of government services or infrastructure. The Zapatista revolution was primarily an uprising against this historical injustice; their rallying cry of *!Ya basta!* (Enough!), a full-throated response to centuries of economic and political discrimination.

Today, long-standing indigenous ways of life are being challenged both by evangelical Christianity – opposed to many traditional animist-Catholic practices – and by the Zapatista movement, which rejects traditional leadership hierarchies and is raising the rights and profile of women. Many highland indigenous people have emigrated to the Lacandón Jungle to clear new land, or to the cities in search of work.

Despite all obstacles, indigenous identities and self-respect survive. They may be suspicious of outsiders, and may resent interference in their religious observances or other aspects of life, but if treated with due respect they are likely to respond in kind.

by horse or bicycle along the main roads to Chamula and Zinacantán should not be risky, however, it's not wise to wander into unfrequented areas or down isolated tracks.

Tours

Exploring the region with a good guide can open up doors and give you a feel for indigenous life and customs you could never gain alone. Most San Cristóbal agencies (see p816) offer four- or five-hour trips to local villages, usually San Juan Chamula and Zinacantán.

Alex & Raúl Tours (☎ 967-678-37-41; alexyraul@tours@yahoo.com.mx; per person M\$150) Enjoyable and informative minibus tours in English, French or Spanish; Raúl and/or a colleague wait at the wooden cross in front of San Cristóbal's cathedral from 8:45-9:30am daily. Trips to Tenejapa (Thursday and Sunday), San Andrés Larraínzar or Amatenango del Valle (M\$200) can also be arranged for a minimum of four people.

Mercedes Tour to Chamula & Zinacantán (☎ 967-674-03-76; alexvald@yahoo.com; 5-6hr trip per person M\$170) The Mercedes Tour is an informative and entertaining trip (generally in English or Spanish, but French, Italian and German available) dwelling on local Maya cosmology and religion, led by sociologist Alejandro Valdiviezo, a native Tzotzil speaker, or his colleague Alberto Medina. Look for someone twirling a colorful umbrella just before 9am daily near the kiosk in San Cristóbal's main plaza. Also does day tours to Toniná (M\$320) focusing on Maya culture.

BICYCLE & SCOOTER TOURS

Croozy Scooters (p823) offer scooter tours to Zinacantán and San Juan Chamula. The friendly English-, German- and Spanish-speaking folk at Los Pingüinos (p817) operate guided half-day mountain-bike tours of 20km to 25km for M\$300 to M\$330 per person. Most trips are to little-visited scenic country areas east of San Cristóbal,

passing through cloud forests. Reserve one day or more ahead; reservations accepted by phone and e-mail on Sundays. Longer tours offered around the Chiapas highlands and beyond.

Marco Antonio Morales (☎ 104-73-09; tonodmar@hotmail.com) offers tailored bike tours of four (M\$165) to six (M\$200) hours visiting Zinacatán, San Juan Chamula and Rancho Nuevo; speaks English and French.

HORSEBACK RIDING

Almost any travel agency or place to stay in San Cristóbal can arrange a four- or five-hour guided ride to San Juan Chamula for M\$100 to M\$120. Don't take anything too valuable with you; thefts have occurred in the past.

Getting There & Away

Transportation to most villages goes from points around the Mercado Municipal in San Cristóbal. Combis to San Juan Chamula (M\$8) leave from Calle Honduras frequently from 4am to about 6pm; for Zinacatán, combis (M\$10) and *colectivo* taxis (M\$12) go at least hourly, 5am to 7pm, from a yard off Robledo.

San Juan Chamula

pop 3000 / elevation 2200m

The Chamulans are a fiercely independent Tzotzil group, about 80,000 strong. Their main village, San Juan Chamula, 10km northwest of San Cristóbal, is the center for some unique religious practices – although conflicts between adherents of traditional Chamulan Catholicism and converts to evangelical, Pentecostal and other branches of Christianity have resulted in the expulsion of many thousands of Chamulans from their villages in the past couple of decades. Here, as at other places in Mexico and Central America, rejection of Catholicism was also in part a political rejection of the long-standing supremacy of the Catholic *mestizo* majority. In San Juan Chamula, evangelism is associated with the Zapatista movement. Most of the exiles now inhabit the shantytowns around San Cristóbal.

Chamulan men wear loose homespun tunics of white wool (sometimes, in cool weather, thicker black wool), but *cargos* – those with important religious and ceremonial duties – wear a sleeveless black tunic and a white scarf on the head. Chamulan

women wear fairly plain white or blue blouses and/or shawls and woolen skirts.

Outsiders can visit San Juan Chamula, but a big sign at the entrance to the village strictly forbids photography in the village church or at rituals. Do *not* ignore these restrictions; the community takes them very seriously. Nearby, around the shell of an older church, is the village **graveyard**, with black crosses for people who died old, white for the young, and blue for others.

Sunday is the weekly **market**, when people from the hills stream into the village to shop, trade and visit the main church. A corresponding number of tourist buses also stream in, so you might prefer to come another day (though avoid Wednesday, when the church is often all but deserted due to local superstitions). Local crafts (mainly textiles) are sold every day for the passing tourist trade.

Standing beside the main plaza, Chamula's main church, the **Templo de San Juan**, is a ghostly white, with a vividly painted arch of green and blue. A sign tells visitors to obtain tickets (M\$15) at the **tourist office** (☎ 9am-6pm), beside the plaza, before entering the church. Inside the darkened sanctuary, hundreds of flickering candles, clouds of incense, and worshipers kneeling with their faces to the pine-needle-carpeted floor make a powerful impression. Chanting *curanderos* (literally 'curers'; medicine men or women) may be rubbing patients' bodies with eggs or bones. Images of saints are surrounded with mirrors and dressed in holy garments. Chamulans revere San Juan Bautista (St John the Baptist) above Christ, and his image occupies a more important place in the church.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Carnaval Festivities also mark the five 'lost' days of the ancient Long Count calendar, which divided time into 20-day periods (18 of these make 360 days, leaving five to complete a year).

Fiesta de San Juan Bautista Up to 20,000 people gather to dance and drink on June 24.

Change of cargo-holders The annual rotation of the honored (but expensive) community leadership positions known as *cargos*; December 30 to January 1.

San Lorenzo Zinacatán

pop 3700 / elevation 2558m

The orderly village of San Lorenzo Zinacatán, about 11km northwest of San Cristóbal, is the main village of the

THE ZAPATISTAS

On January 1, 1994, the day of Nafta's initiation, a previously unknown leftist guerrilla army emerged from the forests to occupy San Cristóbal de Las Casas and other towns in Chiapas. The Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN, Zapatista National Liberation Army) linked anti-globalization rhetoric with Mexican revolutionary slogans, declaring that they aimed to overturn the oligarchy's centuries-old hold on land, resources and power and to improve the wretched living standards of Mexico's indigenous people.

The Mexican army evicted the Zapatistas within days, and the rebels retreated to the fringes of the Lacandón Jungle to wage a propaganda war, mainly fought via the internet. The Zapatistas' balaclava-clad, pipe-puffing Subcomandante Marcos (a former university professor named Rafael Guillén) rapidly became a cult figure. High-profile conventions against neoliberalism were held and international supporters flocked to Zapatista headquarters at La Realidad, 80km southeast of Comitán, and Zapatista-aligned peasants took over hundreds of farms and ranches in Chiapas.

In 1996, Zapatista and Mexican government negotiators agreed to a set of accords on indigenous rights and autonomy. However, the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) never ratified these agreements, and tension and killings escalated in Chiapas through 1997 and 1998. A PRI-linked paramilitary group massacred 45 people in the village of Acteal, north of San Cristóbal, in 1997. By 1999, an estimated 21,000 villagers had fled their homes after the Mexican army, aided and abetted by paramilitaries, launched a campaign of intimidation.

After Vicente Fox was elected Mexico's president in 2000, two attempts to make the necessary constitutional changes failed. The Zapatistas refused to participate in further talks, concentrating instead on consolidating their revolution and their autonomy in the villages of highland and eastern Chiapas, where they had the most support. In 2003 the Zapatista leadership established five regional 'Juntas de Buen Gobierno' (Committees of Good Government) in villages where they set up schools and clinics. But these frequently-rotating committees, set up to democratize governance and teach leadership skills, have been hampered by a lack of accountability and continuity, and criticized as excessively bureaucratic.

By 2005 Zapatista political influence was slight outside their own enclaves, and many former supporters were disillusioned with the EZLN's intransigence. Then suddenly, after four years of silence, Marcos announced a broad new Zapatista political struggle including all Mexico's exploited and marginalized people, not just the indigenous. He rejected all cooperation or dialog with mainstream political parties, launching instead La Otra Campaña (The Other Campaign), a movement to run parallel to, but distinct from, Mexico's 2006 presidential election campaign. On January 1, 2006, Marcos, now styling himself Subdelegado Zero, set off by motorcycle from the jungle to do a six-month Zapatista tour of all Mexico's states. The aim was to forge a new leftist political front by making contact with other groups around the country, to develop a new methodology of 'liberation from below' and a new civilian, peaceful, anticapitalist approach to politics. However, most observers saw scant momentum resulting from the campaign.

More recently, the Zapatista leadership held three large international gatherings (*Encuentros*) during 2007. Pockets of the Chiapas countryside remain tense, and occasional incidents bubble up over control of land.

It's interesting to note that the Zapatistas have loudly denounced the concept of ecotourism. They see the expansion of government tourism infrastructure as a nonmilitary means to make inroads into autonomous EZLN communities.

Check in on the Zapatistas at www.ezln.org.mx. Further background is available in *The Zapatista Reader*, an anthology of writers from Octavio Paz and Gabriel García Márquez to Marcos himself, and at **Global Exchange** (www.globalexchange.org), **SIPaz** (www.sipaz.org) and **IMC** (chiapas.mediosindependientes.org). Some of Marcos' more recent writings are collected in *The Speed of Dreams*.

Zinacantán municipality (population 45,000). Zinacantán people, like Chamulans, are Tzotzil. The men wear distinctive pink tunics embroidered with flower motifs and may sport flat, round, ribboned palm hats.

Women wear pink or purple shawls over richly embroidered blouses.

A small **market** is held on Sundays until noon, and during fiesta times. The most important celebrations are for La Virgen de La

Candelaria (August 7–11) and San Sebastián (January 19–22).

The people of Zinacantán are great flower growers. They have a particular love for the geranium, which – along with pine branches – is offered in rituals for a wide range of benefits.

The huge central **Iglesia de San Lorenzo** (admission M\$20) was rebuilt following a fire in 1975. Photography is banned in the church and churchyard. The small thatched-roofed **Museo Jsoz' Levetik** (admission by donation; ☎ 9am–5pm), three blocks below the central basketball court, covers local culture and has some fine textiles and musical instruments.

Grutas de San Cristóbal

The entrance to this long **cavern** (admission M\$20; ☎ 9am–4:30pm) is among pine woods 9km southeast of San Cristóbal, a five-minute walk south of the Pan-American Hwy. The first 350m or so of the cave has a concrete walkway and is lit. The army took control of the land around the caves in 2003, though visitors are still welcome.

To get there take a Teopisca-bound *colectivo* taxi from the Pan-American Hwy, about 150m southeast of the OCC bus station in San Cristóbal, and ask for 'Las Grutas' (M\$15).

Amatenango del Valle

pop 4500 / elevation 1869m

The women of this Tzeltal village by the Pan-American Hwy, 37km southeast of San Cristóbal, are renowned potters. Pottery here is still fired by a pre-Hispanic method, building a wood fire around the pieces rather than putting them in a kiln. Amatenango children find a ready tourist market with *animalitos* – little pottery animal figures that are inexpensive but fragile. If you visit the village, expect to be surrounded within minutes by young *animalito* sellers.

From San Cristóbal, take a Comitán-bound bus or combi.

OCOSINGO

☎ 919 / pop 35,000 / elevation 900m

A respite from both the steamy lowland jungle and the chilly highlands, the bustling regional market town of Ocosingo sits in a gorgeous and broad temperate valley midway between San Cristóbal and Palenque. The impressive Maya ruins of Toniná are just a few kilometers away.

The market area along Av 2 Sur Ote, three to five blocks east (downhill) from the central plaza, is the busiest part of town. The **Tianguis Campesino** (Peasants' Market; cnr Av 2 Sur Ote & Calle 5 Sur Ote; ☎ 6am–5pm) is for the area's small-scale food producers to sell their goods direct; only women are allowed to trade here, and it's a colorful sight, with most of the traders in traditional dress.

The valleys known as Las Cañadas de Ocosingo, between Ocosingo and the Reserva de la Biosfera Montes Azules to the east, form one of the strongest bastions of support for the Zapatistas, and Ocosingo saw the bloodiest fighting during the 1994 uprising, with about 50 rebels killed here by the Mexican army. The town has been calm since, and the Zapatistas have consolidated their support in the region, despite the presence of a large Mexican army garrison near the Toniná ruins.

Orientation & Information

Ocosingo spreads east (downhill) from Hwy 199. Avenida Central runs down from the main road to the broad central plaza, overlooked from its east end by the Templo de San Jacinto. Hotels, restaurants and services are along Calle Central Nte, running off the north side of the plaza, and elsewhere close by.

A **tourism kiosk** (☎ 9am–3pm & 6–8pm Mon–Fri) in the plaza has maps and multilingual information on Chiapas, but no city maps. **Santander Serfin** (Central Nte 10; ☎ 9am–4pm Mon–Fri, Sat 10am–2pm) and **Banamex** (Av Central; ☎ 9am–4pm Mon–Fri) on the plaza both exchange currency and have ATMs. Cybercafés on the plaza and Calle Central Nte charge M\$8 per hour.

Sleeping

Hospedaje Esmeralda (☎ /fax 673-00-14; www.ranchoesmeralda.net; Central Nte 14; s/d/tr/q with shared bathroom M\$140/230/270/340; (P)) The travelers' haunt of Ocosingo, this small guesthouse has five adequate rooms, all with bright indigenous bedcovers and fans. A welcoming restaurant, bar and terrace area invites lounging and chatting, and the new Mexican owner truly enjoys helping people get to know the area. It also offers horseback-riding excursions (M\$200, about two hours) in the countryside outside Ocosingo, and an excellent book exchange. One room, with private bathroom, costs a bit extra.

Hotel La Casona (☎ /fax 673-01-40; cnr 1a Sur & Calle Central; r M\$200-350; (P) (♿)) A modern three-story hotel on the south side of the plaza, it mostly has unexciting rooms, all with TV and air-con. However, the top floor accommodations, with vaulted ceilings and balconies (some with plaza views) are quite nice.

Hotel Margarita (☎ 673-12-15; hotelmargarita@prodigy.net.mx; Central Nte 19; s/d/tr/q M\$220/260/280/350, air-con extra M\$50; (P) (♿)) Next to Hospedaje Esmeralda, the friendly Margarita has clean and comfortable rooms, all with TV, fan, two big double beds and large framed posters of Chiapas attractions.

Eating

Restaurant El Campanario (☎ 673-02-51; Av Central Ote 2; mains M\$35-70; (♿) 7am-10:30pm) Framed by colonial arcades, El Campanario faces the plaza and has bright tablecloths and a trilingual menu (Spanish, English, French). It serves a typical Chiapas menu of meat, egg and seafood.

Restaurant Esmeralda (☎ 673-00-14; Hospedaje Esmeralda, Central Nte 14; mains M\$50-70) Excellent home-style international and Mexican fare is served here, including healthy buffet breakfasts (M\$40) and dinner favorites like goulash, chicken curry and pork fajitas.

Las Delicias (☎ 673-00-24; Av Central 5; mains M\$50-85; (♿) 7am-11pm) On the plaza-facing veranda of the Hotel Central, this reliable restaurant has big portions and good breakfasts (M\$30 to M\$55).

Fábrica de Quesos Santa Rosa (☎ 673-00-09; 1a Ote Nte 11; (♿) 8am-2pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) Ocosingo is known for its *queso amarillo* (yellow cheese). There are six main types, including *de bola*, which comes in 1kg balls (M\$60) with an edible wax coating and a crumbly, whole-fat center.

Getting There & Away

See p840 for a safety note concerning the road to Palenque.

For Laguna Miramar, San Quintín-bound trucks and taxis leave from near the market (see p830). **Servicios Aéreos San Cristóbal** (☎ 673-03-70; 1a Sur Pte 87; www.serviciosaeoossancristobal.com) has small-plane flights to San Quintín for M\$5000 round-trip (up to four passengers).

Ocosingo's OCC bus terminal (1st-class and deluxe) is on Hwy 199, 600m west of the plaza; AEXA (1st-class) stops at the Restaurante Ave

Fenix across the road. Daily departures are listed in the table. Buses from the OCC terminal also go to Campeche, Cancún, Mérida and Villahermosa.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency (daily)
Palenque	M\$40-72	2¼hr	11 from OCC, 3 AEXA & vans leave every 30 min from Hwy 199, 800m north of OCC
San Cristóbal de Las Casas	M\$30-40	2¼hr	10 from OCC, 4 AEXA & vans and <i>colectivo</i> taxis leave every 20-30 min from a yard just up the road from OCC
Tuxtla Gutiérrez	M\$60-98	4hr	10 from OCC, 4 AEXA

TONINÁ

The towering ceremonial core of **Toniná** (☎ 919-108-22-39; admission M\$37; (♿) 8am-5pm), overlooking a pastoral valley 14km east of Ocosingo, comprises one of the Maya world's most imposing temple complexes. This was the city that brought mighty Palenque to its knees.

The year AD 688 saw the inauguration of the Snake Skull-Jaguar Claw dynasty, with ambitious new rulers bent on controlling the region. Palenque was their rival state, and when Toniná captured the Palenque ruler K'an Joy Chitam II in 711, it's likely that he had his head lopped off here.

Toniná became known as the Place of the Celestial Captives, because its chambers held the captured rulers of Palenque and other Maya cities, destined for decapitation or to be ransomed for large sums. A recurring image in Toniná sculpture is of captives before decapitation, thrown to the ground with their hands tied.

To enter the site, follow the road from the entrance and **site museum**, which details Toniná's history (in Spanish) and contains most of the best artifacts. The road turns to a footpath, crosses a stream and climbs to the broad, flat Gran Plaza. At the south end of the Gran Plaza is the **Templo de la Guerra Cósmica** (Temple of Cosmic War), with five altars in front of it. Off one side of the plaza is a **ball court**, inaugurated around AD 780 under the rule of the female regent Smoking Mirror. A decapitation altar stands cheerfully beside it.

To the north rises the ceremonial core of Toniná, a hillside terraced into a number of platforms, rising 80m above the Gran Plaza. At the right-hand end of the steps, rising from the first to the second platform, is the entry to a **ritual labyrinth** of passages.

Higher up on the right-hand side is the **Palacio de las Grecas y de la Guerra** (Palace of the Grecas and War). The *grecas* are a band of geometrical decoration forming a zigzag X-shape, possibly representing Quetzalcóatl. To its right is a rambling series of chambers, passages and stairways, believed to have been Toniná's administrative headquarters.

Higher again is Toniná's most remarkable sculpture, the **Mural de las Cuatro Eras** (Mural of the Four Eras). Created between AD 790 and 840, this stucco relief of four panels – the first, from the left end, has been lost – represents the four suns, or four eras of human history. The people of Toniná believed themselves to be living in the fourth sun – that of winter, mirrors, the direction north and the end of human life. At the center of each panel is the upside-down head of a decapitated prisoner. Blood spurting from the prisoner's neck forms a ring of feathers and, at the same time, a sun. In one panel, a dancing skeleton holds a decapitated head. To the left of the head is a lord of the underworld, resembling an enormous rodent.

Up the next set of steps is the seventh level, with remains of four temples. Behind the second temple from the left, more steps descend into the very narrow **Tumba de Treinta Metros** (Thirty-Meter Tomb), an impossibly slim passageway that's definitely not for the claustrophobic!

Above here is the acropolis, the abode of Toniná's rulers and site of its eight most important temples – four on each of two levels. The right-hand temple on the lower level, the **Templo del Monstruo de la Tierra** (Temple of the Earth Monster), has Toniná's best-preserved roof comb, built around AD 713.

On the topmost level, the tallest temple, the **Templo del Espejo Humeante** (Temple of the Smoking Mirror), was built by Zots-Choj, who took the throne in AD 842. In that era of the fourth sun and the direction north, Zots-Choj had to raise this, Toniná's northernmost temple, highest of all, which necessitated a large, artificial northeast extension of the hill.

Getting There & Away

Combs to Toniná (M\$10) leave from opposite the Tianguis Campesino in Ocosingo every 30 minutes from early morning onward. The last one returns around 5pm. A taxi costs M\$70.

LAGUNA MIRAMAR

400m

Ringed by rainforest, pristine Laguna Miramar, 140km southeast of Ocosingo in the **Reserva de la Biosfera Montes Azules** (Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve), is one of Mexico's most remote and exquisite lakes. Frequently echoing with the roars of howler monkeys, the 16-sq-km lake is bathtub-warm and virtually unpolluted. Rock ledges extending from small islands make blissful wading spots, and petroglyphs and a sea turtle cave are reachable by canoe.

The lake is accessible thanks to a successful ecotourism project in the Maya community of **Emiliano Zapata**, near its western shore. If you arrive independently, ask for the *Presidente de Turismo*. Through this representative you must arrange and pay for the services you need – a guide costs M\$100 per day, the overnight fee is M\$30, and rental of a *cayuco* (traditional canoe for two or three people) for exploring the lake is M\$150. Drugs are forbidden in the village; alcohol is permitted for visitors' personal consumption only.

The 7km walk from Emiliano Zapata to the lake, through *milpas* (cornfields) and forest that includes *caoba* (mahogany) and the *matapalo* (strangler fig) trees, takes about 1½ hours and can be very muddy – good closed shoes are highly recommended. At the lake, you may hear jaguars at night. Other wildlife includes spider monkeys, tapirs, macaws and toucans; butterflies are prolific. Locals fish for *mojarra* (perch), and will assure you that the lake's few crocodiles are not dangerous.

Sleeping & Eating

At the lakeshore, you can sling a hammock or **camp** (M\$30 per person) under a *palapa* shelter. But if you arrive after noon, you'll need to stay in Emiliano Zapata, as the guides want to make it home before dark. The village has a handful of simple but pretty **cabañas** (M\$100 per person) with river views, all with one queen and one twin bed, a fan and shared hot-water bathrooms. A new **comedor** (meals about M\$30) right next door was almost ready to debut when we visited. You can also rent a hammock and mosquito

net (M\$60) and string it up in a roofed area next to the *cabañas* for M\$30.

Getting There & Away

Miramar is not the easiest place to get to. Try to visit outside the late-August to late-October rainy season, when land access can be more difficult and muddy foot trails can resemble quicksand. Some agencies in San Cristóbal de Las Casas run three- or four-day trips to Miramar from San Cristóbal via the river route, with prices starting around M\$3500 per person (see p816).

AIR

Servicios Aéreos San Cristóbal has small-plane flights to San Quintín from Comitán (p851) or Ocosingo (p828).

LAND

Hold on tight. From Ocosingo, passenger-carrying trucks called *tres toneladas* (three-tonners) bump along 138km of rough road to reach San Quintín (M\$70, about six hours). Departures are at 9am, 10:30am, noon and 2pm from just southeast of Ocosingo's Tianguis Campesino. You can also hire a VW bug (*bocho*) taxi (M\$800 to M\$1000). The route runs through the area known as Las Cañadas de Ocosingo, a Zapatista stronghold. Your documents may be checked at Mexican army or Zapatista village checkpoints, so keep your passport and tourist card handy.

By land or plane you'll arrive in San Quintín, Emiliano Zapata's neighboring village (which is anti-Zapatista and has a large army garrison). A track opposite a military complex beside San Quintín's airstrip leads to the middle of *ejido* Emiliano Zapata, about a 15- to 20-minute walk. Trucks head back from San Quintín to Ocosingo at 2am, 5am, 8am and noon.

RIVER

From Amatitlán (see p851 for *combi* information), a rough 14km from the Carretera Fronteriza Hwy, you can hire a *lancha* (M\$800 one-way, maximum eight passengers, two hours) to Emiliano Zapata via the Río Santo Domingo until about 2pm.

AGUA AZUL & MISOL-HA

These spectacular water attractions – the thundering cascades of Agua Azul and the 35m jungle waterfall of Misol-Ha – are both

short detours off the Ocosingo–Palenque road. During the rainy season, they lose part of their beauty as the water gets murky, though the power of the waterfalls is magnified.

Both are most easily visited on an organized day tour from Palenque, though it's possible, but probably not cheaper, to go independently too.

In the past, this area was the scene of repeated robberies and attempted robberies of tourists, though locals say it is safer now. To minimize the risks, don't walk the access roads, and stick to the main paved trail at Agua Azul. Thefts are still common, so don't bring valuables and keep an eye on your belongings.

Agua Azul

Agua Azul is a breathtaking sight, with its powerful and dazzling white waterfalls thundering into turquoise (most of the year) pools surrounded by verdant jungle. On holidays and weekends the place is thronged; at other times you'll have few companions. The temptation to swim is great, but take extreme care, as people do drown here. The current is deceptively fast, the power of the falls obvious, and there are many submerged hazards like rocks and dead trees.

The turnover for these waterfalls is halfway between Ocosingo and Palenque, some 60km from each. A paved road leads 4.5km down to Agua Azul from Hwy 199, passing through the territory of one *ejido* into a second, whose territory includes the falls. You will probably have to pay M\$10 to M\$15 per person to enter each *ejido*. A well-made stone and concrete path with steps runs 700m up beside the falls from the parking area, lined by *comedores* (mains M\$30-60) and souvenir stalls.

At the time of research, there were reports of paramilitary violence committed against villagers in the adjacent Zapatista community of Bolom Ajaw, allegedly by *ejido* members, and calls for a boycott of the falls.

Misol-Ha

Just 20km south of Palenque, spectacular Misol-Ha cascades 35m into a wonderful wide pool surrounded by lush tropical vegetation. It's a sublime place for a dip when the fall is not excessively pumped up by wet-season rains. A path behind the main fall leads into a cave, which gives a great close-up experience of the power of the fall. **Misol-Ha** (admission

M\$10) is 1.5km off Hwy 199 and the turnoff is signposted.

Centro Turístico Ejidal Cascada de Misol-Ha (☎ in Mexico City 55-5329-0995, ext 7006; www.misol-ha.com; d/tr/q M\$300/400/520; 📍) has great wooden cabins among the trees near the fall, with bathrooms and mosquito netting, plus a good open-air **restaurant** (mains M\$50-75; 🕒 7am-6pm).

Getting There & Away

Almost all Palenque travel agencies (see p837) offer daily trips to Misol-Ha and Agua Azul. Trips cost M\$120 to M\$135 including admission fees, and last six or seven hours, spending 30 to 60 minutes at Misol-Ha and two to three hours at Agua Azul.

To visit the sites independently from Palenque, hire a taxi (around M\$500 to Misol-Ha with a one-hour wait, or M\$800 to Agua Azul with a two-hour wait); or, for Agua Azul, take a van from 4a or 5a Pte Sur, as far as the Agua Azul *crucero* (turnoff) for M\$20. *Camionetas* (pickup trucks) at the turnoff charge M\$15 for the run down to Agua Azul.

PALENQUE

☎ 916 / pop 37,000 / elevation 80m

Deservedly one of the top destinations of Chiapas, the soaring jungle-swathed temples of Palenque are a national treasure and one of the best examples of Maya architecture in Mexico. Modern Palenque town, a few kilometers to the east, is a sweaty, humdrum place without much appeal except as a jumping-off point for the ruins. Many prefer to base themselves at one of the forest hideouts along the road between the town and the ruins, including the funky travelers' hangout of El Panchán.

History

The name Palenque (Palisade) is Spanish and has no relation to the city's ancient name, which may have been Lakamha (Big Water). Palenque was first occupied around 100 BC, and flourished from around AD 630 to around 740. The city rose to prominence under the ruler Pakal, who reigned from AD 615 to 683. Archaeologists have determined that Pakal is represented by hieroglyphics of sun and shield, and he is also referred to as Sun Shield (Escudo Solar). He lived to the then-incredible age of 80.

During Pakal's reign, many plazas and buildings, including the superlative Templo de

las Inscripciones (Pakal's own mausoleum), were constructed in Palenque. The structures were characterized by mansard roofs and very fine stucco bas-reliefs.

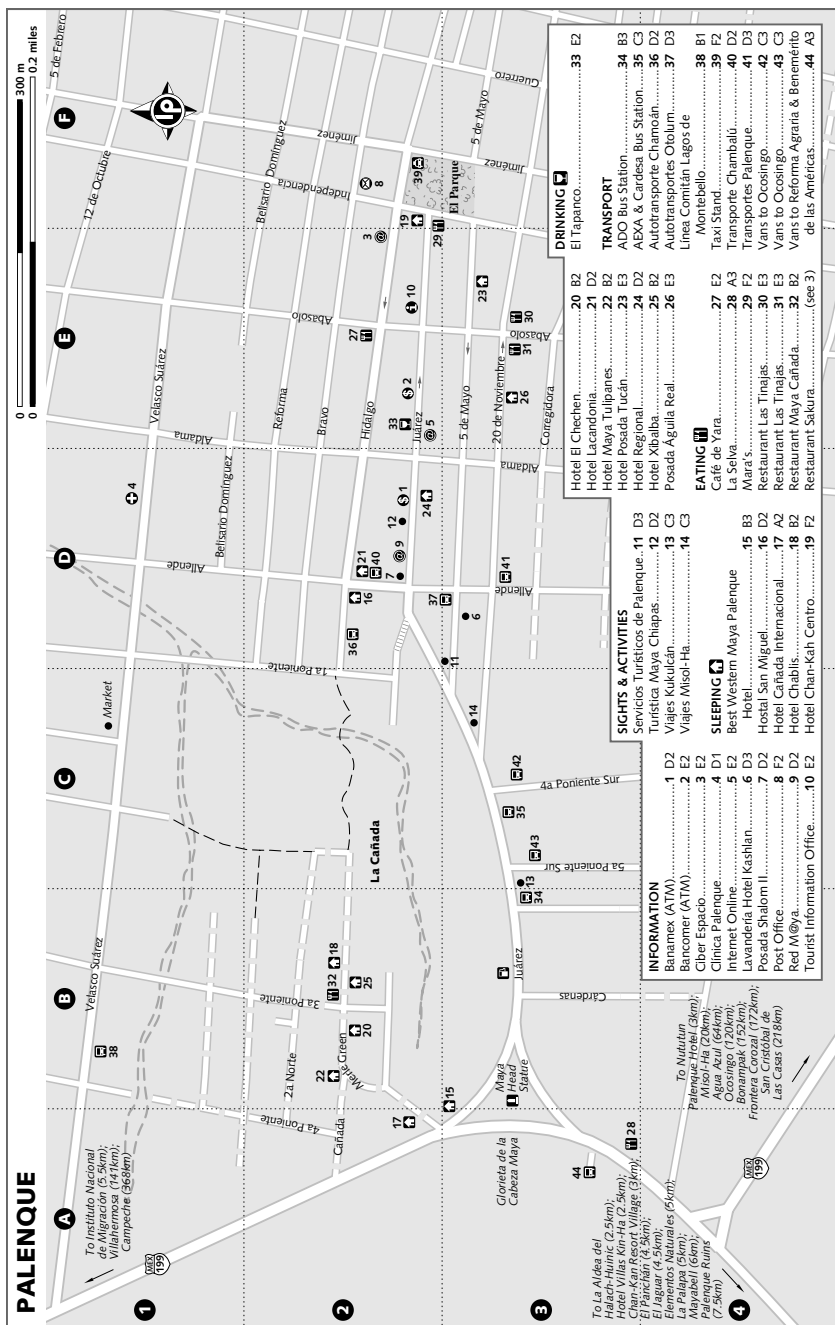
Pakal's son Kan B'alam II (684–702), who is represented in hieroglyphics by the jaguar and the serpent (and also called Jaguar Serpent II), continued Palenque's expansion and artistic development. He presided over the construction of the Grupo de las Cruces temples, placing sizable narrative stone steles within each.

During Kan B'alam II's reign, Palenque extended its zone of control to the Usumacinta river, but was challenged by the rival Maya city of Toniná, 65km south. Kan B'alam's brother and successor, K'an Joy Chitam II (Precious Peccary), was captured by forces from Toniná in 711, and probably executed there. Palenque enjoyed a resurgence between 722 and 736, however, under Ahkal Mo' Nahb' III (Turtle Macaw Lake), who added many substantial buildings.

After AD 900, Palenque was largely abandoned. In an area that receives the heaviest rainfall in Mexico, the ruins were soon overgrown, and the city remained unknown to the Western world until 1746, when Maya hunters revealed the existence of a jungle palace to a Spanish priest named Antonio de Solís. Later explorers claimed Palenque was capital of an Atlantis-like civilization. The eccentric Count de Waldeck, who in his 60s lived atop one of the pyramids for two years (1831–33), even published a book with fanciful neoclassical drawings that made the city resemble a great Mediterranean civilization.

It was not until 1837, when John L Stephens, an amateur archaeology enthusiast from New York, reached Palenque with artist Frederick Catherwood, that the site was insightfully investigated. And another century passed before Alberto Ruz Lhuillier, the tireless Mexican archaeologist, uncovered Pakal's hidden crypt in 1952. Today it continues to yield fascinating and beautiful secrets – most recently, a succession of sculptures and frescoes in the Acrópolis del Sur area, which have vastly expanded our knowledge of Palenque's history.

Frans Blom, the mid-20th-century investigator, remarked: 'The first visit to Palenque is immensely impressive. When one has lived there for some time this ruined city becomes an obsession.' It's not hard to understand why.



PALENQUE

1 To Instituto Nacional de Migración (5.5km); Villahermosa (141km); Campeche (665km)

2 To Nublado (28km); Misol-Ha (20km); Agua Azul (64km); Ocosingo (120km); Palenque (1172km); San Cristóbal de las Casas (218km)

3 To La Aldea del Halcón-Huic (2.5km); Hotel Villas Kon-Ha (2.5km); El Práctico (4.5km); El Jaguar (4.5km); Elementos Naturales (6km); Palenque Ruins (7.5km)

4 To La Aldea del Halcón-Huic (2.5km); Hotel Villas Kon-Ha (2.5km); El Práctico (4.5km); El Jaguar (4.5km); Elementos Naturales (6km); Palenque Ruins (7.5km)

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19 To Nublado (28km); Misol-Ha (20km); Agua Azul (64km); Ocosingo (120km); Palenque (1172km); San Cristóbal de las Casas (218km)

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Orientation

Hwy 199 meets Palenque's main street, Av Juárez, at the Glorieta de la Cabeza Maya, an intersection with a large statue of a Maya chieftain's head, at the west end of the town. From here Juárez heads 1km east to the central square, El Parque. The main bus stations are on Juárez just east of the Maya head statue.

A few hundred meters south from the Maya head, the paved road to the Palenque ruins, 7.5km away, diverges west off Hwy 199. This road passes the site museum after about 6.5km, then winds on about 1km further to the main entrance to the ruins.

Accommodations are scattered around the central part of town and along the road to the ruins. The commercial heart of town, where you'll hardly ever see another tourist, is north of the center along Velasco Suárez.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

There are over a dozen cybercafés; in-town rates range from M\$5 to M\$15 per hour.

Ciber Espacio (Hidalgo s/n; ☎ 7am-10pm)

El Panchán (Carretera Palenque-Ruínas Km 4.5; per hr M\$15; ☎ 10am-10pm)

Internet Online (Juárez s/n; ☎ 7am-10:30pm)

Red M@ya (Juárez 133; ☎ 9am-10pm)

LAUNDRY

Several town-center hotels offer public (often same-day) laundry service.

Posada Shalom II (☎ 345-09-44; Juárez 156; per kg M\$15)

Lavandería Hotel Kashlan (5 de Mayo 105; 1-3kg M\$50)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Clínica Palenque (☎ 345-02-73; Velasco Suárez 33; ☎ 7am-11pm) Dr Alfonso Martínez speaks English.

MONEY

Outside of banking hours, travel agents will change money. The following banks have ATMs.

Banamex (Juárez 62; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Bancomer (Juárez 96; ☎ 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat)

POST

Post office (Independencia s/n; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information office (cnr Juárez & Abasolo;

☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) Has reliable town and transportation information as well as maps.

Sights

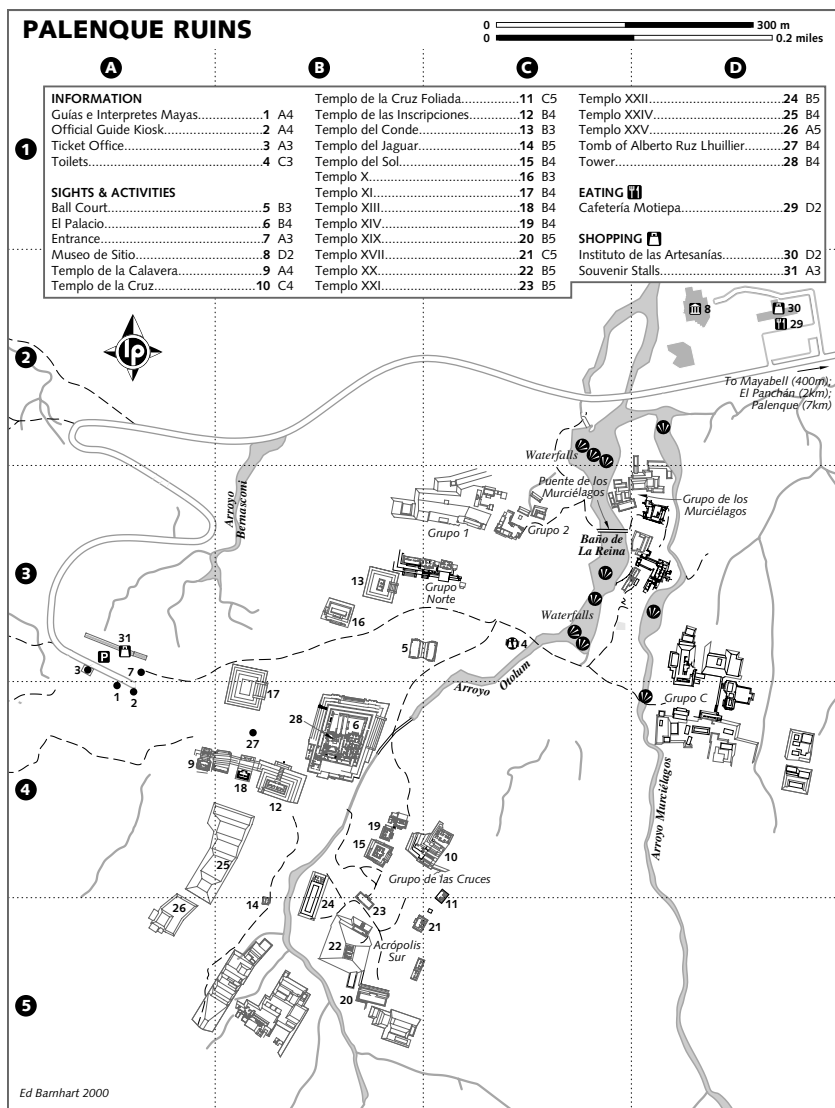
PALENQUE RUINS

Ancient **Palenque** (admission M\$45; ☎ 8am-5pm, last entry 4:30pm) stands at the precise point where the first hills rise out of the Gulf Coast plain, and the dense jungle covering these hills forms an evocative backdrop to Palenque's exquisite Maya architecture. Hundreds of ruined buildings are spread over 15 sq km, but only a fairly compact central area has been excavated. Everything you see here was built without metal tools, pack animals or the wheel.

As you explore the ruins, try to picture the gray stone edifices as they would have been at the peak of Palenque's power: painted blood-red with elaborate blue and yellow stucco details. The forest around these temples is still home to howler monkeys (whom you might hear or see), toucans and ocelots. The ruins and surrounding forests form a national park, the Parque Nacional Palenque, for which you must pay a separate M\$20 admission fee at Km 4.5 on the road to the ruins.

Palenque sees over 1000 visitors on an average day, and visitation spikes in the summer holiday season. Opening time is a good time to visit, when it's cooler and not too crowded, and morning mist may still be wrapping the temples in a picturesque haze. Refreshments, hats and souvenirs are available outside the main entrance, and there are cafés there and at the museum. Vendors carpet many of the paths through the ruins.

Official site **guides** (2hr tour for up to 7 people in English/Spanish/French/Italian M\$650/450/700/700) are available by the entrance. A Maya guide association, **Guías e Interpretes Mayas** (☎ 341-76-88), also has a desk here and offers informative two-hour tours in Spanish, English or Italian at the same prices. Fascinating and entertaining in-depth tours of around five hours (usually for groups of five to 10) are given by **Maya Exploration Center** (www.mayaexploration.org), a group of archaeologists who work on Maya sciences such as astronomy and math, and map unexplored ruins. Email them from the website or ask for Alonso Méndez at El Panchán (p836). Their website is packed with interest for Palenque fans – as is another Palenque archaeologists' site, the **Group of the Cross Project** (www.mesoweb.com/palenque).



Most visitors take a combi or taxi to the ruins' main (upper) entrance, see the major structures and then walk downhill to the museum, visiting minor ruins along the way. Note that it's not permitted to exit the site this way before 9am or after 4pm.

Transportes Chambalú (☎ 345-28-49; Allende s/n) and **Transportes Palenque** (☎ 345-24-30;

cnr Allende & 20 de Noviembre) run combis to the ruins about every 15 minutes from 6am to 7pm daily (M\$10 each way). They will pick you up or drop you anywhere along the town-to-ruins road.

Be aware that the mushrooms sold by locals along the road to the ruins from about May to November are the hallucinogenic variety.

Templo de las Inscripciones Group

As you walk in from the entrance, passing to the south of the overgrown Templo XI, the vegetation suddenly peels away to reveal most of Palenque's most magnificent buildings in one sublime vista. A line of temples rises in front of the jungle on your right, culminating in the Templo de las Inscripciones about 100m ahead; El Palacio, with its trademark tower, stands to the left of the Templo de las Inscripciones; and the Grupo de las Cruces rises in the distance beneath a thick jungle backdrop.

The first temple on your right is Templo XII, called the **Templo de La Calavera** (Temple of the Skull) for the relief sculpture of a rabbit or deer skull at the foot of one of its pillars. The second temple has little interest. Third is **Templo XIII**, containing a tomb of a female dignitary, whose remains were found colored red (as a result of treatment with cinnabar) when unearthed in 1994. You can enter this Tumba de la Reina Roja (Tomb of the Red Queen) to see her sarcophagus. With the skeleton were found a malachite mask and about 1000 pieces of jade. Some speculate, from resemblances to Pakal's tomb next door, that the 'queen' buried here was his wife.

The **Templo de las Inscripciones** (Temple of the Inscriptions), perhaps the most celebrated burial monument in the Americas, is the tallest and most stately of Palenque's buildings. Constructed on eight levels, the Templo de las Inscripciones has a central front staircase rising 25m to a series of small rooms. The tall roof comb that once crowned it is long gone, but between the front doorways are stucco panels with reliefs of noble figures. On the interior rear wall are three panels with the long Maya inscription, recounting the history of Palenque and this building, for which Mexican archaeologist Alberto Ruz Lhuillier named the temple. From the top, interior stairs lead down into the tomb of Pakal (now closed to visitors indefinitely, to avoid further damage to its murals from the humidity inevitably exuded by visitors). Pakal's jewel-bedecked skeleton and jade mosaic death mask were removed from the tomb to Mexico City, and the tomb was re-created in the Museo Nacional de Antropología (p153). The priceless death mask was stolen in 1985, but the carved stone sarcophagus lid remains here – you can see a replica in the site museum (see p836).

The tomb of Ruz Lhuillier, who discovered Pakal's tomb in 1952, lies under the trees in front of Templo XIII.

El Palacio

Diagonally opposite the Templo de las Inscripciones is the **Palace**, a large structure divided into four main courtyards, with a maze of corridors and rooms. Built and modified piecemeal over 400 years from the 5th century on, it probably really was the residence of Palenque's rulers. Its tower, built in the 8th century by Ahkal Mo' Nahb' III and restored in 1955, has remnants of fine stucco reliefs on the walls, but you're not allowed to climb up inside it. Archaeologists believe the tower was constructed so that Maya royalty and priests could observe the sun falling directly into the Templo de las Inscripciones during the winter solstice.

The northeastern courtyard, the **Patio de los Cautivos** (Patio of the Captives), contains a collection of relief sculptures that seem disproportionately large for their setting; the theory is that they represent conquered rulers and were brought from elsewhere.

In the southern part of the complex, the extensive subterranean bathrooms included six toilets and a couple of sweat baths.

Grupo de las Cruces

Pakal's son, Kan B'alam II, was a prolific builder, and soon after the death of his father started designing the temples of the Grupo de las Cruces (Group of the Crosses). All three main pyramid-shaped structures surround a plaza southeast of the Templo de las Inscripciones. They were all dedicated in AD 692 as a spiritual focal point for Palenque's triad of patron deities. The 'cross' carvings in some buildings here symbolize the ceiba tree, which in Maya belief held up the universe.

The **Templo del Sol** (Temple of the Sun), on the west side of the plaza, has the best-preserved roof comb at Palenque. Carvings inside, commemorating Kan B'alam's birth in AD 635 and accession in 684, show him facing his father. Some view this beautiful building as sure proof that Palenque's ancient architects were inspired by the local hallucinogenic mushrooms. Make up your own mind!

Steep steps climb to the **Templo de la Cruz** (Temple of the Cross), the largest and most elegantly proportioned in this group. The stone tablet in the central sanctuary shows the lord

of the underworld smoking tobacco on the right, and Kan B'alam in full royal attire on the left. Behind is a reproduction of a panel depicting Kan B'alam's accession.

On the **Templo de la Cruz Foliada** (Temple of the Foliated Cross), the corbel arches are fully exposed, revealing how Palenque's architects designed these buildings. A well-preserved inscribed tablet shows a king (probably Pakal) with a sun shield emblazoned on his chest, corn growing from his shoulder blades, and the sacred quetzal bird on his head.

Acrópolis Sur

In the jungle south of the Grupo de las Cruces is the **Southern Acropolis**, where archaeologists have recovered some terrific finds in recent excavations. You may find part of the area roped off. The Acrópolis Sur appears to have been constructed as an extension of the Grupo de las Cruces, with both groups set around what was probably a single long open space.

Templo XVII, between the Cruces group and the Acrópolis Sur, contains a reproduction carved panel depicting Kan B'alam, standing with a spear, with a bound captive kneeling before him (the original is in the site museum).

In 1999, in **Templo XIX**, archaeologists made the most important Palenque find for decades: an 8th-century limestone platform with stunning carvings of seated figures and lengthy hieroglyphic texts that detail Palenque's origins. A reproduction has been placed inside Templo XIX – the central figure on the long south side of the platform is the ruler Ahkal Mo' Nahb' III, who was responsible for several of the buildings of the Acrópolis Sur, just as the Grupo de las Cruces was created by Kan B'alam II. Also on view is a wonderful reproduction of a tall stucco relief of Ahkal Mo' Nahb's son, U Pakal.

In **Templo XX**, built in 540, a frescoed tomb of an unknown personage was found in 1999. Ahkal Mo' Nahb' undertook a complete remodeling of this pyramid in the 8th century, but his work was never completed.

In **Templo XXI** in 2002, archaeologists discovered a throne with very fine carvings depicting Ahkal Mo' Nahb', his ancestor the great Pakal, and his son U Pakal.

Grupo Norte

North of El Palacio is a **ball court** (*juego de pelota*) and the handsome buildings of the Northern Group. Crazy Count de Waldeck

(see p831) lived in the so-called **Templo del Conde** (Temple of the Count), constructed in AD 647.

Northeastern Groups

East of the Grupo Norte, the main path crosses Arroyo Otolum. Some 70m beyond the stream, a right fork will take you to **Grupo C**, a set of jungle-covered buildings and plazas, thought to have been lived in from about AD 750 to 800.

If you stay on the main path, you'll descend steep steps to a group of low, elongated buildings, probably occupied residentially around AD 770 to 850. The path goes alongside the Arroyo Otolum, which here tumbles down a series of small falls forming natural bathing pools known as the **Baño de la Reina** (Queen's Bath). Unfortunately, one can't bathe here anymore.

The then path continues to another residential quarter, the **Grupo de Los Murciélagos** (Bat Group), and then crosses the **Puente de los Murciélagos**, a footbridge across Arroyo Otolum.

Across the bridge and a bit further downstream, a path goes west to **Grupos 1 and 2**, a short walk uphill. These ruins, only partly uncovered, are in a beautiful jungle setting. The main path continues downriver to the road, where the museum is a short distance along to the right.

Museo de Sitio

Palenque's **museum** (Site Museum; ☎ 348-93-31; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 7; admission free; ☎ 9am-4:30pm Tue-Sun) is worth a wander, displaying finds from the site and interpreting, in English and Spanish, Palenque's history. Highlights include a blissfully air-conditioned room displaying a copy of the lid of Pakal's sarcophagus (depicting his rebirth as the maize god, encircled by serpents, mythical monsters and glyphs recounting his reign), and recent finds from Templo XXI. The Cafetería Motiepa (p839) and **Instituto de las Artesanías** (☎ 348-35-11; ☎ 9am-5pm), a well-stocked handicraft shop, are next door.

EL PANCHÁN

Just off the road to the ruins, **El Panchán** (www.elpanchan.com; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 4.5) is a legendary travelers' hangout, set in a patch of dense rainforest – the epicenter of Palenque's alternative scene and home to a bohemian bunch of Mexican and foreign residents and

wanderers, including a number of archaeologists and anthropologists. Once ranchland, the area has been reforested by the remarkable Morales family, some of whom are among the leading archaeological experts on Palenque. El Panchán has several (fairly rustic) places to stay (see p838), a couple of restaurants, a set of sinuous streams rippling their way through every part of the property, nightly entertainment, a meditation temple, a temascal (pre-Hispanic steam bath) and a constant stream of interesting visitors from all over the world. **Maya Exploration Center** (www.mayaexploration.org) provides lectures, slide shows and documentary films at weekends in the main tourism seasons.

Tours

Numerous travel agencies in Palenque offer transportation packages to Agua Azul and Misol-Ha (see p830), to Bonampak, Yaxchilán and Lacanjá, and to Flores, Guatemala (p841). They tend to work together, posting almost identical prices. Agencies include the following, most open from around 8am to 9pm daily:

Servicios Turísticos de Palenque (☎ 345-13-40; www.stpalenque.com; cnr Juárez & 5 de Mayo)

Transportes Chambalú (☎ 345-28-49; Allende s/n)

Turística Maya Chiapas (☎ 345-07-98; www.tmaya.chiapas.com.mx; Juárez 123)

Viajes Kukulcán (☎ 345-15-06; www.kukulcantravel.com; Juárez 8)

Viajes Misol-Ha (☎ 345-16-14; www.palenquem.com; viajesmisolha.com; Juárez 148)

Sleeping

The first choice to make is whether you want to stay in or out of Palenque town. Most out-of-town places, including El Panchán, are along the road to the ruins. Except for leafy La Cañada, Palenque town is not particularly attractive, but if you stay here you'll have plenty of restaurants and services nearby. Budget accommodations predominate both in and out of town, but many of the better budget places are midrange in quality.

Prices given here are for the high season, which is mid-July to mid-August, mid-December to early January, and Semana Santa. Rates drop up to 35% at other times.

IN TOWN

Budget

Hotel Regional (☎ /fax 345-01-83; www.regionalpalenque.com; Juárez 119; s/d/tr/q with fan M\$180/230/320/420, tr/

q with air-con M\$400/500; ☎) Something slightly different from the run of the Av Juárez mill: bright paintwork and extremely bright murals enliven two floors of rooms around a courtyard with a turtle pond. The bathrooms are tiny.

Posada Shalom II (☎ /fax 345-09-44; www.hotelesshalom.com; Juárez 156; s/d/tr with fan M\$250/300/350, s/d with air-con M\$350/400; ☎) Airy hallways fringed with potted plants lead to medium-sized rooms with ample bathrooms. Look before unpacking, as some don't have natural light.

Hotel Posada Tucán (☎ 345-18-59; merisui@hotmail.com; 5 de Mayo 3; r/tr/q with fan M\$250/300/550, r/tr/q with air-con M\$300/450/550; ☎) Textured walls in primary colors spice up fair-sized rooms with TV and nicely tiled bathrooms. The 14 breezy rooms, all upstairs, are attractive and clean.

Posada Águila Real (☎ 345-00-04; 20 de Noviembre s/n; s/d M\$350/400, tr M\$450-500; ☎) Seventeen spotless, well-kept, blue-and-yellow rooms are arranged on three floors around an open-air patio. All have good-quality beds, air-con and TV and courtyard windows. There's a small café-restaurant too.

Other basic options include:

Hostal San Miguel (☎ 345-01-52; Hidalgo 43; dm M\$100, r with fan/air-con M\$250/450; ☎) Balcony rooms, all with fans and modern bathrooms; dorms are lackluster but economical.

Hotel El Chechen (☎ 345-10-08; hotelchechen@hotmail.com; Merle Green s/n; s & d M\$400, tr/q M\$600/700; ☎) The only budget option in forested La Cañada, with free internet and all rooms with air-con.

Midrange

These hotels are in the leafy La Cañada area at the west end of town.

Hotel Lacandonia (☎ 345-00-57; hotel-lacandonia@hotmail.com; Allende s/n; r M\$400, tr/q M\$550/650; ☎) A modern hotel with a subtle splash of style. Tasteful, light, airy accommodations all have wrought-iron beds, reading lights and cable TV.

Hotel Chan-Kah Centro (☎ 345-0318; www.chan-kah.com.mx; Juárez 2; s/d/t/q M\$468/530/586/650; ☎) In the center and also good, and right on the park, this place has 17 air-conditioned rooms sporting a tropical theme.

Hotel Xibalba (☎ 345-04-11; www.hotelxibalba.com; Merle Green 9; r M\$550, tr/q M\$600/700; ☎) Preened to perfection by a loving owner, the Xibalba enjoys a tranquil location in two buildings (one in an imitation of the ancient Maya corbel roof style, the other with a full-

size replica of the lid from Pakal's sarcophagus). All rooms have air-con, cable TV and spotless bathrooms, and the bigger ones boast two double beds and bathtubs. The hotel has its own restaurant and travel agency.

Hotel Cañada Internacional (☎ 345-20-94; www.canadainternacional.com.mx; Juárez s/n; r/tr/q M\$700/750/800; (P) (🚰) (🚰)) Bright traditional textiles spill up four stories of large, comfortable rooms, all with air-con and two double beds. Vines creep up a small garden courtyard, and there's a small pool. Rooms in the older section are smaller.

Hotel Chablis (☎ 345-08-70; www.hotelchablis.com; Merle Green 7; r M\$720, tr/q M\$800/880; (P) (🚰) (🚰)) Opposite the Xibalba, this small hotel offers well-presented, spacious rooms, all with one king or two queen-sized beds, air-con and balcony.

Top End

Best Western Maya Palenque Hotel (☎ 345-07-80, 800-904-75-00; www.bestwestern.com; cr Juárez & Merle Green; r/ste M\$1080/1200; (P) (🚰) (🚰) (🚰)) A comfortable international hotel with good-sized air-conditioned rooms, all with two double beds, cable TV, phone and balcony and plenty of natural light. The big garden pool is a plus.

Hotel Maya Tulipanes (☎ 345-02-01; www.maya.tulipanes.com.mx; Cañada 6; r/tr M\$1100/1200; (P) (🚰) (🚰)) Popular with tour groups, this plush La Cañada hotel has large, comfortable, air-conditioned rooms with two wrought-iron double beds and a tropical décor. It's designed around a pretty garden with a small pool and restaurant.

OUTSIDE TOWN

Where Palenque town exudes traffic and commerce, the surrounding area, especially between town and the ruins, holds some magical spots, where howler monkeys romp in the tree canopy and unseen animals chirp after dark. The compound of El Panchán is a travelers' favorite, with low-key budget *cabañas* nestled in stream-crossed jungle. Frequent combis between town and the ruins (see p833) will drop you off and pick you up anywhere along this road.

Budget

Mayabell (☎ 341-69-77; www.mayabell.com.mx; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 6; hammock shelter or campsites per person M\$40, hammock to rent M\$15, small vehicle without hookups M\$20, vehicle site with hookups M\$150, cabaña with shared

bathroom M\$250, r with fan M\$450, r with air-con M\$680; (P) (🚰) (🚰)) Once you see the sprawling jungle-side pool – frequented by monkeys – you'll long to move in. This spacious grassy campground is just 400m from the site museum and has tons of clean and comfortable sleeping options, plus an enjoyable restaurant (opposite). Rooms with air-con are very homey and comfortable; those with fan are more basic. The temascal is M\$80 per person (up to eight people).

Elementos Naturales (enpalenque@yahoo.com.mx; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 5; hammock space/campsites per person M\$30, campsites per person incl breakfast M\$50, dm incl breakfast M\$120, d cabaña incl breakfast M\$300; (P)) It's about 600m on from El Panchán to this calm spot with *cabañas* and *palapa* shelters set around extensive grassy gardens. The *cabañas* (for up to five) and eight-bunk dorms with airy high palapa roofs, all have fans, individual mosquito nets, electric light and their private bathrooms. There's also a restaurant onsite.

Chato's Cabañas (☎ 341-82-09; www.elpanchan.com; El Panchán; cabaña with shared bathroom s/d M\$100/120, s/d/tr/q with private bathroom M\$150/160/180/220; (P)) Chato's 40 wood and concrete cabins, dotted around the Panchán jungle, vary a little in design, but all have screened windows and fans, and some have nice little porches. Some are a bit dilapidated, but still waterproof.

Jungle Palace (☎ 341-82-09; www.elpanchan.com; El Panchán; s/d/tr cabaña with shared bathroom M\$100/120/180) A more basic option in El Panchán, the Jungle Palace offers rudimentary though well-screened cabins with fans, some of which back onto a stream. The best are free-standing, while others share walls and have less privacy.

El Jaguar (☎ 341-82-09; www.elpanchan.com; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 4.5; cabaña with shared bathroom s/d M\$100/120, with private bathroom s/d M\$160/200; (P)) Just across the road from El Panchán, and under the same ownership as Chato's Cabañas, El Jaguar has more open grounds and the same creek running through it. Neat, yellow cabins of wood, plaster and thatch have private bathrooms; simpler ones with mosquito-net windows share clean bathrooms.

Margarita & Ed Cabañas (☎ 348-42-05; El Panchán; cabañas r M\$170, r with fan M\$250-300, r with air-con M\$350, tr & q with air-con M\$500; (P) (🚰) (🚰)) Teeming with local information, Margarita has welcomed travelers to her exceptionally homey place in the jungle for more than 10 years. Bright, clean and cheerful rooms have good mos-

quito netting and the more rustic screened *cabañas* are well kept, too, with reading lights and private bathrooms. There's free drinking water for all.

Midrange

La Aldea del Halach-Huinic (☎ 345-16-93; www.hotel-la-aldea.com.mx; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 2.8; cabaña with shared/private bathroom M\$250/350, air-con cabaña M\$800;) Some 3km from town, the Halach-Huinic has over 40 *palapa*-roofed *cabañas* in spacious gardens. The air-conditioned accommodations are large and bright, with their own bathrooms and terraces, and attractive decorations using stone, rock and tree branches. The cheaper *cabañas*, with clean shared bathrooms, are smaller but also fine, with mosquito-screens and nets, indigenous-style blankets and hammocks on a little porch. There's a small pool and a restaurant.

Hotel Villas Kin-Ha (☎ 345-05-33; www.villaskinha.com; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 2.7; r M\$660-800, ste M\$1320;) Though it has over 90 rooms and bungalows set around its pretty gardens, the Kin-Ha doesn't seem crowded. Most accommodations are palm-thatched and wood-beamed, and all have air-conditioning. The grounds hold two good pools, an open-sided *palapa* restaurant and a theater.

Nututun Palenque Hotel (☎ 345-01-00; www.nututun.com; Carretera Palenque-Ocosingo Km 3.5; campsites per person M\$65, r M\$800-900, deluxe room M\$1000-1200;) The Nututun, 3.5km south of town on the road toward San Cristóbal, has spacious, comfortable, air-conditioned rooms in large and exuberant tropical gardens. As well as a good pool in the gardens, and a restaurant, there's a wonderful bathing spot (free for guests, M\$2 for others) in the Río Chacamax, which flows through the hotel property.

Top End

Chan-Kah Resort Village (☎ 345-11-00; www.chan-kah.com.mx; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 3; r/ste US\$120/330;) Swimmers will go woozy contemplating the Chan-Kah's stupendous 70m stone-lined swimming pool in lush jungle gardens. A quality resort on the road to the ruins, 3km from town, it has handsome well-spaced wood-and-stone cottages with generous bathrooms, ceiling fans, terrace and air-con. There's a good open-air restaurant, bar and games room too. It's rarely busy, except when tour groups block-book the place.

Eating

Palenque is definitely not the gastronomic capital of Mexico, but there's a decent variety of restaurants and prices are fair.

Cafeteria Motiepa (Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 6; snacks M\$20-40; ☎ 8am-3pm) Next to the site museum near the Palenque ruins, this is a good stop for a snack or drink.

Restaurant Sakura (☎ 102-36-56; Hidalgo s/n; mains M\$40-85; ☎ 10am-11pm) We can't vouch for the authenticity of the sushi, but the fried rice and other Chinese comfort foods hit the spot. Enjoy the quiet upper terrace with a bird's-eye view of the park.

Restaurant Las Tinajas (☎ 345-49-70; cnr 20 de Noviembre & Abasolo; mains M\$50-100; ☎ 7am-11pm) It doesn't take long to figure out why this place is always busy. It slings enormous portions of excellent home-style food, and it's enough to keep you (and possibly another person) fueled up for hours. Of the two branches on either side of the same intersection, the newer and more westerly one is more festive and geared toward tourists, and consequently a tad more pricey than the no-frills original. But both have the same great food. *Pollo a la veracruzana* (chicken in a tomato/olives/onion sauce) and *camarones al guajillo* (shrimp with a not-too-hot type of chili) are both delicious, as is the house salsa.

La Selva (☎ 345-03-63; Hwy 199; mains M\$50-160; ☎ 11:30am-11:30pm) Palenque's most upscale restaurant serves up well-prepared steaks, seafood, salads and *antojitos* under an enormous *palapa* roof, with jungle-themed stained-glass panels brightening one wall. The secluded outdoor tables are *muy romántico*.

Mayabell (☎ 341-69-77; Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 6; mains M\$55-90) The open-sided restaurant at Mayabell serves a good range of *antojitos* and meat and fish dishes. There's live music on some evenings.

Mara's (☎ 345-25-78; Juárez 1; mains M\$55-95; ☎ 7am-11pm) On a corner across from the park, this brightly-painted traditional restaurant has a great location. It offers a good range of meat, fish and chicken dishes and patrons can catch an ever-so-welcome tropical breeze.

Don Mucho's (☎ 341-82-09; El Panchán; mains M\$55-110) The hotspot of El Panchán, popular Don Mucho's provides great-value meals in a jungly setting, with a candle-lit atmosphere at night. Busy waiters bring pasta, fish, meat, plenty of *antojitos*, and pizzas (cooked in a purpose-built Italian-designed wood-fired oven) that

are some of the finest this side of Naples. And there's live music – usually *andina*, *cumbia* or Cuban – around 8pm or 9pm, plus a rousing fire dancing show most nights.

Café de Yara (☎ 345-02-69; Hidalgo 66; snacks & breakfasts M\$40-60, mains M\$60-90; ☎ 7am-11pm) A sunny start to the day, this modern and beautiful corner café has great breakfasts and excellent organic Chiapan coffee. In the evening, the lights get intimate, with live salsa and merengue bands serenading diners from Thursday through Saturday.

Restaurant Maya Cañada (☎ 345-02-16; Merle Green s/n; mains M\$60-150) This relatively upmarket and professionally run restaurant in the shady La Cañada area serves fine steaks and terrific seafood kebabs. It's open to the air and has a cool upstairs terrace.

Drinking & Entertainment

Palenque doesn't have much of a nightlife scene. In the evenings, you'll often spot more travelers waiting for a night bus than out on the town. A few restaurants – mostly places along the ruins road – have live music.

El Tapanco (☎ 345-04-15; Juárez 65C) At this upstairs 'attic,' look for live rock and *trova* bands on Fridays and Saturdays. Afternoon drinks come with *botanas*, and cooler evenings are a swell time to munch on pizza (M\$100) washed down with a *Michelada*.

La Palapa (Carretera Palenque-Ruinas Km 5; ☎ until 4am) As freaky-fun as it gets in these parts, this al fresco 'jungle lounge' screens movies (M\$10) at 6pm nightly and its DJs spin reggae, salsa and electronica – sometimes punctuated by fire dancing – starting around 11pm. Dance until the wee hours and then dissolve and regroup in sofas under the *palapa* roof.

Getting There & Away

Highway holdups were once weekly occurrences on Hwy 199 between Ocosingo and Palenque, but an increased military and police presence has made this route pretty safe now. Still, most consider daytime travel to be best.

The **Instituto Nacional de Migración** (☎ 103-18-71; ☎ 24hr), 6km north of town on Hwy 199, can be reached by 'Playas' combis that run here from the Autotransportes Otolul terminal on Allende (M\$15).

Palenque's airport, 3km north of town along Hwy 199, has been closed to regular passenger flights for several years.

ADO (☎ 345-13-44; Juárez s/n) has the main bus terminal, with deluxe and 1st-class services; it's also used by OCC (1st-class) and TRF (2nd-class). **AEXA** (☎ 345-26-30; Juárez 159), with 1st-class buses, and Cardesa (2nd-class) are 1½ blocks east, with an onsite internet café. Vans to Ocosingo wait on 4 and 5 Pte Sur, near the bus stations, and leave when full. **Transportes Palenque** (☎ 345-24-30; cnr Allende & 20 de Noviembre) runs vans to Tenosique.

It's a good idea to buy your outward bus ticket a day in advance. Daily departures include the following:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency (daily)
Campeche	M\$226-230	4½-5½hr	4 from ADO
Cancún	M\$498-584	13-14hr	5 from ADO
Mérida	M\$316-346	8hr	4 from ADO
Mexico City	M\$706	13½hr	2 from ADO
Oaxaca	M\$514	14½hr	1 from ADO
Ocosingo	M\$40-78	2½hr	11 from ADO, 5 AEXA & vans leave about every 30 min
San Cristóbal de Las Casas	M\$75-142	5¼hr	10 from ADO, 5 AEXA
Tenosique	M\$50	2hr	Transportes Palenque vans hourly 5am-7pm
Tulum	M\$424	11hr	5 from ADO
Tuxtla Gutiérrez	M\$105-206	6hr	10 from ADO, 5 AEXA
Villahermosa	M\$50-98	2hr	12 from ADO, 11 AEXA

For information on transportation along the Carretera Fronteriza (for Lacanjá Chansayab, Bonampak, Yaxchilán, Guatemala and other destinations), see opposite.

Getting Around

Taxis wait at the northeast corner of El Parque and at the ADO bus station; they charge M\$40 to El Panchán or Mayabell, and M\$50 to the ruins.

BONAMPAK, YAXCHILÁN & THE CARRETERA FRONTERIZA

The ancient Maya cities of Bonampak and Yaxchilán, southeast of Palenque, are easily accessible thanks to the Carretera Fronteriza, a good paved road running parallel to the Mexico-Guatemala border, all the way from Palenque to the Lagos de Montebello, around the fringe of the Lacandón Jungle. Bonampak,

famous for its frescoes, is 148km by road from Palenque; the bigger and more important Yaxchilán, with a peerless jungle setting beside the broad and swift Río Usumacinta, is 173km by road, then about 22km by boat.

The Carretera Fronteriza is the main thoroughfare connecting a number of excellent ecotourism projects including some in the Lacandón village of Lacanjá Chansayab (p843) as well as the excellent Las Guacamayas ecolodge (p847) and the gorgeous watery wonderland at Las Nubes (p848). In addition, it's the main route from Chiapas to Guatemala's northern Petén region (home of several major Maya sites including mighty Tikal), via the town of Frontera Corozal. Phones in this region usually have satellite service or Guatemala-based numbers.

Dangers & Annoyances

Drug trafficking and illegal immigration are facts of life in this border region, and the Carretera Fronteriza more or less encircles the main area of Zapatista rebel activity and support, so expect numerous military checkpoints along the road, and from this area to Palenque and Comitán. You shouldn't have anything to fear from these checks, but don't tempt easy theft by leaving money or valuables unattended during stops. For your own security, it's best to be off the Carretera Fronteriza before dusk – especially the most isolated section in the far southeast, between Benemérito de las Américas and the Chajul turnoff.

This part of Mexico tends to ignore daylight saving time, so double-check all transportation schedules. And don't forget insect repellent.

Tours

There aren't a lot of private cars traveling this area, and though it's perfectly possible to visit

here independently and to travel through to Guatemala, there are also tour options. Many Palenque travel agencies (see p837) run day tours to Bonampak and Yaxchilán for around M\$500 per person, usually including entry fees, two meals and transportation in an air-conditioned van. There's also a two-day version for around M\$800, with an overnight stay at Lacanjá Chansayab (often referred to as the 'Ecological Reserve' in the publicity). Most of the same agencies offer transportation packages from Palenque to Flores, Guatemala – usually via an air-conditioned van to Frontera Corozal, river launch up the Usumacinta to Bethel in Guatemala, and public bus on to Flores – 10 or 11 hours altogether, for around M\$300. Two-day packages to Flores, visiting Bonampak and Yaxchilán en route, are around M\$800. Always check package inclusions and exclusions, so you can plan your meals and not find yourself digging around to pay for unanticipated park fees.

San Cristóbal-based SendaSur (see p817) and the **Mesoamerican Ecotourism Alliance** (www.travelwithmea.org) organize trips to the region, including the Lacandón villages of Nahá and Metzabok (see below)

Getting There & Away

From Palenque, vans run to Frontera Corozal (M\$60, 2½ to three hours, 13 times daily), and to Benemérito (M\$60, 3½ hours, every 40 minutes from 4am to 5:30pm).

Línea Comitán Lagos de Montebello (☎ 916-345-12-60; Velasco Suárez s/n), two blocks west of Palenque market, runs vans to Benemérito (M\$60) 10 times daily (4am to 2:45pm), with the first five services (4am, 5:30am, 7:15am, 8:45am and 10:15am) continuing round the Carretera Fronteriza to the Lagos de

THE BIRDS & THE BUZZ *Manuela Morales Hernández*

I work for two natural protected areas, Nahá and Metzabok, that are both inhabited by the Lacandón community. Nahá means 'house of water' and Metzabok means 'god of thunder.' My job in the reserve is mostly monitoring birds, and we also have a project monitoring mammals. The most common bird we see in the jungle is the toucan.

Right now there is a project growing organic, shade-grown coffee outside of the reserve. Ejido Avendaño has been growing coffee since they first settled the area in the 1970s. They used to practice conventional techniques, and they would clear the jungle and grow coffee without shade. Now they take advantage of the shade and their product is organic and not sprayed with pesticides.

Manuela Morales Hernández works as a biologist for Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas (National Commission of Protected Natural Areas)

Montebello (M\$160, seven hours to Tzucaco) and Comitán (M\$170, eight hours).

All these services stop at San Javier (M\$45, two hours), the turnoff for Lacanjá Chansayab and Bonampak, 140km from Palenque; and at Crucero Corozal (M\$50, 2½ hours), the intersection for Frontera Corozal.

There are no gas stations on the Carretera Fronteriza, but plenty of entrepreneurial locals sell reasonably-priced gasoline from large plastic containers. Look for homemade 'Se vende gasolina' signs.

Bonampak

Bonampak's setting in dense jungle hid it from the outside world until 1946. Stories of how it was revealed are full of mystery and innuendo, but it seems that Charles Frey, a young WWII conscientious objector from the US, and John Bourne, heir to the Singer sewing machine fortune, were the first outsiders to visit the site when Chan Bor, a Lacadón, took them there in February 1946. Later in 1946 an American photographer, Giles Healey, was also led to the site by Chan Bor and found the Templo de las Pinturas, with its famous murals.

The site of **Bonampak** (admission M\$37; ☞ 8am-4:45pm) spreads over 2.4 sq km, but all the main ruins stand around the rectangular Gran Plaza. Never a major city, Bonampak spent most of the Classic period under Yaxchilán's sphere of influence. The most impressive surviving monuments were built under Chan Muwan II, a nephew of the Yaxchilán's Itzamnaaj B'alam II, who acceded to Bonampak's throne in AD

776. The 6m-high **Stele 1** in the Gran Plaza depicts Chan Muwan holding a ceremonial staff at the height of his reign. He also features in **Stele 2** and **Stele 3** on the Acrópolis, which rises from the south end of the plaza.

However, it's the vivid frescoes inside the modest-looking **Templo de las Pinturas** (Edificio 1) that have given Bonampak its fame – and its name, which means 'Painted Walls' in Yucatecan Maya.

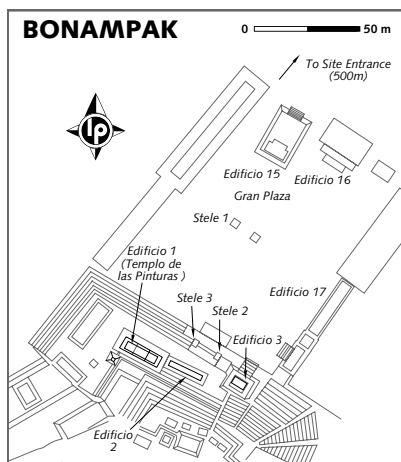
Diagrams outside the temple help interpret these murals, which are the finest known from pre-Hispanic America, but which have weathered badly since their discovery. (Early visitors even chucked kerosene over the walls in an attempt to bring out the colors!) Room 1, on the left as you face the temple, shows the consecration of Chan Muwan II's infant son, who is seen held in arms toward the top of the right end of the room's south wall (facing you as you enter). Witnessing the ceremony are 14 jade-toting noblemen. The central Room 2 shows tumultuous battle scenes on its east and south walls and vault, while on the north wall Chan Muwan II, in jaguar-skin battle dress, presides over the torture (by fingernail removal) and sacrifice of prisoners. A severed head lies below him, beside the foot of a sprawling captive. Room 3 shows a celebratory dance on the Acrópolis steps by lords wearing huge headdresses, and on its east wall three white-robed women puncture their tongues in a ritual bloodletting. The sacrifices, the bloodletting and the dance may all have been part of the ceremonies surrounding the new heir.

In reality, the infant prince probably never got to rule Bonampak; the place was abandoned before the murals were finished, as Classic Maya civilization evaporated.

The Bonampak site abuts the Reserva de la Biosfera Montes Azules, and is rich in wildlife. Drinks and snacks are sold at the entrance to the Monumento Natural Bonampak protected zone, 8km before the ruins, and by the archaeological site entrance.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bonampak is 12km from San Javier on the Carretera Fronteriza. The first 3km, to the Lacanjá Chansayab turnoff, is paved, and the rest is good gravel/dirt road through the forest. Taxis will take you from San Javier or the Lacanjá turnoff to the ruins and back for M\$70 per person, including waiting time. Private



vehicles cannot pass the Monumento Natural Bonampak entrance, 1km past the Lacanjá turnoff, but you can rent bicycles there for M\$60 for three hours, or take a combi to the ruins for M\$70 round-trip. Free lockers are available at the park entrance.

Lacanjá Chansayab

pop 260 / elevation 320m

Lacanjá Chansayab, the largest Lacandón Maya village, is 6km from San Javier on the Carretera Fronteriza, and 12km from Bonampak. Its family compounds are scattered around a wide area, many of them with creeks or even the Río Lacanjá flowing past their grassy grounds. Nights here are wonderfully quiet, the sky screaming with stars and the ground twinkling with fireflies. Low-key tourism is now an important income-earner and many families run '*campamentos*' with rooms, camping and hammock space. As you approach the village you'll cross the Río Lacanjá on a bridge, from which it's about 700m to a central intersection where tracks go left (south), right (north) and straight on (west).

The *campamentos* all offer guided walks through the surrounding forests to the 8m-high, 30m-wide **Cascada Ya Toch Kusam** waterfall, the little-explored ancient Maya **Lacanjá ruins**, and the 2.5km-long **Laguna Lacanjá**. The waterfall can actually be reached by a self-guiding trail, the 2.5km **Sendero Ya Toch Kusam** (admission M\$35), which starts 200m west from the central intersection. To continue from the fall to the ruins (a further 2km or so) you do need a guide. A typical three-hour guided walk to the fall and ruins costs M\$200 to M\$450 per group, plus the admission fee for the trail.

Staying at Lacanjá is an interesting experience, and the Lacandón people are amiable and welcoming, though don't expect to find much evidence of their old way of life: the villagers here are now predominantly Presbyterian and attuned to the modern world, and only some wear the traditional long white Lacandón tunic. Some have developed their traditional crafts into commercial *artesanías*, and you may want to budget some pesos for the pottery, wood carvings, seed necklaces, arrows and drums that they sell.

SLEEPING & EATING

The *campamentos* mentioned here are just a selection from almost a dozen nearby.

Campamento Río Lacanjá (www.ecochiapas.com/lacanja; bunk M\$120, d M\$290, Ya'ax Can r/tr/q M\$480/580/650; (P)) Two kilometers south of the central intersection, these rustic semi-open-air wood-frame cabins with mosquito nets stand close to the jungle-shrouded Río Lacanjá and open to the sounds and sights of the forest and river. A separate group of large rooms with fans, called *Cabañas Ya'ax Can*, have two solid wooden double beds, tile floors and hot-water bathroom. There's also a restaurant here serving all meals (M\$45 to M\$55). As well as guided walks, rafting trips on the Río Lacanjá – which has waterfalls up to 2.5m high but no rapids – are offered for a minimum of four people: a half-day outing including Lacanjá ruins and Cascada Ya Toch Kusam (both reached on foot from the river) costs M\$570 per person; an overnight rafting and camping trip also visiting Bonampak ruins is around M\$1000 per person. Rafting trips and tours staying at Campamento Río Lacanjá can be reserved through Explora (p817) in San Cristóbal.

Campamento Topche (campamento-topche@hotmail.com; M\$225 d & tr M\$325; (P) (Q)) Fronted by mature papaya trees, this comfortable *campamento* about 550m west of the central intersection has three rooms with terracotta tile floors, hot water bathrooms and a vaulted and mosquito-proofed *palapa* roof. There's even internet access, available by satellite, for M\$15 per hour. *Topche* is the Lacandón Maya name for a regional wildflower, though the signs to here also say 'Campamento Enrique Paniagua.'

Centro de Alimentos Chankin (mains M\$40-50; ☎ 8am-8pm) Bordering Enrique Paniagua's *campamento*, this good garden restaurant is run by his daughter. Fragrant walls of flowers attract swarms of hyperactive hummingbirds.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A taxi to Lacanjá Chansayab from San Javier costs M\$50, or M\$15 per person *colectivo*.

Frontera Corozal

pop 4000 / elevation 200m

This riverside frontier town (formerly called Frontera Echeverría) is the stepping-stone to the beautiful ruins of Yaxchilán, and is on the main route between Chiapas and Guatemala's Petén region. Inhabited mainly by Chol Maya, who settled here in the 1970s, Frontera Corozal is 16km by paved road from Crucero Corozal junction on

THE LACANDÓN JUNGLE

The Selva Lacandona (Lacandón Jungle), in eastern Chiapas, occupies just one-quarter of 1% of Mexico. Yet it contains more than 4300 plant species (about 17% of the Mexican total), 450 types of butterfly (42% of the national total), at least 340 birds (32% of the total) and 163 mammals (30% of the Mexican total). Among these are such emblematic creatures as the jaguar, red macaw, white turtle, tapir and harpy eagle.

This great fund of natural resources and genetic diversity is the southwest end of the Selva Maya, a 30,000-sq-km corridor of tropical rainforest stretching from Chiapas across northern Guatemala into Belize and the southern Yucatán. But the Lacandón Jungle is shrinking fast, under pressure from ranchers, loggers, oil prospectors, and farmers desperate for land. From around 15,000 sq km in the 1950s, an estimated 3000 to 4500 sq km of jungle remains today. Waves of land-hungry settlers deforested the northern third of the Lacandón Jungle by about 1960. Also badly deforested are the far eastern Marqués de Comillas area (settled since the 1970s) and Las Cañadas, around Ocosingo and Montes Azules. Most of what's left is in the Reserva de la Biosfera Montes Azules and the neighboring Reserva de la Biosfera Lacan-tun.

The Mexican government deeded a large section of the land to a small number of Lacandón families in the 1970s, creating tensions with other indigenous communities whose claims were put aside. Land within the region remains incredibly contested. Lacandones and their advocates frame the issue as an environmentally-sensitive indigenous group defending their property against invasive settlers. Other communities within the reserve, who provide some of the Zapatista rebels' strongest support, view it as an obfuscated land grab and pretext for eviction under the guise of environmental protection. Zapatista supporters also argue that the settlers are using the forests in sustainable ways, and claim that the government seeks to exploit the forests for bio-prospecting (patenting) traditional plants.

the Carretera Fronteriza. The broad Río Usumacinta, flowing swiftly between jungle-covered banks, forms the Mexico-Guatemala border here.

Long, fast, outboard-powered *lanchas* come and go from the river *embarcadero*. Almost everything you'll need is on the paved street leading back from the river here – including the **immigration office** (☎ 8am-6pm), 400m from the *embarcadero*, where you should hand in/obtain a tourist card if you're leaving for/arriving from Guatemala. If it's slow, the officer often closes up early, but anyone in town can tell you where to find him, if need be.

The neat and modern **Museo de la Cuenca del Usumacinta** (Museum of the Usumacinta Basin; admission free; ☎ 8am-7pm), opposite the immigration office, has good examples of Chol Maya dress, and some information in Spanish on the area's post-conquest history, but pride of place goes to two fine and intricately carved steles retrieved from the nearby site of Dos Caobas.

SLEEPING & EATING

Escudo Jaguar (☎ 502-5353-5637; http://mx.geocities.com/hotel_escudojaguar; campsites per person M\$70; cabaña

with shared bathroom d/tr M\$200/258, cabaña with 1/2/3 d beds M\$380/572/760; (P) Professionally run by a local Chol organization, Escudo Jaguar overlooks the river 300m from the *embarcadero*. Its solidly built, pink, thatched *cabañas* are all kept spotless, and come equipped with fan and mosquito net. The best are very spacious and have hot showers and terraces strung with hammocks. Room prices dip by up to 30% outside the high seasons. The restaurant (mains M\$70, breakfasts M\$40 to M\$55, open 7am to 8pm) serves straightforward, well-prepared Mexican dishes.

Tsol K'in Nueva Alianza (☎ 502-5353-1395; ctnuevaalianza@hotmail.com; www.ecotur.lacandona.com; r per person shared bathroom M\$100, f M\$600-700; (P) Friendly, Chol-run Nueva Alianza, among trees 150m along a side road from the museum, provides well-built family rooms with fan, bathroom and good wooden furniture. The budget rooms are small and plain, with wooden walls that don't reach the ceiling, but are well kept and have cheerful blue cement floors. There's a good onsite restaurant (mains M\$35 to M\$40, breakfasts M\$25 to M\$45).

Restaurante Imperio Maya (☎ 502-5727-9612; mains M\$60-70; ☎ 8am-7pm) Attached to the museum, this spacious *palapa*-topped restaurant

mostly caters to Yaxchilán-bound tourists, but the locals like it too.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

If you can't get a bus or combi direct to Frontera Corozal, get one to Crucero Corozal, 16km southeast of San Javier on the Carretera Fronteriza, where taxis (M\$20 per person *colectivo*, M\$70 otherwise) and occasional vans (M\$20) run to Frontera Corozal. If you're driving, the *ejido* hits up cars entering town for a M\$15 toll.

Autotransporte Chamoán vans run from Frontera Corozal *embarcadero* to Palenque (M\$60, 2½ to three hours) around 13 times daily, with the last departure at 6pm.

Lanchas leave for Bethel (40 minutes upstream) on the Guatemalan bank of the Usumacinta, and for La Técnica, directly opposite Frontera Corozal. **Lancha organizations** (boat to Bethel for 3/4/7/10 people M\$400/500/600/750) have desks in a thatched building near the *embarcadero*, and all charge the same prices. Information in Frontera Corozal is unreliable on onward buses within Guatemala from Bethel to Flores (Q\$60, four hours), but there are normally departures around 11am, 1:30pm, 3pm and 5pm. *Lanchas* to La Técnica go on a *colectivo* basis for M\$15 per person. A bus from La Técnica to Flores (US\$6, five to six hours) leaves around 8am, stopping for immigration in Bethel.

Yaxchilán

Jungle-shrouded **Yaxchilán** (admission M\$45; 🚗 8am-4:30pm, last entry 3:30pm) has a terrific setting above

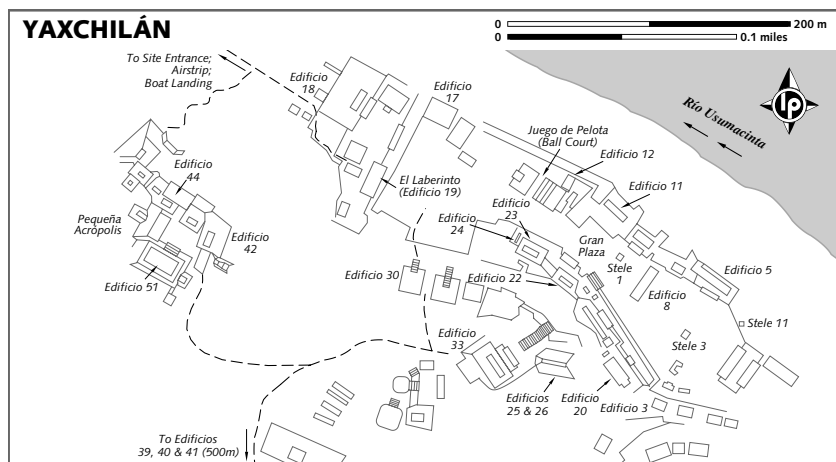
a horseshoe loop in the Usumacinta. The control this location gave it over river commerce, and a series of successful alliances and conquests, made Yaxchilán one of the most important Classic Maya cities in the Usumacinta region. Archaeologically, Yaxchilán is famed for its ornate facades and roof combs, and its impressive stone lintels carved with conquest and ceremonial scenes. A flashlight is helpful for exploring some parts of the site.

Howler monkeys inhabit the tall trees here, and are an evocative highlight. You'll almost certainly hear their visceral roars, and you stand a good chance of seeing some. Spider monkeys, and occasionally red macaws, can also be spotted here at times.

Yaxchilán peaked in power and splendor between AD 681 and 800 under the rulers Itzamnaaj B'alam II (Shield Jaguar II, 681–742), Pájaro Jaguar IV (Bird Jaguar IV, 752–68) and Itzamnaaj B'alam III (Shield Jaguar III, 769–800). The city was abandoned around AD 810. Inscriptions here tell more about its 'Jaguar' dynasty than is known of almost any other Maya ruling clan. The shield-and-jaguar symbol appears on many Yaxchilán buildings and steles; Pájaro Jaguar IV's hieroglyph is a small jungle cat with feathers on its back and a bird superimposed on its head.

At the site, *refrescos* (refreshments) are sold at a shack near the river landing. Most of the main monuments have information boards in three languages, including English.

As you walk toward the ruins, a signed path to the right leads up to the **Pequeña Acrópolis**,



a group of ruins on a small hilltop – you can visit this later. Staying on the main path, you soon reach the mazy passages of **El Laberinto** (Edificio 19), built between AD 742 and 752, during the interregnum between Itzamnaaj B'alam II and Pájaro Jaguar IV. Dozens of bats shelter under the structure's roof today. From this complicated two-level building you emerge at the northwest end of the extensive **Gran Plaza**.

Though it's difficult to imagine anyone here ever wanting to be any hotter than they already were, **Edificio 17** was apparently a sweat house. About halfway along the plaza, **Stele 1**, flanked by weathered sculptures of a crocodile and a jaguar, shows Pájaro Jaguar IV in a ceremony that took place in AD761. **Edificio 20**, from the time of Itzamnaaj B'alam III, was the last significant structure built at Yaxchilán; its lintels are now in Mexico City. **Stele 11**, at the northeast corner of the Gran Plaza, was originally found in front of Edificio 40. The bigger of the two figures visible on it is Pájaro Jaguar IV.

An imposing stairway climbs from Stele 1 to **Edificio 33**, the best-preserved temple at Yaxchilán, with about half of its roof comb intact. The final step in front of the building is carved with ball-game scenes, and splendid relief carvings embellish the undersides of the lintels. Inside is a statue of Pájaro Jaguar IV, minus his head, which he lost to treasure-seeking 19th-century timber cutters.

From the clearing behind Edificio 33, a path leads into the trees. About 20m along this, fork left uphill; go left at another fork after about 80m, and in some 10 minutes, mostly going uphill, you'll reach three buildings on a hilltop: **Edificio 39**, **Edificio 40** and **Edificio 41**. Climb to the top of Edificio 41 for great views across the top of the jungle to the distant mountains of Guatemala.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

River launches take 40 minutes running downstream from Frontera Corozal, and one hour to return. *Lancha* outfits, with desks in a thatched building near the Frontera Corozal *embarcadero*, all charge the same prices for **trips** (return journey with 2½hr at the ruins for 3/4/7/10 people M\$650/780/950/1300). *Lanchas* normally leave frequently until 1:30pm or so, and it's sometimes possible to hook up with other travelers or a tour group to share costs.

Benemérito de las Américas

pop 6300 / elevation 200m

South of Frontera Corozal is the far eastern corner of Chiapas known as Marqués de Comillas (for its Spanish former landowner). After oil explorers opened tracks into this jungle region in the 1970s, settlers poured in from all over Mexico. Ranching and logging have made some rich, while others profit from smuggling drugs or immigrants. Note that for your own security, it's best to be off the Carretera Fronteriza before dusk – especially the most isolated section in the far southeast, between Benemérito de las Américas and the Chajul turnoff.

Benemérito de las Américas is the region's main town, but that's not saying much. Situated on the west bank of the Río Salinas, an Usumacinta tributary that forms the Mexico–Guatemala border here, it's a bit forlorn, with no attractions except as a staging post (a possible route into northern Guatemala starts here). The main street is a 1.5km-long stretch of the Carretera Fronteriza, where residents sprinkle pails of water on the streets to tamper down the nonstop dust clouds. The well-signed and brilliant green **Hotel Posada del Sol** (☎ 502-5907-0687; s & d without/with air-con M\$150/200, tr & q without/with air-con M\$200/250; 📍 📶) is a block west in the middle of town, with clean basic rooms and brand new TVs. On the highway and also in the center of town, the **Restaurante Las Cazadores** (☎ 502-5353-1833; mains M\$30-75; 🕒 7am-9pm) serves up a myriad of meats like *tepezcuintle* (a type of rodent) and venison, along with the usual beef and chicken dishes.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

On the highway toward the north end of town, Cooperativa Rápidos de la Selva and Transporte Benito Juárez run combis to Palenque (M\$60, three to 3½ hours) every 30 or 45 minutes from 4:30am to 5:30pm, stopping at Crucero Corozal (M\$20, 45 minutes) and San Javier (M\$25, one hour) en route. Línea Comitán Lagos de Montebello, on the highway toward the south end of town, runs seven vans to Palenque (M\$60, three to 3½ hours) between 4am and 3:15pm, and 10 along the Carretera Fronteriza and Pan-American Highway to Comitán (M\$150, five hours) between 3am and 2pm.

The arrival of foreign travelers might raise eyebrows at Benemérito's river *embarcadero* (1km off the main street); the traffic here

TOP PLACES TO HEAR SQUAWKS & SCREAMS

- **Sima de las Cotorras** (p810) A spiraling and shrieking vortex of parrots ascends at dawn.
- **Yaxchilán** (p845) Howler monkeys act like they own the place.
- **Las Guacamayas** (below) This macaw refuge echoes with avian abandon.
- **Las Nubes** (p848) Toucans and howler monkeys duke it out for full-throated dominance.

seems to run more toward contraband than tourists. Notwithstanding, you can hire a *lancha* for M\$1500 (negotiable) to take you three or four hours up the Río Salinas and Río de la Pasión to Sayaxché (Guatemala), a base for visiting the interesting Maya ruins of Ceibal, Aguateca and Dos Pilas. On the way, you have the opportunity to stop and see more ruins at Pipiles and Altar de los Sacrificios.

An alternative is to take a *lancha* a short distance downriver to Laureles, on the Guatemalan side (*colectivo* M\$5, *especial* M\$150). Buses leave Laureles at around 3am, 4am and 5am for El Subín (Q\$20, 2½ hours), a junction on the Flores–Sayaxché road with plenty of minibuses and buses to both towns.

Benemérito has no immigration post; you must pick up or hand in Mexican tourist cards at Frontera Corozal.

Benemérito de las Américas to Lagos de Montebello

Below Benemérito, the Carretera Fronteriza heads 60km south before turning west. Deforestation gradually gives way to more intact forest, with the road crossing several rivers, but you still pass numerous villages founded in recent decades, some of them settled by Guatemalan refugees. West of Ixcán you climb more than 1000m up to the cooler, pine-forested highlands around the Lagos de Montebello.

LAS GUACAMAYAS

In the small village of **Reforma Agraria**, 49km southwest of Benemérito, the beautiful ecolodge of **Las Guacamayas** (☎ in Mexico City 55-5329-0995, ext 8004; guacamayaescarlata@hotmail.com; www.colegiomexsur.edu.mx/rm_lg.html; Ejido Reforma

Agraria; campsite per person without/with tent & bedding M\$50/100, dm M\$180, d cabaña M\$750-850, tr cabaña M\$1000, ste M\$950-1100, meals M\$60-110; (P ☑), is the heart of an impressive community program to protect the local population of scarlet macaws. This spectacular and endangered member of the parrot family once ranged as far north as Veracruz, but its only Mexican home today is far eastern Chiapas. Numbers at Reforma Agraria have increased to more than 100 pairs since 1991, when the 14.5-sq-km macaw reserve was founded. The birds move in and out of the reserve in seasonal pursuit of food; the best months for observing them are December to June, when they are nesting.

The very friendly and welcoming lodge is right on the bank of the broad Río Lacantún, one of the Usumacinta's major tributaries, with the Reserva de la Biosfera Montes Azules on the opposite bank. Large, comfortable, thatch-roofed *cabañas*, with full mosquito screens, verandas and ample bathrooms with hot showers, are spread around the extensive grounds, linked by wooden walkways. There's a good restaurant overlooking the river, serving straightforward but satisfying Mexican meals.

Two-hour guided macaw-spotting walks cost M\$300 – they're best in the early morning or at dusk. Boat trips into the Montes Azules reserve cost M\$1200/1400 for two/three hours. You should spot crocodiles and howler monkeys, and with luck toucans and white-tailed deer. Villagers in Reforma Agraria also rent out horses for M\$100 per hour. Note that all prices drop around 20% in low season.

Getting There & Away

The road to Reforma Agraria turns west off the Carretera Fronteriza 8km south of Benemérito. It's paved as far as Pico de Oro (25km from the highway), then mostly unpaved for 16km. Beyond Reforma Agraria the road continues unpaved for 33km to rejoin the Carretera Fronteriza 5km south of Chajul. It's normally perfectly passable (if very jarring in places) in an ordinary car, but in the rainy season you should ask ahead about its condition.

From a small terminal near the Maya Head statue in Palenque, hourly combis run to Pico de Oro (M\$92, four to five hours), leaving from 8am to 4pm. Occasional *camionetas* also run from Benemérito to Pico de Oro (M\$25, 40 minutes). *Camionetas* run from Pico de

Oro to Reforma Agraria (M\$15, one hour), and vice versa, about hourly from 6am or 7am till early afternoon. A taxi from Benemérito to Reforma Agraria costs around M\$200.

From Comitán, around eight vans a day run to Reforma Agraria (M\$150, 4½ hours), passing through the Lagos de Montebello en route (see p851 for further details).

LAS NUBES

A bit of a trek but well worth it, **Las Nubes** (☎ 963-100-93-82; ecoturismo_nubes@hotmail.com; cabaña M\$550, ste M\$800-1000, main dishes M\$50-75; (P)) is a heavenly retreat among scores of cascades and rapids on the turquoise Río Santo Domingo. Some of the river pools are great swimming spots, and it's M\$10 per person to swim here if you're not staying the night. A swinging bridge straddles a fierce section of water-carved canyon, making an excellent vantage point to swoon over the grandest waterfalls. There's an adrenaline-pumping zip-line (M\$50), and you can spelunk and rappel from February through June. A 15-minute hike up to a *mirador* rewards with blue-green jungle views.

Fifteen well-built *cabañas* have hot water and pleasant porches, and an open restaurant serves meals, but no alcohol (though you can bring your own).

Las Nubes is 12km off the Carretera Fronteriza, 55km from Tzisco. From Transportes Tzoyol in Comitán, there are four daily combis (M\$45, 3½ to 4 hours) between 8am and 2pm, and four daily returns. From Embarcadero Jerusalén, just east of the Las Nubes highway turnoff (and on the combi route), you can raft to the compound for M\$1500 (five to eight passengers).

COMITÁN

☎ 963 / pop 83,000 / elevation 1560m

With a pretty plaza of modern sculpture pieces and mature flat-topped trees where birds flock and chirp in the evening, the colonial town of Comitán has a pleasant artsy atmosphere. Set on a high plain 90km southeast of San Cristóbal, many travelers bypass it on their way to Guatemala, but it's a very agreeable place to spend a few days. It contains some good places to stay and eat, a few interesting little museums, and several natural and archaeological attractions less than an hour away in the surrounding big-sky countryside.

The city's full name is Comitán de Domínguez, in recognition of local doctor

Belisario Domínguez (1863–1913), a national senator during the Mexican Revolution. He vigorously protested the political murders of President Victoriano de la Huerta and consequently became a victim himself. The uproar over his assassination led to Huerta's resignation in 1914.

Orientation & Information

Comitán is set on hilly terrain, with a beautiful broad main plaza. Hwy 190 (the Pan-American Hwy), named Blvd Dr Belisario Domínguez here but often just called 'El Bulevar,' passes through the west of town.

Banorte (1a Calle Sur Pte 5; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Currency exchange and ATM.

Ciber@dictos (Local 13B, Pasaje Morales; per hr M\$5; ☎ 9am-9pm)

Post office (Av Central Sur 45; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat)

Tourist office (☎ 632-40-47; www.visitacomitan.com; Calle Central Ote 6; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat) On the north side of the plaza, with good maps and helpful English-speaking staff available.

Sights

On the plaza, the **Iglesia de Santo Domingo** (☎ 10am-7pm) dates back to the 16th and 17th centuries, and sports unusual and handsome blind arcading on its tower. Its former monastic buildings next door are now the **Centro Cultural Rosario Castellanos** (admission free; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun), with a pretty wood-pillared patio featuring a mural on local history.

Just south of the main plaza is the **Casa Museo Dr Belisario Domínguez** (☎ 632-13-00; Av Central Sur 35; admission M\$5; ☎ 10am-6:45pm Tue-Sat, 9am-12:45pm Sun), the family home of Comitán's biggest hero and the site of his medical practice. It provides (in Spanish) fascinating insights into the state of medicine and the life of the professional classes in early-20th-century Chiapas (with a reconstruction of the onsite pharmacy), as well as the heroic tale of Domínguez' political career, ending in his assassination.

One block further down this street is a neat little modern art museum, the **Museo de Arte Hermila Domínguez de Castellanos** (☎ 632-20-82; Av Central Sur 51; admission M\$5; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun), with work by prominent Mexican artists, including José Luis Cuevas and Arnulfo Mendoza, as well as good temporary shows.

The **Museo Arqueológico de Comitán** (☎ 632-57-66; 1a Calle Sur Ote; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun),

just east of the plaza, displays artifacts from the area's many archaeological sites. The misshapen pre-Hispanic skulls on display – deliberately 'beautified' by squeezing infants' heads between boards – make you wonder what kind of thoughts would have taken shape inside such distorted brains.

Festivals & Events

Festival Internacional Rosario Castellanos is a week-long fiesta in early July, with free admission for many events.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Posada Las Flores (☎ 632-33-34; 1a Av Pte Nte 17; s/d with shared bathroom M\$80/130, with private bathroom

M\$200/230) Clean rooms with hot water and wood ceilings surround a pretty patio here.

Hospedaje Montebello (☎ 632-35-72; hospedaje montebello@hotmail.com; 1a Calle Nte Pte 10; r with shared bathroom M\$120, r with private bathroom M\$180-210) A welcoming cheapie with large, tiled and clean rooms around a courtyard with a towering agave as a prickly centerpiece. There's also a small restaurant.

Posada San José (☎ 101-43-03; s/d M\$200/250, tr 300-350; (P)) Has 10 very clean and good-sized rooms, all with private bathrriin and exterior windows. There's a tranquil back patio area pepped up with bougainvillea, and the rooms closest to this side are the quietest.

Pensión Delfin (☎ 632-00-13; Av Central Sur 21; s/ d/tr/q M\$234/304/409/468; (P)) The Delfin, on the

COMITÁN

To San Cristóbal de Las Casas (90km)
 To Immigration Office (4km);
 Servicios Aéreos San Cristóbal (10km);
 Tenam Puente (13km);
 Museo Parador Santa María (39km);
 El Chitlón (40km);
 Chinkultic (49km);
 Parque Nacional Lagunas de Montebello (54km);
 Guatemalan border (82km)

To Transportes Tzoyul (3km)

0 400 m
0 0.2 miles

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Casa Museo Dr Belisario Domínguez.....	6	C2
Centro Cultural Rosario Castellanos.....	(see 18)	
Iglesia de Santo Domingo....	7	C1
Museo Arqueológico de Comitán.....	8	C1
Museo de Arte Hermila Domínguez de Castellanos.....	9	C2

SLEEPING

Hospedaje Montebello.....	10	B1
Hotel del Virrey.....	11	B1
Hotel Hacienda de los Angeles.....	12	B1
Hotel Internacional.....	13	C2
Hotel Posada El Castellano.....	14	B1
Pensión Delfin.....	15	B2
Posada Las Flores.....	16	B1
Posada San José.....	17	C2

EATING

Café Quipic.....	18	C1
Dante's Pizza.....	19	C1
Helen's Enrique Restaurant.....	20	B2
Juli Moni comedor.....	21	C1
Matisse.....	22	B1

DRINKING

Jarro Café Bar & Grill.....	23	B1
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ENTERTAINMENT

Shangri La.....	24	B1
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DRINKS OF CHIAPAS

- **Comiteco** A unique variant of *mezcal* made with a mix of maguey and *piloncillo* (cooked sugarcane), it's smoother and more syrupy than tequila, with a clear appearance or a greenish tint. Traditionally made in Comitán, it's making a big comeback in popularity.
- **Tascalate** A cold sweet concoction prepared from ground cacao, pine nuts, toasted corn, cinnamon and *achiote* (annatto). Very interesting and super delicious!
- **Pox** Inexpensive grain alcohol made from sugarcane, it's pronounced (and sometimes spelled) *posh*. The undisputed choice for those who want to pass out cold on the street, but not so deadly when mixed with lots of fruit juice.
- **Pozol** A thick heavy mixture of *masa* (corn meal dough) in water, it's often mixed with sugar, and sometimes has chili or chocolate added. It's the indigenous equivalent of an energy drink, and you can see people everywhere carrying it around in re-used plastic liter bottles. Travelers often take a ball of the *masa* and make some up when there's water available.

west side of the main plaza with a plant-filled patio, has well-kept, decent-sized rooms, some with wood paneling and all with cable TV.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hotel del Virrey (☎ 632-18-11; hotel_delvirrey@hotmail.com; Av Central Nte 13; s M\$300-340, d M\$420, r 3-6 people M\$650; (P) (Q)) Resident turtles splash in a fountain at the friendly Virrey, a 19th-century house with homey, artfully kitted-out rooms of varying sizes radiating around a flower-draped courtyard. All have cable TV and spotless tiled bathrooms, and some upstairs enjoy a nice view of nearby El Calvario church.

Hotel Posada El Castellano (☎ 632-33-47; www.posadaelcastellano.com.mx; 3a Calle Nte Pte 12; s/d/tr M\$360/400/440; (P) (Q)) This excellent hotel is colonial in style but modern in build and amenities. Comfy rooms, equipped with fan, cable TV and solid wood furniture, are on two floors around wood-pillared patios. The staff is amiable and there's free wi-fi and a nice restaurant.

Hotel Internacional (☎ /fax 632-01-10; Av Central Sur 16; s & d M\$420-480, tr M\$50-570; (P)) This downtown hotel is good value considering its comfort levels and stylish décor. All 27 rooms have two double beds, TV and attractive bathrooms. Remodeled ones have newer beige-toned carpets and bedspreads.

Hotel Hacienda de los Ángeles (☎ 632-00-74; www.haciendadelosangeles.com; 2a Calle Nte Pte 6; r M\$900, ste M\$1200-1500, all incl breakfast; (P) (Q) (R)) Comitán's single luxury hotel provides professional service and spacious accommodations with sober, classical-style décor. All rooms have at least two double beds or one king-size bed, air-con,

cable TV, bathtub and quality furnishings, and suites have two levels. There's even a dramatically-lighted pool with its own bar.

Eating

Café Quiptico (☎ 632-06-24; 1a Av Ote Sur s/n; breakfast M\$40-70, mains M\$55-70; ☎ 7:30am-1am) A swell spot for coffee on the plaza, the Quiptico is set under an impressive stone colonnade and run by indigenous coffee growers. The menu isn't huge, but it serves tasty and filling breakfasts, plus superb organic coffee, salads, *antojitos*, meat dishes and desserts.

Dante's Pizza (☎ 632-03-09; 1a Av Ote Nte 8; pizzas 1-person M\$50-80, 2-person M\$80-100; ☎ 9am-10:30pm; (♿)) A roomy upstairs locale, it serves satisfying pizzas, pasta, empanadas and *quesos fundidos* (melted cheese). Very family friendly, there are plenty of high chairs as well as a kids' playhouse. It's also an internet café (M\$10 per hour).

Helen's Enrique Restaurant (☎ 632-17-30; Av Central Sur 19; mains M\$60-95; ☎ 8am-11:30pm) This long-running place, with a terrace overlooking the plaza, is good for chicken and meat dishes, breakfasts and *antojitos* – or just for an evening beer.

Matisse (☎ 632-71-52; 1a Av Pte Nte 16; mains M\$70-120; ☎ 2-11pm Tue-Sat, to 5pm Sun) A step up, the stylish and popular Matisse serves inventive and well-presented dishes in warm, wood-pillared surroundings. Start with a carpaccio or the excellent *fusiole* salad (spinach with nuts, bacon, avocado and balsamic oil), and follow it up with a beef *filete* or a creative pasta dish. There's plenty of wine and cocktails, and a neat patio for alfresco dining when the temperature's right.

For an inexpensive meal or snack, the mercado *comedor* of **Juli Moni** (☎ 6am-5pm) has tasty and filling quesadillas (M\$15). The nopales (cactus) and *flor de calabazas* (squash flower) are also a good option for vegetarians.

Drinking & Entertainment

Jarro Café Bar & Grill (☎ 632-21-70; 1a Av Pte Nte 7; ☎ 6pm-2am Tue-Sun) A semi-futuristic space with a burbling fountain, it's a fun all-purpose bar with loud music. Depending on the night, it could be showing *futbol* or patrons might be crooning karaoke tunes.

Shangri La (☎ 110-66-82; 1a Calle Nte Ote 6; ☎ 6pm-3am Tue-Sat) A new indoor/outdoor club, it features live merengue and salsa on Fridays and Saturdays. A stone wall encircles a romantic patio garden lit by lawn lamps, and a stylish interior has four intimate rooms with comfortable seating and fabric-draped ceilings.

Getting There & Around

Comitán's **OCC bus terminal** (☎ 632-09-80; Blvd Dr Belisario Domínguez Sur 43) is on the Pan-American Hwy. Destinations served from here include:

Ciudad Cuauhtémoc (M\$52, 1¼ hours, four daily)

San Cristóbal de Las Casas (M\$36, 1¼ hours, 15 daily)

Tapachula (M\$146, 5½ hours via Motozintla, 6 daily)

Tuxtla Gutiérrez (M\$70 to M\$84, three hours, 17 daily.)

OCC also serves Oaxaca, Mexico City, Palenque, Villahermosa, Playa del Carmen and Cancún.

'Centro' combis and minibuses, across the road from the OCC terminal, take you to the main plaza for M\$4; a taxi is M\$18.

You can also reach San Cristóbal by vans (M\$30) and *colectivo* taxis (M\$35) from **Rápidos de los Altos** (Blvd Dr Belisario Domínguez Sur). Further vans to San Cristóbal leave from two other stops across the road; vans for Ciudad Cuauhtémoc (M\$30, every 20 to 30 minutes, 4am to 8pm) leave from a stop just south of Rápidos de los Altos.

Línea Comitán Lagos de Montebello (☎ 632-08-75; 2a Av Pte Sur 23) runs vans to the Lagos de Montebello and along the Carretera Fronteriza, with departures to Laguna Bosque Azul (M\$25, one hour) and Tziscaco (M\$25, 1¼ hours) every 20 to 30 minutes from 3am to 8:30pm; to Reforma Agraria (M\$92, 4½ hours) at 3am, 8:55am and

12:20pm; to Benemérito de las Américas (M\$150, five hours) 10 times daily, 4am to 2:30pm; and to Palenque (M\$175, eight hours) five times daily, 4am to 9:45am.

Transportes Tzoyol (☎ 632-77-39; 4a Av Pte Sur 1039) runs further vans to Reforma Agraria, five times daily, 3am to 12:45pm, as well as to Amatitlán (M\$55, three hours), the connection for boats to Laguna Miramar, six times a day between 4am and 2pm.

The local **immigration office** (☎ 632-22-00; Carretera Panamericana; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) is on the Pan-American Hwy just past the turnoff for Tzizimol, 5km south of the town center.

Servicios Aéreos San Cristóbal (☎ 632-46-62; Carretera Panamericana Km 1262; www.serviciosaereos-sancristobal.com) has four-seater charter flights to San Quintín for Laguna Miramar and day trips to Bonampak and Yaxchilán (M\$8000 round-trip).

AROUND COMITÁN El Chiflón

These mighty waterfalls tumble off the edge of an escarpment 41km southwest of Comitán. For an up-close experience of sheer awesome power, El Chiflón is hard to beat. The local *ejido*, **San Cristobalito La Cascada** (☎ 963-703-65-84; admission M\$10; ☎ 7am-5:30pm), has set up a number of attractive amenities on the approach to the falls, including comfortable, well-built **cabañas** (d/q M\$300/400), all with river view, bathroom and mosquito nets, and the good open-air **Restaurant La Ceiba** (light meals M\$15-35, mains M\$50-70; ☎ 8am-6pm). **Camping** (M\$26 per person) is permitted as well.

A 1km approach road heads up from Hwy 226 to the parking area, from which a well-made path leads 1.3km up alongside the forest-lined Río San Vicente (which has good swimming spots) to a series of increasingly dramatic and picturesque waterfalls. Finally you reach the 70m Velo de Novia fall: prepare to be drenched by flying spray. You can also fly across the river on a zip-line (M\$100).

In the dry season, from roughly February through July, the falls form a foamy line and the blue river water is safe enough to swim in. But during the rainy season, rapid currents turn the river a muddy brown, the falls gush with abandon, and swimming is a death wish.

From Comitán, **Autotransportes Cuxtepeques** (☎ 632-49-22; Blvd Dr Belisario Domínguez Sur), between Calles 1a and 2a Nte Pte, runs vans and buses to the El Chiflón turnoff on Hwy 226 (M\$20,

45 minutes), about every 30 minutes, 5am to 4pm. **Mototaxis** (M\$5 per person) wait there to ferry passengers up the road. Drivers should take the Tzitol turnoff from the Pan-American Hwy, 5km south of central Comitán.

Tenam Puente

These **Maya ruins** (admission free; ☎ 9am-4pm) feature three ball courts, a 20m tiered pyramid and other structures rising from a terraced, wooded hillside. Like Chinkultic (see below) Tenam Puente was one of a set of fringe Classic Maya settlements in this part of Chiapas that (unlike more famed lowland sites such as Palenque and Yaxchilán) seem to have survived in the Postclassic period, possibly as long as AD 1200. It has a pleasant rural setting and good long-distance views.

A 5km-long paved road leads west to the site from Hwy 190, 9km south of Comitán. **Transportes Francisco Sarabia** (3a Av Pte Sur 8, Comitán) runs combis every 45 minutes, 8am to 6pm, to the site (M\$12) or to the village of Francisco Sarabia, 2km before Tenam Puente. The last combi from the ruins returns at 4pm. A taxi costs M\$250 to M\$300 return (with an hour at the ruins).

Museo Parador Santa María

Evocative of a past era, this beautiful **hotel** (☎ / fax 963-632-51-16; www.paradorsantamaria.com.mx; Carretera La Trinitaria-Lagos de Montebello Km 22; r M\$2000; ☎), 1.5km off the road to the Lagos de Montebello, is the most luxurious and atmospheric place to stay in the Comitán area. The restored 19th-century hacienda is decorated throughout with period furniture and art; some of the eight rooms have tiled bathtubs and fireplaces, and all look over expansive grassy lawns to the countryside beyond. The chapel here is a **religious art museum** (admission M\$20; ☎ 9am-5pm) with an interesting array of colonial-era work from Europe and the Philippines as well as Mexico and Guatemala. The excellent **Restaurant Los Geranios** (mains M\$110-160; ☎ 8am-8pm) serves Chiapas and international dishes prepared with organic ingredients (including coffee) grown onsite. Look for the 22km marker from La Trinitaria on the Montebello road. Prices drop 50% in the low season, but book lodging two months in advance in high season.

Chinkultic

These dramatically sited **ruins** (admission M\$20; ☎ 9am-4pm) lie 2km north of the road to the

Lagos de Montebello, 48km from Comitán. The access road is paved.

Chinkultic was a minor Maya power during the late Classic period and, like Tenam Puente, may have survived into Postclassic times. Of 200 mounds scattered over a wide area, only a few have been cleared, but the site is worth a visit.

The ruins are in two groups. From the entrance, first take the path to the left, which curves around to the right below one of Chinkultic's biggest structures, E23, still covered in thick vegetation. The path reaches a grassy plaza with several weathered steles, some carved with human figures, and a long ball court on the right.

Return to the entrance, from which another path heads to the **Plaza Hundida** (Sunken Plaza), crosses a stream, then climbs steeply up to the **Acrópolis**, a partly restored temple atop a rocky escarpment, with remarkable views over the surrounding lakes and forests and down into a cenote 50m below – into which the Maya used to toss offerings of pottery, beads, bones and obsidian knives.

On the highway just over 1km east of the Chinkultic turnoff, **El Pino Feliz** (☎ 963-102-10-89; Carretera La Trinitaria-Lagos de Montebello; r per person M\$70; ☎) has very simple wood cabins with up to three double beds, and hot water in the shared bathrooms. It also provides excellent meals (main dishes M\$30).

Lagos de Montebello

The temperate pine and oak forest along the Guatemalan border east of Chinkultic is dotted with over 50 small lakes of varied hues, known as the Lagos (or Lagunas) de Montebello. The area is very picturesque, refreshing and peaceful. The paved road to Montebello turns east off Hwy 190 just north of La Trinitaria, 16km south of Comitán. It passes Chinkultic after 32km, and enters the Parque Nacional Lagunas de Montebello 5km beyond. A further 800m along is a ticket booth, where you must pay a M\$20 park admission fee. Here the road forks – north to the Lagunas de Colores (2km to 3km) and east to the village of Tziscaco (9km), beyond which it becomes the Carretera Fronteriza, continuing east to Ixcán and ultimately Palenque (see p840).

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

From the park ticket booth, the northward road leads to the **Lagunas de Colores**, five lakes



whose vivid hues range from turquoise to deep green: **Laguna Agua Tinta**, **Laguna Esmeralda**, **Laguna Encantada**, **Laguna Ensueño** and, the biggest, **Laguna Bosque Azul**, on the left where the paved road ends. There's a nice walk from here to the **Grutas San Rafael del Arco**, a group of caves. Follow the track ahead from the parking lot, turn left after 500m at the 'Gruta San Rafael del Arco' sign, then follow the path, mostly downhill, for 500m to 600m to a 'Grutas' sign. To the left here, a river rushes through a natural rock arch. To the right, the path forks after 60m. The left branch leads 100m to a riverside cave downstream from the rock arch; the right branch leads 40m to a more extensive cave that turns out to be the bottom of a sinkhole.

In the Laguna Bosque Azul parking lot, *camiones* offer shared three- to five-hour lake tours for M\$40, or you can do a private tour for M\$350. Boys can take you to the caves on horseback for M\$80, on a multi-lake excursion that includes **Dos Cenotes** (M\$150, two to three hours), a pair of sinkholes in the forest, or to the Laguna de Montebello (about one hour away).

Along the eastward road from the park ticket booth, after 3km a track leads 200m north to the **Laguna de Montebello**, one of the area's larger lakes, with a flat open area along its shore, and more boys offering horseback rides to Dos Cenotes. The local *ejido* charges a M\$5 entrance fee to access the lake areas along the Tzisco road; pay once and keep your receipt for the other lakes. Three kilometers further along the Tzisco road, another track leads

left to the **Cinco Lagunas** (Five Lakes). Only four are visible from the road, but the second, **La Cañada**, on the right after about 1.5km, is one of the most beautiful Montebello lakes, nearly cut in half by two rocky outcrops.

One kilometer nearer to Tzisco, another track leads 1km north to cobalt-blue **Laguna Pojoj**, with an island in the middle. **Laguna Tzisco**, on the Guatemalan border, comes into view 1km past the Pojoj junction. The turnoff to the Chuj-speaking village of Tzisco, a pretty and spread-out place stretching down to the lakeside, is a little further on. Though deforestation has thinned out their habitat and made them increasingly harder to find, spectacularly-tailed quetzal birds inhabit the border forests here and local guides can suggest places for bird-watching.

SLEEPING & EATING

Cabañas de Doña Josefa (☎ 963-632-59-71; cabaña M\$300; (P)) These rustic, two-story *cabañas* are on the northwest side of Laguna Bosque Azul, 1km along a drivable track from the lake's main parking lot. Two have private bathrooms with hot water, seven others share a toilet and must use the lake for washing. Meals are usually available at weekends and holidays.

Hotel Tzisco (☎ 963-352-40-83; www.tzisco.com; campsites per person M\$80, r M\$500, 4-person cabaña M\$650; restaurant dishes M\$30-60; (P) (Q)) By the lake in Tzisco village (2km from the highway turnoff), and run by an *ejido* cooperative, this basic but well-kept place has extensive,

grassy grounds that include a sandy beach with terrific views across the lake to the foothills of the Cuchumatanes in Guatemala. You can rent two-person kayaks (M\$80 per hour), or bicycles (M\$100 per hour, M\$300 per day) to go exploring. There are rooms in the main building, but some of the good wooden *cabañas* have an ideal position, almost on the waterside. All accommodations have private bathroom with hot water.

Beside the Laguna Bosque Azul parking lot, several basic **comedores** (dishes M\$30-40; ☎ approx 7am-5pm) serve drinks and simple plates of *carne asada* (roasted meat) or quesadillas.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Public transportation to Chinkultic and the lakes from Comitán is a snap, making it an easy day trip. See p851 for details; vans go to the parking lot at Laguna Bosque Azul and to Tziscaco, and will drop you at the turnoffs for Museo Parador Santa María, Chinkultic, and the other lakes mentioned above. The last vehicles back to Comitán leave Tziscaco around 5pm, and Laguna Bosque Azul around 5:30pm.

From San Cristóbal de Las Casas, a number of agencies offer tours (p816) that take in the lakes, throw in a visit to El Chiflón, and still get you back by dinnertime.

CIUDAD CUAUHTÉMOC

pop 2900

A blip of a border town that feels like it has more vehicles than people, this is the last and first place in Mexico on the Pan-American Hwy (190). Comitán is 83km north, and the Guatemalan border post is 4km south at La Mesilla. Taxis (M\$10 *colectivo*, M\$40 private) ferry people between the two sides. There are banks and moneychangers on both sides of the border, which closes to car traffic from 9pm to 6am.

Frequent vans, combis and buses run to and from Comitán (M\$30 to M\$52, 1½ hours), about every 20 to 30 minutes, 5am to 5pm. A few OCC buses run to San Cristóbal de Las Casas (M\$100, 3½ hours) and beyond between 12:30pm and 9:30pm, but it's usually quicker to get to Comitán and pick up onward transportation there.

From La Mesilla, mototaxis (M\$3 or Q\$2) can drop you at the depot, where buses leave for Huehuetenango (Q\$15, two hours) and Quetzaltenango (Q\$30, 3½ hours) at least

20 times a day between 6am and 6pm, and hourly to Guatemala City (Q\$72 to Q\$110, seven hours) from 6am to 10am.

RESERVA DE LA BIOSFERA EL TRIUNFO

The luxuriant cloud forests, high in the remote El Triunfo Biosphere Reserve in the Sierra Madre de Chiapas, are a bird-lover's paradise and a remarkable world of trees and shrubs festooned with epiphytes, ferns, bromeliads, mosses and vines. The cool cloud forest is formed by moist air rising from the hot, humid lowlands to form clouds and rain on the uplands.

The Sierra Madre de Chiapas is home to over 300 bird species, of which more than 30 are nonexistent or rare elsewhere in Mexico. This is the one place in the country where chances are good of seeing the resplendent quetzal. Also here are the extremely rare horned guan (big as a turkey, but dwelling high in the trees), the azure-rumped tanager, black guan and blue-tailed and wine-throated hummingbirds. Visitors see hundreds of butterfly species and, often, jaguar and tapir tracks.

Visits are controlled. Most visitors go in the driest months, January to May; avoid the wettest months, September and October. Make arrangements about three months in advance by contacting **Claudia Virgen** (☎ 961-125-11-22; eo.turismotriunfo@prodigy.net.mx; Calle San Cristóbal 8, Fracc Residencial La Hacienda, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas 29030), the visitors program coordinator. A normal visit (US\$400 to US\$600 per person, minimum four people, maximum 12) starts with one night in a hotel in the nearest town, Jaltenango (also called Ángel Albino Corzo), followed by three or four nights at the basic Campamento El Triunfo, 1850m high in the reserve. The price includes guides who are expert bird-spotters, transportation between Jaltenango and the coffee-growing village of Finca Prusia, and mules to carry your baggage on the 14km hike between Finca Prusia and Campamento El Triunfo (three to four hours uphill on the way in). The **Mesoamerican Ecotourism Alliance** (www.travelwithmea.org) has all-inclusive 10-day trips that also visit La Encrucijada (US\$2850).

EL SOCONUSCO

Chiapas' fertile coastal plain, 15km to 35km wide, is called the Soconusco, and is named for the Aztecs' most distant 15th-century province, called Xoconochco. It's hot and humid

year-round, with serious rainfall from mid-May to mid-October. The lushly vegetated Sierra Madre de Chiapas, rising steeply from the plain, provides an excellent environment for coffee, bananas and other crops.

Tonalá

☎ 966 / pop 32,000

This sweaty, bustling town on Hwy 200 is the jumping-off point for Puerto Arista. There's a helpful **tourist office** (☎ 663-10-34; Calle 16 de Septiembre 46; ☹ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) a half-block north of the central plaza. You can check your email back on the corner facing the plaza at **Cyber Cristy** (Av Rayon s/n; per hr M\$8; ☹ 8am-10pm) and change money or use the ATM at **Banamex** (Hidalgo 137; ☹ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat), a block east of the plaza on the main drag (Hidalgo).

A fine central choice fronting the east side of the plaza, the **Hotel Galilea** (☎ 663-02-39; Hidalgo 138; s/d/tr M\$300/400/450; 📍 ☹) has a convenient restaurant and clean medium-sized rooms with dark wooden furniture that give it an Old World feel. **Hotel Grajandra** (☎ 663-01-44; Hidalgo 204; s & d M\$450, tr M\$750; 📍 ☹) is a friendly place next to the OCC bus terminal, with bright, large rooms with 1970s-era décor and a breezy upstairs restaurant.

The **OCC bus terminal** (☎ 633-05-40; Hidalgo s/n), with deluxe and 1st-class buses, is 600m west of the central plaza. **Rápidos del Sur** (RS; Hidalgo s/n), with 2nd-class buses, is 250m east of the plaza. Daily services include the following:

Tapachula (M\$85-164, three to four hours, 34 from OCC, 35 RS)

Tuxtla Gutiérrez (M\$60-126, three hours, 16 from OCC, 35 RS)

Most Tapachula buses stop at Escuintla (M\$60 to M\$95, 2½ hours). OCC also runs buses to Mexico City, Oaxaca and Puerto Escondido. **Colectivo** taxis for Puerto Arista (M\$15, 20 minutes) and Boca del Cielo (M\$20, 35 minutes) run from the corner of Matamoros and 20 de Marzo, four blocks east of the plaza and one block downhill. Puerto Arista combis (M\$12) leave from Juárez, one block further downhill. Taxis and combis run until 7pm. A private taxi to Puerto Arista is M\$80 (up to M\$100 at night).

Puerto Arista

☎ 994 / pop 900

Most of the time Puerto Arista, 18km southwest of Tonalá, is an ultra-sleepy little fishing

and part-time tourist town where the most action you'll see is a piglet breaking into a trot because a dog has gathered the energy to bark at it. You get through a lot of drinks while you watch the waves roll up and down the infinite expanse of gently sloping sands that is Puerto Arista's beach. The torpor is disturbed at weekends, during August and the Christmas–New Year period, and shattered during *Semana Santa*, when *chiapanecos* roll in from the towns and cities inland. A smattering of international travelers can usually be found hanging out here at most times of year.

PA's single, potholed, street is little more than a scruffy strip of palm-shack restaurants and salt-bitten concrete hotels, but the ultra-relaxed ambience soon starts to grow on you. The endless beach and ocean are wonderfully clean here, and you may never swim in warmer seas, but take care where you go in – riptides (known as *canales*) can quickly sweep you out a long way.

The only real street, called (seemingly interchangeably) Av Matamoros, Blvd Zapotal or Blvd González Blanco, parallels the beach, one block inland. The road from Tonalá hits it at a T-junction by a lighthouse, the midpoint of town. Public transportation terminates here, although *colectivo* taxis will take you to your door for an extra M\$15.

A tiny commercial area called the Plaza Puerto Arista (across the street from the Hotel Arista Bugambilias) has an ATM, **satellite internet access** (per hr M\$10; ☹ 9am-4pm), and a computer kiosk with tourist information in a closet-sized but wonderfully air-conditioned room.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

During the July-to-October nesting season, the **Campamento Tortuguero** (Turtle Camp; admission free; ☹ 9am-5pm) collects thousands of newly-laid Olive Ridley turtle eggs from 40km of beach. They incubate them and release the hatchlings when they emerge seven weeks later. Located 2.5km northwest along the single street from the lighthouse (taxi charge M\$25), visitors are welcome and can help release the hatchlings. At the camp, run by Chiapas' state **ecology institute** (www.ihne.gob.mx), you'll also see injured turtles recuperating in tanks, and caimans bred for release in Reserva de la Biosfera La Encrucijada (p856). There's an annual **Festival de la Tortuga Marina** during the last weekend of October, with events for

adults and children and the release of thousands of hatchlings.

About 300m behind the eastern beach, **Estero Prieto** is a treacle-colored mangrove estuary. Rare boat-billed herons and other water birds are common here, and there are small crocodiles, freshwater turtles and a few iguanas. José's (see below) rents canoes.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are plenty of places in both directions from the lighthouse. The more expensive ones drop their prices significantly outside the high seasons of *Semana Santa*, July-August and Christmas-New Year's. Book at least one month ahead for *Semana Santa*.

José's Camping Cabañas (☎ 600-90-48; r/round ing85@hotmail.com; campsites per person M\$35, s/d/tr with shared bathroom M\$140/160/190, s/d/tr with private bathroom M\$200/225/275; P ♻️) Run by a Canadian who's been living here for three decades, this is a welcoming place to stay and relax. It has a small pool and the simple but impeccably kept brick-and-thatch *cabañas* – all with mosquito screens, fan and shaded sitting areas – are dotted about an extensive coconut and citrus grove. José enjoys socializing with his guests and creates good home-cooked meals (M\$35 to M\$80). Canoe rentals for the bird-rich estuary to the rear are M\$100 per day. To find José's, follow the main street southeast from the lighthouse for 800m, then turn left (inland) by Hotel Lucero.

Hotel Arista Bugambilias (☎/fax 600-90-44; r/site M\$695/1053; P ♻️) About 800m northwest of the lighthouse, the Bugambilias has beautiful beachfront grounds, an enticing pool, plus a restaurant and bar. Nice, good-sized rooms all have air-con and TV. Rates are 20% lower during the week.

Hotel Lucero (☎ 600-90-42; Matamoros 800; r M\$750, q M\$850; P ♻️) The Lucero, 800m southeast of the lighthouse and across the street from the beach, has comfortable, pastel-shaded, air-conditioned rooms with up to three double beds, and the upper floors have great ocean views. Its big double pool (M\$30 for nonguests) and open-air Restaurant Flamingos (mains M\$80 to M\$110, open 8am to 5pm, dinner also in high season), front the beach.

There are scores of almost-identical beachfront *palapa* eateries. Those with most customers are likely to be the best.

Fish and shrimp dishes cost M\$60 to M\$95; eggs, chicken and *bistec* are M\$30 to M\$70. *Robalo* (snook) is the quality fish here; *huachinango* (snapper), *mojarra* (bass or perch) and *pargo* (sea perch) are pretty good too.

Reserva de la Biosfera La Encrucijada

This large biosphere reserve protects a 1448-sq-km strip of coastal lagoons, sandbars, wetlands, seasonally flooded tropical forest and the country's tallest mangroves (some above 30m). This ecosystem is a vital wintering and breeding ground for migratory birds and harbors one of Mexico's biggest populations of jaguars, plus spider monkeys, turtles, crocodiles, caimans, boa constrictors, fishing eagles and lots of waterfowl – many in danger of extinction.

A ride in a *lancha* through the reserve takes you between towering mangroves and past palm-thatched lagoonside villages. Birding is good any time of year, but best during the November to March nesting season. *Lanchas* also serve Barra de Zacapulco, a small settlement on a sandbar between ocean and lagoon, with a handful of *palapa comedores* and a sea-turtle breeding center nearby.

The nearest town is Acapetahua, 6km southwest of Escuintla. The **Hotel El Carmen** (☎ 918-647-00-62; Av Central s/n, Acapetahua; s/d/tr M\$150/220/250; P ♻️) has clean, cheerfully painted rooms with bathroom, air-con and TV. At the Barra de Zacapulco *comedores* you can camp or sling a hammock for M\$20 per person; some have *cabañas* (r M\$150) too. A big plate of seafood costs around M\$50.

To get to La Encrucijada, take a bus along Hwy 200 to Escuintla, then a *colectivo* taxi to Acapetahua (M\$5, 10 minutes). Beside the abandoned railway in Acapetahua (if you have time, check out the rusting freight trains nearby), get a combi or bus 18km to Embarcadero Las Garzas (M\$10, 20 minutes). These run about every 30 minutes till 4pm.

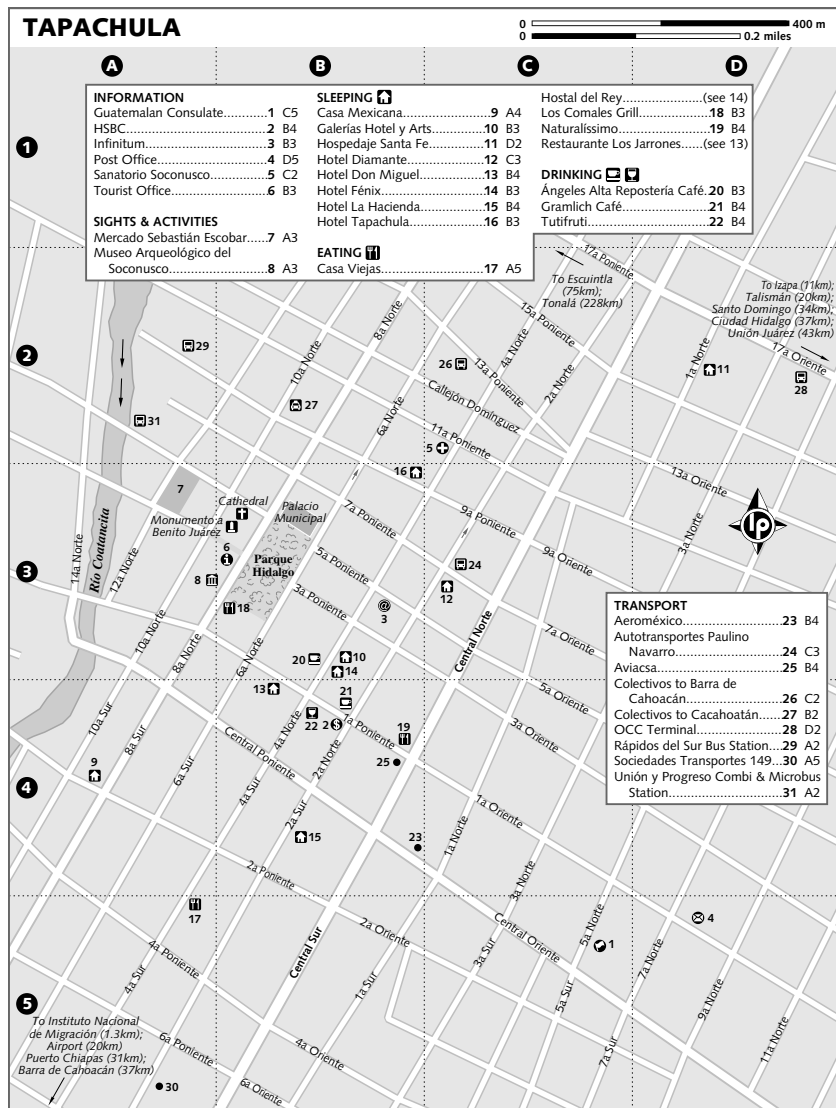
From Embarcadero Las Garzas, a *colectivo lancha* (M\$30) to Barra de Zacapulco takes 25 minutes. The last *lancha* back from Barra de Zacapulco may be as early as 3:30pm, and the last combi from Embarcadero Las Garzas to Acapetahua goes about 5pm. Two- to three-hour private *lancha* tours from Embarcadero Las Garzas cost around M\$500 for up to four people, but you can try bargaining.

TAPACHULA

☎ 962 / pop 190,000 / elevation 100m
 ‘The Pearl of Soconusco,’ Mexico’s bustling southernmost city doesn’t quite live up to its nickname, though it does have an interesting combination of urban sophistication and tropical tempo. A new cruise ship terminal at nearby Puerto Chiapas has led to an in-

crease in local investment, but trees still grow through crumbling and evocative old houses in the center. The city is an important commercial center, not only for the Soconusco but also for cross-border trade with Guatemala.

When the *cruceros* (cruise ship passengers) stream into town every few weeks, the city sucks in its belly and puts its best



DANGER ON THE SOUTHERN BORDER

When immigration and Mexico are heard in the same sentence, most people think of Mexicans heading to the US. However, many Central Americans, driven by even weaker economies in their own countries, cross into Mexico on an epic 2500km-long journey north. While the perils of crossing the US–Mexico border include deadly desert crossings and unscrupulous coyotes (people smugglers), the southern border is arguably more dangerous. Immigrants have few rights within Mexico, and are targeted as easy prey by both criminals and the authorities. Opportunistic gangs regularly beat, rob and rape, and the police extort bribes to let people pass without arrest.

Until the last of the southern lines closed in 2007, many migrants jumped the freight trains heading north from the border cities of Tapachula and Tenosique. Nicknamed ‘death trains’ because fatalities and maimings are so common, many now walk more than 250km north to Arriaga, the closest terminus. For a riveting account of riding Mexican freight trains from Chiapas, read *Enrique’s Journey* by Sonia Nazario. For information on volunteering with injured train-hoppers, contact the **Albergue Jesús el Buen Pastor del Pobre y el Migrante** (☎ 962-137-73-43; www.alberguebuenpastor.org.mx; Entronque a Raymundo Enriquez, Tapachula).

foot forward. A hot, humid and busy place year-round, Tapachula’s heart is the large, lively Parque Hidalgo, with vistas of the towering 4110m cone of Volcán Tacaná to the north on clear days. Most travelers simply pass through here on the way to or from Guatemala, but it makes a good base for a number of interesting nearby attractions.

Information

HSBC (cnr 2a Nte & 1a Pte; ☎ 8am–7pm Mon–Sat)

Money exchange and ATM.

Infinitum (5a Pte 16; per hr M\$7; ☎ 9am–8pm) Internet access.

Instituto Nacional de Migración (☎ 128-22-73;

Vialidad 435, Fracc Las Vegas; ☎ 8am–3pm) Immigration office.

Post office (1a Ote s/n)

Sanatorio Soconusco (☎ 626-50-74, 4a Nte 68) A

clinic with 24-hour emergency service.

Tourist office (☎ 628-77-25; www.turismotapachula

.gob.mx; 8a Nte s/n; ☎ 9am–8pm Mon–Fri, 10am–2pm Sat) In the Antiguo Palacio Municipal.

Sights

The modernized, well-displayed **Museo Arqueológico del Soconusco** (☎ 626-41-73; 8a Nte 20; admission M\$26; ☎ 9am–6pm Tue–Sun) faces Parque Hidalgo. Steles and ceramics from Izapa (see p860) are prominent – on the steles, the top fringe represents the sky and gods, the middle depicts earthly life, and the bottom fringe shows the underworld. There are also 5000-year-old early stone heads and figurines from the coastal marshes, a collection of pre-Hispanic musical instruments (drums,

conch trumpets, scrapers made from human bones...), and other items displaying Olmec, Teotihuacán, Maya and Aztec influences. Explanatory material is in Spanish only.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Hospedaje Santa Fe (☎ 626-24-28; 1a Nte 107; s/d/tr with fan M\$160/220/250, s/d/tr with air-con M\$230/260/300;

☎ ☎) Just a couple of blocks from the OCC bus station, this budget option has clean medium-sized rooms with cable TV, though the air-con rooms have interior windows only. No hot water, but there’s an inexpensive café.

Hotel Diamante (☎ 628-50-32; 7a Pte 43; s with fan M\$196-280, with air-con M\$280-364, d with fan M\$252-336, with air-con M\$364-448; ☎ ☎) A good-value hotel with modern air-conditioning, clean rooms and cable TV.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Fénix (☎ 628-96-00; www.fenix.com.mx; 4a Nte 19; s/d with fan M\$210/260, with air-con M\$360/455, with air-con & TV M\$450/560; ☎ ☎) The Fénix has a selection of rooms, so look before you sleep. The ones at the rear are generally better. Some fan rooms are good-sized while some of the more expensive ones are smaller.

Galerías Hotel y Arts (☎ 642-75-90; 4a Nte 21; www.galeriasartshotel.com; s M\$380-430, d/tr M\$540/650; ☎ ☎) Stylish, contemporary and boutique-on-a-budget, Galerías is an excellent small hotel with jazzy art prints and large, comfortable air-conditioned rooms. Double rooms are spacious and two cozy but comfy singles are a deal for those going solo.

ourpick Casa Mexicana (☎ 626-66-05; www.casamexicanachiapas.com; 8a Sur 19; s M\$575, d M\$675-775; (P) (♿) (♿)) An exquisite boutique hotel paying homage to Mexican women in history, guests can choose from sumptuous rooms named for heroines such as human rights lawyer Digna Ochoa or Zapatista Commander Ramona. Antiques, lush plants and all kinds of interesting art create a soothing, creative feel. The 10 rooms on two floors surround a tropical garden-patio that even has a small pool. With a small bar and a restaurant serving excellent homemade meals, this is a fabulous place to stay.

Hotel Tapachula (☎ 626-60-60; www.hoteltapachula.com; 9a Pte 17; s/d M\$690/790, ste M\$890-1040; (P) (♿) (♿)) This glass-fronted luxury hotel is the poshest address in town. Large, stylish, marble-floored rooms, some with volcano views, come with either king- or queen-size beds or two doubles. There's a good restaurant, a small pool and a nifty glass elevator to take you there.

Also recommended are the following:

Hotel La Hacienda (☎ 626-61-00; fax 625-20-61; 2a Sur 14; s/d/tr M\$360/430/540; (P) (♿)) A modern, comfortable place; older rooms have more colonial style.

Hotel Don Miguel (☎ 626-11-43; www.hoteldonmiguel.com.mx; 1a Pte 18; s M\$504, d M\$628-701, ste M\$780-901; (P) (♿)) Comfy beds in bright, air-conditioned rooms with TV and phone; a good restaurant.

Eating

Naturalísimo (☎ 625-17-27; cnr Central Nte & 1a Pte; mains M\$25-40; ☎ 7am-9:30pm; (V)) This vegetarian mainstay is inexpensive, with fresh juices and a breezy corner location that always hits the spot on a sweltering afternoon.

Hostal del Rey (☎ 625-07-55; 4a Nte 17; breakfasts M\$40-50, mains M\$60-90; ☎ 7am-11pm Mon-Sat, 7am-3pm Sun) Staffed by solicitous bow-tied waiters, the spacious, air-conditioned Hostal del Rey is particularly good for leisurely breakfasts.

Los Comales Grill (☎ 626-24-05; 8a Nte 4; mains M\$50-85; ☎ 24hr) To feel like you're in the thick of things, dine in this open-air restaurant with a prime location in Parque Hidalgo. The menu includes good *caldo tlalpeño* (hearty chicken, vegetable and chili soup) and decent steaks. There's marimba music Thursday, Saturday and Sunday evenings from 8pm to 11pm.

Restaurante Los Jarrones (☎ 626-11-43; Hotel Don Miguel, 1a Pte 18; mains M\$60-140) Perennially popular, Los Jarrones provides welcome air-con and a big choice of Mexican and international

fare. Sit near the windows to escape the painfully hokey live dinner bands.

ourpick Casas Viejas (☎ 625-27-97; 4a Sur 30; mains M\$75-140; ☎ 9am-11pm Tue-Sat) Opened in 2007, this is already one of the finest restaurants in Chiapas. Set in a gorgeous garden patio of two 'old houses,' chef/owner Matias Klein Kötter creates a delectable and ever-evolving international menu using regional ingredients. The *pollo al tamarindo* (tamarind chicken) and *pasta de salmon* (salmon pasta with orange and tequila) keep the locals in eye-fluttering rapture, and if it's not too busy, the kitchen might whip you up a custom dish (including vegetarian options). For dessert, locally-grown cardamom, chocolate and coffee are blended together to make scrumptious crepes, but Kötter won't give up the family secret of the chocolatey *pastel tlacopac*.

A number of clean and popular *comedores* are hidden upstairs at the **Mercado Sebastián Escobar** (cnr 5a Pte & 12a Nte; mains M\$35-45; ☎ 6am-5pm), dishing out mammoth plates of cooked-to-order Chinese food. Snag a bench seat at the picnic tables and come hungry!

Drinking

Nestled in the coffee-growing region of the state, Tapachula has an especially nice coffee-house culture and lots of evening café life.

Ángeles Alta Repostería Café (☎ 625-6731; 4a Nte 24B; dessert M\$12-30, breakfast M\$38-45; ☎ 7am-11pm) Bring a book or the newspaper and settle in for a good read over blood-pumping espresso. Spread out over two levels, this modern air-conditioned café invites lingering over scrumptious desserts, good breakfasts and free wi-fi.

Gramlich Café (1a Pte 9; coffees & snacks M\$10-35; ☎ 8:30am-9:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-9:30pm Sat, 2-10pm Sun) Serving up organic coffee grown in the mountains north of town, this popular coffeehouse has more of an old-fashioned feel.

Tutifrutti (☎ 626-67-50; 1a Pte 14A; juices & licuados M\$17; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) Melt into a freshly-made fruit juice or a cool *licuado*.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Tapachula's **airport** (☎ 626-41-89; Carretera Tapachula-Puerto Madero Km 18.5) is 20km southwest of the city. **Aviaca** (☎ 625-40-30; Central Nte 18) flies to/from Mexico City three times daily, and both **Aeroméxico** (☎ 626-39-21; Central Ote 4) and **Mexicana** have three daily departures.

BUS

Deluxe and 1st-class buses go from the **OCC terminal** (☎ 626-28-81; 17a Ote s/n), 1km northeast of Parque Hidalgo. The main 2nd-class services are by **Rápidos del Sur** (RS; ☎ 626-11-61; 9a Pte 62). Daily departures (from OCC unless otherwise stated) include the following:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency (daily)
Comitán	M\$154	6hr (via Motozintla)	7
Escuintla	M\$20-52	1½hr	12 from OCC, 26 RS
Mexico City	M\$830-1200	18hr	12
Oaxaca	M\$388	11hr	1
San Cristóbal de Las Casas	M\$206	7½hr (via Motozintla)	7
Tonalá	M\$85-164	3hr	6 from OCC, 26 RS
Tuxtla Gutiérrez	M\$130-434	6hr	10 from OCC, 26 RS

Other buses from the OCC station go to Palenque, Puerto Escondido and Villahermosa. There are also six daily buses from here to Guatemala City (five to six hours): **Trans Galgos Inter** (www.transgalgosinter.com.gt) at 6am, 10am, 11:45am and 2:30pm (M\$260 to M\$370), **Línea Dorada** (www.tikalmayanworld.com) at 2:30pm (M\$150) and **Tica Bus** (www.ticabus.com) at 7am (M\$173).

Galgos also runs two daily buses to San Salvador, El Salvador (M\$360, nine hours) via Escuintla in Guatemala. The Tica Bus service continues all the way to Panama City, with several long overnight stops en route.

For destinations in western Guatemala, including Quetzaltenango, it's best to get a bus from the border (see opposite).

Getting Around

Sociedades Transportes 149 (☎ 625-12-87; 2a Sur 68) has a booth in the arrivals hall, charging M\$65 per person *colectivo* from the airport to the center, or M\$150 for a private taxi (up to two people).

Taxis within the central area (including the OCC terminal) cost M\$20.

AROUND TAPACHULA**Barra de Cahocán**

Half an hour (37km) southwest of Tapachula, on the coast past the airport and the mammoth Puerto Chiapas cruise terminal, this

town has a low-key beach with *palapas* and a pool for rent and a seafood *comedor*. Sea turtles migrate here from July through October, and a project begun in 2007 gathers and releases the eggs. *Colectivos* from Tapachula (M\$15) run every 30 minutes; the last departure back leaves at 6:20pm.

Izapa

The pre-Hispanic ruins at Izapa are important to archaeologists, and of real interest to archaeology buffs. Izapa flourished from approximately 200 BC to AD 200, and its carving style (mostly seen on tall slabs known as steles, fronted by round altars) shows descendants of Olmec deities, with their upper lips unnaturally lengthened. Some Maya monuments in Guatemala are similar, and Izapa is considered an important 'bridge' between the Olmecs and the Maya. Izapa had 91 known stele-and-altar pairings, and you can see some well-preserved examples in the Tapachula museum (p858).

Izapa is around 11km east of Tapachula on the Talismán road. There are three groups of ruins (admission free, info M\$15; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), each looked after by a caretaking family. The northern group is on the left of the road if you're going from Tapachula – watch out for the low pyramid mounds; you'll also see a ball court and several carved steles and altars. For the other groups, go back 700m toward Tapachula and take a signposted dirt road to the left. You'll pass houses with 2000-year-old sculptures lying in their gardens. After 800m you'll reach a fork with signs to Izapa Grupo A and Izapa Grupo B, each about 250m further on. Grupo A has 10 very weathered stele-and-altar pairings around a field. Grupo B is a couple of grass-covered mounds and more stone sculptures, including three curious ball-on-pillar affairs.

To get there from Tapachula take a combi or microbus (M\$10) of **Unión y Progreso** (☎ 962-626-33-79; 5a Pte 53).

Santo Domingo, Unión Juárez & Volcán Tacaná

☎ 962

Volcán Tacaná's dormant cone towers over the countryside north of Tapachula. Even if you're not interested in climbing to its summit, two villages on its gorgeously verdant lower slopes make an attractive trip, their cooler climate offering welcome relief from the Tapachula steam bath.

Santo Domingo lies 34km northeast of Tapachula, amid coffee plantations. The imposing three-story wooden 1920s *casa grande* of the German immigrants who formerly owned the coffee plantation here has been restored as the **Centro Turístico Santo Domingo** (☎ 627-00-55; ☎ 8am-8pm), with a restaurant (mains M\$35 to M\$80), a small coffee museum (M\$10) and a well-tended tropical garden and pool (M\$10).

Nine kilometers beyond Santo Domingo, **Unión Juárez** (population 2700, elevation 1300m) is the starting point for ascents of Tacaná and other, less demanding walks. Tapachula folk like to come up here on weekends and holidays to cool off and feast on *parrillada*, a cholesterol-challenging plate of grilled meat and a few vegetables.

The best months to climb Tacaná are late November to March. There are two routes up the mountain from Unión Juárez. Neither requires any technical climbing, but you need to allow two or three days for either, preferably plus time to acclimatize. Be prepared for extreme cold at the top. The less steep route is via Chiquihuites, 12km from Unión Juárez and reachable by vehicle. From there it's a three-hour walk to Papales, where you can sleep in huts for a donation of M\$20. From Papales to the summit is about a five-hour ascent. The other route is via Talquián (about two hours' walk from Unión Juárez) and Trigales (five hours from Talquián). It's about a six-hour climb from Trigales to the summit. The two routes meet a couple of hours below the summit, and on both you have access to camping areas.

Combis from Unión Juárez will carry you to the small town of Córdoba, about halfway to Talquián, also passing the turnover for Chiquihuites (about 1½ hours' walk away). It's a good idea to get a guide for Tacaná in Unión Juárez. Ask for the Valera brothers at **Hotel Colonial Campestre** (☎ 647-20-15), or Humberto Ríos at the **Cafetal de la Montaña** (☎ 647-20-31). Expect to pay about M\$500 for an ascent.

Another local place to head for is **Pico del Loro**, a parrot's beak-shaped overhanging rock that offers fine panoramas. The rock is 5km up a drivable track that leaves the Santo Domingo-Unión Juárez road about halfway between the two villages. Or ask directions to **La Ventana** (the Window), a lookout point over the valley of the Río Suchiate (the international border), or the **Cascadas Muxbal**, each about one hour's walk from Unión Juárez.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Aljoad (☎ 647-21-06; s/d M\$100/200) Just north of Unión Juárez' plaza, Hotel Aljoad has clean, tidy rooms around a large patio, all with hot-water bathrooms. Inexpensive meals are available.

Hotel Colonial Campestre (☎ 647-20-15; s/d M\$200/300; mains M\$50-80) This hotel, a couple of blocks below Unión Juárez' plaza, has spacious rooms with bathroom and TV, good views, and a restaurant (*parrillada* for two M\$155).

There are plenty of *comedores* and restaurants around Unión Juárez' plaza.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Tapachula, first take a *colectivo* taxi (M\$15, 30 minutes) from 10a Norte, between 9a and 11a Pte, to Cacahoatán – 20km north. From where these terminate in Cacahoatán, Transportes Tacaná combis head on to Santo Domingo (M\$10, 30 minutes) and Unión Juárez (M\$10, 45 minutes).

Coffee Fincas

The hills north of Tapachula are home to numerous coffee *fincas* (ranches), many of them set up by German immigrants over a century ago. These have tours, restaurants and overnight accommodations:

Finca Argovia (☎ 962-692-30-51; www.argovia.com.mx; r per person incl breakfast from M\$625)

Finca Hamburgo (☎ 962-626-64-04; www.fincahamburgo.com; d from M\$1000)

Finca Irlanda (☎ 962-625-92-03; www.fincairlanda.grupopeters.com; r incl breakfast M\$600 per person, 4-person ste incl all meals M\$1800)

Border Towns

It's 20km from Tapachula to the international border at Talismán, opposite El Carmen in Guatemala. The border crossing between Ciudad Hidalgo, 37km from Tapachula, opposite Ciudad Tecún Umán in Guatemala, is busier and has more onward connections. Both border points have money-changing facilities and are open 24 hours – though you should get through by early afternoon for greater security and to guarantee onward transportation. Watch out for moneychangers passing counterfeit bills at the Ciudad Hidalgo crossing.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Combis of **Autotransportes Paulino Navarro** (☎ 962-626-11-52; 7a Pte 5, Tapachula) head to Ciudad

Hidalgo (M\$15, 50 minutes) every 10 minutes, 4:30am to 9:30pm.

Combis of **Unión y Progreso** (☎ 962-626-33-79; 5a Pte 53, Tapachula) leave for Talismán every few minutes, between 5am and 10pm (M\$10). A taxi from Tapachula to Talismán takes 20 minutes and costs around M\$100. You can also catch combis to either border from the street outside the OCC bus station in Tapachula.

Frequent buses leave Ciudad Tecún Umán until about 6pm for Guatemala City (US\$8, six hours) by the Pacific slope route, through Retalhuleu and Escuintla. Buses to Quetzaltenango (US\$3.50, 3½ hours) depart up to about 2pm.

The majority of bus services from El Carmen, which include around 20 a day to

Guatemala City (US\$8.50, seven hours), go via Ciudad Tecún Umán, and then head along the Pacific slope route. For Quetzaltenango, you can either take one of these and change at Coatepeque or Retalhuleu, or alternatively get a *colectivo* taxi to Malacatán, on a more direct road to Quetzaltenango via San Marcos, and then look for onward transportation from there.

If you're heading for Lake Atitlán or Chichicastenango, you need to get to Quetzaltenango first.

Drivers: the processing point for vehicle import permits, whether you're entering or leaving Mexico by these borders, is north of Tapachula on Hwy 200, at Carretera Tapachula-Huixtla Km 8.