

# The Highlands



Guatemala's most dramatic region – the Highlands – stretches from Antigua to the Mexican border northwest of Huehuetenango. Here the verdant hills sport emerald-green grass, cornfields and towering stands of pine, and every town and village has a story.

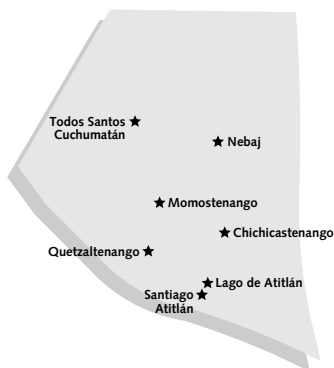
The traditional values and customs of Guatemala's indigenous peoples are strongest in the Highlands. Mayan dialects are the first language, Spanish a distant second. The age-old culture based on maize (from which the Maya believe that humans were created) is still alive; a sturdy cottage set in the midst of a thriving *milpa* (maize field) is a common sight. And on every road you'll see men, women and children carrying burdens of *leña* (firewood), to be used for heating and cooking.

Most towns here were already populated by the Maya when the Spanish arrived. History turned bloody and inhumane with the beginning of the civil war in 1960, when the Highlands were targeted heavily by guerrillas and the army alike.

The poster child for Guatemala's natural beauty, the volcano-ringed Lago de Atitlán has been attracting tourists for decades. Surrounded by small villages, the lake deals with its popularity well. The only place that feels really played out is Panajachel – the other villages maintain a quiet air, while offering a reasonable degree of comfort. This area was particularly badly hit by Hurricane Stan in late 2005 and the whole village of Panabaj disappeared under a landslide. Reconstruction work – for the most part by local communities and international organizations – is ensuring a slow but sure return to normality for this region.

## TOP FIVE

- Kicking back or partying hard lakeside around sublime **Lago de Atitlán** (p123)
- Hunting down a bargain at colorful, indigenous markets at **Chichicastenango** (p149) and **Momostenango** (p179)
- Polishing your Spanish and hiking volcanoes around **Quetzaltenango** (p161)
- Taking in the stunning Cuchumatanes scenery and village life around **Nebaj** (p158) or **Todos Santos Cuchumatán** (p185)
- Admiring the colorful costumes in towns such as **Santiago Atitlán** (p137), **Todos Santos Cuchumatán** (p185) and **Nebaj** (p158), and tuning into age-old **Mayan culture** in small towns and villages everywhere



## CLIMATE

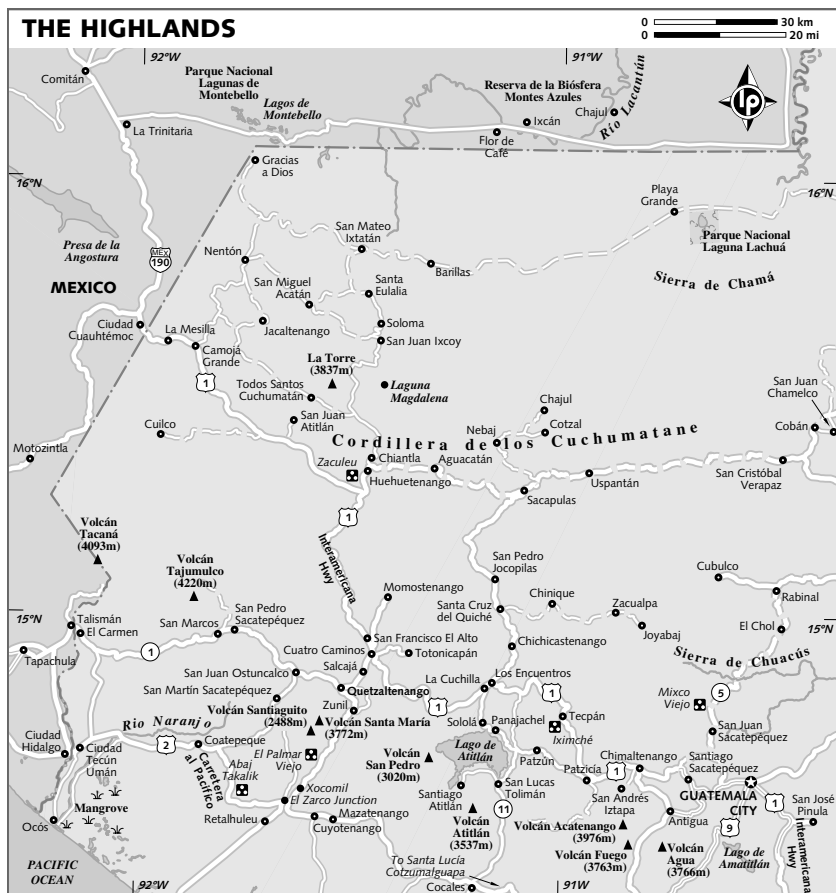
The emerald-green grass, tall fields of yellow maize (corn) and towering stands of pine that characterize the Highlands all depend on the abundant rain that falls between May and October. If you visit during this rainy season, be prepared for some dreary, chilly, damp days. At high altitudes it can get cold at night at any time of year. But when the sun comes out, this land is stunning to behold.

## GETTING AROUND

The meandering Interamericana (Hwy 1), running 345km along the mountain ridges between Guatemala City and the Mexican border at La Mesilla, passes close to all of the region's most important places, and count-

less buses roar up and down it all day, every day. Two key intersections act as major bus interchanges: Los Encuentros for Panajachel and Chichicastenango, and Cuatro Caminos for Quetzaltenango. If you can't find a bus going all the way to your destination, simply get one to Los Encuentros or Cuatro Caminos and change there. These transfers are usually seamless, with not-too-frustrating waiting times and locals who are always ready to help travelers find the right bus.

Travel is easiest in the morning and, for smaller places, on market days. By mid- or late afternoon, buses may be difficult to find, and it's not generally a good idea to be out on the roads after dark. On more-remote routes further off the beaten track, you may



be relying more on pickups or trucks than buses for transportation.

Shuttle minibuses ferry tourists between the major destinations of the region and beyond. They travel faster, more comfortably and more expensively than buses. There's a belief that shuttles are more vulnerable to highway robbery, because a vanload of gringos (Westerners) is such a tempting target. In reality, the percentage of shuttles that gets held up is minuscule – but you have to make up your own mind.

## LAGO DE ATITLÁN

Surrounded by volcanoes, steep hillsides and villages where traditional Mayan culture meets the international travel scene, Lago de Atitlán – 8km across from north to south, 18km from east to west, and averaging around 300m deep – is one of the world's most beautiful and fascinating bodies of water. Many travelers have fallen in love with it and made their homes here. It's a three-hour bus ride west from Guatemala City or Antigua. The main lakeside town is Panajachel, or 'Gringotenango' as it is sometimes unkindly called, and most people initially head here to launch their Atitlán explorations.

The Maya around the north and northeast sides of the lake are mostly Kaqchiquel, while those on the west, south and southeast are Tzutujil. When the Spanish arrived in 1524 the Kaqchiquels allied with them against the Tzutujils, who were defeated in a bloody battle at Tzanajuyú. The Kaqchiquels subsequently rebelled against the Spanish and were themselves subjugated by 1531.

There is an ersatz town at the highway junction of Los Encuentros, based on the presence of throngs of people changing buses. From La Cuchilla junction, 2km further west along the Interamericana, a road descends 12km southward to Sololá, and then a sinuous 8km more, losing 500m in altitude, through pine forests to Panajachel. Sit on the right-hand side of the bus for breathtaking views of the lake and its surrounding volcanoes.

### Dangers & Annoyances

Although most visitors never experience any trouble, there have been incidents of robbery, rape and murder in the Highlands. The

most frequent sites for robberies are unfortunately some of the most beautiful – the paths that run around Lago de Atitlán. The security situation is forever changing here – some months it's OK to walk between certain villages, then that route suddenly becomes dangerous.

If you do plan to go walking, use common sense – don't take any more money than you need, or anything that you really don't want to lose. Walk in groups of at least six. Locals often take a machete along (for deterrent purposes only, naturally). If you do run into trouble, don't resist – your life is worth more than your camera.

There are persistent rumors about a Japanese tourist who was lynched for taking a photo of a child in the Highlands. This is slightly misleading. What he actually did was pick up a crying child in an effort to comfort it, which led the locals to think that a kidnapping was afoot. Fears of foreigners kidnapping children are common in the Highlands, so exercise restraint. And, of course, ask permission before taking photos of people.

Stay out of the lake in the first couple of weeks of the rainy season, when many months' worth of dry-season garbage and excreta is washed down into it.

### TECPÁN

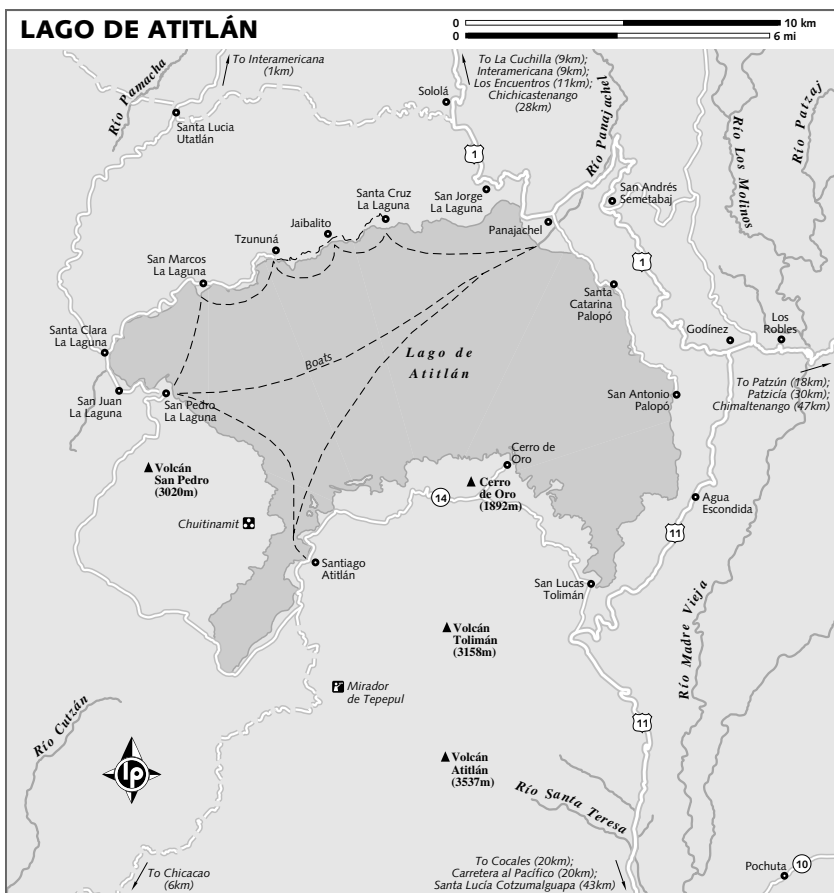
Founded as a Spanish military base during the conquest, Tecpán today is a somewhat dusty town with a couple of small hotels. The ruins of the Kaqchiquel Mayan capital, Iximché (ish-im-che), make it worth a visit for history fans.

Overlooking the more northerly of Tecpán's twin central plazas is a fine colonial church, the **Parroquia de San Francisco de Asís**. Tecpán honors San Francisco de Asís (St Francis of Assisi) in its annual **festival** in the first week of October. Market day is Thursday.

### Iximché

Founded in 1463 on a flat promontory surrounded by ravines, Iximché was well sited to be the Kaqchiquel capital. At that time, the Kaqchiquel were at war with the K'iche' Maya, and the city's natural defenses served them well.

The Spanish, who arrived in 1524, set up their first Guatemalan headquarters at Tecpán. However, the demands of the Spanish



for gold and other loot soon put an end to their alliance with the Kaqchiquel, who were defeated in the ensuing guerrilla war.

Entering the **archaeological site** (admission US\$4; ☎ 8am-4:30pm), visit the small museum on the right, then continue to the four ceremonial plazas, which are surrounded by temple structures up to 10m high, and ball courts. Some structures have been uncovered: on a few the original plaster coating is still in place.

Ruinas buses to the site (US\$0.20, 10 minutes) leave the north side of the more southerly of Tecpán's plazas at least every hour till 4pm. The last bus back leaves the site no later than 4:30pm.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Iximché** (☎ 7840 3495; 1a Av 1-38, Zona 2; s/d US\$4/8, with bathroom US\$7/13) This hotel will put you up in pink-painted, decent-sized, adequately clean rooms. It's just off the southern plaza.

There are various eateries around the twin plazas.

## Getting There & Away

Veloz Poaquileña runs buses to Guatemala City (US\$1, two hours) about every 30 minutes, from 5:30am to 7pm, departing in front of the church. Few buses traveling to or from Los Encuentros (US\$0.70, 40 minutes), or anywhere else northwest along the Intera-

## HOW ATITLÁN WAS BORN

The first volcanoes in the Atitlán region popped up 150,000 years ago, but today's landscape has its origins in the massive Los Chocoyos eruption of 85,000 years ago, which blew volcanic ash as far as Florida and Panama. The quantity of magma expelled from below the earth's crust caused the surface terrain to collapse, forming a huge, roughly circular hollow that soon filled with water – the Lago de Atitlán. Smaller volcanoes rose out of the lake's southern waters thousands of years later: Volcán San Pedro (today 3020m above sea level) about 60,000 years ago, followed by Volcán Atitlán (3537m) and Volcán Tolimán (3158m) some 40,000 to 30,000 years ago. These reduced the lake's surface area but at the same time created the dramatic volcano vistas that make Atitlán what it is. The lake today is around 300m deep and has a surface area of 128 sq km. Its water level fluctuates curiously from year to year.

mericana, go into central Tecpán. It's about a 1km walk (or, if you're lucky, a short ride on a yellow urban bus) to the center from the Tecpán turnoff on the Interamericana.

## SOLOLÁ

pop 59,960 / elev 2110m

There was a Kaqchiquel town (called Tzoleyá) here long before the Spanish showed up. Sololá's importance comes from its location on trade routes between the *tierra caliente* (hot lands of the Pacific Slope) and *tierra fría* (the chilly highlands). All the traders meet here, and Sololá's terrific **market** (☞ Tue & Fri) is one of the most authentic in the Highlands. On market mornings the plaza next to the cathedral is ablaze with the colorful costumes of people from a dozen surrounding villages and towns. Displays of meat, vegetables, fruit, house wares and clothing are neatly arranged in every available space, with tides of buyers ebbing and flowing around the vendors. Elaborate stands are well stocked with brightly colored yarn for making the traditional costumes you see around you. This is a local rather than a tourist market.

Every Sunday morning the officers of the traditional *cofradías* (religious brotherhoods) parade ceremoniously to the cathedral. On other days, Sololá sleeps.

You can make a very pleasant walk from Sololá down to the lake, either taking the highway to Panajachel (8km) or the walking track to Santa Cruz La Laguna (10km), but ask around about safety before starting out.

Virtually everyone stays in Panajachel, but if you need a bed in Sololá, **Hotel Belén** (☎ 7762 3105; 10a Calle 4-36, Zona 1; s/d US\$5/9; 📍) has eight clean upstairs rooms with hot-water bathroom. It's a block uphill behind the clock tower that overlooks the main square.

All buses between Panajachel and Los Encuentros stop at Sololá. It's US\$0.20 and 20 minutes to either place.

## PANAJACHEL

pop 15,000 / elev 1560m

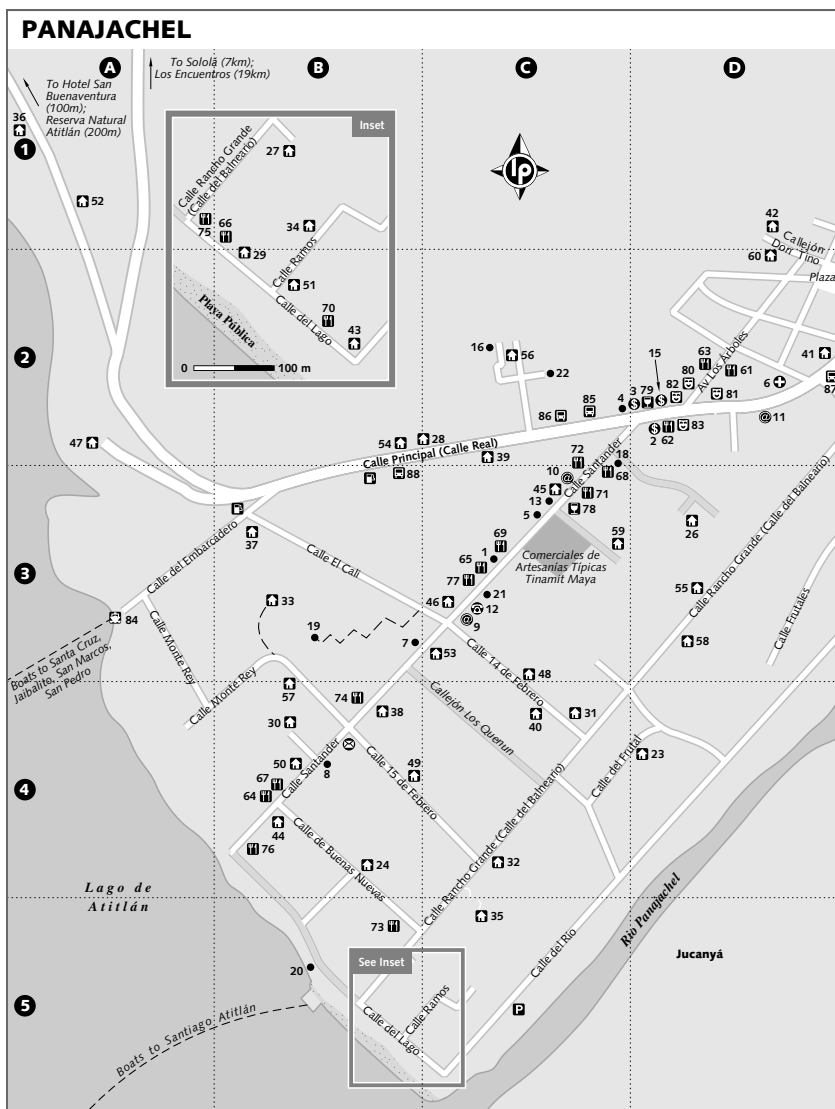
The busiest and most built-up lakeside settlement, Panajachel ('Pana' to pretty much the entire country) has developed haphazardly and, some say, in a less than beautiful way.

Several different cultures mingle on Panajachel's dusty streets. Ladinos and gringos control the tourist industry. The Kaqchiquel and Tz'utujil Maya from surrounding villages come to sell their handicrafts to tourists. Tour groups descend on the town by bus for a few hours or overnight.

Panajachel's excellent transportation connections and thumping nightlife make it a favorite destination for weekenders and Guatemalans. During the week, things quieten down, though the main street, Calle Santander, remains the same – internet café after handicrafts store after restaurant after travel agent. But you need only go down to the lakeshore to understand why Pana attracts so many visitors.

Lago de Atitlán is one of the world's most spectacular locales. Diamond splatters dance across the water, fertile hills dot the landscape, and over everything loom the volcanoes, permeating the entire area with a mysterious beauty. It never looks the same twice.

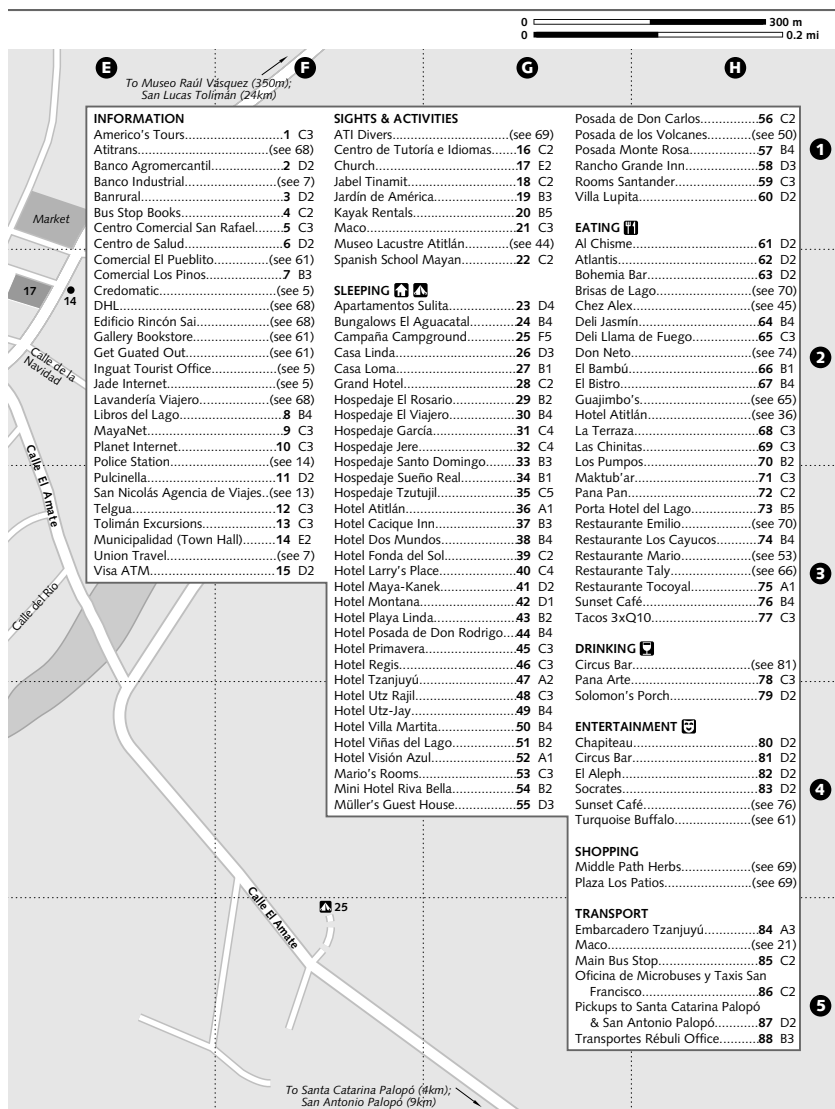
Lago de Atitlán is often placid and beautiful early in the day, which is the best time for swimming – though Pana's shores aren't the cleanest. (Note that since the lake is a volcanic crater filled with water, the lake bed often drops off sharply very near the shore.) By noon the Xocomil, a southeasterly wind, may have risen to ruffle the water's surface,



sometimes violently, making it a tough crossing for the small boats plying between the lakeside villages. This is particularly true between November and February, a time known as the windy season in these parts. It's always good to get your traveling done in the morning, when weather conditions are better and there is more traffic.

## Orientation

Calle Principal (also called Calle Real) is nominally Pana's main street, although with Calle Santander's plethora of tourist-related businesses, you'll probably find yourself spending much more time there. Many of the establishments here don't use street addresses.



Most buses stop at the intersection of Calle Principal and Calle Santander, the main road to the lake. Calle Santander is lined with restaurants, shops, accommodations, cybercafés, travel agencies and other tourist services. Beyond the Calle Santander corner, Calle Principal continues 400m to 500m northeast to the town center, where

you'll find the market (busiest on Sunday and Thursday, but in action daily), church, town hall and a further smattering of places to sleep and eat.

Calle Rancho Grande (also called Calle del Balneario) is the other main road to the beach; it's parallel to, and east of, Calle Santander. The pedestrian Calle del Lago

runs along the lakeside between Calle Santander and Calle Rancho Grande; it's a pretty place for strolling.

## Information

### BOOKSTORES

**Bus Stop Books** (Centro Comercial El Dorado, Calle Principal) A good range of mainly used books to swap and buy, and a small selection of guidebooks.

**Gallery Bookstore** (Comercial El Pueblito, Av Los Árboles) Sells and exchanges used books, plus sells a few new ones including some Lonely Planet guides.

**Libros del Lago** (Calle Santander) Has an excellent stock of books in English and other tongues on Guatemala, the Maya and Mesoamerica, plus maps, English and Latin American literature in English, and Lonely Planet and other guidebooks.

### EMERGENCY

**Policía de Turismo** (Tourist Police) Town Hall (☎ 7762 1120; Municipalidad, Calle Principal; ☎ 9am-5pm); Inguat tourist office (Centro Comercial San Rafael Local 11, Calle Santander; ☎ 9am-5pm) English-speaking; main office in the town hall.

### INTERNET ACCESS

As you'd expect, Pana has plenty of places to check your email and surf the web. The standard price is US\$1.30 an hour; typical hours are 9am to 10pm, perhaps slightly shorter on Sunday.

**Gallery Bookstore** (Comercial El Pueblito, Av Los Árboles)

**Jade Internet** (Centro Comercial San Rafael, Calle Santander) One of several cybercafés on Calle Santander.

**MayaNet** (Calle Santander 3-62)

**Planet Internet** (Calle Santander) Has good connections.

**Pulcinella** (Calle Principal 0-62)

### LAUNDRY

**Lavandería Viajero** (Edificio Rincón Sai, Calle Santander; ☎ 8am-7pm) Reliable place; charges US\$0.45 per pound.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

The nearest hospital is at Sololá.

**Centro de Salud** (Clinic; Calle Principal; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat)

### MONEY

**Banco Agromercantil** (cnr Calles Principal & Santander; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks, and has a MasterCard ATM.

**Banco Industrial** (Comercial Los Pinos, Calle Santander; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Changes cash US dollars, offers Visa-card cash advances and has a Visa ATM.

**Banrural** (Calle Principal; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks; next door are a Visa ATM and Banco Agromercantil.

**Credomatic** (Centro Comercial San Rafael, Calle Santander) Visa and MasterCard cash advances and changes cash US dollars.

Some of the travel agencies, restaurants and hotels along Calle Santander will change US dollars or euros cash, but not at the best rates.

**Americo's Tours** Does Visa and MasterCard cash advances, but charges a 10% commission.

**Circus Bar** (Av Los Árboles) Changes euros.

### POST

**DHL** (Edificio Rincón Sai, Calle Santander) Courier service.

**Get Guated Out** (☎ /fax 7762 0595; gguated@c.net.gv; Comercial El Pueblito, Av Los Árboles) English-speaking outfit that can ship your important letters and parcels by air freight or international courier. It will also buy handi-crafts for you and ship them for export – handy if you can't come to Panajachel yourself.

**Post Office** (cnr Calles Santander & 15 de Febrero)

### TELEPHONE

Some cybercafés and travel agencies located on Calle Santander offer moderately cheap phone calls – around US\$0.15 a minute to North America or Central America and US\$0.25 a minute to Europe. Try Jade Internet or Planet Internet. For local calls there is a line of card phones outside **Telgua** (Calle Santander).

### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Inguat** (☎ 5874 9450; Centro Comercial San Rafael Local 11, Calle Santander; ☎ 9am-5pm) This tourist office is on the main street. There are a few brochures available and staff can answer straightforward questions.

### TRAVEL AGENCIES

Many of the full-service travel agencies located in Panajachel are scattered along Calle Santander. These establishments offer trips, tours and shuttle services to other destinations around Guatemala. Included among these travel agencies:

**Americo's Tours** (☎ 7762 2021; Calle Santander)

**Atitrans** (☎ 7762 2336; Edificio Rincón Sai)

**San Nicolás Agencia de Viajes** (☎ 7762 0382; Calle Santander 1-71)

**Tolimán Excursions** (☎ /fax 7762 2455, 7762 0334; Calle Santander 1-77)

**Union Travel** (☎ 7762 2426; Local 2, Comercial Los Pinos)



## Sights

### MUSEUMS

Pana has two very worthwhile museums. The **Museo Lacustre Atitlán** (Hotel Posada de Don Rodrigo, Calle Santander; admission US\$4.50; ☎ 8am-6pm Sun-Fri, 8am-7pm Sat) has fascinating displays on the history of the Atitlán region and the volcanic eruptions that created its majestic landscape, and a collection of ancient Mayan artifacts recovered from the lake. The **Museo Raúl Vásquez** (5a Calle Peatonal, Calle Principal; admission US\$1.30; ☎ 10am-6pm) is the home, studio, and sculpture and meditation garden of the quirky Panajachel artist for which it is named. The garden is filled with Vásquez sculptures of an eclectic selection of deities, from Jesus Christ to Shiva; indoors, you can browse his colorful, abstract paintings. To get there, follow Calle Principal 700m northeast from the market, and follow the museum sign pointing down an alley: the museum is 120m off the road.

### RESERVA NATURAL ATITLÁN

A former coffee plantation being retaken by natural vegetation, the **Reserva Natural Atitlán** (☎ 7762 2565; www.atitlanreserva.com; admission US\$5; ☎ 8am-5pm) is 200m past the Hotel Atitlán on the northern outskirts of town. It makes a good outing on foot or bicycle. You can walk the main trail at a leisurely pace in an hour: it leads up over swing bridges to a waterfall, then down to a platform for viewing the local population of spider monkeys. You should also see *pisotes* (coatis), relatives of the raccoon with long snouts and long, upright, furry tails. The reserve also includes a herb garden and butterfly enclosure, an interpretive center, zip lines, camping, a small shade coffee plantation and an aviary.

## Activities

### CYCLING, HIKING, KAYAKING & HORSE RIDING

Lago de Atitlán is a cycling, hiking and riding wonderland, with hill and dale spread among a fantastic setting. You can take a bike by boat to Santiago Atitlán, San Pedro La Laguna or another village to start a cycling tour around the lake. A few places in Panajachel rent out bikes: equipment varies, so check out a bike before renting it. **Maco** (☎ 7762 0883; Calle Santander) rents motorbikes for around US\$8/40 per one/24 hours.

See Santiago Atitlán (p137) and following sections for information on walks around Lago de Atitlán.

Make inquiries about safety before setting out for any hike or ride, and keep asking as you go (see p123). In some cases it's better to go with a guide, and some travel agencies, such as Tolimán Excursions (opposite), offer guided hikes and rides in the lake area.

A one-day walking trip from Panajachel to the top of Volcán San Pedro and back (crossing the lake by boat) should cost around US\$25 per person.

Kayaks are available for rent (from US\$4 per hour) from the pier at the foot of Calle del Balneario.

### DIVING

British- and American-run **ATI Divers** (☎ 7762 2621; www.laiguana perdida.com; Plaza Los Patios, Calle Santander; ☎ 9:30am-1pm Mon-Sat) leads dive trips from Santa Cruz La Laguna (p148). Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) beginning certification is a four-day affair costing US\$205. ATI also offers advanced certification, fun dives for certified divers (US\$30/50 for one/two dives), and specialty courses including a two-dive altitude course (US\$70). Lago de Atitlán is an interesting dive site because it's a collapsed volcanic cone with bizarre geological formations and some places where hot water vents directly into the lake. There's not much aquatic flora or fauna here. The advantages of doing a dive course here is that it's one of the rare places in the world where you can dive at altitude without having to use a dry suit. Diving at altitude brings its own challenges – you need better control over your buoyancy, and visibility will be reduced. During the rainy season the water clouds up, so the best time to dive is between October and May (in the morning).

ATI Divers also organizes the annual garbage cleanup of the lake, during which several tons of trash are collected. This event, typically held in September, is a great opportunity to give something back to the community and make new friends.

### Language Courses

Panajachel has a niche in the language-school scene. Two well-set-up schools are **Jardín de América** (☎/fax 7762 2637; www.jardindeamerica.com; Calle 14 de Febrero, 3a Av Peatonal 4-44) and **Jabel Tinamit** (☎ 7762 0238; www.jabeltinamit.com; Calle Santander). Both have ample gardens and good atmospheres. Four hours of one-on-one study five

days per week, including a homestay with a local family, will cost around US\$120 per week at either place. Other schools include **Centro de Tutoría e Idiomas** (CTI; ☎ 7762 0259/1005; 2a Av Peatonal 1-84, Zona 2) and **Spanish School Maya** (☎ 7810 7196; Callejón Santa Elena), both of which teach some Mayan languages as well as Spanish.

## Tours

If you're pressed for time, a boat tour of the lake, stopping at a few villages, is a fine idea. Boats leave the Playa Pública quay daily at 8:30am and 9:30am for tours to San Pedro La Laguna (where you stop for about 1½ hours), Santiago Atitlán (1½ hours) and San Antonio Palopó (one hour). Both get back at 3:30pm, so you get a little less shore time on the 9:30am departure. Cost is US\$8 for either tour. Many travel agencies (p128) offer more-expensive boat tours (around US\$25 per person), which may include weaving demonstrations, visits to the shrine of Maximón in Santiago, and so on. To arrange a tour, head to the pier at the foot of Calle del Balneario and start bargaining. Most travel agencies also arrange boat tours.

## Festivals & Events

The **festival of San Francisco de Asís**, October 4, is celebrated with massive drinking and fireworks in Panajachel.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

Budget travelers here will rejoice at the profusion of family-run *hospedajes* (budget hotels). They're simple – perhaps two rough beds, a small table and a light bulb in a bare boarding room – but cheap. Most provide clean toilets, and some have hot showers. More-expensive hotels offer generous discounts for longer stays.

**Campaña Campground** (☎ 7762 2479; Carr a Santa Catarina Palopó; campsites per person US\$4) Located 1km out of town on the road to Santa Catarina Palopó. Amenities include a kitchen, a book exchange, luggage storage, clean bathrooms, electrical hookups, free drinking water, basketball, darts and inexpensive international phone calls, all in a pleasant, tree-surrounded setting. To get there, follow the Palopó road 1km from Calle Principal and turn left opposite Calle Cementerio. Three clean little rooms in wooden cabins are available too.

**Casa Linda** (☎ 7762 0386; Callejón El Capulín; s/d US\$5/7, with bathroom US\$9/12) Spotless little rooms down an alley off Calle Santander. Upstairs, rooms get a good breeze and the balconies are good for that afternoon siesta.

**Rooms Santander** (☎ 7762 1304; off Calle Santander; s/d US\$5/8, with bathroom US\$9/12) One of Panama's longest-running budget hostels, the Santander is still going strong, with clean rooms on two levels around a small patio full of trees.

**Hotel Villa Martita** (Calle Santander 5-51; s/d US\$5/8) A friendly little three-room place two blocks from the lake. Rooms are basic and clean, and some of the cheapest in town.

**Hospedaje Santo Domingo** (☎ 7762 0236; off Calle Monte Rey; s/d US\$5/8, with bathroom US\$10/13) This amicable, tranquil establishment has a variety of rooms. The cheapest are very basic wood-plank affairs, but there are also better shared-bathroom doubles in a newer, two-story block. There's a grassy hangout area here that makes this place.

**Hospedaje García** (☎ 7762 2787; Calle 14 de Febrero 2-24; s/d US\$5/9, with bathroom US\$15/20) The rooms with bathroom here are OK – clean enough, but the real winners are the cheaper ones – they're about twice the size and have balconies looking out onto the patio.

**Casa Loma** (☎ 7762 1447; Calle Rancho Grande; s/d US\$5/10, with bathroom US\$20/26) Excellent-value, solid wooden rooms are on offer at this place. Most are in a two-story building and have good, firm beds. The huge grassy lawn out the back is a great place to hang out.

**Villa Lupita** (☎ 5511 0541; Callejón Don Tino; s/d US\$6/7.50, with bathroom US\$7/8.50) Family-run Lupita is great value if you feel like staying in the town center. The 18 clean, secure rooms have comfortable beds, reading lamps and colorful carpets, and free coffee and drinking water are on offer. The shared hot-water bathrooms are clean, and the roof terrace affords good views.

**Mario's Rooms** (☎ 7762 2370; Calle Santander; s/d US\$6.50/9, with bathroom US\$9/13) Offering some of the best budget rooms in town, the smallish rooms at Mario's are ranged on two floors facing a cheery, plant-filled courtyard, and have blasting-hot showers.

**Hotel Fonda del Sol** (☎ 7762 0407; h\_fondadelso@yahoo.com; Calle Principal, near bus stop; s/d US\$7/14, with bathroom US\$12/24; P) The more expensive rooms here are heavy on stonework and light on other decoration. The cheaper ones are an excellent budget choice – large,

wood-paneled rooms with comfy beds and random decorations.

**Hospedaje Tzutujil** (☎ 7762 0102; off Calle Rancho Grande; s/d US\$8/10, with bathroom & cable TV US\$14/18) Down a little alley set among cornfields, the Tzutujil is one of the best budget deals in town, with clean, modern rooms, balconies and firm beds. Upstairs rooms all have fantastic mountain views.

**Hospedaje El Viajero** (☎ 7762 0128; www.sleeprentbuy.com/elviajero; s/d US\$10/13) Nothing fancy going on here, but the paintwork should wake you up smiling, and the proximity to the lake is a winner. Upstairs rooms are a bit bigger, brighter and airier. El Viajero is at the end of a short lane off lower Calle Santander, making it quiet and peaceful, yet you're near everything. You can use a cooker, microwave and fridge, and there's laundry service and free drinking water.

**Hotel Viñas del Lago** (☎ 7762 0389; Playa Pública; s/d with bathroom US\$10/13; ☑) Don't let the garish paint job put you off – the big, airy rooms upstairs here have some of the best views in town.

**Hospedaje Jere** (☎ 7762 2781; jere\_armando@yahoo.com; Calle Rancho Grande; s/d with bathroom US\$10/13; ☑ ☑) The Jere's big, tastefully decorated rooms are another class act in this part of town. Everything is enlivened by textiles, photos, maps and informative posters, and you can book shuttle buses and lake tours on the spot.

**Hotel Utz Rajil** (☎ 7762 0303; gguated@yahoo.com; Calle 14 de Febrero; s/d with bathroom US\$13/19) A modern, three-story hotel with bigger rooms than most. Try to snag a front one, as the big balconies have good views.

**Posada Monte Rosa** (☎ 7762 0055; Calle Monte Rey; s/d with bathroom US\$13/20) A short distance off Calle Santander, rooms here are sizable, with colorful Mayan fabric curtains, and fronted by patches of lawn. Unfortunately, this place don't take phone reservations.

**Hotel Maya-Kanek** (☎ 7762 1104; Calle Principal; s/d with bathroom US\$14/18; ☑) These motel-style rooms in the town center are arranged around a cobbled courtyard filled with flitting hummingbirds. The 20 rooms, though small and simple, are a bit more comfortable than at a *hospedaje*, and they come with hot-water bathroom. Ask for a discount if you stay more than one night.

**Posada de Don Carlos** (☎ 7762 0658; Callejón Santa Elena 4-45; s/d with bathroom US\$15/20) Huge upstairs

rooms face a balcony overlooking a lush courtyard, and the bathrooms, with full-sized tubs, are unbeaten in this price range.

**Hotel Larry's Place** (☎ 7762 0767; Calle 14 de Febrero; s/d with bathroom US\$15/20; ☑) Set back from the road behind a wall of vegetation, Larry's Place offers good-sized, cool dark rooms. Furnishings are tasteful and the balconies without views are nonetheless welcome.

**Hospedaje El Rosario** (☎ 7762 1482; Calle del Lago, Playa Pública; s/d with bathroom US\$15/20; ☑) Set around a parking lot, these stone rooms nonetheless have a bit of character and are literally stumbling distance from the lake.

**Apartamentos Sulita** (☎ 7762 2514; Calle del Frutal 3-42; cabins per week US\$125) These cute little one- or two-person cabins are a great option if you're going to be hanging around for a while – they come fully equipped with kitchen, lounge, bathroom and one bedroom. Cable TV is available on request.

## MIDRANGE

Midrange lodgings are busiest on weekends. From Sunday to Thursday you may get a discount, and you should definitely get one if you're planning on staying for longer than four days. All provide bathrooms with hot showers.

**Hospedaje Sueño Real** (☎ 7762 0608; Calle Ramos; s/d US\$18/23) Raising its head a little above the budget pack here, the Sueño Real has tasteful, clean rooms with TV, fan and hot-water bathroom. They're well decorated, if slightly cramped. The 2nd-floor terrace with chairs, tables and lake view is a plus.

**Mini Hotel Riva Bella** (☎ 7762 1348; Calle Principal 2-21; s/d US\$18/23; ☑) This collection of neat two-room bungalows, each with cable TV and its own parking place, is set around lush gardens. They're clean and modern but lack cooking facilities.

**Hotel Montana** (☎ 7762 0326; Callejón Don Tino; s/d US\$25/30; ☑) Down a narrow street near the church, the Montana has 23 clean, bright rooms. The curvy balconies and Mayan fabrics thrown around the place give it a touch of style. It's in a quiet location with a fine, green, parking courtyard full of birdsong.

**Hotel Utz-Jay** (☎ 7762 0217; hotelutzjay.com; Calle 15 de Febrero 2-50; s/d incl breakfast US\$27/36; ☑ ☑) This excellent-value small hotel, a short distance from the lake and Calle Santander, has eight beautiful mud-brick cottages set separately around a shady yard area. They have

traditional fabrics, a hot-water bathroom, cozy sitting areas out front and nice touches such as candles and drinking water. Good breakfasts and laundry service are available and there's a traditional Mayan sauna called a *chuj*. The owners speak Spanish, French and English, have lots of information about the area, and run hiking and camping trips around the lake.

**Posada de los Volcanes** (☎ 7762 0244; www.posadade losvolcanes.com; Calle Santander 5-51; s/d US\$29/39) It may be a bit of an ask, but if you can make it to the 4th floor of this modern hotel, you'll be rewarded with high ceilings and good lake and volcano views. Some rooms have two double beds, some have one; all are brightened by paintings and mirrors.

**Hotel Playa Linda** (☎ 7762 0097; akennedy@gua .gbm.net; Calle del Lago, Playa Pública; r with/without lake view US\$45/30; Ⓟ) The Playa Linda is a rambling place with 17 assorted rooms, mostly good sized, and welcoming owners and staff. Rooms 1 to 5 and 26 have large balconies with tables, chairs and wonderful lake views. The gardens out front are bursting with rose bushes. All the rooms have a bathroom, most have fireplaces and some have a TV. Rates go up US\$5 on Friday and Saturday, and by around 35% (without view) or around 50% (with view) for July, August, Semana Santa (Easter week) and the Christmas–New Year holidays.

**Hotel Tzanjuyú** (☎ 7762 1318; Calle Principal 4-96; s/d US\$30/39; Ⓟ) Probably quite stylish once, and still appealing in a faded-charm sort of way, this is another hotel that comes alive at holiday times. It's set right on the lakeshore, with large gardens and a good-sized pool. The big bonuses here are the lake views from each room's private balcony and the hippie-free-zone location.

**Müller's Guest House** (☎/fax 7762 2442; atmuller@ amigonet.gt; Calle Rancho Grande; s/d incl breakfast US\$30/40; Ⓟ) Blending the European and colonial styles, this place has big rooms with wooden floorboards, firm beds and serious-sized TVs. Balconies facing the grassy patio are a great place to while away the hours.

**Hotel Primavera** (☎ 7762 2052; www.primaveratitlan .com; Calle Santander; s/d US\$30/40) This minimally decorated hotel just feels right – there are plant-filled window boxes in the rooms and a wooden decked patio area out back that makes for a relaxing atmosphere. Rates go up about 50% for July, August, Semana Santa and the Christmas–New Year holidays.

**Hotel Visión Azul** (☎/fax 7762 1426; Finca San Buenaventura; r US\$40; Ⓟ) Spanish tiles and local carvings mix well here, in a semi-secluded location just outside of town, looking toward the lake. The big, bright rooms in the main building have spacious terraces festooned with bougainvillea and ivy. The private balconies are well furnished, too, and have some great sunset views.

**Grand Hotel** (☎ 7762 2940; granhotelpanjachel@yahoo .com; Calle Principal; s/d US\$40/45; Ⓟ) The Grand looks grungy from the street, but inside is a garden with lawns, plants and fountains. The 30 rooms are a little tired but adequately clean, with cheery, colored bedspreads. Get one at the back for quietness – there are slightly cheaper rooms that overlook the street. All rooms have TV and hot-water bathroom, and there's a pool and restaurant, so it's a good place to stay if you're traveling with kids.

**Hotel Regis** (☎/fax 7762 1152; registrosrevesaciones@ yahoo.com; Calle Santander 3-47; s/d US\$40/50; Ⓟ) Dinky, pine-paneled rooms that are spacious enough, with sitting room and oddly beautiful tile work. The real attraction here is the grounds – great expanses of lawn peppered with sitting areas, kids playgrounds, and hot tubs with water fed from a volcanic seam. Rates rise during July, August, Semana Santa and the Christmas–New Year holidays.

**Hotel Dos Mundos** (☎ 7762 2078; www.hoteldos mundos.com; Calle Santander 4-72; s/d US\$40/55; Ⓟ) Italian-owned Dos Mundos has a great location towards the lake end of Calle Santander, but its installations are set well away from the street. The 22 bungalows, all with terracotta floors, woven bedspreads, Italian fittings, cable TV and at least one double and one single bed, are set around tropical gardens with a large pool. Also here are a good Italian restaurant, an in-house travel agency and a clean-cut continental-style bar fronting the street.

**Rancho Grande Inn** (☎ 7762 2255; www.ranchogrande inn.com; Calle Rancho Grande; d incl breakfast US\$45-65; Ⓟ) Founded in the 1940s, the Rancho Grande has a dozen varied rooms, suites and *cabañas* (cabins) in perfectly maintained German country-style villas. Most rooms are carpeted and some are a little poky. All have TV, phone and carpets, and rates include a filling, delicious breakfast featuring original pancakes and home-grown honey and coffee. The grounds are gorgeous – manicured lawns dotted with fruit trees, and the best part – there's bar service in the swimming pool until 9pm.

**Hotel Cacique Inn** (☎ /fax 7762 2053; Calle El Cali 3-82; s/d US\$50/60; (P) 🚰) Near Embarcadero Tzanjuyú, where boats leave for the lake's western villages, the Cacique is an assemblage of pseudo-rustic red-roofed buildings around verdant gardens with lots of birds and a swimming pool. The 34 comfortable rooms have double beds, fireplaces and weavings.

**Bungalows El Aguacatal** (☎ 7762 1482; Calle de Buenas Nuevas; bungalows for 4 with/without kitchen US\$65/52; (P) 🚰) The decorations may strike you as a little drab, but these concrete bungalows are a good deal for groups, especially if you're planning on cooking. Each bungalow has two bedrooms and salon.

## TOP END

**Hotel San Buenaventura** (☎ 7762 2559; www.hotelsanbuenaventura.net; Finca San Buenaventura; s/d US\$73/105, bungalows for 4/6 people US\$173/262; (P) 🚰) The beautifully designed brick cottages here either come as simple rooms, or can be hired entirely, giving you a living room, fully equipped kitchen and terrace with barbecue area.

**Hotel Posada de Don Rodrigo** (☎ 7762 2326; www.corporacionhotelera.com; Calle Santander; s/d US\$80/100; (P) 🚰) In the center of the action, down by the lakeside, the Don Rodrigo's cobblestoned grounds hold all sorts of delights – saunas, restaurants, squash courts, swimming pools. The rooms are big and decorated in the colonial style, and open onto private grassy sitting areas.

**Hotel Atitlán** (☎ /fax 7762 1441; www.hotelatitlan.com; Finca San Buenaventura; r incl breakfast US\$140; (P) 🚰 🚰) Pana's loveliest hotel is on the lakeshore 1.5km northwest of the town center. It's a rambling, three-story, semicolonial-style affair surrounded by large and gorgeous gardens. Decorations go heavy on the religious imagery, wood carvings and wrought iron. The patio has views across the swimming pools to the lake. The 65 rooms all have lake-facing balconies, and the hotel has a restaurant, bar and a well-stocked gift shop.

## Eating

### BUDGET

**Pana Pan** (Calle Santander 1-61; pastries US\$0.80; ☺ breakfast & lunch) Great cinnamon rolls, banana and chocolate muffins, and whole-wheat bread make a call here obligatory. Take away or sit down with a coffee.

**Tacos 3xQ10** (Calle Santander; 3 tacos US\$1.30; ☺ 8am-10pm Sun-Thu, 8am-11pm Fri & Sat) Try the

yummy *hawaiiano*, with chicken, onion, chili and pineapple.

**Deli Jasmín** (lower Calle Santander; items US\$3-5; ☺ breakfast & lunch Wed-Mon) This tranquil garden restaurant serves a great range of healthy foods and drinks to the strains of soft classical music. Breakfast is served all day, and you can buy whole-wheat or pita bread, hummus or mango chutney to take away.

**Deli Llama de Fuego** (Calle Santander; items US\$3-5; ☺ 7am-6pm Thu-Tue) Has the same excellent menu as Deli Jasmín, in only slightly less peaceful surroundings.

**Bohemia Bar** (Av Los Árboles; mains US\$3-5; ☺ lunch & dinner) The snacks and burgers are OK at this little place, but it really gets cooking with the three-hour happy hour, starting at 6pm, and occasional live-music shows.

**Al Chisme** (Comercial El Pueblito, Av Los Árboles; mains US\$3-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Offers Tex-Mex, vegetarian and pasta dishes, and more-expensive meat and fish as well as down-home food such as biscuits and gravy (US\$3). Its streetside patio is most popular in the evening, especially when there's live music.

**Las Chinitas** (Plaza Los Patios, Calle Santander; mains or set lunches US\$4-6.50; ☺ lunch & dinner) Las Chinitas serves up unbelievably delicious, moderately priced food. Try the Malaysian curry with coconut milk or the satay, both with rice, tropical salad and your choice of tofu, tempeh, chicken, pork or prawns.

**Guajimbo's** (Calle Santander; mains US\$4-6; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This Uruguayan grill is one of Pana's best eateries, serving up generous meat and chicken dishes with vegetables, salad, garlic bread and either rice or boiled potatoes. You won't leave hungry. Try the *chivita Hernandezias*, tenderloin cooked with bacon, mozzarella, peppers and olives. There are vegetarian dishes too, good-value breakfasts, and bottomless cups of coffee for US\$0.70.

**Atlantis** (Calle Principal; mains US\$4-9; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This café-bar serves up some excellent submarines (US\$4) alongside more-substantial meals. The beer garden out the back is the place to be on a balmy night.

**Maktub'ar** (Calle Santander 3-72; mains US\$5-7; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The garden setting here is an excellent, relaxed place to hang out during the day. At night, once happy hour kicks in, things start to liven up. The menu runs from sandwiches and burgers to larger meals, but the real winner is the wood-fired thin-crust pizza.

**Sunset Café** (cnr Calles Santander & del Lago; mains US\$6-8; ☺ lunch & dinner) This open-air eatery has a great lake vista and serves meat, fish and vegetarian dishes. With a bar and live music nightly, it's quite the place to be to watch the sun go down behind the volcanoes.

**El Bistrot** (Calle Santander; meals US\$6-10; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) It doesn't look like much from the outside, but this is the place for authentic Italian food, including a range of pastas, and treats such as carpaccio and antipasto.

If you're looking for cheap with a view, check out the touristy restaurants overlooking the lake at the east end of Calle del Lago, such as El Bambú and Restaurante Taly (both with breezy upper floors), Los Pumpos, Restaurante Emilio and Brisas de Lago. Most of these places will do breakfast for US\$1.50 to US\$2 and quite acceptable lunch or dinner mains for US\$4.

Cheap meals on Calle Santander? Several places offer bargain set meals:

**Restaurante Los Cayucos** (breakfast mains US\$1-1.50, mains from US\$1.70; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The food is standard, but the prices bring in the customers.

**Don Neto** (mains US\$2-3.25; ☺ lunch & dinner) The US\$2 lunch or dinner gives you a choice of eight or nine meat or fish selections, with fries, salad, rice, tortilla and a soft drink.

**Restaurante Mario** (lunches US\$4; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The lunch includes soup, a main dish with rice or steamed veggies, and coffee.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Ristorante La Lanterna** (Hotel Dos Mundos, Calle Santander 4-72; mains US\$6-10; ☺ 7am-3pm & 6-10pm) This is a good, authentic Italian restaurant with both inside and garden tables; you're welcome to use the swimming pool if you eat here.

**La Terraza** (☎ 7762 0041; Edificio Rincón Sai, Calle Santander; mains US\$6-11; ☺ lunch & dinner) One of Calle Santander's most atmospheric spots, this breezy upstairs restaurant has French, Mexican and Asian influences. It's a good idea to book on weekends.

**Porta Hotel del Lago** (☎ 7762 1555; cnr Calle Rancho Grande & Calle de Buenas Nuevas; breakfast/dinner buffet US\$7/13; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This luxury hotel offers lavish Sunday buffets when it's fully occupied, which usually happens on weekends and holidays.

**Restaurante Tocoyal** (Calle del Lago; mains US\$8-11; ☺ 8:30am-5pm Sun-Fri, 8:30am-8pm Sat) The Tocoyal is a cut above the other Calle del Lago eateries. Staples are meat, chicken and fish, but there are cheaper vegetarian dishes and *chiles rellenos* (chile stuffed with cheese, meat or rice).

**our pick Chez Alex** (☎ 7762 2052; Hotel Primavera, Calle Santander; mains US\$10-17; ☺ lunch & dinner) This is some of Pana's finest dining, with plenty of European influence. There's fondue, stuffed trout and a whole range of seafood, among other delicacies.

**Hotel Atitlán** (☎ 7762 1441; Finca San Buenaventura; lunch or dinner buffet US\$15; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This hotel, on the northern outskirts of town, has a beautiful restaurant with some outdoor tables and magnificent lake views. If you come to eat here, you can use the swimming pool and gardens for free. The Sunday breakfast buffet is US\$9. Lunch or dinner buffets are offered when occupancy is high: call ahead. Otherwise, ample set meals are always available for similar prices.

## Drinking

Pana's best places to drink are generally the places that also have live music (opposite).

**Pana Arte** (Calle Santander) This is a good place to start, continue or finish your night, with a seemingly endless happy hour. The classic rock may not be to your liking, but two mixed drinks for under US\$2 is hard to argue with.

**Circus Bar** (Av Los Árboles; ☺ noon-midnight) The best thing about this bar is the double swing doors, so you can go busting in like a real cowboy. Yeehaw! Closely following is the huge list of imported liquors, US\$2 Bloody Marys, good pizza and live music most nights.

**Solomon's Porch** (Calle Principal; ☺ lunch & dinner) The balcony overlooking Calle Santander is a great place for a few drinks, accompanied by big-screen TV, wireless internet and live music.

## Entertainment

Panajachel's miniature Zona Viva (party zone) focuses on Av Los Árboles. Things can be quiet from Sunday to Wednesday.

## CINEMAS

**Turquoise Buffalo** (Comercial El Pueblito, Av los Árboles; admission US\$2) This cinema shows two movies each evening. If you go earlier in the day, you can choose your own film (minimum two people).

## DANCING

**Chapiteau** (Av Los Árboles) After the music stops at the Circus Bar or Al Chisme, simply cross the street and come here, a disco-bar with billiards upstairs.

**El Aleph** (Av Los Árboles) Located a couple of doors down from Chapiteau, this bar has occasional trance and hip-hop DJ sessions or live music.

**Socrates** (Calle Principal) Opposite the start of Av Los Árboles, Socrates is a large disco-bar playing thumping Latin pop, highly popular with the Guatemalan teens and 20-somethings who descend on Pana on weekends and holidays (as well as a smattering of gringos). The assorted folk pictured on the walls run the gamut from Albert Einstein to Jerry García of the Grateful Dead.

## LIVE MUSIC

**Circus Bar** (Av Los Árboles; ☎ noon-midnight) With walls hung with old circus posters, smooth drinks service and food, Circus Bar has live music (normally a Latin combo of some kind) from 8pm to 11pm nightly. An interestingly mixed crowd usually assembles here.

**Al Chisme** (Comercial El Pueblito, Av Los Árboles) Often serves up neat jazz or piano music on Friday or Saturday nights.

**Sunset Café** (cnr Calles Santander & del Lago; ☎ 11am-midnight) Head here for sunset (and later) drinks overlooking the lake. It's popular, with great views, food, a bar, and live music nightly.

## Shopping

Calle Santander is lined with booths, stores and complexes that sell (among other things) traditional Mayan clothing, jade, Rasta berets with built-in dreadlocks, colorful blankets, leather goods and wood carvings. Freelance vendors and artisans also set up tables or blankets, especially on weekends. Among this is **Comerciales de Artesanías Típicas Tinamit Maya** (☎ 7am-7pm), an extensive handicrafts market, with an impressive variety at dozens of stalls. You can make good buys here if you bargain and take your time. **Middle Path Herbs** (Plaza Los Patios, Calle Santander) sells medicinal herbs and health foods (and can put you in touch with an acupuncturist or masseur).

Some travelers prefer the Pana shopping scene to the well-known market at Chichicastenango because the atmosphere is low-key and you're not bumping into tour groups with video cameras at every turn. The beach end of Calle Rancho Grande is also adorned with booths.

There are also wholesalers in Pana if you want to buy in bulk. If you're interested, check [www.panajachel.info](http://www.panajachel.info) for some contacts.

## Getting There & Away

### BOAT

Passenger boats for Santiago Atitlán depart from the Playa Pública (public beach) at the foot of Calle del Balneario. All other departures leave from the dock at the foot of Calle del Embarcadero. The big, slow ferries are generally only used for the Santiago run, with fast, frequent *lanchas* (small motor-boats) going elsewhere. Boats stop running around 4:30pm.

One-way passage anywhere on Lago de Atitlán costs US\$1.30, but prepare to get done like a sucker. Generally, foreigners end up paying around US\$2.50. You can hold out for the local fare, but you may have to let a few boats go by. One way to keep the cost down is to ignore all middlemen (or boys, as the case may be) and negotiate the fare directly with the captain.

Another route goes counterclockwise around the lake, stopping in Santa Cruz La Laguna (15 minutes), Jaibalito, Tzununá, San Marcos La Laguna (30 minutes), San Juan La Laguna and San Pedro La Laguna (40 minutes). After departing Panajachel from the Calle del Balneario dock, the boats stop at another dock at the foot of Calle del Embarcadero before heading out (or vice versa, when arriving at Panajachel).

*Lanchas* are also available for private hire from the Playa Pública or Embarcadero Tzanjuyú: expect to pay around US\$23 to San Pedro.

To the villages along the lake's eastern shore, there are no public boat services. A privately hired *lancha* from the Playa Pública costs around US\$13 to Santa Catarina Palopó, US\$23 to San Antonio Palopó and US\$40 to San Lucas Tolimán. It's better to go by bus or pickup.

### BUS

Panajachel's main bus stop is at the junction of Calle Santander and Calle Principal, across from the Banco Agromercantil. The taxi and shuttle bus booth nearby on Calle Principal can usually give you the general picture on bus schedules, but this is not an exact science. Transportes Rébulo, running buses to Guatemala City, has an office further down Calle Principal, but its buses still usually depart from the Principal/Santander corner. Departures – approximately and subject to change – are as follows:

**Antigua** A direct Pullman bus (US\$5, 2½ hours, 146km) departs from the Rébuli office at 10:45am Monday to Saturday. Or take a Guatemala City bus and change at Chimaltenango.

**Chichicastenango** About eight buses (US\$1.50, 1½ hours, 37km) depart 7am to 4pm daily. Or take any bus heading to Los Encuentros and change buses there.

**Ciudad Tecún Umán (Mexican border)** By the Pacific route (210km), take a bus to Cocales and change there; by the highland route (210km), take a bus to Quetzaltenango and change there.

**Cocales (Carr al Pacífico)** Eight buses (US\$1, 2½ hours, 70km) depart 6:30am to 2:30pm daily.

**Guatemala City** Sportes Rébuli (US\$2.50, 3½ hours, 150km) departs 10 times daily from 5am to 2:30pm. Or take a bus to Los Encuentros and change there.

**Huehuetenango** Take a bus to Los Encuentros (3½ hours, 140km) and wait there for a bus bound for Huehue or La Mesilla. Or catch a bus heading to Quetzaltenango, alight at Cuatro Caminos and change buses there. There are buses at least hourly from these junctions.

**La Mesilla** (Mexican border; 6 hours; 225km; see Huehue).

**Los Encuentros** Take any bus heading towards Guatemala City, Chichicastenango, Quetzaltenango or the Interamericana (US\$1; 35 minutes; 20km).

**Quetzaltenango** Six buses (US\$2; 2½ hours; 90km) depart from 5am to 4pm daily. Or take a bus to Los Encuentros and change there.

**San Lucas Tolimán** There's one bus at 4pm (US\$1.20, 1½ hours, 28km) or you can take any bus heading for Cocales, get off at the San Lucas turnoff and walk about 1km into town.

**Santa Catarina Palopó** Daily buses (US\$0.80, 20 minutes, 4km). Or get a pickup at the corner of Calles Real and El Amate.

**Sololá** Frequent direct local buses (US\$0.60; 20 minutes; 8km). Or take any bus heading to Guatemala City, Chichicastenango, Quetzaltenango or Los Encuentros.

## MOTORCYCLE

**Maco** (☎ 7762 0883; Calle Santander) rents motorbikes for around US\$8/40 per one/24 hours.

## SHUTTLE MINIBUS & TAXI

Tourist shuttle buses take half the time of buses, for several times the price. You can book at a number of travel agencies on Calle Santander (p128). The **Oficina de Microbuses y Taxis San Francisco booth** (Calle Principal near cnr Calle Santander) also sells shuttle bus seats (or can call you a taxi). Despite impressive advertised lists of departures, real shuttle schedules depend on how many customers there are, so try to establish a firm departure time before parting with money. Typical fares: Antigua US\$12; Chichicastenango US\$6; Guatemala City US\$22; La Mesilla US\$25; Quetzaltenango US\$20; and Ciudad Tecún Umán US\$40.

## AROUND PANAJACHEL

East of Pana, 5km and 10km respectively along a winding road, lie the lakeside villages of Santa Catarina Palopó and San Antonio Palopó – picturesque places of narrow streets paved in stone blocks and adobe houses with roofs of thatch or tin. Some villagers still go about daily life dressed in their beautiful traditional clothing. There's little in the way of sightseeing, but these are good places to buy the luminescent indigo weavings you see all around Lago de Atitlán. Also out here is a surprising little clutch of midrange and top-end places to stay.

### Santa Catarina Palopó

On weekends and holidays, young textile vendors may line the path to the lakeside at Santa Catarina Palopó with their wares, and any day you can step into wooden storefronts hung thick with bright cloth.

**Posada Don Vitalino** (☎ 7762 2660; s/d US\$7/14), a little hotel on the edge of town, offers decent-sized, clean rooms with hot showers. Get a room upstairs – downstairs they get a bit stuffy.

A further 2km along, **San Tomás Bella Vista Ecolodge** (☎ 7762 1566; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast US\$45/60/75/90; P ♻️) has vast grounds running down to the lakeshore, with walking trails and even a sandy beach. The 14 rooms, in bungalows, are bright and spacious. Main dishes at lunch and dinner cost US\$5 to US\$10. This is one of those places that is best on weekends and holidays: midweek, with no one around, it can seem desolate.

If your budget allows, **Villa Santa Catarina** (☎ 7762 1291; www.villasdeguatemala.com; s/d/ste US\$61/68/104; P ♻️) is a treat for a drink or a meal. The dining room serves moderately priced table d'hôte meals and the hotel has a big swimming pool and lovely gardens almost on the lakeshore. The 36 neat rooms have wood-beam ceilings, colorful weavings and lake views. Rooms 24, 25, 26 and 27 (partly) and the two suites face across the lake to Volcán San Pedro. Two children under 12 can share with two adults for free.

One kilometer past Santa Catarina, on the hillside above the road to San Antonio Palopó, **Hotel Casa Palopó** (☎ 7762 2270; www.casapalopo.com; rUS\$153-208; P ♻️) is a luxury retreat for the moneyed. It has just seven rooms, furnished in tasteful modern style with Mayan touches, super views, a pool and a classy restaurant.



The open-air **Restaurante Laguna Azul** (mains US\$3.25-5), on the lakeshore below the Villa Santa Catarina, serves reasonably priced chicken, fish and meat dishes.

### San Antonio Palopó

San Antonio Palopó is a larger (population 3700) but similar village. Entire families clean mountains of scallions by the lakeshore and tend their terraced fields in bursts of color provided by their traditional dress. Up the hillside, the gleaming white church forms the center of attention. **Cerámica Palopó Atitlán** (☎ 7762 2606), to the right along the street just before the lake as you descend from the church, sells attractive blue stoneware pottery.

The excellent **Hotel Terrazas del Lago** (☎ 7762 0157; s/d US\$28/31), almost on the lakeshore, has 15 attractive stone-walled rooms with Frederick Crocker prints, small terraces and hot-water bathrooms, and serves good, inexpensive meals (US\$5 to US\$8) on a terrace looking straight across to Volcán Tolimán.

### Getting There & Away

Pickups to both Santa Catarina and San Antonio leave about every half-hour from the corner of Calles Principal and El Amate in Panajachel. It takes 20 minutes to Santa Catarina (US\$0.80) and 45 minutes to San Antonio (US\$1.20). Frequency is less after about noon, and the last pickup back to Pana leaves San Antonio about 5pm.

### San Lucas Tolimán

pop 15,950 / elev 1590m

Further around the lake from San Antonio Palopó, but reached by a different, higher-level road, San Lucas Tolimán is busier and more commercial than most lakeside villages. Set at the foot of the dramatic Volcán Tolimán, it's a coffee-growing town and a transportation point on a route between the Interamericana and the Carretera al Pacífico. Market days are Sunday and Thursday. The 16th-century **Parroquia de San Lucas** parish church has a beautiful children's folk choir, which sings at 10:30am mass most Sundays. The parish, aided by Catholic missionaries from the USA and volunteers from North America and Europe, has been active in redistributing coffee-plantation land, setting up the Juan-Ana fair-trade coffee cooperative and founding schools, a clinic and a reforestation program. For visits to the cooperative, guided volcano hikes and infor-

mation on volunteering, contact the **parish office** (☎ 7722 0112; sanlucas@pronet.net.gt).

From San Lucas, a paved road goes west around Volcán Tolimán to Santiago Atitlán.

An atmospheric choice almost on the waterfront, **Hotel Don Pedro** (☎ 7722 0028; Final de Calle Principal; s/d US\$9/17; (P) ) is made entirely of stone and rough-hewn timber beams. Rooms are spacious, and upstairs ones have lake views. There's a restaurant (meals US\$5 to US\$8) and bar on the premises.

**Hotel Tolimán** (☎ 7722 0033; www.atitlanhotel.com; Final de Calle Principal; s/d US\$36/50; (P) ) has 22 rooms and suites in a rustic but comfortable style, with hot-water bathroom, and a restaurant (meals US\$6 to US\$8), bar and a pool in lush gardens on the lakeshore.

For details on bus and boat transportation, see p141.

### Parque Chuiraxamolo

Just off the road between the main highway and Santa Clara, this community-run **adventure park** (admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-4pm Wed-Sun) offers incredible views of the lake from a few paths that run around the mountains. The big attraction here, though, is the canopy tour and rappelling (US\$10) – there are three zip lines set up, the scariest being 400m long and 200m off the ground.

### SANTIAGO ATITLÁN

elev 1590m

South across the lake from Panajachel, beside an inlet squeezed between the towering volcanoes of Tolimán and San Pedro, lies Santiago Atitlán. Though Santiago is the most touristy lakeside settlement outside Panajachel, many *atitecos* (as its people are known) cling to a traditional Tz'utujil Mayan lifestyle. Women weave and wear *huipiles* (tunics) embroidered with brilliantly colored birds and flowers, and the town's *cofradías* maintain the ceremonies and rituals of *la costumbre*, the syncretic traditions and practices of Mayan Catholicism. There's a large art and crafts scene here, too. The best days to visit are Friday and Sunday, the main market days, but in fact any day will do.

It's the most workaday of the lake villages, home to Maximón (mah-shee-mohn; see the boxed text, p140), who is paraded around during Semana Santa – a good excuse to head this way during Easter. The rest of the year, Maximón resides with a caretaker, receiving

## TRADITIONAL CLOTHING

Anyone visiting the Highlands can delight in the beautiful *traje indígena* (traditional Mayan clothing). The styles, patterns and colors used by each village – originally devised by the Spanish colonists to distinguish one village from another – are unique, and each garment is the creation of its weaver, with subtle individual differences.

The basic elements of the traditional wardrobe are the *tocoyal* (head covering), *huipil* (tunic), *corte* or *refago* (skirt), *calzones* (trousers), *tzut* or *kaperraj* (cloth), *paz* (belt) or *faja* (sash) and *caïtes* or *xajáp* (sandals).

Women's head coverings are beautiful and elaborate bands of cloth up to several meters long, wound about the head and often decorated with tassels, pom poms and silver ornaments. In some places they are now only worn on ceremonial occasions and for tourist photos.

Women's *huipiles* are worn proudly every day. Though some machine-made fabrics are now being used, many *huipiles* are still made completely by hand. The white blouse is woven on a backstrap loom, then decorated with appliqué and embroidery designs and motifs common to the weaver's village. Many of the motifs are traditional symbols. No doubt all motifs originally had religious or historical significance, but today that meaning is often lost to memory.

*Cortes* (*refagos*) are pieces of cloth 7m to 10m long that are wrapped around the body. Traditionally, girls wear theirs above the knee, married women at the knee and old women below the knee, though the style can differ markedly from region to region.

Both men and women wear *fajas*, long strips of backstrap-loom-woven cloth wrapped around the midriff as belts. When they're wrapped with folds upward like a cummerbund, the folds serve as pockets.

*Tzutes* (for men) or *kaperraj* (for women) are the all-purpose cloths carried by local people and used as head coverings, baby slings, produce sacks, basket covers and shawls. There are also shawls for women called *perraj*.

Before the coming of the Spaniards, the leather thong sandals known as *caïtes* or *xajáp* were commonly only worn by men. Even today, many highland women and children go barefoot, while others wear more elaborate *huarache*-style sandals or modern shoes.

offerings. He changes house every year, but he's easy enough to find by asking around. If that's too much work, local children will take you to see him for a small tip.

In the 1980s, left-wing guerrillas had a strong presence in the Santiago area, leading to the killings or disappearance of hundreds of villagers at the hands of the Guatemalan army. Santiago became the first village in the country to succeed in expelling the army, following a notorious massacre of 13 villagers on December 1, 1990.

## Orientation & Information

The street straight ahead from the dock leads up to the town center. Every tourist walks up and down this street, so it's lined with craft shops and art galleries.

You'll find a lot of fascinating information about Santiago, in English, at [www.santiagoatitlan.com](http://www.santiagoatitlan.com).

About 500m up from the dock, turn left past the Hotel Tzutuhil to reach the central plaza and, behind it, the Catholic church.

You can change cash US dollars and traveler's checks at **Banrural** (☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) on the plaza.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Santiago children may greet you as you disembark at the dock, selling small souvenirs or offering to act as guides. If you hire them, agree on the price beforehand or, as one sage traveler put it, you'll 'be amazed at the bad language some charming little girls can haul out.' Santiago kids have been known to pick tourists' pockets. If a few of them start to crowd you in, watch out.

Muggings of tourists have reportedly occurred, mostly at night, on the outskirts of Santiago, such as the trail between the dock and the Hotel Bambú or the road out to the Posada de Santiago. Take care.

## Sights

The huge parish church, the **Iglesia Parroquial Santiago Apóstol**, was built between 1572 and 1581. A memorial plaque on your right just

inside the entrance commemorates Father Stanley Francis Rother, a missionary priest from Oklahoma. Beloved by the local people, he was hated by ultrarightist 'death squads,' who murdered him in his study at the church during the troubled year of 1981. Along the walls are wooden statues of the saints, each of whom has new clothes made by local women every year. On the carved wooden pulpit, note the figures of corn (from which humans were formed, according to Mayan religion) and of the angel, quetzal bird, lion and horse (symbols of the four evangelists, with the quetzal replacing the more traditional eagle). Mayanist Allen Christenson writes that in the center of the nave is a hole called the R'muxux Ruchiliew, which traditionalist Tz'utujils believe is an entrance to the underworld. The hole is uncovered only on Good Friday, when a large cross bearing a statue of Christ is lowered into it. At the far end of the church stand three sacred colonial altarpieces that were renovated between 1976 and 1981 by brothers Diego Chávez Petzey and Nicolás Chávez Sojuel. The brothers subtly changed the central altarpiece from a traditional European vision of Heaven to a more Mayan vision representing a sacred mountain with two Santiago *cofradía* members climbing towards a sacred cave. The three altarpieces together symbolize the three volcanoes around Santiago, which are believed to protect the town and also, in a local creation myth, to have been the first dry land that rose

out of the primordial waters. You can read a version of Allen Christenson's interpretation at [www.mesoweb.com](http://www.mesoweb.com).

On the subject of religion, you can't fail to notice while wandering around Santiago just how many evangelical churches are now competing with Catholicism and traditional Mayan *costumbre* for the villagers' faith.

The site of the 1990 massacre is now the **Parque de Paz** (Peace Park), about 500m beyond the Posada de Santiago.

## Activities

There are several rewarding **day hikes** around Santiago. Unfortunately, owing to robberies and attacks on tourists in the Atitlán area, it's highly advisable to go with a guide and tourist police escort. Ask at your hotel for a recommended guide, or get in touch with the Posada de Santiago (see p141). Prices for hikes up any of the three **volcanoes** usually run at about US\$80 per group; to the **Mirador de Tepepul**, about 4km south of Santiago, it's US\$30 for two; and to **Cerro de Oro**, some 8km northeast, should be around US\$30 for two. The *mirador* (lookout) trip, four to five hours roundtrip, goes through cloud forest populated with many birds, including parakeets, curassows, swifts, boat-tailed grackles and tucanets (if you're lucky you might even glimpse a quetzal), and on to a lookout point with beautiful views all the way to the coast. Cerro de Oro is a small village beneath a hill

## IN THE PATH OF STAN

In October 2005, Hurricane Stan slammed into the west coast of Guatemala, killing hundreds and leaving thousands homeless. Areas hardest hit were the coastal regions, San Marcos and Huehuetenango province and the area around Lake Atitlán.

Much of the devastation was caused by landslides, as mud from deforested hillsides slid down and buried villages below. This is what happened in Panabaj, a village behind Santiago Atitlán. The slide happened at night, causing many to be buried as they slept.

Exact figures vary, but everybody agrees that there were at least 250 people buried underneath the mudslide.

A frantic, week-long rescue effort began, but had to be abandoned as the land was too unstable and the work became dangerous. President Berger announced that the area, the size of six football fields, would become a burial ground, as the risk of infection from unearthed corpses was too great.

Massive protests from victims' families fell on deaf ears, and the Forensic Anthropology Foundation nongovernment organization (NGO), more experienced at excavating civil war mass graves, moved in to help recover the bodies.

Government relief and reconstruction efforts have been characteristically slow, and more than a year after the tragedy, displaced families were still living in makeshift refuges. To learn more about relief efforts, log on to [www.puebloapueblo.org](http://www.puebloapueblo.org).

of the same name (1892m), about halfway between Santiago and San Lucas Tolimán. The climb up the hill yields great views, and there's a pretty church in town. You could travel at least one way by one of the pickups running between Santiago and San Lucas Tolimán.

Another destination from Santiago is **Chuitnamit**, a small hill across the inlet from Santiago with the ruins of the prehispanic Tz'utujil capital and the site of the Santiago area's first church and Franciscan monastery, founded about 1540. Walking to San Pedro La Laguna is not recommended, unless the security situation improves, since this remote route has a robbery risk.

**Jim and Nancy Matison** (☎ 7811 5516; wildwest@amigo.net.gt) offer well-recommended **horse rides** to the Mirador de Tepepal and elsewhere, for

US\$45 to US\$60. Most rides include a meal. They do guided hikes, too.

Dolores Ratzan Pablo is an accomplished guide specializing in **Mayan ceremonies**. This charming, funny Tz'utujil woman can introduce you to the wonders of Mayan birthing and healing ceremonies or take you to weaving demonstrations and art galleries. Dolores speaks English, Spanish, Kaqchiquel and, of course, Tz'utujil. Tours typically last between one and three hours, for US\$18 an hour. Contact Dolores through the Posada de Santiago (see opposite).

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Tzanjuju** (☎ 5590 3980; s/d US\$4/6, with bathroom US\$6/8) Decent, plain rooms with a choice of volcano or lake views. It is prohibited, as signs point out, to spit on the walls here.

### THAT'S ONE SMOKIN' GOD

The Spanish called him San Simón, the ladinos (persons of mixed indigenous and European race) named him Maximón and the Maya know him as Rilaj Maam (ree-lah-mahm). By any name, he's a deity revered throughout the Guatemalan Highlands. Assumed to be a combination of Mayan gods, Pedro de Alvarado (the Spanish conquistador of Guatemala) and the biblical Judas, San Simón is an effigy to which Guatemalans of every stripe go to make offerings and ask for blessings. The effigy is usually housed by a member of a *cofradía* (Mayan Catholic brotherhood), moving from one place to another from year to year, a custom anthropologists believe was established to maintain the local balance of power. The name, shape and ceremonies associated with this deity vary from town to town, but a visit will be memorable no matter where you encounter him. For a small fee, photography is usually permitted, and offerings of cigarettes, liquor or candles are always appreciated.

In Santiago Atitlán, Maximón is a wooden figure draped in colorful silk scarves and smoking a fat cigar. Locals guard and worship him, singing and managing the offerings made to him (including your US\$0.25 entry fee). His favorite gifts are Payaso cigarettes and Venado rum, but he often has to settle for the cheaper firewater Quetzalteca Especial. Fruits and gaudy, flashing electric lights decorate his chamber; effigies of Jesus Christ and Christian saints lie or stand either side of Maximón and his guardians. Fires may be burning in the courtyard outside as offerings are made to him.

In Nahualá, between Los Encuentros and Quetzaltenango, the Maximón effigy is à la Picasso: a simple wooden box with a cigarette protruding from it. Still, the same offerings are made and the same sort of blessings asked for. In Zunil, near Quetzaltenango, the deity is called San Simón but is similar to Santiago's Maximón in custom and form.

San Jorge La Laguna on Lake Atitlán is a very spiritual place for the highland Maya; here they worship Rilaj Maam. It is possible that the first effigy was made near here, carved from the *palo de pito* tree that spoke to the ancient shamans and told them to preserve their culture, language and traditions by carving Rilaj Maam (*palo de pito* flowers can be smoked to induce hallucinations). The effigy in San Jorge looks like a joker, with an absurdly long tongue.

In San Andrés Itzapa near Antigua, Rilaj Maam has a permanent home, and is brought out on October 28 and paraded about in an unparalleled pagan festival. This is an all-night, hedonistic party where dancers grab the staff of Rilaj Maam to harness his power and receive magical visions. San Andrés is less than 10km south of Chimaltenango, so you can easily make the party from Antigua.

**Hotel Lago de Atitlán** (☎ 7721 7174; s/d US\$4/7, with bathroom US\$10/12) Go four blocks uphill from the dock, then turn left to this hotel, whose reception is in the *ferreteria* (hardware store) next door. It's a modern five-story building, rather an anomaly in this little town. Rooms are bland but mostly bright, many having large windows with decent views. Go up to the rooftop for great sunsets.

**Hotel & Restaurant Bambú** (☎ 7721 7332; www.ecobambu.com; s/d US\$38/52; (P)) The Bambú is a fine hotel set in wild-yet-manicured grounds. It's run by amiable Spaniard José de Castro, a veteran Latin American traveler. It's 600m from the dock: walk to the left (north) along a path through lakeside vegetable gardens – the hotel's large grass-roofed restaurant building is visible from the dock. The 10 spacious rooms are in grass- or bamboo-roofed buildings, with cypress wood fittings, colorful paint and earthy tile floors. All have a bathroom. The excellent restaurant has big picture windows with sweeping views out over the lake towards the San Pedro Volcano. The incredibly tasty, reasonably priced dishes include an international array of very-well-prepared pasta, meat, seafood and vegetarian main dishes for US\$6 to US\$11. For those with vehicles, the hotel has an entrance from the Cerro de Oro road on the edge of Santiago.

**Posada de Santiago** (☎ 7721 7366; www.posadade.santiago.com; s/d from US\$50/65; (P)) This is another of the most charming hotels around Lago de Atitlán. Seven cottages and two suites, all with stone walls, fireplaces, porches, hammocks and folk art, are set around beautiful gardens stretching up from the lake. There are also a few budget rooms for US\$14 per person, sharing hot-water bathrooms, and two suites for US\$85 and US\$95. The restaurant has well-prepared Asian, Continental and American food, and a very cozy ambience. The Posada can set you up with hikes and biking trips. It's 1.5km from the dock. Walk up the street ahead all the way to its end, turn left, go to the end of the street, and turn right onto a paved road, which almost immediately becomes dirt. Alternatively, you can arrange for the Posada to pick you up by *lancha* at the Santiago dock (US\$3 to US\$4) or at Panajachel (US\$20).

**El Pescador** (set lunches US\$4.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Two blocks up the street straight ahead from the dock, this is a good, clean restaurant with big windows, white-shirted waiters and neatly laid tables. A typical *menú del día* (set

lunch) might bring you chicken, rice, salad, guacamole, tortillas and a drink.

## Shopping

The street leading up from the dock to the town center is lined with shops selling leather belts and hats, carved wooden animals, colorful textiles, masks and paintings.

## Getting There & Away

Subject to change (of course!), boats leave Santiago for San Pedro La Laguna (US\$1.30, 45 minutes) at 7am, 9am, 10am, 11am, noon, 1pm, 2pm, 3:30pm and 5pm. Pickups to Cerro de Oro and San Lucas Tolimán start outside the Hotel Chi-Nim-Yá. Buses to Guatemala City (US\$3.50, three hours) leave about hourly, 4am to 2pm, from the main plaza. For transportation from Panajachel, see p135.

## SAN PEDRO LA LAGUNA

pop 10,000 / elev 1610m

It all comes down to what you're looking for – price wars between competing businesses keep San Pedro among the cheapest of the lakeside villages, and the beautiful setting attracts long-term visitors whose interests include (in no particular order) drinking, fire twirling, African drumming, Spanish classes, volcano hiking and hammock swinging.

Right alongside this whirling circus, San Pedro has a very conservative side – there's plenty of traditional dress and subsistence agriculture going on. You'll see coffee being picked and spread out to dry on wide platforms at the beginning of the dry season.

## Orientation & Information

San Pedro has two docks, about 1km apart. The one on the southeast side of town serves boats going to and from Santiago Atitlán. The other, around on the northwest side of town, serves boats going to and from Panajachel. From each dock, streets run ahead to meet outside the market in the town center, a few hundred meters uphill. Most of the interest for travelers is in the lower part of town, between the two docks and either side of them. Various minor streets, tracks and paths enable you to walk around this lower area without going up to the town center. To work your way across this lower area from the Panajachel dock, turn left immediately before the Hotel Mansión del Lago, then right opposite Casa Elena, then left at the

## TZ'UTUJIL OIL PAINTING

Although many of the paintings on display in Santiago's tourist galleries – landscapes, portraits, scenes of local life – use lurid acrylic colors and look very similar to each other, some works by finer Santiago artists such as Martín Reanda Quieju, Nicolás Reanda Quieju, Pedro Miguel Reanda, Miguel Chávez and Martín Ratzan Reanda exude a special energy and talent. Good Tz'utujil painting has a distinctive primitivist style, depicting rural life in vibrant colors. Centered on San Pedro La Laguna and Santiago Atitlán, the style is distinctly Mayan and has been the theme of shows the world over.

Legend has it that Tz'utujil art began one day when Rafael González y González from San Pedro La Laguna noticed some dye that had dripped and mixed with the sap of a tree; he made a paintbrush from his hair and began creating the type of canvases still popular today. His relatives Pedro Rafael González Chavajay, Lorenzo González Chavajay and Mariano González Chavajay are leading exponents of the Tz'utujil style.

The grandfather of Santiago painting was Juan Sisay; success at an international art exhibition in 1969 sparked an explosion of painters working in his style. Juan Sisay was assassinated in 1989, but his sons Manuel, Diego and Juan Francisco carry his banner, chiefly working in photographic-style portraits.

For more on Mayan oil painting, visit the website **Arte Maya Tz'utuhil** ([www.artemaya.com](http://www.artemaya.com)).

top of that street. From the Santiago dock, turn right immediately before the Hotel Villasol. No one much uses street names or numbers in San Pedro, even though they do officially exist. We give them where it has been possible to discover them.

There is no tourist information office in San Pedro, but the staff at the Alegre Pub near the Pana dock are well informed, and have a folder full of answers to most FAQs.

You can change cash US dollars and traveler's checks at **Banrural** (☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat), in the town center, which has a Visa ATM. There's internet access at D'Noz, Casa Verde Internet and the Internet Cafe, all just up the street from the Panajachel dock; the typical rate is around US\$0.80 an hour. You can call North America/Europe for US\$0.65/0.90 at D'Noz, or anywhere in the world for US\$0.65 a minute at Hotel Mansión del Lago, 100m further up the street.

## Sights

Two very good museums focusing on local Mayan culture operate in San Pedro. They're both on the path in between the docks.

**Museo Maya Tzutujil** (admission US\$1.50; ☎ 9am-1pm, 3-6pm Mon-Sat) is the more humble of the two, but it does have some good displays on the various *trajes* (traditional costumes) used by people around the lake, some great old photographs and a good lending library/bookstore. Once a month or so, a Mayan priest comes to perform ceremonies here, and the

public is welcome to attend – ask for when the next one is.

**Museo Tz'unun Ya'** ([www.descubresanpedro.com](http://www.descubresanpedro.com); admission US\$4; ☎ 8am-noon, 2-6pm Tue-Sun) is an excellent, modern museum focusing on culture, folklore and the fascinating geology of the region. Displays are semi-interactive and a free guided tour (in Spanish only at the time of writing) is included in the admission price.

## Activities

### ASCENDING VOLCÁN SAN PEDRO

Looming above the village, Volcán San Pedro almost asks to be climbed by anyone with a bit of energy and adventurous spirit. The volcano has recently been placed within an **Ecological Park** to minimize environmental damage caused by hikers and also to improve the security situation, which wasn't great before. Guides can take you up here from San Pedro for US\$13, including entrance fee.

**Excursion Big Foot** (7a Av, Zona 2), 50m to the left at the first crossroads up from San Pedro's Panajachel dock, has a track record of responsibility in this respect and goes at 6am when there are at least four people (US\$10 each). The ascent is through fields of maize, beans and squash, followed by primary cloud forest. You'll be back in San Pedro about 1pm. Take water, snacks, a hat and sunblock.

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

Another popular hike goes up the hill to the west of the village that is generally referred to

as **Indian Nose** (its skyline resembles the profile of an ancient Maya dignitary). **Excursion Big Foot** (7a Av, Zona 2) will guide a minimum of four people up there for US\$10 each; it also offers horse rides (US\$2.50 per hour) and rents bikes (US\$1.50/7 per hour/day).

Walking from San Pedro to other lakeside villages is potentially risky. In recent years there have been robberies, at least one armed attack and at least one rape at various places between San Pedro and Jaibalito, and robberies between San Pedro and Santiago. Hopefully this will change, but meanwhile we don't recommend these walks except with a responsible guide who can give convincing safety assurances. It takes about four hours from San Pedro to Santiago, 1½ hours to San Pablo, three hours to San Marcos and six hours to Santa Cruz.

**Kayaks** are available for hire, turning right from the Pana dock. Prices start at US\$1.50 per hour.

After all that activity, you'll probably be in need of a good soak, and one of the best places to do so is in the solar-heated tubs at **Thermal Waters** (☎ 9am-9pm; US\$3 per person), down a small path next to the Buddha Bar. Book ahead so they have a pool nice and hot for you when you arrive.

## Courses

Turning right from the Pana dock and following the 'Yoga and Massage' signs brings you to **La Mysticoteca** (☎ 5871 0506; www.freewebs.com/la\_mysticoteca). This health and wellness center offers courses in Shiatsu massage, reiki and meditation. You can also practice yoga (US\$3.50) here or come for reiki (US\$10), sound healing (US\$17) or massages (from US\$15).

On the path between the docks, **Cielo Maya** (☎ 5928 6189; ☎ 2-5:30pm) is a Tz'utujil women's collective that sells fair-trade woven goods and offers weaving and beading classes from US\$2 per hour (materials not included).

## LANGUAGE COURSES

San Pedro is making quite a name for itself in the language game, with ultra-economical rates at its Spanish schools, whose numbers are now approaching double figures. Check out a couple of schools before deciding. Some of them are distinctly rustic, rather amateurish affairs; others are professional enterprises with good reputations. Optional extras can range from volcano hikes and dance classes to Mayan culture seminars and volunteer work

opportunities. The standard price for four hours of one-on-one classes, five days a week, is US\$50 to US\$55. Accommodation with a local family, with three meals daily (except Sunday) usually costs US\$40. Schools can also organize other accommodation options.

Run as a cooperative (therefore guaranteeing fair wages for teachers), **Cooperativa Spanish School** (☎ 5398 6448; www.cooperativeschoolsanpedro.com) comes highly recommended. A percentage of profits goes to needy families around the lake. After-school activities include videos, conferences, salsa classes, volunteer work, kayaking and hiking. The office is halfway along the path between the two docks.

Down a laneway coming off the street between the two docks, the well-organized **Escuela Mayab** (☎ 5556 4785) holds classes under shelters in artistically designed gardens. Activities include videos, kayaking and horse rides, although tuition is cheaper without these things. It is associated with a medical clinic in Nahuala and can organize volunteer work for doctors, nurses and assistants.

Run by respected brothers and teachers Samuel and Vicente Cumes, **Casa Rosario** (☎ 5613 6401; www.casariosario.com) holds classes in gardens near the lake. The office is along the first street to the left as you walk up from Santiago dock. Volunteer projects include reforestation, teachers' assistants and environmental awareness campaigns.

Turn first left as you go up from Santiago dock to reach the well established **Corazón Maya** (☎ 7721 8160; www.corazonmaya.com). Activities include cooking classes, visits to local artists, and conferences about current political, social and cultural issues in Latin America.

**San Pedro Spanish School** (☎ 7715 4604; www.sanpedrospanishschool.org), a well-organized school on a street between the two docks, consistently gets good reviews. Classes are held under shelters in artistically designed gardens. The school supports Niños del Lago, an organization that sponsors Tz'utujil children to provide them with education, health care and nutrition.

## Sleeping

Although San Pedro has a lot of places to stay, you may still find that your first choices are full. In many places in San Pedro it's possible to negotiate deals for longer stays and during low season. For longer stays, it's also possible to rent a room or an entire house in town. Ask around.

**NEAR THE PANA DOCK**

**Hotel Xocomil** (☎ 5598 4546; xocomil333@yahoo.com; s/d US\$2/4) Up the lane to the right just after the Gran Sueño, this place is definitely in the basic backpacker category, with quiet rooms around a cement courtyard.

**Hotel Mansión del Lago** (☎ 7721 8124; 3a via & 4a Av, Zona 2; s/d US\$4/8) Straight up from the Pana dock, you'll see this concrete monster. Rooms are good and big, with wide balconies and lake views. A room at the top costs another US\$2.

**Gran Sueño** (☎ 7721 8110; 8a Calle 4-40 Zona 2; s/d US\$5/10) On the street going left from the Mansión del Lago is the Gran Sueño. Rooms here are OK sized, spotless with tiled floors, cable TV and good hot showers. Get one upstairs for glimpses of the lake.

**Hotel Nahual Maya** (☎ 7721 8158; 6 Av 8 C-12; s/d US\$5/10) This modern construction isn't the loveliest piece of architecture you're likely to see in Guatemala, but the rooms are big and homey and have little balconies with hammocks out front.

**BETWEEN THE DOCKS**

**Hostel Jarachik** (☎ 5571 8720; 4a Calle 2-95 Zona 2; s/d US\$8/10) This happening little hostel is a newcomer in town, and rightly popular. Rooms are clean and bright. Get one on the top floor for light and ventilation.

**Hotelito El Amanecer Sak'cari** (☎ 8712 1113, 7721 8096; www.hotelsakcari.com; 7a Av 2-12, Zona 2; s/d with bathroom US\$8/12; (P)) On the left just after San Pedro Spanish School, the Sak'cari has clean, tangerine-colored rooms. They vary greatly in size and comfort, so have a look around. Right down the back, rooms have big balcony areas out front with lake views and hammocks.

**Hotel Mikaso** (☎ 5173 3129; www.mikasohotel.com; 4a Callejon A 1-88; dm/rm with bathroom US\$8/30) Fans of Antigua's colonial hotel scene will find some comforting memories here in this built-new-to-look-old construction. Really the only 'fine' hotel in San Pedro, its rooms are big and well furnished and the rooftop bar and Spanish restaurant (mains US\$6 to US\$8) have lovely lake views. Dorm rooms are spacious and spotless and a good deal for large groups.

**NEAR THE SANTIAGO DOCK**

**Hotel Villa Sol** (☎ 7721 8009; cnr 7a Av & Calle Principal; s/d US\$3/4, with bathroom US\$5/8; (P)) The 45 rooms here, just 200m up from the Santiago dock, are bare but clean; those with a bathroom look onto a grassy courtyard.

**Hotel Peneleu** (☎ 5925 0583; 5a Av 2-20, Zona 2; s/d with bathroom US\$3/6) It doesn't look like much from the outside, but once you get past the dirt yard, you'll find a clean, modern hotel with some of the best budget rooms in town. Try to get No 1 or 2, which are up top with big windows overlooking the lake. To find it, go 80m up Calle Principal from Hotel Villasol, then along the street to the left.

**Hotel Villa Cuba** (☎ 5409 1633; www.hotelvillacuba.com; Camino a la finca, Zona 4; s/d US\$6/12) A large, modern hotel on grounds that sweep down to the lake, set out in cornfields in a quiet stretch on the road to Santiago. The swimming is good here, but it's definitely a walk to the bar and restaurant scene. To find it, take the first road to the left up from the dock and follow it for 2km.

**Eating**

There are plenty of places to get your grub on around the Pana dock. Prices are incredibly low lakeside in San Pedro, but if you're still hurting, there are a bunch of *comedores* (cheap eateries) up the hill in the main part of town.

**Alegre Pub** (8a Calle 4-10; mains US\$3-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Near the Pana dock, the Alegre is always, well, *alegre* (happy), with a real British pub feel – drinks specials, a Sunday roast and trivia nights. There are free movies twice a week in the way-laid-back rooftop garden, and loads of free, reliable tourist info. The big breakfast fry-up will make Brits weep with homesickness.

**Bistro Nuevo Sol** (mains US\$3-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This little place serves up some tasty US\$3 breakfasts and other gourmet delights such as California pizza (US\$6), calzones, focaccias and a mouthwatering spicy tomato soup.

**Shanti Shanti** (8a Calle 3-93; mains US\$4-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) By far the best set-up as far as lakeside chilling goes. Falafel, sandwiches and curry are just some of the tempters on the menu here.

**Fata Morgana** (8a Calle 4-12; mains US\$4-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed Wed) Really good coffee has finally made it to San Pedro thanks to this little Italian restaurant-café-bakery. Also on offer are some good basic pastas and excellent homemade breads and pastries.

**Chile's** (4a Av 8-12; mains US\$4-7; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Chile's deck overlooking the Pana dock and lake will always be a popular option. The party starts later here, too, with



## BUYING LOCAL

At the time of research, an anonymous poster campaign was under way in San Pedro. The gist of it was that foreigners (who constitute a large part of the business community in San Pedro) were taking away income from the locals. The advice for travelers was to only patronize restaurants and businesses that were locally owned.

It's a good argument, on the surface, and certainly an effective one in more-glamorous locations, where large multinational corporations move in and squeeze out local competition, then send the profits out of the country.

The reality is a bit more humble in San Pedro, though – the great majority of foreigners who own businesses do so because they live here. They employ locals, shop locally and often have family connections with the local community. In short, the money stays in San Pedro.

Foreign-owned businesses are often more successful because they know what travelers want, not because they have the money to squeeze out the competition. To take one example: if a local can make the best pizza in town, that's where travelers are going to eat, regardless of whose name is on the lease.

free salsa classes and dance music through the week.

**D'Noz** (4a Av 8-16; mains US\$4-7; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is upstairs above Nick's and is another popular hangout – it's about as close as San Pedro gets to a cultural center, with a global menu, free movies, a big bar, board games and a lending library.

Restaurants on the path between the two docks:

**Buddha Bar** (2a Av 2-24; mains US\$6-8; ☺ lunch & dinner, closed Tue) An excellent place to hang out – downstairs there's a pool table, upstairs a restaurant doing convincing versions of Thai, Indian and other Asian dishes.

**Mikaso** (4a Callejon A 1-88; mains US\$6-8; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) With a real live Spanish chef, this is the place to come for Iberian delights. If you want the paella (US\$8 per person) you'll have to give 24 hours' notice.

## Drinking & Entertainment

**El Barrio** (7a Av 2-07, Zona 2; ☺ 5pm-1am) This cozy bar on the path between the two docks has one of the most happening happy hours in town, food till midnight and drinks till one. There's a good cocktail and snacks list and a couple of chilled-out outside areas.

**Alegre Lounge** (8a Calle 4-10) This place has a range of ridiculous drinks specials, such as US\$0.30 Cuba Libres, all through the week.

**Freedom Bar** (8a Calle 3-95, Zona 2; ☺ till 1am) The hardest-partying bar in town, the Freedom has good lounging areas, a pool table, a (relatively) huge dance floor and often hosts guest DJs on weekends. It's on the first street to your left coming up from the Pana dock.

At the Panajachel dock, D'Noz and the Alegre Lounge show movies most nights.

## Shopping

About 100m uphill from Hotel Mansión del Lago is Caza Sueños, a leather shop owned by brothers Fernando and Pedro González. They handcraft custom leather goods, including vests, boots and bags. For a very reasonable US\$35 they will craft a pair of shoes to your specifications of size, color, fringe, trim and lace style; allow a few days. Galería de Arte, on the road leading uphill from the Santiago dock, is operated by the family of celebrated primitivist artist Pedro Rafael González Chavajay. Some of his paintings and those of many of his family and students are exhibited and sold here.

## Getting There & Away

Passenger boats arrive here from Panajachel (see p135) and Santiago Atitlán (see p141). Boats from San Pedro to Santiago (US\$1.30, 45 minutes) leave hourly from 6am to 2pm. The last *lancha* from San Pedro to San Marcos, Jaibalito, Santa Cruz and Panajachel usually leaves around 5pm.

San Pedro is connected by paved roads to Santiago Atitlán and to the Interamericana at Km 148 (about 20km west of Los Encuentros). A paved branch off the San Pedro–Interamericana road runs along the northwest side of the lake from Santa Clara to San Marcos. Veloz San Pedro buses leave for Quetzaltenango (US\$3, 2½ hours) from San Pedro's Catholic parish church, up in the town center, at 4:45am, 6am and 7am.

## SAN JUAN LA LAGUNA

pop 4900

Two kilometers east of San Pedro, this is a mellow little lakeside village that has escaped much of the excesses of its neighbors. There are a couple of good swimming beaches here and a trail leads to Las Cristalinas mountains – you should take an experienced guide, both for navigation and security (see Dangers & Annoyances, p123, for more details).

Two weaving cooperatives operate in town, the Asociación de Mujeres de Color on the right from the dock having the greater variety.

San Juan is famous for its *petates* – woven mats made from reeds that grow by the lakeshore. No doubt you will see them in hotel rooms and restaurants around the lake.

Accommodations here are limited compared to other lakeside villages. **Uxlabil Eco Hotel** (☎ 2366 9555; www.uxlabil.com/atitlan-ing.htm; s/d US\$45/62) is the best option in town, with hand-carved stone trimmings done by local craftsmen. The hotel is set on 2 acres of coffee plantation and has a good swimming dock. It can arrange a variety of hikes and ecotours in the area. **Hospedaje Estrella del Lago** (☎ 7759 9126; s/d US\$) provides simple rooms with shared bathrooms.

To get to San Juan, you can ask any boat coming from Pana to drop you off at the dock. Otherwise it's a 15-minute (US\$0.30) pickup or bus ride from San Pedro.

## SAN MARCOS LA LAGUNA

pop 3000 / elev 1640m

Without doubt the prettiest of the lakeside villages, the flat shoreline in San Marcos La Laguna has paths snaking through banana, coffee and avocado trees. The town has become something of a magnet for hippies with a purpose, who believe the place has a particular spiritual energy, and is an excellent place to learn or practice meditation, holistic therapies, massage, reiki and other spiritually oriented activities.

Whatever you're into, it's definitely a great place to kick back and distance the everyday world for a spell. Lago de Atitlán is beautiful and clean here, with several little docks you can swim from.

Boats usually put in at a central dock just below Posada Schumann. The path leading up to the village center from here, and a parallel

one about 100m west, are San Marcos' main axes for most visitors.

The nongovernment organization (NGO) **La Cambalacha** (☎ 5590 2649; www.lacambalacha.org), which provides space, technical training and teachers for projects that get local kids involved in theater and the arts, is based here. It's always looking for volunteers.

## Sights & Activities

The village's greatest claim to fame is the meditation center **Las Pirámides** (☎ 5205 7151; www.laspiramidesdelka.com). You can enter from the path that passes Posada Schumann, or walk a short distance to the left (west) from the dock below Posada Schumann. A one-month personal development course begins every full moon, with three sessions daily, Monday to Saturday: one of Hatha yoga, one of meditation, and one of introduction to the spiritual life (first week), Shaluha-Ka therapy (second week), metaphysics and astral travel (third week) and retreat (fourth week). The final week requires fasting and silence by participants, so is not recommended for novice spiritualists. If you can stay for a month to do the whole course, come in time for the full moon. Most sessions are held in English, though occasionally they'll be translated from Spanish. There's also a three-month solar course running from each equinox to the following solstice, with a whole month's silence at the end.

Other experiences available here include yoga, aura work, massage (US\$20) and tarot readings. Monday through Saturday, nonguests can come for the meditation (5pm to 6pm) or Hatha yoga (7am to 8:30am) sessions for US\$4.

Most structures on the property are pyramidal in shape and oriented to the four cardinal points, including the two temples where sessions are held. Accommodations are available in little pyramid-shaped houses for US\$15/13/11 per day by the day/week/month and are only available to people interested in taking courses. Included in this price are the course, use of the sauna, and access to a fascinating library with books in several languages. There's also a great vegetarian restaurant here, and room to wander about in the medicinal herb garden.

Next door to Hotel El Unicornio, **San Marcos Holistic Centre** (www.sanmholisticcentre.com; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), run by Briton Louise Rothwell

with various resident and visiting practitioners, provides a whole range of massages, holistic therapies and training courses in fields such as Bach flower remedies, reiki, shiatsu, massage and reflexology. The approach is relaxed and you're welcome to discuss possibilities before committing to anything. English, Spanish, French and German are spoken. Most massages and therapies cost around US\$13 an hour.

**Guy** (☎ 5854 5365) at Restaurant Sol y Tul (see right) offers paragliding rides (US\$60) in the mornings from Santa Clara down to San Juan. It's an exhilarating ride offering some great photo opportunities.

The walks along the lake west to Santa Clara La Laguna and east to Jaibalito and Santa Cruz La Laguna are breathtaking, but attacks and robberies have made it essential to take local advice before setting out. The section between San Marcos and Jaibalito is particularly notorious and you may be advised only to try it in a large group, or not at all.

## Sleeping

**Hotel El Unicornio** (s/d US\$5/9) A favorite with the budget-conscious, El Unicornio has eight rooms in small, thatch-roofed A-frame bungalows among verdant gardens, sharing hot showers, nice hangout areas, a sauna and an equipped kitchen. Mexican owner Chus is a musician and enjoys playing with guests and making fun recordings in his little domed studio. To get here, turn left past Hotel La Paz, or walk along the lakeside path and turn right after Las Pirámides.

**Hotel La Paz** (☎ 5702 9168; r per person US\$6) Along a side path off the track behind Posada Schumann, the mellow La Paz has rambling grounds holding two doubles and five dormitory-style rooms. All are in bungalows of traditional *bajareque* (a stone, bamboo and mud construction) with thatch roofs, and some have loft beds. Antiques, art works, the organic gardens and vegetarian restaurant, the traditional Mayan sauna and the music and book room above the restaurant all contribute to making this place a little bit special. You can join Hatha yoga sessions (US\$2) in a special pavilion at 8am, or take a massage.

**Hotel Paco Real** (☎ 5891 1025; agutknecht54@hotmail.com; s/d US\$8/13) Along the same side path as Hotel La Paz, the Paco Real has simple but tasteful rooms in thatched cottages, with shared bathrooms. Also here is a good

restaurant with some Mexican choices (mains US\$4 to US\$5).

**Posada Schumann** (☎ 5202 2216; hotel.schumann@hotmail.com; s US\$11-17, d US\$22-33) Set in gardens that stretch right down to the lakeside, popular Posada Schumann has neat rooms in stone or wooden cottages, some with kitchen, most with bathroom and some with an upper floor and extra bed. There's also a restaurant (meals US\$6 to US\$10) and sauna.

**Aaculaax** (☎ 5803 7243; www.aaculaax.com; s/d from US\$12/15) An ecological fantasy come true, the new, German-owned Aaculaax is a five- to 10-minute walk to the left (west) along the lakeside path from the Posada Schumann dock. It's built around the living rock of the hillside, also using lots of recycled glass and plastic (plastic bottles stuffed hard with empty plastic bags form the core of many walls). Each of the seven double rooms is unique, with terrace, lake views, hot-water bathroom and compost toilets, and four have kitchens. A bar and restaurant should be open by the time you get there.

**Posada del Bosque Encantado** (☎ 5208 5334; gringamaya@yahoo.com; s/d US\$13/21) Set in jungly grounds that could well be an enchanted forest, these rooms strike a good balance between rustic and stylish. Each room has a loft with a double bed and another bed downstairs. Walls are mud-brick, beds are big and firm and there are hammocks strewn around the place.

## Eating

A couple of *comedores* around the plaza sell tasty, good-value Guatemalan standards.

**Il Giardino** (mains US\$2.75-5.25; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) This excellent vegetarian restaurant, owned by a Costa Rican-Italian couple, is set in a tranquil, spacious garden reached just before Hotel Paco Real. Main dishes include pizzas, spaghetti and fondues. The burritos with salsa and melted mozzarella are a treat.

**Il Forno** (mains US\$6-10; ☎ lunch & dinner) Serves up delicious pizzas cooked in a wood-fired oven. To get there, follow the signs from the main path to the dock.

**Sol y Tul** (mains US\$6-10; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Out on the balcony at this French-influenced restaurant are some of the best lake views in town. Meals are huge and the service is friendly. To get there, turn left from the main dock and follow the path for 20m.

## Getting There & Away

The last dependable boat back to Jaibalito, Santa Cruz and Panajachel usually goes about 5pm. For information on boats from Panajachel, see p135.

A paved road runs east from San Marcos to Tzununá and west to San Pablo and Santa Clara, where it meets the road running from the Interamericana to San Pedro. You can travel between San Marcos and San Pedro by pickup, with a transfer at San Pablo.

## JAIBALITO

pop 400

This small village, only accessible by boat or on foot, has two marvelous places to stay. Unfortunately, the picturesque hike to San Marcos (6km) was not recommended at the time of writing, except perhaps for large groups, because of attacks on walkers in the Tzununá area. The equally picturesque 45-minute (4km) path to Santa Cruz is, however, currently safe.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Vulcano Lodge** (☎ 5410 2237; d US\$25-57) Towards the back of the village, Norwegian-owned-and-built Vulcano Lodge doesn't enjoy La Casa del Mundo's views, but its handful of trim and spotless Scandinavian-cum-Guatemalan rooms are just as appealing and its gardens just as lovely. There's also a fine restaurant with mainly European food (US\$9 for the all-you-can-eat four-course dinner). The owners, Terje and Monica, are well versed in local walking routes.

**La Casa del Mundo Hotel & Café** (☎ 5218 5332; www.lacasadelmundo.com; r US\$27, with bathroom US\$55; ☒) Perched on a secluded cliff facing the three volcanoes, this is one of Guatemala's most spectacular hotels. Designed and built by husband-and-wife team Bill and Rosie Fogarty, it has beautiful gardens, good lake swimming and even a wood-fired hot tub overhanging the lake (US\$36 for up to 10 people). Every room has privacy and views and is impeccably outfitted with comfortable beds, Guatemalan fabrics and fresh flowers. The best rooms seem to be floating above the water, with no land visible beneath. All rooms are nonsmoking. The excellent restaurant is open to the public; dinner (US\$9) is four courses of seriously tasty food. You can rent kayaks (US\$3.50 to US\$7 an hour) for exploring the lake. Room reservations (by phone only) are advisable.

## Getting There & Away

Jaibalito is a 20-minute *lancha* ride from Panajachel or San Pedro. As well as the public dock roughly in the center of the village, La Casa del Mundo has a pier.

## SANTA CRUZ LA LAGUNA

pop 5680 / elev 1665m

For all practical purposes four hotels spread along the lakeside, this is the earthiest of the lake options, and also the home of the lake's scuba diving outfit, ATI Divers. The main part of the village is uphill from the dock.

**Amigos de Santa Cruz** (www.amigosdesantacruz.org) is an excellent, grass-roots program focusing on Santa Cruz's families in need. It's always looking for mid- to long-term volunteers for projects including fuel-efficient stoves, nutritional programs, technology training, school sponsorships and medical care.

## Activities

**ATI Divers** (☎ 7762 2621; www.laiguanaaperdida.com) offers a four-day PADI open-water diving certification course (US\$205), as well as a PADI high-altitude course and fun dives. It's based at La Iguana Perdida hotel.

Good walks from Santa Cruz include the beautiful lakeside walking track between Santa Cruz and San Marcos, 10km (about four hours) one way. You can stop for a beer and a meal at La Casa del Mundo en route (see Jaibalito, left). Or you can walk up the hill to Sololá, a 9km (3½-hour) walk one way.

## Sleeping & Eating

Three welcoming lakeside places provide beds and meals.

**La Iguana Perdida** (☎ 5706 4117; www.laiguana-perdida.com; dm US\$3, s/d US\$8/10) Some might say they're going a bit overboard on the whole rustic thing, but this is still a good place to hang out, enjoy the lake views and meet other travelers. There's no electricity and the showers in the bathrooms (all shared) are lovely and cold! Meals are served family-style, with everyone eating together; a three-course dinner is US\$5.50. You always have a vegetarian choice, and everything here is on the honor system: your tab is totaled up when you leave. Don't miss the Saturday night cross-dressing, fire and music barbecues!

**Arca de Noé** (☎ 5515 3712; arcasantacruz@yahoo.com; s/d US\$8/12, with bathroom US\$22/24) Spread out along the lakeside, the rooms and bungalows

here are spacious, with good views. The concrete bed bases are a bit of a letdown. Solar energy provides some hot water and electric light. It has a welcoming, sociable atmosphere and great food: the large candlelit set dinner, always with a vegetarian option, is US\$8.50. For breakfast try the filling, tasty Western omelet (US\$3).

**Casa Rosa Hotel** (☎ 5803 2531; www.la-casa-rosa.com; r/bungalows US\$30/37) With gardens running down to the lake, but a little removed from the action of the other hotels, Casa Rosa is the most formal of the lakeside establishments. Rooms are spacious and cool, shaded by banana trees and decorated in a restrained, tasteful fashion. There are large picture windows overlooking the lake, and wide balconies for catching an afternoon breeze.

### Getting There & Away

For information about boats travelling to Santa Cruz, see Panajachel (p135) and San Pedro La Laguna (p145).

## QUICHÉ

A largely forgotten little pocket of the country, most visitors here are on a quick in-and-out for the famous market at Chichicastenango. Further north is Santa Cruz del Quiché, the departmental capital; on its outskirts lie the ruins of K'umarcaaj (or Gumarcaah), also called Utaatlán, the last capital city of the Quiché Maya.

More adventurous souls come for the excellent hiking around Nebaj, a small mountain town which suffered terribly during the civil war, and the breathtaking backdoor route to Cobán.

The road into Quiché leaves the Interamericana at Los Encuentros, winding northward through pine forests and cornfields. Women sit in front of their little roadside houses weaving gorgeous pieces of cloth on backstrap looms. From Los Encuentros, it takes about half an hour to travel the 17km to Chichicastenango.

### CHICHICASTENANGO

pop 49,000 / elev 2030m

Surrounded by valleys, with mountains serrating the horizons, Chichicastenango can seem isolated in time and space from the

rest of Guatemala. When its narrow cobbled streets and red-tiled roofs are enveloped in mist, as they often are, it can seem magical. The crowds of crafts vendors and tour groups who flock in for the huge Thursday and Sunday markets give the place a much worldlier, commercial atmosphere, but Chichi remains beautiful and interesting, with lots of shamanistic and ceremonial overtones. *Masheños* (citizens of Chichicastenango) are famous for their adherence to pre-Christian religious beliefs and ceremonies. If you have a choice of days, come for the Sunday market rather than the Thursday one, as the *cofradías* (Mayan religious brotherhoods) often hold processions in and around the church of Santo Tomás on Sunday.

Chichi has two religious and governmental establishments. On the one hand, the Catholic Church and the Republic of Guatemala appoint priests and town officials; on the other, the indigenous people elect their own religious and civil officers to manage local matters, with a separate council and mayor, and a court that decides cases involving only local indigenous people.

Once called Chaviar, Chichi was an important Kaqchiquel trading town long before the Spanish conquest. In the 15th century the Kaqchiquel and the K'iche' (based at K'umarcaaj near present-day Santa Cruz del Quiché, 20km north) went to war. The Kaqchiquel abandoned Chaviar and moved their headquarters to the more defensible Iximché. When the Spanish conquered K'umarcaaj in 1524, many of its residents fled to Chaviar, which they renamed Chugüilá (Above the Nettles) and Tziguan Tinamit (Surrounded by Canyons). These are the names still used by the K'iche' Maya, although everyone else calls the place Chichicastenango, a name given by the Spaniards' Mexican allies.

### Information

Chichi's many banks all stay open on Sunday, taking their day off (if any) on some other day of the week. Most banks change cash US dollars and traveler's checks.

**ACSES** (6a Calle; per hr US\$0.80) Internet access; east of 5a Av.

**Banco Industrial** (☎ 10am-2pm Mon, 10am-5pm Wed & Fri, 9am-5pm Thu & Sun, 10am-3pm Sat) Almost next door to Banrural; changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks.

**Banrural** (6a Calle; ☎ 9am-5pm Sun-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks; has a MasterCard ATM. East of 5a Av.

**Hotel Santo Tomás** (p153) Has a good selection of books for sale in its lobby.

**Internet Digital** (5a Av 5-60; per hr US\$0.80) Internet access.

**Post office** (7a Av 8-47) On the road into town, 3½ blocks south of Hotel Santo Tomás.

**Visa ATM** (cnr 5a Av & 6a Calle) On the street.

## Dangers & Annoyances

The cemetery on the western edge of town is an unwise place to wander, even in groups. Tourists have been robbed at gunpoint there.

Crowded markets are the favorite haunts of pickpockets, so be alert while you wander in the labyrinth of stalls here.

When you arrive in Chichi, you may be approached by touts offering guide services and assistance in finding a hotel. Showing up at a hotel with a tout in tow means you'll be quoted a higher price for a room, as the hotel has to give them a kickback – and this on top of your tip! In fact, you don't need their 'help,' because there's no difficulty finding lodgings. In addition, touts won't take you to some of the best-value hotels because the owners refuse to provide kickbacks.

## Sights

Make sure you check out the fascinating mural that runs alongside the wall of the town hall on the east side of the plaza. It's dedicated to the victims of the civil war and tells the story of the war using symbology from the *Popol Vuh*.

## MARKET

In the past villagers would walk for many hours carrying their wares to participate in Chichi market, one of Guatemala's largest indigenous markets. Some still do, and when they reach Chichi on the night before the market, they lay down their loads in one of the arcades or spaces around the plaza, cook some supper, spread out a blanket and go to sleep.

At dawn on Thursday and Sunday they spread out their vegetables, fruits, chunks of chalk (ground to a powder, mixed with water and used to soften dried maize), balls of wax, handmade harnesses and other merchandise and wait for customers. The plaza is now the territory of more full-time traders, with stalls covered in unsightly black plastic sheeting, but many more traders fill the streets for several blocks around the plaza on Sunday and Thursday. Tourist-oriented handicraft stalls selling masks, textiles, pottery and so on now occupy much of the plaza and the streets to the north. Things villagers need – food, soap, clothing, sewing notions, toys – cluster at the north end of the square, in the *centro comercial* off the north side, and in streets to the south.

The market starts winding down around 3pm. Prices are best just before it breaks up, as tired traders would rather sell than carry goods away with them. By this time you'll also notice quite a few drunks staggering around or lying comatose in the street.

## IGLESIA DE SANTO TOMÁS

This church on the east side of the plaza dates from about 1540 and is often the scene of

### THE MAYAN 'BIBLE'

One of the most important Mayan texts, the *Popol Vuh*, was written down after the Spanish conquest in K'iche' Maya, using Latin script. The K'iche' scribes showed their book to Francisco Ximénez, a Dominican who lived and worked in Chichicastenango from 1701 to 1703. Friar Ximénez copied the K'iche' book word for word, then translated it into Spanish. Both his copy and the Spanish translation survive, but the Mayan original has been lost. The *Popol Vuh* deals with the dawn of life and the glories of gods and kings. You'll find copies on sale throughout Guatemala. The definitive English translation is by Dennis Tedlock. Its tale is somewhat cyclical and not always consistent, but its gist is as follows: the great god K'ucumatz created humankind first from earth (mud), but these earthlings were weak and dissolved in water. The god tried again, using wood. The wood people had no hearts or minds and could not praise their creator. These too were destroyed, all except the monkeys of the forest, who are the descendants of the wood people. The creator tried once again, this time successfully, using material recommended by four animals – the grey fox, the coyote, the parrot and the crow. The substance was white and yellow corn, ground into meal to form the flesh and stirred into water to make the blood. Thus do Guatemalans think of themselves with pride as *hombres de maíz*, men of corn.

## CHICHICASTENANGO

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| Municipalidad (Town Hall).....    | 12 C2 |
| Museo Regional.....               | 13 C2 |
| Pascual Abaj.....                 | 14 B4 |

| SLEEPING                      |       |
|-------------------------------|-------|
| Chalet House.....             | 15 D1 |
| Hospedaje Salvador.....       | 16 C3 |
| Hotel Chugüilá.....           | 17 D2 |
| Hotel Girón.....              | 18 C2 |
| Hotel Mashito.....            | 19 B2 |
| Hotel Santo Tomás.....        | 20 D2 |
| Hotel Tuttos.....             | 21 C3 |
| Maya Lodge.....               | 22 C2 |
| Mayan Inn.....                | 23 C2 |
| Mini-Hotel Chichicasteca..... | 24 C1 |
| Posada El Arco.....           | 25 D1 |
| Posada El Teléfono.....       | 26 B2 |

| EATING                        |          |
|-------------------------------|----------|
| Casa de San Juan.....         | 27 C2    |
| Hotel Santo Tomás.....        | (see 20) |
| La Parrilla.....              | 28 D2    |
| La Villa de los Cofrades..... | 29 C2    |
| Los Cofrades.....             | 30 C2    |
| Mayan Inn.....                | (see 23) |
| Tu Café.....                  | 31 C2    |
| Tziguán Tinamit.....          | 32 C2    |

| TRANSPORT   |          |
|---|----------|
| Agency Chichi Maya.....                                       | 33 D2    |
| Buses to Los Encuentros, Interamericana & Guatemala City..... | 34 D2    |
| Buses to Santa Cruz del Quiché.....                           | 35 D1    |
| Chichi Turkaj Tours.....                                      | (see 17) |

rituals that are only slightly Catholic and more distinctly Mayan. The front steps of the church serve much the same purpose as did the great flights of stairs leading up to Mayan pyramids. For much of the day (especially on Sunday), they smolder with incense of copal resin, while indigenous prayer leaders called *chuckkajaues* (mother-fathers) swing censers (usually tin cans poked with holes) and chant magic words marking the days of the ancient Mayan calendar and in honor of their ancestors.

It's customary for the front steps and door of the church to be used only by important church officials and by the *chuckkajaues*, so you should go around to the right and enter by the side door.

Inside, the floor of the church may be spread with pine boughs and dotted with offerings of maize kernels, flowers, bottles of liquor wrapped in corn husks, and candles. Many local families can trace their lineage back centuries, some even to the ancient kings of the K'iche'. The candles and offerings on the floor are in remembrance of those ancestors, many of whom are buried beneath the church floor just as Maya kings were buried beneath pyramids. Please note that photography is not permitted in this church.

On the west side of the plaza is another whitewashed church, the **Capilla del Calvario**, which is similar in form and function to Santo Tomás, but smaller.

### MIXING IT UP

Much is made of the blend of Catholicism and Mayan beliefs. And indeed, one survival technique for the Maya was to 'accept' Catholicism, and simply rename their objects of worship. This is most obvious in that Mary is associated with the moon and the stars whereas God or Jesus represents the sun.

But the Maya were using the cross long before the Spanish arrived – for them the four points represent the sun, the Earth, the moon and people. Four is an especially holy number for the Maya, as they believe that the world is supported at its four corners by gods.

One Mayan creation story that obviously owes little to the bible is that of Old Jesus and Young Jesus. The story goes that one day the two Jesuses found a tree with wax at the top. The young one climbed the tree, and started dropping the wax down to the old one, who made an army from it. But young Jesus dropped too much wax, angering the old one, who ordered his army to bite off the tree trunk, causing Young Jesus to fall to his death.

Old Jesus went to tell his mother, the Virgin Mary, what happened and she banished him to a mountaintop, where he found an umbilical cord, climbed to Heaven and became the sun, at which point his mother became the moon.

### MUSEO REGIONAL

Chichi's **Museo Regional** (5a Av 4-47; admission US\$0.80; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Tue-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun), entered from the south side of the main square, has a collection of ceremonial masks, copper ax heads, obsidian spearheads, incense burners, figurines and *metates* (grindstones for maize). The museum also holds the Rossbach jade collection, with some beautiful necklaces and figurines. Hugo Rossbach, from Germany, served as Chichi's Catholic priest for many years until his death in 1944.

### PASCUAL ABAJ

On a hilltop south of the town, **Pascual Abaj** (Sacrifice Stone) is a shrine to the Mayan earth god Huyup Tak'ah (Mountain Plain). Said to be hundreds – perhaps thousands – of years old, the stone-faced idol has suffered numerous indignities at the hands of outsiders, but local people still revere it. *Chuchkajaues* come regularly to offer incense, food, cigarettes, flowers, liquor, Coca-Cola, and perhaps even to sacrifice a chicken, in thanks and hope for the Earth's continuing fertility.

Sacrifices do not take place at regular hours. If you're in luck, you may witness one. The worshippers will not mind if you watch, but be sure to request permission before taking any photos and don't assume it will be granted. You may be asked if you want to make an offering (of a few quetzals) yourself. If there is no ceremony, you can still see the idol and enjoy the walk up the pine-clad hill. Tourists walking to visit Pascual Abaj have on occasions been robbed, so the best plan

is to join with others and go not too late in the afternoon.

Walk downhill on 5a Av from the main plaza, turn right into 9a Calle and follow it downhill. At the bottom of the hill, bear left along a path and head up through either of the **moreñas** (ceremonial mask workshops, worth a visit) that are signposted here. From the back of either *moreña*, follow the path uphill through the trees to the top of the hill. You'll find the idol in its rocky, smoke-blackened shrine in a clearing, looking a little like something from Easter Island. The squat stone crosses nearby have many significances for the Maya, only one of which pertains to Christ. The area is littered with past offerings.

### Festivals & Events

Holidays and special events here can offer a more intriguing experience than the usual dancing, drinking and fireworks typical of Guatemalan fiestas. December 7 sees the **Quema del Diablo** (Burning of the Devil), when residents burn their garbage in the streets and usher a statue of the Virgin Mary to the steps of the Iglesia de Santo Tomás. There's lots of incense and candles, a marimba band and an ingenious and daring fireworks display that has observers running for cover. The following day is the **Feast of the Immaculate Conception**; don't miss the early-morning dance of the giant, drunken cartoon characters in the plaza.

The **fiesta of Santo Tomás** starts on December 13 and culminates on December 21 when pairs of brave (some would say mad) men fly about at high speeds suspended from a tall,



vertical pole in the *palo volador* (fliers' pole) extravaganza. Traditional dances and parades also feature.

## Sleeping

Chichi does not have a lot of accommodations, and it's a good idea to call or arrive fairly early on Wednesday or Saturday if you want to secure a room the night before the Thursday or Sunday market.

## BUDGET

**Posada El Teléfono** (☎ 7756 1197; 8a Calle A 1-64; s/d US\$4/8) Not exactly luxury, but the rooms here are comfortable enough and good value for the price. The view of the town's technicolor cemetery from the rooftop is a draw in itself. There's a kitchen that guests can use.

**Hospedaje Salvador** (☎ 7756 1329; 5a Av 10-09; s/d US\$5/7, with bathroom US\$8/10) Huge and crumbling, the Salvador still scrapes together a bit of character, but it's mostly just budget digs for market days. Rooms get better as you go higher: Nos 49 to 52 on the top floor are light and airy, with good views. Try negotiating for reduced prices. The entrance is an unmarked blue door on 10a Calle.

**Mini-Hotel Chichicasteca** (☎ 7756 2111; 5a Calle 4-42; s/d US\$5/9) This hotel's adequately clean rooms with bare brick walls are a decent budget choice. It's conveniently located for both the bus stop and plaza.

**Hotel Mashito** (☎ 7756 1343; 8a Calle 1-72; s/d US\$5.50/11, with bathroom US\$7/14) Another cheapie-but-goodie, also on the road to the cemetery, offering plain but comfortable rooms in a big family house.

**Hotel Tuttos** (☎ 7756 1540; 12a Calle 6-29; s/d with bathroom US\$10/12) Up on a hill away from the chaos of the market area, the Tuttos has good-sized, fairly clean rooms. The terrace and rooms out back have great views over the valley behind town.

**Hotel Girón** (☎ 7756 1156; 6a Calle 4-52; s/d with bathroom US\$11/15; ☐) There's plenty of varnished pine going on here, but the paint job's cheery, rooms are big and spotless and the proximity to the market can't be beat for the price. There are broad, sunny walkways in front of the rooms for catching a few rays. There are a couple of cheaper rooms with shared bathroom.

**Chalet House** (☎ 7756 1360; www.chalethotelguatemala.com; 3a Calle C No 7-44; s/d with bathroom US\$15/22) The cozy Chalet House has good beds, homey touches and private hot-water bathrooms.

Rooms get better the further upstairs you go, so ask to see a few. Rates rise in July, August and September.

## MIDRANGE

**Posada El Arco** (☎ 7756 1255; 4a Calle 4-36; s/d US\$20/26) This winner guesthouse, near the Arco Gucumatz, is the best accommodation for the price in Chichi. All seven rooms are spacious and spotless, with attractive decor, fireplace and hot-water bathroom. Rooms 6 and 7 have private balconies with great views. You can sit in lawn chairs in the garden and enjoy a great northward view of the mountains of Quiché. The friendly owners, Emilsa and Pedro Macario, speak English and Spanish. Reservations are a good idea.

**Hotel Chuguilá** (☎ 7756 1134; chuguilá@intelnet.net.gt; 5a Av 5-24; s/d US\$26/30; ☐) All 36 colonial-style rooms have a bathroom, and some have a fireplace, but check a few before settling in, as some are huge, with separate sitting areas. They're set around a large, pretty courtyard providing ample parking – overall, it's decent value.

**Maya Lodge** (☎ 7756 1167; 6a Calle A 4-08; s/d US\$26/30; ☐) Located right on the main plaza, this hotel has a slightly colonial atmosphere. The 10 rooms have wooden ceilings, three with a fireplace and all with a hot-water bathroom, are set along a pretty pillared patio and adorned with woven rugs and Mayan-style bedspreads. You're really paying for the location on this one.

## TOP END

**Hotel Santo Tomás** (☎ 7756 1061; hst@itelgua.com; 7a Av 5-32; s/d US\$70/80; ☐ ☎) Chichi's most gorgeous hotel is big on plant-filled patios, tinkling fountains and decorations that include local handicrafts and religious relics. Each of the rooms has a bathroom with tub and a fireplace. There's a swimming pool, Jacuzzi and a good bar and dining room (see p154).

**Mayan Inn** (☎ 7756 1176; www.mayaninn.com.gt; 8a Calle A 1-91; s/d/tr US\$80/92/110) A lovely old inn on a quiet street, the Mayan Inn was founded in 1932 by Alfred S Clark of Clark Tours, and is the best hotel in town. It has grown to include several restored colonial houses, their courtyards planted with exuberant tropical flora and their walls covered with bright indigenous textiles. Not all of the 30 rooms are equally charming, so look before

## COFRADÍAS

Chichicastenango's religious life is centered in traditional religious brotherhoods known as *cofradías*. Membership in the brotherhood is an honorable civic duty, and election as leader is the greatest honor. Leaders must provide banquets and pay for festivities for the *cofradía* throughout their term. Though it is very expensive, a *cofrade* (brotherhood member) happily accepts the burden, even going into debt if necessary.

Each of Chichi's 14 *cofradías* has a patron saint. Most notable is the *cofradía* of Santo Tomás, Chichi's patron saint. *Cofradías* march in procession to church every Sunday morning and during religious festivals, with the officers dressed in costumes showing their rank. Before them is carried a ceremonial staff topped by a silver crucifix or sun-badge that signifies the *cofradías'* patron saint. A drum and a flute, and perhaps a few more modern instruments such as a trumpet, may accompany the procession, as do fireworks.

During major church festivals, effigies of the saints are carried in grand processions, and richly costumed dancers wearing traditional wooden masks act out legends of the ancient Maya and of the Spanish conquest. For the rest of the year, these masks and costumes are kept in storehouses-cum-workshops called *morerías*; you'll see them, marked by signs, around the town.

choosing. Each has a fireplace and interesting antique furnishings. The bathrooms (many with tubs) may be old-fashioned, but they are decently maintained. A staff member is assigned to answer your questions and serve you in the dining room (see right), as well as to look after your room – there are no door locks.

## Eating BUDGET

On Sunday and Thursday, eating at the cookshops set up in the center of the market is the cheapest way to go. Don't be deterred by the fried-food stalls crowding the fringe – dive into the center for wholesome fare. On other days, look for the little *comedores* near the post office on the road into town.

**Casa de San Juan** (4a Av, main plaza; dishes US\$3-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The San Juan is one of the few eateries in town with style – art on the walls and the tables themselves, jugs of lilies, wrought-iron chairs – and its food is great too, ranging from burgers and tortillas to homemade cakes and more-traditional dishes. There are balcony tables overlooking the market and live music some nights.

**Tu Café** (5a Av, main plaza; mains US\$3.50-5; ☺ lunch & dinner) The *plato vegetariano* here is soup, rice, beans, cheese, salad and tortillas, for a reasonable US\$3.50. Add *lomito* (a pork fillet) and it becomes a *plato típico* (US\$4.50).

**Tziguán Tinamit** (5 Av 5-67; mains US\$3.50-6; ☺ lunch & dinner) For a more down-to-earth dining experience, check out this local eatery, with good pastas (US\$4) and hit-and-miss pizzas (US\$5).

**La Villa de los Cofrades** (6a Calle A, main plaza; dishes US\$4-6; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) You can't beat this location in the arcade on the north side of the plaza. This is a fine café for breakfast, crepes or larger meals with an Italian influence and good strong coffee.

**La Parrilla** (6a Calle 5-37; mains US\$5-6; ☺ lunch & dinner) A meat lover's dream, La Parrilla serves up every cut imaginable, chargrilled, in a quiet courtyard setting.

**Los Cofrades** (cnr 6a Calle & 5a Av; 2-course lunch or dinner US\$6-7; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This bright upstairs restaurant (enter from 6a Calle) serves up some excellent set meals and has a decent drinks list. Go for a table out on the balcony – the atmosphere inside is very 'dining hall.'

## MIDRANGE

**Mayan Inn** (8a Calle A 1-91; set breakfast/lunch/dinner with drinks US\$7/13/13; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The three dining rooms at Chichi's classiest hotel have beamed ceilings, red-tiled floors, colonial-style tables and chairs, and decorations of colorful local cloth. Waiters wear traditional costumes evolved from the dress of Spanish colonial farmers: colorful headdress, sash, black embroidered tunic, half-length trousers and squeaky leather sandals called *caïtes*. The food may not be as stellar as the costuming, however.

**Hotel Santo Tomás** (7a Av 5-32; 3-course dinner US\$14; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Chichi's other top-end hotel has a good dining room, but you might find it crowded with tour groups. Try to get one of the courtyard tables, where you can enjoy the sun and the marimba band that

plays at market-day lunchtimes and on the evenings before.

### Getting There & Away

Buses heading south to Los Encuentros, Panajachel, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala City and all other points reached from the Interamericana normally arrive and depart from the corner of 5a Calle and 5a Av, one block uphill from the Arco Gucumatz. Buses heading north to Santa Cruz del Quiché stop half a block downhill on the same street. On market days, however, buses to or from the south may stop at the corner of 7a Av and 9a Calle, to avoid the congested central streets.

**Antigua** (3½ hours, 108km) Take any bus heading for Guatemala City and change at Chimaltenango.

**Guatemala City** (US\$3, three hours, 145km) Buses every 20 minutes from 4am to 5pm.

**Los Encuentros** (US\$1.50, 30 minutes, 17km) Take any bus heading south for Guatemala City, Panajachel, Quetzaltenango and so on.

**Nebaj** (103km) Take a bus to Santa Cruz del Quiché and change there.

**Panajachel** (US\$2.50, 1½ hours, 37km) About eight buses, from 5am to 2pm; or take any southbound bus and change at Los Encuentros.

**Quetzaltenango** (US\$3, 3 hours, 94km) Seven buses, mostly in the morning; or take any southbound bus and change at Los Encuentros.

**Santa Cruz del Quiché** (US\$1.50, 30 minutes, 19km) Buses depart every 20 minutes, 5am to 8pm.

On market days, shuttle buses arrive en masse mid-morning, bringing tourists from Panajachel, Antigua, Guatemala City and Quetzaltenango. They depart around 2pm. If you're looking to leave Chichi, you can usually catch a ride out on one of these.

**Chichi Turkaj Tours** (☎ 5293 5480; Hotel Chugüüilá, 5a Av 5-24) and **Agency Chichi Maya** (☎ 7756 1008; 6a Calle 6-45) provide shuttles to the same places and elsewhere including Huehuetenango, the Mexican border and the ruins of K'umarcaaj near Santa Cruz del Quiché. In most cases they need four or five customers unless you're prepared to rent the whole vehicle (which costs around US\$30 to Panajachel, and US\$65 to Antigua or Quetzaltenango).

### SANTA CRUZ DEL QUICHÉ

pop 25,600 / elev 2020m

The capital of Quiché department is 19km north of Chichicastenango. As you leave Chichi heading north along 5a Av, you pass

beneath the Arco Gucumatz, an arched bridge named for Ku'ucumatz, the founder of the old K'iche' Maya capital K'umarcaaj, near Santa Cruz.

Without Chichi's big market and attendant tourism, Santa Cruz – usually called El Quiché or simply Quiché – is quieter and more typical of Guatemalan towns. Travelers who come here usually do so to visit K'umarcaaj or to change buses en route further north (for Nebaj, for example).

The main market days are Thursday and Sunday, making things slightly more interesting and way more crowded.

### Orientation & Information

Everything you need is within a few short blocks of the central plaza, called the Parque Central. From the bus terminal, walk three blocks north on 1a Av (Zona 5), then two blocks to the left (west), then one to the right (north) to reach the plaza's southeast corner. The church rises on the east side of the plaza, with the market behind it.

**Banrural** (☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat), at the plaza's northwest corner, changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks and has a MasterCard ATM. You can access the internet at Occitel on the west side of the plaza.

### Sights

#### MUSEO MILITAR

Should you want to know the Guatemalan army's version of the civil war in Quiché department, have a look at the **Military Museum** (admission US\$0.25; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) in the northeast corner of the plaza. Displays cover uniforms and weapons, the struggle against communism, and social work now being done by the military. No comment.

#### K'UMARCAAJ

The ruins of the ancient K'iche' Maya capital (also called Gumarcaaj or Utatlán) are 3km west of El Quiché along an unpaved road. Take a flashlight (torch) if you have one. Head west along 11a Calle, opposite the bus station, and follow this all the way to **K'umarcaaj** (admission US\$2.50; ☎ 8am-5pm). A taxi there and back from the bus station, including waiting time, costs around US\$12.

The kingdom of K'iche' was established in late postclassic times (about the 14th century) by a mixture of indigenous people and invaders from the Tabasco/Campeche border area

in Mexico. Around 1400, King Ku'ucumatz founded K'umarcaaj and conquered many neighboring settlements. During the long reign of his successor Q'uiq'ab (1425–75), the K'iche' kingdom extended its borders to Huehuetenango, Nebaj, Rabinal and the Pacific Slope. At the same time the Kaqchiquel, a vassal people who once fought alongside the K'iche', rebelled, establishing an independent capital at Iximché.

When Pedro de Alvarado and his Spanish conquistadors hit Guatemala in 1524, it was the K'iche', under their king Tecún Umán, who led the resistance to them. In the decisive battle fought near Quetzaltenango on February 12, 1524, Alvarado and Tecún locked in mortal combat. Alvarado prevailed. The defeated K'iche' invited Alvarado to visit K'umarcaaj, secretly planning to kill him. Smelling a rat, Alvarado enlisted the aid of his Mexican auxiliaries and the anti-K'iche' Kaqchiquel, and together they captured the K'iche' leaders, burnt them alive in K'umarcaaj's main plaza and then destroyed the city.

The ruins have a fine setting, shaded by tall trees and surrounded by ravines, which failed to defend it against the conquistadors. Archaeologists have identified 100 or so large structures here, but only limited restoration or clearing has been done. The **museum** at the entrance will help orientate you. The tallest of the structures round the central plaza, the Templo de Tohil (a sky god), is blackened by smoke and has a niche where contemporary prayer-men regularly make offerings to Mayan gods. K'umarcaaj is still very much a sacred site for the Maya.

Down the hillside to the right of the plaza is the entrance to a long tunnel known as the *cueva*. Legend has it that the K'iche' dug the tunnel as a refuge for their women and children in preparation for Pedro de Alvarado's coming, and that a K'iche' princess was later buried in a deep shaft off this tunnel. Revered as the place where the K'iche' kingdom died, the *cueva* is sacred to highland Maya and is an important location for prayers, candle burning, offerings and chicken sacrifices.

If there's anyone around the entrance, ask permission before entering. Inside, the long tunnel (perhaps 100m long) is blackened with smoke and incense and littered with candles and flower petals. Use your flashlight and watch your footing: there are several side tunnels and at least one of them,

on the right near the end, contains a deep, black shaft.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel San Pascual** (☎ 7755 1107; 7a Calle 0-43, Zona 1; s/d US\$5/8, with bathroom US\$11/14; (P)) Between the bus station and plaza, this is a clean and friendly hotel with plants in its two courtyards. More-expensive rooms have big clean bathrooms and cable TV.

**Hotel Leo** (☎ 7765 0776; 1 Av 9-02, Zona 5; s/d US\$10/12) An excellent deal right around the corner from the bus terminal, with spacious, quiet rooms and good clean bathrooms.

**Hotel Rey K'iche** (☎ 7755 0827; 8a Calle 0-39, Zona 5; s/d/tr US\$12/22; (P)) Between the bus station and plaza, the Rey K'iche has 24 good, clean, modern rooms with brick and/or whitewash walls, cable TV and hot-water bathroom. There's free drinking water and a decent restaurant open 24 hours daily.

**San Miguel** (2 Av & 5 Calle, Zona 1; snacks US\$2-3; ☎ breakfast & lunch) A little bakery-café that injects a bit of style into Santa Cruz's eating scene. A friendly, tranquil environment and some excellent baked goods and sandwiches are on offer.

**Café La Torre** (2a Av, Zona 1; mains US\$3-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) If you want to escape the hectic streets for a while, this little upstairs café is a good place to do it and catch some plaza views at the same time. Snacks include burgers and sandwiches and good-value set lunches (US\$3) are available.

## Getting There & Away

Many buses from Guatemala City to Chichicastenango continue to El Quiché. The last bus from El Quiché headed south to Chichicastenango and Los Encuentros leaves mid-afternoon.

El Quiché is the jumping-off point for the somewhat remote reaches of northern Quiché, which extend all the way to the Mexican border. Departures from the bus station include the following:

**Chichicastenango** (US\$1.50, 30 minutes, 19km) Take any bus heading for Guatemala City.

**Guatemala City** (US\$4, 3½ hours, 163km) Buses every 20 minutes, 3am to 5pm.

**Los Encuentros** (US\$2.50, one hour, 36km) Take any bus heading for Guatemala City.

**Nebaj** (US\$3, 2½ hours, 75km) Eight buses, 8:30am to 5pm

**Sacapulas** (US\$2, one hour, 45km) Buses every 30 minutes, 8:30am to 5pm; or take any bus bound for Nebaj or Usulután

**Uspantán** (US\$3.50, 3 hours, 75km) Buses at approximately 9:30am, 10:30am, 1:30pm, 3pm and 3:30pm

## SACAPULAS

This small, friendly town on the Río Negro is where the El Quiché–Nebaj road meets the Huehuetenango–Cobán road and so is a place where you may need to change buses or possibly stay a night. **Banrural** (☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri, 8am–noon Sat) on the plaza, up the hill from the bridge, changes cash US dollars.

There's a Cruz Roja (Red Cross) post on the southern bank of the river, where you'll also find the friendly **Hospedaje Tujal** (s/d US\$8/16). The rooms here are big and bright and overlook the river. Bonuses are the super-clean private bathrooms with hot showers, flat-screen cable TV and decent *comedor* downstairs.

## Getting There & Away

The 45km road from El Quiché is paved; the spectacular mountain roads to Huehue, Uspantán and Nebaj are newly paved, and (at the time of writing) some of the best roads in the country. Minibuses for Nebaj, Uspantán and Aguacatán leave from the north end of the bridge whenever full. Bus schedules from Sacapulas are imprecise.

**Cobán** (US\$6, five hours, 100km) Transportes Mejía's Aguacatán–Cobán bus stops at the north end of Sacapulas bridge at about 7:30am on Saturday and Tuesday (only). Otherwise, catch a minibus to Uspantán and either spend the night there or catch another one onward.

**El Quiché** (US\$1.50, one hour, 45km, 12 daily, 1:30am–5:30pm) Buses stop at the south end of the bridge at erratic hours: the greatest frequency is between about 6am and 10am.

**Huehuetenango** (US\$2, 2½ hours, 42km, two daily, 4am & 5:30am) Buses go from the north end of the bridge: later in the day, occasional pickups and other vehicles can take you as far as Aguacatán, from where buses leave for Huehue a dozen times between 4:45am and 4pm.

**Nebaj** (US\$1, 1½ hours, 26km, eight daily, 9:30am–6pm) Catch these at the south end of the bridge.

**Uspantán** (US\$4, 1¾ hours, 30km, five daily, 10:30am, 11:30am, 2:30pm, 4pm and 4:30pm) Catch them at the south end of the bridge.

## USPANTÁN

pop 3500

You may end up spending the night in Uspantán while traveling between Nebaj/Sacapulas/Huehuetenango and Cobán. The last scheduled minibus leaves at 4pm, but

ask around – there may be somebody going later. It's a benevolent and clean town, with wide paved avenues, though it can seem distinctly eerie if you arrive after dark during one of the frequent power outages and the place is enveloped in fog! It can get very cold here, so don't hesitate to ask for extra blankets.

Rigoberta Menchú (p38) grew up a five-hour walk through the mountains from Uspantán. She is not loved by all her former neighbors, however, so don't be shocked if you get a chilly reaction on this front.

**Banrural** (7a Av, Zona 4; ☎ 8:30am–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat), 2½ blocks from the central plaza, will change cash US dollars.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Pensión Galindo** (5a Calle 2-09; s/d US\$3.50/7) About three blocks from the plaza, Galindo offers a reasonable deal, with a dozen tiny, clean rooms round a neat little patio open to the stars. Get a room on the avenida side of the building if you can – it's quieter there.

**Hotel Doña Leonar** (☎ 7951 8041; 6a Calle 4-25; s/d from US\$10/12) An excellent, comfortable option in this wishful place a couple of blocks from the plaza. Luxuries include firm beds, reading lamps and spotless bathrooms with blasting-hot showers.

**Restaurant San José** (7 Calle 4-32, Zona 2; mains US\$3-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The finest dining in town is to be had in the semitropical (in looks, anyway) surrounds at this outdoor eatery by the Hotel Montana. Meat is the go here, and the *parrillada* (mixed grill; US\$5.50) is hard to beat, but there are vegetarian options available. On weekends they show movies on the big screen.

The simple *comedor* on the plaza, opposite the Municipopaz office (which is next to the church), will grill slices of meat over hot coals and serve it up with rice, avocado, tortillas and hot chocolate for US\$2.30.

## Getting There & Away

Five or six buses daily leave Uspantán for Quiché (US\$4, three hours) via Sacapulas, the first two at about 3am and 5am, the last at 4pm. For Cobán (US\$4, three to four hours), buses go at 3am and 5am. On Saturday and Tuesday (only) there's also Transportes Mejía's Aguacatán–Cobán bus, at about 9am. Get to the plaza in good time for the early buses, as they fill up fast with sleepy locals.

The rest of the time, faster, more-cramped minibuses are the go, leaving whenever full up until around 4pm. For Nebaj get a Sacapulas bus and change either at the *entronque de Nebaj* (Nebaj turnoff), about 8km before Sacapulas, or at Sacapulas itself, where you might be more likely to get a seat.

Spantán to Cobán is one of the most gorgeous rides in Guatemala and epitomizes the chicken-bus experience, as it's a difficult ride in a crowded bus on an unpaved road. You may find yourself praying to higher powers as the bus loses its grip on muddy mountain passes in the pitch black of night, but try to be awake when the sun pushes over the tops of the mountains, burning off the fog clinging to the valley below. Sit on the right for views.

## NEBAJ

pop 27,200 / elev 1900m

Hidden in a remote fold of the Cuchumatanes mountains north of Sacapulas is the Triángulo Ixil (Ixil Triangle), comprising the towns of Nebaj, Cotzal and Chajul and dozens of outlying villages and hamlets. The scenery is breathtakingly beautiful, and the local Ixil Maya people, though they suffered perhaps more than anybody in Guatemala's civil war and are still very impoverished, cling proudly to many of their old traditions. Nebaj women are celebrated for their beautiful purple, green and yellow pom-pommed hair braids, and for their *huipiles* and *rebozos* (shawls) of the same colors, with many bird and animal motifs. This is a fascinating area to explore and free (to date) of crime against tourists and of the trails of trash that disfigure so much of the Guatemalan countryside.

Living in this beautiful mountain vastness has long been both a blessing and a curse. The Spaniards found it difficult to conquer and laid waste to the inhabitants when they did. The area suffered terribly during the Guatemalan civil war, especially during the brutal reign of Efraín Ríos Montt (1982–83), when the local people became the chief victims of the army's merciless measures to dislodge guerrillas from the area. Massacres and disappearances were rife, and more than two dozen villages were destroyed. The horror touched every family, and many people fled to Guatemala City, Mexico or simply to the forests. Some were settled in *polos de desarrollo* (poles of development), supposed 'strategic hamlets' whose real purpose was to enable

the army to keep their inhabitants under close control. You may hear some appalling personal experiences from locals while you are here. For a horrifying report and analysis of massacres in and around Nebaj, see the website <http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ciidh/dts/toc.html>.

The people of the Ixil Triangle are making a heroic effort to build a new future. Development organizations and NGOs have contributed to this and you'll likely encounter some of their workers too. One project of special interest to visitors, carried out with the help of the Spanish NGO Solidaridad Internacional, has been the establishment of a network of signed walking routes and *posadas comunitarias*, simple village lodgings with meals and guides available, to make it easier for travelers to hike some of the beautiful Ixil countryside and experience village life.

## Orientation & Information

Coming from the south, your first view of Nebaj, set neatly at the foot of a bowl ringed by green mountains, makes the rough bus ride worthwhile. Nebaj's central plaza, known as the Parque, has a large church on its south side. From the southeast corner of the Parque, the market (daily but busiest on Sunday) is one block east, and the Terminal de Buses (bus terminal) is one longish block south then 1½ blocks east. Calzada 15 de Septiembre, sometimes simply called the Salida a Chajul, runs northeast from the Parque to become the road to Cotzal and Chajul.

The restaurant **El Descanso** (☎ 5311 9100; www.nebaj.com; 3a Calle, Zona 1; ☎ 6am–10pm) is a focal point for travelers, development workers and locals. To reach it, walk two blocks north along 5a Av from the northwest corner of the Parque, then half a block to the left. Tetz Chemol in the El Descanso building sells 1:50,000 area maps for US\$8.50.

**Banrural** (2a Av 46; ☎ 9am–4pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat), one block east from the northeast corner of the Parque, then half a block north, changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks and has a Visa ATM. The **post office** (5a Av 4-37) is one block north of the Parque. **La Red** (El Descanso Bldg, 3a Calle, Zona 1) has Nebaj's fastest internet connections, for US\$1 per hour (US\$0.70 with its discount card).

There's a heap of fascinating and helpful information about Nebaj in Spanish at [www.nebaj.org](http://www.nebaj.org). If you can't understand Spanish,

the maps and listings are still useful. The Guías Ixil website ([www.nebaj.com](http://www.nebaj.com)) also has good information on hiking, volunteering and studying in the area.

## Activities

**Guías Ixil** (☎ 5311 9100; [www.nebaj.com](http://www.nebaj.com); 3a Calle, Zona 1), in the El Descanso building, offers hikes with informative young local guides. Like all the other enterprises in this building, a portion of Guías Ixil's profits goes to a community project. Short one-day hikes, costing US\$6 for one person plus US\$3 for each extra person, go to **Las Cataratas** (a series of waterfalls on the Río Las Cataratas north of town), or around town with visits to the **sacred sites** of the *costumbristas* (people who still practice non-Christian Mayan rites). Las Cataratas is actually easy enough to reach on your own: walk 1.25km past the Hotel Ilebal Tenam along the Chajul road to a bridge over a small river. Immediately before the bridge, turn left (north) onto a gravel road and follow the river. Walking downriver for 45 minutes to an hour (6km one way), you'll pass several small waterfalls before reaching a larger waterfall about 25m high.

Longer day hikes with Guías Ixil, costing US\$10 for one person plus US\$4 for each extra person, go across the mountains to **Cocop** (one of the worst hit of all villages in the civil war, 4km east of Nebaj as the crow flies), **Acul** (founded as the first *polo de desarrollo* in 1983; 4km west) or **Ak' Txumb'al**, also called La Pista, about 5km north (also founded as a *polo de desarrollo*). Ak' Txumb'al means New Mentality in the Ixil language, a name given by its military founders; La Pista (Spanish for airstrip) refers to a civil-war landing strip where you can still see bomb craters. A three-day hike to **Xeo** and **Cotzol** (northwest of Nebaj) and back to Nebaj through Ak' Txumb'al costs US\$11 per day for one person plus US\$6 for each extra person. Guías Ixil also offers two- to three-day treks over the Cuchumatanes to Todos Santos Cuchumatán north of Huehuetenango (US\$120 per person plus US\$40 per extra person).

In Cocop, Xeo and Cotzol you can stay in **posadas comunitarias** (dm US\$3; veg/meat meals US\$2/3) – community-run lodges with wooden-board beds, bedding, drinking water, toilets and solar electricity. Just north of Acul, in a beautiful, tranquil valley along the road leading to the Nebaj–Salquil Grande road, **Hospedaje San Antonio** (☎ 5439 3352; r per person US\$10) has neat, wood-roofed and wood-floored rooms, some

with a hot-water bathroom, and two meals (US\$4.50). This place makes its own cheese.

Guías Ixil sells a very useful booklet, *Trekking en la Región Ixil*, full of maps and information on the above village walks, for US\$2.

**Pablo's Tours** (☎ 7755 8287; [pablostours@hotmail.com](mailto:pablostours@hotmail.com); 3a Calle 3-20, Zona 1), next door to El Descanso, also provides guided walks of up to two days, plus horse rides. It's run by a young local guy and gets good reports. Drop in to see its program and photos.

If you prefer to hike without a guide, take a copy of *Trekking en la Región Ixil* with you and organize lodging and food on arrival in villages. There are further *posadas comunitarias* at Xexocom, Chortiz and Parramos Grande, west of Nebaj, on a possible four-day hike route.

## Language Courses

**Nebaj Language School** (☎ 5311 9100; [www.nebaj.com](http://www.nebaj.com); El Descanso Bldg, 3a Calle, Zona 1) charges US\$63 for 20 hours a week of one-to-one Spanish lessons, including some hiking and cultural activities, or US\$3 per hour. Staying with a local family, with two meals a day, costs US\$50 a week. You can also take cooking classes here, learning how to make regional faves like *boxholes* (corn dough wrapped in *güisquil* (squash) leaves, served with a spicy peanut sauce) for US\$3.50 per hour.

## Festivals & Events

Nebaj's annual **festival** runs from August 12 to 15.

## Sleeping

**Popi's Hostel** (☎ 7756 0159; 5a Calle 6-74; dm US\$3.50) An excellent choice for the truly budget-conscious are the comfortable if plain rooms at this popular café-bakery. Choose your bed carefully – some sag dramatically.

**Media Luna Medio Sol** (☎ 5311 9100; 3a Calle 6-15; dm US\$3.50) The three dorm rooms upstairs here aren't a bad deal – there's six beds per dorm, with a ping pong table and kitchen facilities to keep you busy.

**Hospedaje La Esperanza** (☎ 7756 0098; 6a Av 2-36, Zona 1; s/d US\$4/8) This reasonably friendly place has basic wooden rooms with pink walls. There's hot water in the shared showers. Upstairs rooms provide more light and air, but some beds sag.

**Hotel Ilebal Tenam** (☎ 7755 8039; Calzada 15 de Septiembre; s/d US\$6/8, with bathroom US\$8/12; (P)) Good clean rooms out on the edge of town

(which is only 500m from the Parque). The quiet location and shady patio area make it a good deal.

**Hotel Ixil** (☎ 7756 0036; 9 Calle & 2 Av, Zona 5; s/d US\$9/12) A great little budget hotel, with clean, bright rooms set around a plant-filled courtyard. Rooms have cable TV and good hot showers.

**Hotel Ixil** (☎ 7756 0036; cnr 2a Av & 9a Calle, Zona 5; s/d US\$9/12; (P)) One of the best places in town, just one block south of the bus station. The clean, bright, modern rooms have cable TV and hot-water bathrooms. They're set around a leafy courtyard that offers some good hammocking opportunities.

**Hotel Turansa** (☎ 7755 8219; cnr 5a Calle & 6a Av; s/d US\$10/15; (P)) Surprisingly unfriendly for this little town, but the rooms are a decent size and come with big TVs, looking out onto a cheery courtyard. It's one block west of the Parque.

**Hotel Shalom** (☎ 7755 8028; cnr Calzada 15 de Septiembre & 4a Calle, Zona 1; s/d US\$10/16; (P)) If you can ignore the low-level grunge, you'll be pretty happy with this one – big rooms with cable TV, gas-fired hot water and two double beds.

**Hotel Villa Nebaj** (☎ 7756 0005; Av 15 de Septiembre 2-37; s/d US\$12/17, with bathroom US\$25/32) Nebaj's fanciest hotel is actually a pretty good deal – slate-tiled courtyards with fountains and well-decorated, comfortable rooms in a three-story building.

## Eating

**Popi's Restaurant** (5a Calle 6-74; mains US\$2-4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) For all your baked-goods needs, head straight to Popi's. It also sells a mean selection of breads and pies to take away, and some good comfort food, such as barbecued pork ribs (\$US3.50).

**Comedor Dámaris** (Av 15 de Septiembre; meals US\$2.80; ☎ lunch & dinner) A large room with six long tables, the Dámaris has such *típico* Guatemalan adornments as plastic flowers, strings of leftover Christmas decorations and stacks of Coke crates. The set lunch might be a tasty *caldo de res* (a broth with large chunks of meat and veggies), half an avocado, tortillas and a soft drink. It's one block from the Parque.

**El Descanso** (3a Calle, Zona 1; mains US\$3-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Probably the most comfortable café in the entire highlands, this two-story place has a bar and lounge areas, good music and board games and serves

everything from salads to sandwiches to *churrascos*. It was started as a Peace Corps project as a sustainable way for local youth to earn money, and shares its building with Trekking Ixil and the Nebaj Language School. A portion of the profits from all these businesses goes to fund a lending library in town for children and young adults.

**Pizza del César** (2a Av; medium/small pizzas US\$6/7, slices US\$0.70-1.40; ☎ lunch & dinner) The pizza is average, but it's pizza. From the northeast corner of the Parque, go one block east then half a block north.

## Shopping

You can buy local textiles at stalls on and around the Parque, or at Tetz Chemol in the El Descanso building. A *huipil* costs anywhere from US\$30 to US\$170, depending on quality. A *rebozo* is US\$15 to US\$20, and a *cinta* (the pom-pommed braid woven into Ixil women's hair) around US\$20. For more variety, check out the surprisingly hassle-free **artisan's market** (cnr 7a Calle & 2a Av, Zona 1).

## Getting There & Away

About eight daily buses run to/from Santa Cruz del Quiché (US\$3, two hours), via Sacapulas (US\$1, 1½ hours). The best time to get one is between 5am and 8am, and the last departure may be no later than noon. After that, minibuses pick up the slack, leaving whenever full and charging roughly the same. There's an 11pm bus all the way to Guatemala City via Chichicastenango. To head west to Huehuetenango or east to Cobán, change at Sacapulas (p157). If you want to make it to Cobán in one day from Nebaj, you should definitely leave before midday.

# WESTERN HIGHLANDS

The departments of Quetzaltenango, Totonicapán and Huehuetenango are more mountainous and generally less frequented by tourists than regions closer to Guatemala City. The scenery here is incredibly beautiful, and the indigenous culture vibrant, colorful and fascinating. Highlights of a visit to this area include Quetzaltenango, Guatemala's second-largest city, with an ever-growing language-school and volunteer-work scene;



the pretty nearby town of Zunil, with its Fuentes Georginas hot springs; ascents of the volcanoes around Quetzaltenango; and the remote mountain village of Todos Santos Cuchumatán, north of Huehuetenango, with a strong traditional culture and excellent walking possibilities.

## CUATRO CAMINOS

Westward from Los Encuentros, the Interamericana twists and turns ever higher into the mountains, bringing still more dramatic scenery and cooler temperatures. It reaches its highest point, 3670m, after the village of Nahualá, some 42km from Los Encuentros. After a further 17km, you come to another dusty and important highway junction, Cuatro Caminos (Four Ways). You'll know the place by the many parked buses and people milling about as they change buses. The road to the southwest leads to Quetzaltenango (13km). To the east is Totonicapán (12km). Northward, the Interamericana continues to Huehuetenango (77km) and La Mesilla on the Mexican border (160km).

## QUETZALTENANGO

pop 140,400 / elev 2335m

Quetzaltenango, which the locals kindly shorten to Xela (*shell-ah*), itself an abbreviation of the original Quiché Maya name, Xelajú, may well be the perfect Guatemalan town – not too big, not too small, enough foreigners to support a good range of hotels and restaurants, but not so many that it loses its national flavor. The Guatemalan 'layering' effect is at work in the city center here – once the Spanish moved out, the Germans moved in and their architecture gives the zone a somber, some would say Gothic, feel.

Xela attracts a more serious type of traveler – people who really want to learn Spanish, and then stay around and get involved in the myriad volunteer projects on offer.

It also functions as a base for a range of spectacular hikes through the surrounding countryside – the constantly active Santiaguillo and highest-point-in-Central-America Tajumulco volcanoes and the picturesque, fascinating three-day trek to Lake Atitlán to name a few.

Xela is big, but by Guatemalan standards, it is an orderly, clean and safe city. It helps that the bus terminal is far removed from the center.

## History

Quetzaltenango came under the sway of the K'iche' Maya of K'umarcaaj when they began their great expansion in the 14th century. Before that it had been a Mam Maya town. It was near here that the K'iche' leader Tecún Umán was defeated and killed by the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado in 1524 (p155).

The town prospered in the late-19th-century coffee boom, with brokers opening warehouses and *finca* (plantation) owners coming to town to buy supplies. The boom was shattered by a combined earthquake and eruption of Santa María in 1902, which brought mass destruction. Still, the city's position at the intersection of roads to the Pacific Slope, Mexico and Guatemala City guaranteed it some degree of prosperity. Today it's again busy with commerce, of the indigenous, foreign and ladino varieties.

## Orientation

The heart of Xela is the Parque Centroamérica, shaded by old trees, graced with neoclassical monuments and surrounded by the city's important buildings. Most accommodations are within a few blocks of the park.

The main bus station is Terminal Minerva, on 7a Calle, Zona 3, on the western outskirts and next to one of the main markets. First-class bus lines have their own terminals (p173).

## Information

### BOOKSTORES

**El Libro Abierto** (Map p164; 15a Av A 1-56, Zona 1) Great selection of books in English and Spanish on Guatemala and the Maya, plus Lonely Planet guides, fiction, dictionaries, language textbooks and maps; will buy used books.

**North & South** (Map p163; 8 Calle & 15 Av, Zona 1) A wide range of books focusing on Latin America, politics, poetry and history. Also plenty of new and used guidebooks and Spanish student resources.

**Vrisa Bookstore** (Map p164; 15a Av 3-64, Zona 1) Excellent range of secondhand books in English and European languages. One of the best notice boards in town.

### EMERGENCY

**Bomberos** (Firefighters; ☎ 7761 2002)

**Cruz Roja** (Red Cross; ☎ 7761 2746)

**Policía Municipal** (☎ 7761 5805)

**Policía Nacional** (☎ 7765 4991/2)

### INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access here is some of the cheapest in Guatemala, at around US\$0.25 to US\$0.80 per hour. Some of the places it's available:

**Café Digital** (Map p163; Diagonal 9 19-77, Zona 1)  
**Celas Maya** (Map p164; 6a Calle 14-55, Zona 1)  
**Infinito Internet** (Map p163; 7a Calle 15-16, Zona 1)  
**Xela Pages** (Map p163; 4 Calle 19-48, Zona 1)

### INTERNET RESOURCES

**Xela Pages** ([www.xelapages.com](http://www.xelapages.com)) Packed with information about Xela and nearby attractions. Also a useful discussion forum.

### LAUNDRY

It costs around US\$0.50 to wash and dry 1kg loads at a laundry. You may have to pay a bit more for detergent.

**Lavandería El Centro** (Map p164; 15a Av 3-51, Zona 1; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-5pm Sat)  
**Lavandería Mini-Max** (Map p164; 14a Av C47)  
**Rapi-Servicio Laundromat** (Map p164; 7a Calle 13-25A, Zona 1; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat)

### MEDIA

English-language publications are available free in bars, restaurants and cafés around town.

**EntreMundos** ([www.entremundos.org](http://www.entremundos.org)) Newspaper published every two months by the Xela-based organization of the same name. It has plenty of information on political and current events and volunteer projects in the region.

**XelaWho** ([www.xelawho.com](http://www.xelawho.com)) Billing itself as 'Quetzaltenango's leading Culture & Nightlife Magazine' (where's the competition?), this little magazine has details of cultural events in the city, plus some fairly irreverent takes on life in Guatemala in general.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Hospital Privado Quetzaltenango** (Map p163; ☎ 7761 4381; Calle Rodolfo Robles 23-51)  
**Hospital San Rafael** (Map p163; ☎ 7761 4414; 9a Calle 10-41, Zona 1) This hospital has a 24-hour emergency service.

### MONEY

Parque Centroamérica is the place to go for banks. **Banco de Occidente** (Map p164; ☎ 8:30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-1:30pm Sat), in the beautiful building on the northern side of the plaza, changes US dollars and traveler's checks and gives advances on Visa. **Banco Industrial** (Map p164; ☎ 9:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9:30am-1:30pm Sat), on the east side of the plaza, changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks, and has a Visa ATM. A MasterCard ATM and another Visa ATM are next to Banrural on the west side of the plaza.

### POST

**Main post office** (Map p164; 4a Calle 15-07, Zona 1) Central location.

### TELEPHONE

**Café Digital** (Map p163; Diagonal 9 19-77, Zona 1) Calls to USA or Canada/Europe cost US\$0.10/0.15 per minute.  
**Infinito Internet** (Map p164; 7a Calle 15-16, Zona 1) Calls to USA or Canada/Europe cost US\$0.10/0.15 per minute.  
**Telgua** (Map p164; cnr 15a Av A & 4a Calle) Plenty of card phones outside this office.  
**Xela Pages** (Map p163; 4 Calle 19-48, Zona 1) Calls to US or Canada/Europe cost US\$0.15/0.20 per minute.

## LOCAL VOICES: EDUARDO TATZAN, TREKKING GUIDE

The countryside around Xela is teeming with volcanoes, mountains and other trekking possibilities. We talked to local guide Eduardo Tatzan about what's so good about getting high.

### When did you start climbing volcanoes?

About 10 years ago. Since then I've climbed Santa Maria about 300 times and Tajumulco 91 times. When I get to 101 on Tajumulco I'm going to retire.

### Have you got a favorite trek?

They're all different and I like them all for different reasons. The views and the wildlife change. For walking, I like the trek from Xela to Lake Atitlán. You go through beautiful countryside and stay with local families or camp by the river.

### What attracts you to the mountains?

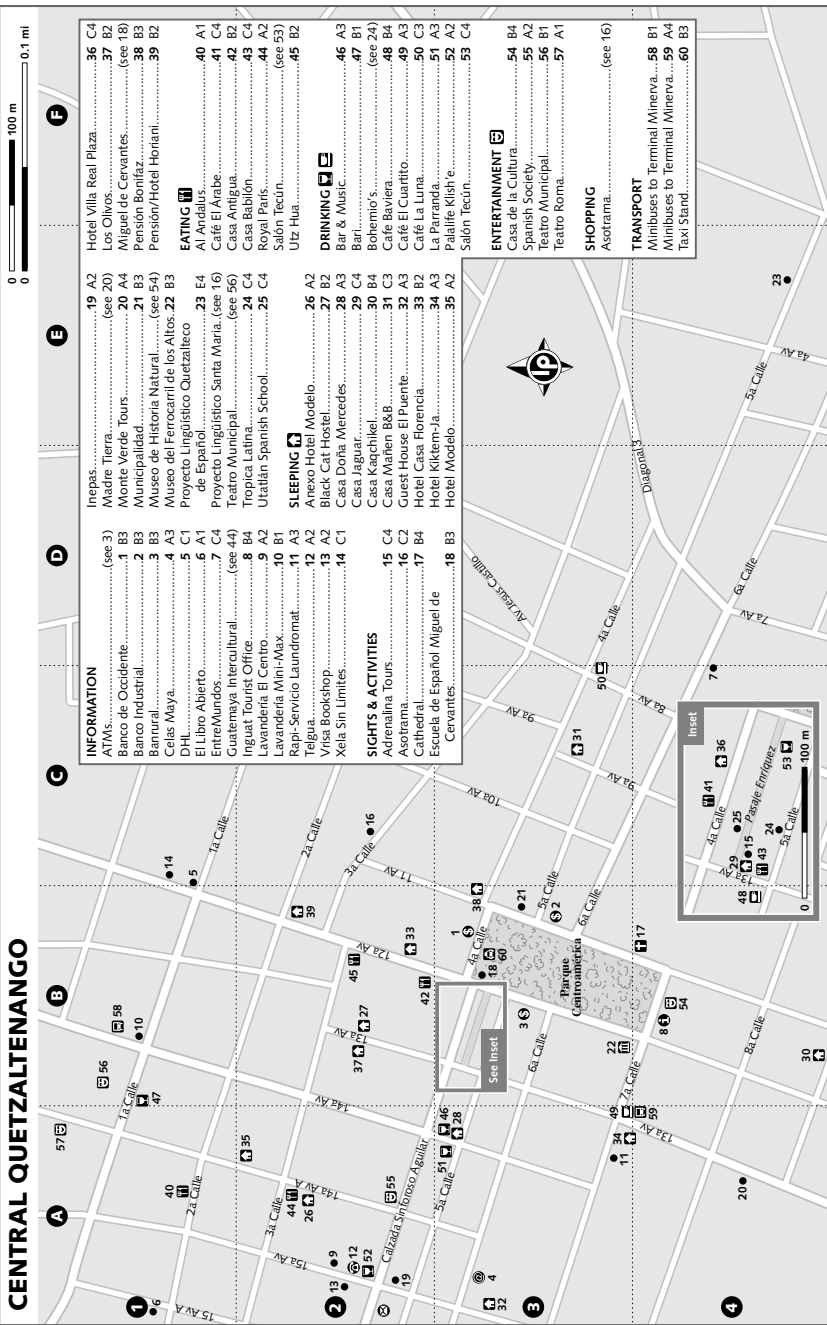
It's getting into nature. Here in town, things can get crazy with the people and the traffic and the noise, but you get up onto the mountain and it's pure peace, pure nature.

### What do the mountains mean for the Maya?

For the Maya, the mountains and volcanoes are very spiritual places. Going up high, you get closer to God. Each volcano has its *nahual* (spirit) and so Maya go up to pray for better lives, better harvests, those kinds of things. Some come from Chichi or Quiché to pray on Tajumulco, like the Catholics when they go on pilgrimage. They also pray to Juan Noj, the mountain spirit. They say he lives in a cave on Cerro Quemado, just out of Xela.



CENTRAL QUETZALTENANGO



|        |                                  |                  |                  |                           |                             |                         |  |  |   |                         |                        |                       |                          |                       |                   |                       |                        |                        |                            |                        |                       |                            |                       |                       |                              |                           |                            |                       |                            |   |   |                      |
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| Hotels | Hotel Villa Real Plaza.....36 C4 | Inepas.....19 A2 | ATMs.....(see 3) | Madre Tierra.....(see 20) | Monte Verde Tours.....20 A4 | Municipalidad.....21 B3 | Museo de Historia Natural.....(see 54) | Museo del Ferrocarril de los Altos.....22 B3 | Proyecto Lingüístico Quetzalteco de Español.....23 E4 | Café El Arabe.....42 C2 | Casa Antigua.....43 C4 | Casa Bibión.....44 A2 | Royal Prifs.....(see 53) | Salón Tecún.....45 B2 | Utz Hua.....46 A3 | Bar & Music.....47 B1 | Bohemio's.....(see 24) | Café Baviera.....48 B4 | Café El Cuartito.....49 A3 | Café La Luna.....50 C3 | La Parranda.....51 A3 | Palafite Klish'e.....52 A2 | Salón Tecún.....53 C4 | Asotrama.....(see 16) | Casa de la Cultura.....54 B4 | Spanish Society.....55 A2 | Teatro Municipal.....56 B1 | Teatro Roma.....57 A1 | Terminal Minerva.....58 B1 | Mimibuses to Terminal Minerva.....59 A4 | Mimibuses to Terminal Minerva.....60 B3 | Taxi Stand.....60 B3 |
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| Information | ATMs.....(see 3) | Banco de Occidente.....1 B3 | Banco Industrial.....2 B3 | Banruar.....3 B3 | Celías Maya.....4 A3 | DHL.....5 C1 | EL Libro Abierto.....6 A1 | FrieteMundos.....7 C4 | Guatemala Intercultural.....(see 44) | Inguat Tourist Office.....8 B4 | Lavandería El Centro.....9 A2 | Lavandería Mini-Max.....10 B1 | Rapi-Servicio Laundromat.....11 A3 | Tegua.....12 A2 | Visa Bookshop.....13 A2 | Xela Sm Limites.....14 C1 | Adrenalina Tours.....15 C4 | Asotrama.....16 C2 | Catedral.....17 B4 | Escuela de Español Miguel de Cervantes.....18 B3 | Antexo Hotel Modelo.....26 A2 | Black Cat Hostel.....27 B2 | Casa Doña Mercedes.....28 A3 | Casa Jaguar.....29 C4 | Casa Kiechikel.....30 B4 | Casa Mañen B&B.....31 C3 | Guest House El Puente.....32 A3 | Hotel Casa Florencia.....33 B2 | Hotel Kiktem-Ja.....34 A3 | Hotel Modelo.....35 A2 |
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| Sights & Activities | Adrenalina Tours.....15 C4 | Asotrama.....16 C2 | Catedral.....17 B4 | Escuela de Español Miguel de Cervantes.....18 B3 | INFORMATION | ATMs.....(see 3) | Banco de Occidente.....1 B3 | Banco Industrial.....2 B3 | Banruar.....3 B3 | Celías Maya.....4 A3 | DHL.....5 C1 | EL Libro Abierto.....6 A1 | FrieteMundos.....7 C4 | Guatemala Intercultural.....(see 44) | Inguat Tourist Office.....8 B4 | Lavandería El Centro.....9 A2 | Lavandería Mini-Max.....10 B1 | Rapi-Servicio Laundromat.....11 A3 | Tegua.....12 A2 | Visa Bookshop.....13 A2 | Xela Sm Limites.....14 C1 |
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## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Inguat** (Map p164; ☎ /fax 7761 4931; 🕒 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat) At the southern end of Parque Centroamérica. If you're looking for a brochure, this is the place to come. For hard information, you're often better off asking Tour Operators (see p169).

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Adrenalina Tours** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 4509; www.adrenalinatours.com; 13a Av, Zona 1, inside Pasaje Enríquez) Flights and package deals to anywhere in the country (and the world), a direct plane-ticket booking service, charter flights and much more.

**Guatemaya Intercultural** (Map p164; ☎ 7765 0040; www.xelapages.com/guatemaya; 14a Av A 3-06, Zona 1) Sells student, youth, teacher and discounted air fares; issues student, youth and teacher cards (US\$9); and offers deals to Tikal and other tours within Guatemala, and to Cuba and South America.

**Xela Sin Límites** (Map p164; ☎ /fax 7761 6043; www.xelapages.com/xelasinlimites; 12a Av C-35, Zona 1) Does tours locally and around Guatemala and can make international travel arrangements.

## Sights

### PARQUE CENTROAMÉRICA

The park and the buildings surrounding it are pretty much what there is to see in Xela itself. The **Casa de la Cultura** (Map p164) at the southern end holds the funky **Museo de Historia Natural** (Map p164; admission US\$0.80; 🕒 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat), which has a fascinating collection including exhibits on the Maya, the liberal revolution in Central American politics and the Estado de Los Altos, of which Quetzaltenango was the capital. Marimbas, the weaving industry, stuffed birds (frightening

eagles and owls) and animals (some scary members of the cat family), and other local artifacts also claim places here.

The once-crumbling **cathedral** has been rebuilt in recent decades: the facade of the colonial building has been preserved, and a modern church built behind it.

The **Municipalidad** (Town Hall; Map p164), at the northeastern end of the park, was rebuilt after the 1902 earthquake in the grandiose neoclassical style so favored as a symbol of culture and refinement in this wild mountain country.

On the west side of the park between 4a and 5a Calles is **Pasaje Enríquez**, an imposing arcade built to be lined with elegant shops – but as Quetzaltenango has few elegant shoppers, it stands half-empty.

## OTHER SIGHTS

Walk north on 14a Av to 1a Calle to see the impressive neoclassical **Teatro Municipal** (Map p164; 1a Calle), which holds regular, recommended performances. Inside are three tiers of seating, the lower two with private boxes for prominent families; each is equipped with a vanity.

**Mercado La Democracia** (Map p163; 1a Calle, Zona 3), about 10 blocks north of Parque Centroamérica, is an authentic Guatemalan city market with food and other necessities for city dweller and villager alike.

About 3km northwest of Parque Centroamérica, near the Terminal Minerva bus station and another big market, is the **Parque Zoológico Minerva** (Map p163; admission free; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), a zoo-park with a few monkeys, coyotes, raccoons, deer, Barbary sheep, plus

## SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR WALKING

Before embarking on a walking trip, consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Pay any fees and possess any permits required by local authorities.
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable walking for a sustained period.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions along your intended route.
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about wildlife and the environment.
- Walk only in regions and on trails within your realm of experience.
- Be aware that weather conditions and terrain vary significantly from one region to another, or even from one trail to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any trail. These differences influence the way walkers dress and the equipment they carry.
- Ask before you set out about the environmental characteristics that can affect your walk and how local, experienced walkers deal with these considerations.

## RESPONSIBLE TREKKING

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of Guatemala, consider the following tips when trekking.

### Rubbish

- Carry out *all* your rubbish. Don't overlook easily forgotten items, such as silver paper, orange peel, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Empty packaging should be stored in a dedicated rubbish bag. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Never bury your rubbish: Digging disturbs soil and ground cover and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will likely be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it. It may also take years to decompose.
- Minimize waste by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you will need. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
- Sanitary napkins, tampons, condoms and toilet paper should be carried out despite the inconvenience. They burn and decompose poorly.

### Human Waste Disposal

- Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is a toilet, please use it. Where there is none, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm (6in) deep and at least 100m (320ft) from any watercourse. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. In snow, dig down to the soil.
- Ensure that these guidelines are applied to a portable toilet tent if one is being used by a large trekking party. Encourage all party members, including porters, to use the site.

### Washing

- Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if they are biodegradable.
- For personal washing, use biodegradable soap and a water container (or even a lightweight, portable basin) at least 50m (160ft) away from the watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully.
- Wash cooking utensils 50m (160ft) from watercourses using a scourer, sand or snow instead of detergent.

### Erosion

- Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion. Stick to existing trails and avoid shortcuts.
- If a well-used trail passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud so as not to increase the size of the patch.
- Avoid removing the plant life that keeps topsoils in place.

a few rides for children. Outside the zoo on an island in the middle of 4a Calle stands the neoclassical **Templo de Minerva** (Map p163), built by dictator Estrada Cabrera to honor the Roman goddess of education and to inspire Guatemalans to new heights of learning.

## Activities

### VOLCANO ASCENTS & TREKS

There are many exciting walks and climbs to be done from Xela. **Volcán Tajumulco** (4220m), 50km northwest, is the highest point in

Central America and is a challenging trip of one long day from the city or two days with a night camping on the mountain. This includes about five hours' walking up from the starting point, Huitán, and three to four hours down. Huitán is about three hours by bus from Xela.

With early starts, **Volcán Santa María** (3772m), towering to the south of the city, and the active **Santiaguito** (2488m), on Santa María's southwest flank, can both be done in long mornings from Xela. You start walking

### Fires & Low-Impact Cooking

- Don't depend on open fires for cooking. The cutting of wood for fires in popular trekking areas can cause rapid deforestation. Cook on a light-weight kerosene, alcohol or Shellite (white gas) stove and avoid using stoves powered by disposable butane gas canisters.
- If you are trekking with a guide and porters, supply stoves for the whole team. In highland areas, ensure that all members are outfitted with enough clothing so that fires are not a necessity for warmth.
- If you patronize local accommodation, select those places that do not use wood fires to heat water or cook food.
- Fires may be acceptable below the tree line in areas that get very few visitors. If you light a fire, use an existing fireplace. Don't surround fires with rocks. Use only dead, fallen wood. Remember the adage 'the bigger the fool, the bigger the fire.' Use minimal wood, just what you need for cooking. In huts, leave wood for the next person.
- Ensure that you fully extinguish a fire after use. Spread the embers and flood them with water.

### Wildlife Conservation

- Do not engage in or encourage hunting. Even when it is legal, many animals are on the verge of joining the endangered list.
- Don't buy items made from endangered species.
- Don't attempt to exterminate animals in huts. In wild places, they are likely to be protected native animals.
- Discourage the presence of wildlife by not leaving food scraps behind you. Place gear out of reach and tie packs to rafters or trees.
- Do not feed the wildlife as this can lead to animals becoming dependent on hand-outs, to unbalanced populations and to diseases.

### Environmental Organizations

If you would like to know more about environmental issues in Guatemala, the following organizations can provide information:

- **Alianza Verde** ([www.alianzaverde.org](http://www.alianzaverde.org))
- **Arcas** ([www.arcasguatemala.com](http://www.arcasguatemala.com))
- **ProPetén** ([www.propeten.org](http://www.propeten.org))
- **Rainforest Alliance** ([www.rainforest-alliance.org](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org))

at the village of Llanos del Pinal, 5km south of Xela (US\$6.50 by taxi from Xela; US\$0.25 by bus), from which it's about four hours up to the summit of Santa María (then three hours down). Getting too close to Santiaguito is dangerous, so people usually just look at it from a *mirador* about 1½ hours' walk from Llanos del Pinal.

**Kaqchikel Tours** (Map p163; ☎ 5294 8828; [www.kaqchikeltours.com](http://www.kaqchikeltours.com); 7 Calle 15-36, Zona 1) is a well-run, locally owned outfit specializing in volcano ascents and other great-value hikes, with

camping along the way on some trips. Two-day Tajumulco trips cost around US\$40. Kaqchikel also offers full-moon ascents of Santa María (US\$15) and challenging two-day Santiaguito trips (US\$66 with a minimum group size of four), camping on a small hill as close as is safely possible to the active crater. A three-day Quetzaltenango-Lago de Atitlán trek is US\$70, and a five-day Nebaj-Todos Santos jaunt across the Cuchumatanes mountains is US\$130. Prices include transportation, food, equipment and a guide.

**Adrenalina Tours** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 4509; www.adrenalinatours.com; 13a Av, Zona 1, inside Pasaje Enriquez) Goes everywhere, with an emphasis on little-visited parts of the Huehuetenango region.

**Monte Verde Tours** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 6105; www.monte-verdetours.com; 13a Av 8-34, Zona 1) Does a variety of volcano hikes and offbeat tours around the local area.

### CYCLING

Cycling is a great way to explore the surrounding countryside or commute to Spanish class. Fuentes Georginas, San Andrés Xequil and the steam vents at Los Vahos (see p174) are all attainable day trips. **Vrisa Bookstore** (Map p164; 15a Av 3-64, Zona 1) rents mountain and town bikes for US\$3.50/9.50 per day/week, as does **Monte Verde Tours** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 6105; www.monte-verdetours.com; 13a Av 8-34, Zona 1).

### DANCE CLASSES

The highly recommended **Tropica Latina** (Map p164; ☎ 5892 8861; www.xelawho.com/tropicalatina; 5a Calle 12-24, Zona 1) is the longest-running dance school in town, and gets top marks for its fun atmosphere and professionalism. Group and private salsa classes and private merengue classes are offered.

### WEAVING CLASSES

The women's co operative **Asotrama** (Map p164; ☎ 7765 8564; www.xelapages.com/asotrama; 3a Calle 10-56, Zona 1) offers backstrap weaving classes and operates a fair-trade fabrics shop.

### Language Courses

Xela's many language schools attract students from around the world. Unlike Antigua, which has had a similar reputation for quite a bit longer, Xela is not overrun with foreigners, though there is a growing social scene revolving around language students and volunteer workers.

Xela seems to attract altruistic types, and most of the Spanish schools here provide opportunities to get involved in social action programs working with the local K'iche' Maya. Prices for the schools vary, but not by much; the standard price is US\$110/125 per week for four/five hours of instruction per day, Monday to Friday, including room and board with a local family, or around US\$80/95 per week without homestay. Some schools charge up to 20% more for tuition during the high season from June to August, and many require nonrefundable registration fees. College students may be able to take classes for academic credit.

### VOLUNTEERING IN XELA

The Quetzaltenango area has many nonprofit organizations working on social projects with the local K'iche' Maya people and others that need volunteers. Volunteer jobs can range from teaching math to village children, to designing websites for indigenous organizations, to developing sustainable agriculture, to medical work in clinics, to working in orphanages for disabled children. For anyone in a giving frame of mind, the possibilities are endless. You can volunteer part time for a week or two while also studying Spanish, or you can live and work in a close-knit indigenous village for a year. Obviously, the more Spanish you speak the better, but in a few weeks at one of Xela's schools, you can learn enough to be effective. Indeed, many schools are intimately connected with particular social projects – some in fact exist primarily to generate funds for them – and can help students to participate in their free time. Skills in fields such as medicine, nursing, teaching, youth work and computers are prized, but there are possibilities for anyone with the will to help. Volunteers must normally meet all their own costs and be willing to commit to a project for a specified minimum time. Three months is fairly typical for full-time posts, though the minimum can be as little as a week or as long as a year.

**Entremundos** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 2179; www.entremundos.org; El Espacio, 6a Calle 7-31, Zona 1) is a forum for social projects in Xela. Its website has details on hundreds of nonprofit projects all over Guatemala, many of which need volunteers, and its magazine, *Entremundos*, comes out every couple of months with articles and ads about volunteering, volunteer opportunities and some completely unrelated interesting stuff!

**Guatemaya Intercultural** (Map p164; ☎ 7765 0040; www.xelapages.com/guatemaya; 14a Av A 3-06, Zona 1) can place volunteers in any of 15 projects including human rights and ecological organizations, medical clinics, schools and old-people's homes.



Most schools are lively and have plenty going on. Extras (some free, some not) range from movies and free internet to dancing and cooking classes, trips out and lectures and discussions on Guatemalan politics and culture.

Reputable language schools (there are more!) include the following:

**Casa Xelajú** (Map p163; ☎ 7761 5954; www.casaxelaju.com; Callejón 15 D13-02, Zona 1) One of the biggest, also offering classes in K'iche', and college credits.

**Celas Maya** (Map p164; ☎ /fax 7761 4342; www.celasmaya.edu.gt; 6a Calle 14-55, Zona 1) Set around a pleasant garden-courtyard, Celas Maya also offers classes in K'iche'.

**Centro Bilingüe Amerindia** (CBA; Map p163; ☎ 7771 8049; www.languageschool.com.gt; 12a Av 10-27, Zona 1) Classes in Mayan languages as well.

**Centro de Estudios de Español Pop Wuj** (Map p163; ☎ /fax 7761 8286; www.pop-wuj.org; 1a Calle 17-72, Zona 1) Pop Wuj's profits go to development projects in nearby villages, in which students can participate. The school also offers medical and social work specialist language programs.

**El Nahual** (Map p163; ☎ 7765 2098; www.languages.elnahual.com; 27 Av 8-68, Zona 1) A bit out of town, but runs some excellent, grass-roots community projects in which students can participate, such as teaching underprivileged kids and maintaining an organic community garden.

**El Quetzal** (Map p163; ☎ 7765 1085; www.xelawho.com/elquetzal; 10a Calle 10-29, Zona 1) One of the few indigenous-run businesses in town, offering plenty of activities and a reading room with more than 300 books.

**Escuela de Español Miguel de Cervantes** (Map p164; ☎ 7765 5554; www.learn2speakspanish.com; 12a Av 8-31) Friendly female owner, intimate atmosphere, also has accommodation (see Sleeping).

**Inepas** (Instituto de Estudios de Español y Participación en Ayuda Social; Map p164; ☎ 7765 1308; www.inepas.org; 15a Av 4-59) Offers a selection of cheap accommodations other than living with a family, also organizes worthy projects in which students are invited to participate.

**La Democracia** (Map p163; ☎ 7763 6895; www.lademocracia.net; 9a Calle 15-05, Zona 3) In a residential part of town, this highly recommended school arranges volunteer work teaching English to underprivileged kids and building classrooms.

**Madre Tierra** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 6105; www.madre-tierra.org; 13 Av 8-34, Zona 1) Plenty of activities; runs its own reforestation project. Classes held in a pretty courtyard in classic colonial house.

**Mundo en Español** (Map p163; ☎ 7761 3256; www.elmundoenespanol.org; 8 Av Calle B A-61, Zona 1) Seventeen years' experience, family atmosphere; gym, garden and accommodation on premises.

**Proyecto Lingüístico Quetzalteco de Español** (Map p164; ☎ /fax 7763 1061; www.hermandad.com; 5a Calle

2-42, Zona 1) This very professional and politically minded school also runs the Escuela de la Montaña, a language school with a maximum enrollment of eight on an organic coffee *fincas* in the mountains near Xela, where participation in local culture and volunteering are strongly encouraged.

**Proyecto Lingüístico Santa María** (Map p164; ☎ 7765 8136; 3a Calle 10-56, Zona 1) Young staff and good atmosphere. Nonprofit status since 1984. Can organize volunteer work with Maya women's weaving cooperative. The director writes books on Spanish grammar and usage.

**Utatlán Spanish School** (Map p164; ☎ 7763 0446; www.xelapages.com/utatlan; Pasaje Enriquez, 12a Av 4-32, Zona 1) Young and energetic with plenty of parties and activities.

## Tours

A professional, knowledgeable and amiable outfit, **Adrenalina Tours** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 4509; www.adrenalinatours.com; Pasaje Enriquez, Zona 1) provides a range of trips in the Xela area, including to Zunil, Fuentes Georginas and little-visited parts of the department of Huehuetenango. Also offers shuttles around the country, international flights and personalized trips all over Central America.

**Monte Verde Tours** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 6105; www.monte-verdetours.com; 13a Av 8-34, Zona 1) also offers tours in the Xela area, beach trips, ecotours and tours of local coffee farms, as well as shuttle buses and guided bike tours.

## Festivals & Events

**Xela Music Festival** Organized by the Alianza Francaise, this one- or two-day festival takes place in late March or early April, and sees city streets blocked off as local musicians play on five or six stages around the city center.

**Feria de la Virgen del Rosario** (Feria Centroamericana de Independencia) Held from September 15 to 22, this is Xela's big annual party. Residents kick up their heels at a fairground on the city's perimeter and there's plenty of entertainment at selected venues around town.

**Juegos Florales Centroamericanos** The prizes in this international Spanish-language literary competition hosted by the city are awarded at the time of Feria de la Virgen del Rosario too.

## Sleeping BUDGET

All of the places listed here are in Zona 1.

**Pensión/Hotel Horiani** (Map p164; ☎ 7763 5228; 12a Av 2-23; s/d US\$4/6) There's very little in the way of frills on offer here, but the small plain rooms upstairs set around a plant-filled patio have a certain charm to them. Enter on 2a Calle.

**Posada San Andrés** (Map p163; 4 Calle D 12-41; www.guesthousesanandres.com; s/d US\$4/7) Undergoing renovations at the time of writing, this old wooden house has spacious, bare rooms with shared bathrooms and kitchen access. A few sticks of furniture and some art on the walls make the place comfortable enough.

**Casa Kaqchikel** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 2628; 9a Calle 11-26; dm US\$4, s/d US\$5.50/10, with bathroom US\$8/12) There's only a few rooms in this old wooden house, but they're all good value – big and comfortable. The super-friendly family who run the place can whip you up a Guatemalan meal, or you can use the kitchen.

**Guest House El Puente** (Map p164; ☎ 7765 4342; 15a Av 6-75; s/d US\$5.50/8, with bathroom US\$8/10) An intimate little place with five good-sized rooms, kitchen access and a grassy garden area. Discounts for longer stays keep the place filled with long-termers.

**Hostal Don Diego** (Map p163; ☎ 5511 3211; hostal.dondiego@gmail.com; 6a Calle 15-12; dm US\$4.50, s/d US\$6/10) A beautiful little budget choice – rooms are OK, with parquet floors and good firm beds. Kitchen access and a sunny courtyard are other bonuses. It offers reduced rates for weekly or monthly stays, with or without kitchen use.

**Miguel de Cervantes** (Map p164; ☎ 7765 5554; www.learn2speakspanish.com; 12 Av 8-31; s/d US\$7/14) These basic but comfortable wood and concrete rooms are set around one of the cutest courtyards in Xela. When there's water pressure, the showers in the shared bathrooms rock.

**Black Cat Hostel** (Map p164; ☎ 5037 1871; blackcatxela@gmail.com; 13a Av 3-33; dm incl breakfast US\$7, s/d incl breakfast US\$11/17) Xela's newest hostel is a good deal, and a great place to go if you're looking to meet up with other travelers. There's a sunny courtyard, a bar-restaurant and lounge/TV area. Rates include a big breakfast.

For long-term stays, renting an apartment is an option. Read all the fine print and know the terms for deposits and gas and electricity charges before plunking down your cash. **Casa Jaguar** (Map p164; ☎ 5446 3785; Pasaje Enriquez; r/apt per person per month US\$131/266) rents fully furnished apartments with cable TV and free gas for the first month. Also available are rooms with access to shared kitchen and bathroom facilities.

#### MIDRANGE

**Casa Azafran** (Map p163; ☎ 7763 0206; casababylonrestaurantehotel@yahoo.com; 15 Av A 3-33; s/d US\$10/12, with bathroom US\$14/20) A classic old house on a

quiet street just out of the center. Each room is spacious, with two big firm beds, closets and cable TV. One room has a fireplace.

**Los Olivos** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 0215; 13a Av 3-32; s/d US\$12/21; (P)) Up a side street next to the park, this one offers neat, tiled rooms with good hot-water bathrooms and carpeted floors. Beds are big and firm and there's cable TV.

**Hotel Casa Florencia** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 2326; www.hotelcasaflorencia.com; 12a Av 3-61, Zona 1; s/d US\$15/24; (P)) The attractive wood-paneled rooms here are a pretty good deal. They're all carpeted, with plenty of space, big TVs with cable, and closets galore. Breakfast is available in the dining room.

**Hotel Kiktem-Ja** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 4304; 13a Av 7-18; s/d US\$16/21; (P)) Set in a great old building downtown, the Kiktem-Ja is all floorboards at weird angles, and colonial touches. Rooms are spacious, with TV and fireplaces. The hot-water bathrooms don't disappoint.

**Casa Doña Mercedes** (Map p164; ☎ 7765 4687; 6a Calle & 14 Av; r US\$20) Some of Xela's best-looking rooms are on offer here at this newish little guesthouse in the heart of downtown. Rooms have shared bathrooms, but are otherwise extremely comfortable, with carpeted floors or wooden floorboards, cable TV and closets.

**Anexo Hotel Modelo** (Map p164; ☎ 7763 1376; s/d US\$23/27) In a surprisingly tranquil setting right in the heart of Xela's Zona Viva, rooms here are a good deal for the price – spacious, with cable TV and some well-chosen room furnishings.

**Hotel Villa Real Plaza** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 4045; 4a Calle 12-22, Zona 1; s/d US\$35/45; (P)) By far the grandest-looking hotel in town, the Real Plaza started life as a prison. Looking at the stone archways, high ceilings and spacious rooms, you'd never know. There's a courtyard restaurant, bar and sauna.

**Hotel Modelo** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 2529; hotelmodelo1892@yahoo.es; 14a Av A 2-31, Zona 1; s/d US\$35/40; (P)) Set in a beautiful old colonial house, the Modelo offers some of the most atmospheric rooms in town, with wooden floorboards, firm beds and spacious bathrooms. Some are along a pretty patio at one side but tend to be noisier because they front the street.

#### TOP END

**our pick Casa Mañen B&B** (Map p164; ☎ 7765 0786; www.comeseit.com; 9a Av 4-11; s/d from US\$40/50) Most tourist towns in Guatemala have at least one hotel fit for honeymooning couples – a quiet place with romantic atmosphere, beautifully

and comfortably outfitted rooms, tranquil gardens and a distinguishing style. In Xela, Casa Mañen is it. All nine rooms have traditional appointments (hand-woven woolen rugs, bed throws and wall hangings), hand-carved furniture, tiled floors, TV and a hot-water bathroom – even toweling dressing gowns folded on the beds. Upstairs units have balconies and views, as does the roof terrace/bar.

**Pensión Bonifaz** (Map p164; ☎ 7765 1111; bonifaz@intel.net.gt; 4a Calle 10-50, Zona 1; s/d US\$61/65; P ♿) The oldest and grandest hotel in Xela, this one could try a little harder. What's with the wood-patterned linoleum, for example? Rooms are good otherwise – spacious and comfortable enough, scattered over four floors right next to the Parque Centroamérica.

## Eating

Quetzaltenango has a good selection of places to eat in all price ranges. Cheapest are the food stalls in and around the small market to the left of the Casa de la Cultura, where snacks and main-course plates are sold for US\$1 or less.

## GUATEMALAN & LATIN AMERICAN CUISINE

**Blue Angel Video Café** (Map p163; 7a Calle, Zona 1; snacks US\$2-4; ☎ lunch & dinner) Economical café with excellent, healthy foods and an awesome tea selection – popular with language students.

**Café Sagrado Corazón** (Map p163; 14a Av 3-08, Zona 1; lunch plates US\$2-2.60; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is an excellent place for Guatemalan home cooking. Regional specialties such as *pepian* and *jocom* are often on the menu, but there's always fried chicken and grilled beef as fallbacks. Meals are truly filling, coming with soup, tamalitos, rice, potatoes, avocado and salad.

**Utz Hua** (Map p164; 12a Av & 3a Calle; meals US\$3.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Delicious, authentic Guatemalan and Quetzalteco dishes for equally yummy prices. The restaurant is well (if slightly frantically) decorated, and it's worth stopping by to check out the in-door thatched roof, if nothing else.

**Restaurante Las Calas** (Map p164; 14a Av A 3-21; mains US\$4-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) An artistic sort of place with lilies growing in the patio and lily-themed art on the walls (and a gallery in the back), Las Calas serves good medium-priced meals. Satisfying portions of chicken, fish or beef are creatively prepared

and served with a unique *salsa picante*. This restaurant also features cheaper vegetarian dishes and a daily regional specialty.

**Cubatenango** (Map p163; 19a Av 2-06; mains US\$4-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Authentic Cuban food with a Miami twist is the go here – *ropa vieja* (shredded beef), *moros y cristianos* (black beans and rice) and *vaca frita* (fried beef). The *tostones* (fried, mashed, savory bananas) are worth the trip alone, and this place makes a mean Mojito.

## INTERNATIONAL CUISINE

**Café Q** (Map p163; Diagonal 12 4-46; mains from US\$3.50; ☎ 7-10pm Mon-Fri) The varied international flavors at Q's include interesting vegetarian options such as falafel, soy burgers and chickpea soup.

**Al Andalus** (Map p164; 2a Calle 14 A 3-30; mains US\$4-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Xela's Spanish restaurant comes up with the goods in terms of paella, lentils and *chorizo* (spicy sausage) and other Spanish favorites. It's set in a charming courtyard ringed by potted plants and Moorish archways.

**Sabor de la India** (Map p163; 2 Calle 15 A 2-34; mains US\$4-6; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, dinner Sun) Probably the most authentic Indian dishes in the country, whipped up by a friendly Indian/Guatemalan couple. Servings are huge and there are plenty of vegetarian options.

**Las Orquideas** (Map p163; 4a Calle 15-45; mains US\$4-6; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Hanging out for some Thai food? This is the place. Green curry, pad thai, satay, oodles of noodles, and sticky rice with papaya to round things out.

**Salón Tecún** (Map p164; Pasaje Enríquez; burgers, salads & sandwiches US\$4-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) On the west side of Parque Centroamérica, the Tecún, consistently Xela's busiest bar, serves good bar food including the best burgers in town.

**Casa Antigua** (Map p164; 12a Av 3-26; meals US\$4-8; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) An excellent, tranquil spot right in the middle of downtown. Sandwiches are big, chunky affairs and there's plenty of steaks flame-grilling out front.

**El Panorama** (☎ 5319 3536; Map p163; 13a Av A; meals US\$4-8; ☎ dinner Wed-Fri, lunch & dinner Sat & Sun) This Swiss-owned restaurant (a 10-minute slog up the hill at the south end of town) does good set meals and raclette. The view is amazing and it's a romantic spot for that special night out.

**Café El Árabe** (Map p164; 4a Calle 12-22, Zona 1; mains US\$4-9; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) Fans of Middle

Eastern food will be thrilled to find such an authentic place here, just off Parque Centroamérica. The Arabic bread is made on the premises and the ingredients for all dishes are lovely and fresh. You can fill up on meat dishes but there are plenty of vegetarian choices. The falafel and dips are wonderful.

**Casa Babylon** (Map p164; cr 13a Av & 5a Calle; mains US\$4-12; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) With the widest menu in town, the Babylon is a travelers' favorite. Dishes run from big, tasty sandwiches to Guatemalan classics such as *pepian*, to more exotic fare such as fondue and Middle Eastern choices.

**Il Giardino** (Map p163; 19a Callejón 8-07; mains US\$5-9; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) The best pizzas in town are made by the Italian-descended family who run this place. It's set around a big leafy indoor garden and offers pasta, steaks and good salads and sandwiches, too.

**Royal Paris** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 1942; 14 Av A 3-06; meals from US\$5; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Xela's oldest French restaurant has some lovely cheesy steak dishes, cheap set lunches and live music on Friday and Saturday nights (reservations recommended).

**Casa Azafran** (Map p163; 15 Av A 3-33; mains from US\$6; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Sun) Serving up the most elaborate French food in town, this well-decorated, intimate restaurant is a romantic choice with some decadent options, such as lobster tails, on the menu.

## Drinking

The live music scene is particularly strong in Xela. For details on what's on, pick up a copy of *Xela Who* or check [www.xelawho.com](http://www.xelawho.com). All of the following are in Zone 1.

## CAFÉS

Coffee plays an important part in Xela's economy, and there are plenty of places where you can grab a cup.

**Café Baviera** (Map p164; 5a Calle 13-14 ☎ 7am-8:30pm) This European-style café has good coffee, roasted on the premises, and is a decent place for breakfast or a snack (crepes, croissants, soups and salads; US\$3 to US\$4). The wooden walls are hung with countless photos and clippings on Xela and international themes.

**Café La Luna** (Map p164; 8a Av 4-11 ☎ 9:30am-9pm Mon-Fri, 4-9pm Sat & Sun) La Luna is a comfortable, relaxed place to hang out and eat a cake, salad or sandwich (snacks US\$2). The hot chocolate

is the specialty – the coffee is so-so. Choose any of several rooms: decor is in similar vein to Café Baviera but the music is classical instead of jazz.

**Café Las Calas** (Map p164; 14a Av A 3-21; ☎ 7am-9:30pm Mon-Sat) Some of Xela's best coffee gets served up here in a leafy, tranquil courtyard environment. There's live music on Thursday and Friday nights. Meals from US\$4.

**Café El Cuartito** (Map p164; 13a Av 7-09; ☎ 7am-midnight Wed-Mon) Xela's hippest café does a good range of snacks and juices and coffee just about any way you want it. On weekends it often has DJs spinning laid-back tracks, and there's always art on the walls by local contemporary artists.

## BARS

**Salón Tecún** (Map p164; Pasaje Enriquez; ☎ 8am-1am) On the west side of Parque Centroamérica, and busy all day and night with a healthy crowd of Guatemalans and foreigners, the Tecún claims to be the country's longest-running bar (since 1935). Don't miss it.

**Bajo La Luna** (Map p164; 8a Av 4-11; ☎ 8pm-1am Thu-Sat) An atmospheric wine-and-cheese bar set in a cellar with exposed beams. Liters of Chilean red go for US\$6.

**Bar & Music** (Map p164; 13a Av 5-38; ☎ 6pm-1am Mon-Sat) The regular hotspot before hitting the dance floors, with decently priced drinks and loud Latin pop and rock music.

**Pool & Beer** (Map p163; 12a Av 10-21; ☎ 5pm-midnight) An excellent place for some drinks and a few games of pool. At the time of writing, the tables hadn't been trashed and the cues were straight.

**Bohemio's** (Map p164; 5a Calle 12-24; ☎ 8pm-1am Tue-Sat, Zona 1) Some nights it's mellow, some nights it goes berserk, but this friendly little bar a few steps away from the Parque Central is always worth a look in.

**La Parranda** (Map p164; 6 Calle & 14a Av) The hottest place in town for dancing and drinking. Wednesdays there's free salsa classes, other nights have guest DJs and drinks giveaways.

**Bari** (Map p164; 1a Calle 14-31; ☎ 8pm-1am Thu-Sat) This little bar has live trova, pop and rock music Thursday to Saturday and sells a good selection of wine and draft beers.

**La Fonda del Ché** (Map p163; 15a Av 7-43; ☎ 7pm-1am Tue-Sat) Trova and other guitar music nightly.

**Palalife Klish'e** (Map p164; 15a Av & 4a Calle; ☎ 5pm-1am Tue-Sat) This 'open minded' disco-bar is always fun and attracts a mixed crowd, with

good dance music, drinks specials and drag shows on Saturday night.

## Entertainment

It gets chilly when the sun goes down, so you won't want to sit out in the Parque Centroamérica enjoying the balmy breezes – there aren't any. Nevertheless, it's softly lit and still a pleasant place for an evening stroll.

The **Spanish Society** (Map p164; 4a Calle & 14 Av A, Zone 1) cultural center hosts a women's theater group that stages monthly performances, and occasionally has events such as book launches and poetry readings.

Other recommendations:

**Blue Angel Video Café** ([www.xelawho.com/blueangel/](http://www.xelawho.com/blueangel/); Map p163; 7a Calle 15-79, Zona 1; US\$1.30) Shows Hollywood videos nightly.

**Cinema Paraíso** At the time of writing, this cinema, which shows a couple of interesting documentaries or movies daily, was looking for a new home. Check notice boards around town for the latest.

**Teatro Municipal** (Map p164; 1a Calle) Cultural performances are presented at this beautiful venue.

**Teatro Roma** (Map p164; 14a Av A) Facing Teatro Municipal; sometimes screens interesting movies.

## Shopping

**Asotrama** (Map p164; ☎ 7765 8564; [www.xelapages.com/asotrama/](http://www.xelapages.com/asotrama/); 3a Calle 10-56, Zona 1), the shop belonging to the association of Maya women weavers, is just uphill from the park.

Xela's central market (Map p163) is three floors of reasonably priced handicrafts and souvenirs. Bargain hard. For a more intense, everyday marketing experience, hit the Democracia market (Map p164), up in Zona 3. You should be able to find everything from pirated CDs to a Sony TV.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

For 2nd-class buses, head out to Terminal Minerva, a dusty, noisy, crowded yard on 7a Calle, Zona 3, in the west of town. Buses leave frequently for many highland destinations. Leaving or entering town, some buses make a stop east of the center at the Rotonda, a traffic circle on Calzada Independencia, marked by the Monumento a la Marimba. Getting off here when you're coming into Xela saves the 10 to 15 minutes it will take your bus to cross town to Terminal Minerva.

First-class companies operating between Quetzaltenango and Guatemala City have

their own terminals. All of the buses listed here depart from Terminal Minerva, unless otherwise indicated.

**Almolonga (for Los Vahos)** (US\$0.50, 15 minutes, 6km) Buses every 15 minutes, 5:30am to 5pm, with a stop for additional passengers at the corner of 9a Av and 10a Calle.

**Antigua** (170km) Take any bus heading to Guatemala City via the Interamericana and change at Chimaltenango.

**Chichicastenango** (US\$3, three hours, 94km) Buses at 5am, 6am, 9:30am, 10:45am, 11am, 1pm, 2pm and 3:30pm. Or take a bus heading to Guatemala City by the Interamericana and change at Los Encuentros.

**Ciudad Tecún Umán (Mexican border)** (US\$3.50, 3½ hours, 129km) Hourly buses from 5am to 2pm.

**Cuatro Caminos** (US\$0.50, 30 minutes, 11km) Take any bus for Huehuetenango, Momostenango, Totonicapán, San Francisco El Alto and so on.

**El Carmen/Talismán (Mexican border)** Take a bus to Coatepeque (US\$2.50, two hours, every 30 minutes) and get a direct bus to El Carmen (US\$2.50, two hours).

**Guatemala City** (US\$6, four to five hours, 205km) Línea Dorada (☎ 7767 5198; 12 Av & 5 Calle, Zona 1) Two 1st-class buses (US\$8), 4am and 2:30pm; Líneas América (☎ 7761 4587; 7a Av 3-33, Zona 2) Six pullmans, 5:15am to 3:30pm; Transportes Álamo (☎ 7763 5044; 14 Av 5-15, Zona 3) Seven pullman buses, from 4:30am to 4:45pm; Transportes Galgos (☎ 7761 2248; Calle Rodolfo Robles 17-43, Zona 1) Five pullmans, 3am to 3pm. Each departs from their own terminals. Cheaper 2nd-class buses depart Terminal Minerva every 30 minutes, 3am to 4:30pm, but they make many stops and take longer.

**Huehuetenango** (US\$2, two hours, 90km) Buses every 30 minutes, 5am to 5:30pm.

**La Mesilla (Mexican border)** (US\$3, 3½ hours, 170km, buses at 5am, 6am, 7am, 8am, 1pm and 4pm) Or take a bus to Huehuetenango and change there.

**Momostenango** (US\$1, 1¼ hours, 26km) Buses every 30 minutes, 6am to 5pm.

**Panajachel** (US\$2.50, 2½ hours, 90km) Buses at 5am, 6am, 8am, 10am, noon and 3pm. Or take any bus for Guatemala City via the Interamericana and change at Los Encuentros.

**Retalhuleu** (US\$1.50, 1 hour, 46km) Buses every 30 minutes, 4:30am to 6pm. Look for 'Reu' on the bus; 'Retalhuleu' won't be spelled out.

**San Andrés Xecul** (US\$0.80, 40 minutes) Buses every hour or two, from 6am to 3pm. Or take any bus to San Francisco El Alto or Totonicapán, get out at the Esso station at the Moreira junction and flag a pickup.

**San Francisco El Alto** (US\$0.60, one hour, 15km) Buses about every 15 minutes, 6am to 6pm.

**San Martín Sacatepéquez (San Martín Chile Verde)** (US\$0.80, 45 minutes, 22km) Various companies have buses that leave when full. Placards may say 'Colomba' or 'El Rincón'. Minibuses also serve this route.

## EXPLORE MORE OF QUETZALTENANGO

The wide open spaces and mountainous countryside around Xela offer an almost endless array of opportunities for getting out there and doing a bit of solo exploration. Small villages dotted around the valley mean that you shouldn't ever have too much trouble finding somebody to ask directions from, and the relative safety of the area means that the biggest danger you're ever likely to face is that of a yapping dog (carry a stick). A few destinations to head towards:

- the Santiaguito lookout – get a close-up view of volcanic eruptions, going off like clockwork every 20 minutes
- the lava fields – over near Mt Candelaria, these extensive fields are a great place for a picnic and a spot of sunbathing
- the San Cristobal waterfall – halfway between Xela and San Francisco, the falls are much more impressive in the wet season
- Las Mojadas – the walk to this pretty flower-growing village takes you from Llanos del Pinal and past the Santiago volcano. And the best part – you can catch a bus back.

**Tonicapán** (US\$1, one hour, 22km) Buses every 20 minutes, 6am to 5pm. Departing from the Rotonda on Calzada Independencia. Placards generally say 'Toto.'

**Zunil** (US\$0.60, 20 minutes, 10km) Buses every 30 minutes, 7am to 7pm. With an additional stop at the corner of 9a Av and 10a Calle, southeast of Parque Centroamérica.

## SHUTTLE MINIBUS

**Adrenalina Tours** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 4509; www.adrenalinatours.com; 13a Av, Zona 1, inside Pasaje Enriquez) runs shuttle minibuses to many destinations including Guatemala City (US\$30 per person), Antigua (US\$25), Chichicastenango (US\$15), Panajachel (US\$15), and San Cristobal Las Casas (Mexico; US\$35). **Monte Verde Tours** (Map p164; ☎ 7761 6105; www.monte-verdetours.com; 13 Av 8-34, Zona 1) offers the same runs for slightly cheaper prices.

## CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Rental companies in Xela:

**Econorent** (☎ 7765 0592; cnr 4a Calle & 14a Av, Zona 3)

**Tabarini** (Map p163; ☎ /fax 7763 0418; 9a Calle 9-21, Zona 1)

## Getting Around

Terminal Minerva is linked to the city center by minibuses known as microbuses, charging US\$0.15 for the 10- to 15-minute ride. From the terminal, walk south through the market to the intersection by the Templo de Minerva, where you'll see the vehicles waiting on the south side of 4a Calle. Inguat has information on city bus routes. City buses charge US\$0.15, doubling the fare after 7pm and on public holidays. Going from the center to the terminal, you can catch the microbuses

on 13a Av at the corner of 7a or 4a Calle, or on 14a Av north of 1a Calle. Linea Dorada has a door-to-door shuttle service (US\$3) for passengers getting their 4am departure. A taxi from Terminal Minerva to the city center costs around US\$4.50. The Rotonda bus stop on Calzada Independencia is also served by Parque microbuses running to the center and by taxis.

There's a taxi stand at the north end of Parque Centroamérica.

## AROUND QUETZALTENANGO

The beautiful volcanic country around Quetzaltenango makes for many exciting day trips. For many, the volcanoes themselves pose irresistible challenges (p166). The steam baths at Almolonga are basic but cheap and accessible. The hot springs at Fuentes Georginas are idyllic. You can feast your eyes and soul on the wild church at San Andrés Xecul, or hike to the ceremonial shores of Laguna Chicabal. Or simply hop on a bus and explore the myriad small traditional villages that pepper this part of the Highlands. Market days are great opportunities to observe locals in action, so Sunday and Wednesday in Momostenango, Monday in Zunil, Tuesday and Saturday in Tonicapán and Friday in San Francisco El Alto are good days to visit these surrounding towns.

## Los Vahos

If you're a hiker and the weather is good, you'll enjoy a trip to the rough-and-ready sauna/steam baths at **Los Vahos** (the Vapors; admission US\$3; ☎ 8am-6pm), 3.5km from the Parque Centroamérica. Take a bus headed for Almolonga and ask to get

out at the road to Los Vahos, which is marked with a small sign reading 'A Los Vahos.' From here it's a 2.3km uphill walk (around 1½ hours) to Los Vahos. As you climb, the views of the city on a clear day are remarkable. But, better still, walk south straight out of the city center along 13a Av to its end, where you'll see the little yellow-and-red Monte Sinai evangelical church. Continue straight ahead on the road passing the right-hand side of the church. The road soon zigzags uphill, becoming a dirt track and then a good footpath. Follow the path past the dairy and school to where it joins the main track to Los Vahos. From here you'll have 1km or so more to walk uphill to the steam baths.

At Los Vahos you can have a sauna/steam bath and a picnic if you're so inclined. The saunas are just two dark stone rooms behind plastic curtains. Occasionally, the vents are carpeted with eucalyptus leaves, giving the steam a herbal quality. Straight in front of the steam-bath entrance is a rocky hillside, which you can climb to some caves.

A taxi costs US\$22 for the return trip, including waiting time.

## Almolonga

On the way to Zunil the road passes through Almolonga, 6km from Quetzaltenango, an indigenous town become relatively wealthy from vegetable-growing (it exports veggies to El Salvador) and with a population that is more than 90% evangelical Christian. Market days are Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, when you'll see the most gorgeous vegetables ever. Almolonga celebrates its annual fair on June 27. Don't miss the **Iglesia de San Pedro**, which has a gilded altarpiece with a backdrop of incongruous neon lights, an inverted galleon ceiling and huge old paintings. At the lower end of the village the road passes through **Los Baños**, an area with natural hot sulfur springs. Several little places down here have bath installations; most are quite decrepit, but if a hot-water bath at low cost is your desire, you may want to stop. Rather tomb-like enclosed concrete tubs rent for US\$2 to US\$3 an hour. **El Recreo** and **Los Grillos** are among the better set-ups.

## Zunil

pop 10,900 / elev 2076m

Zunil is a pretty agricultural and market town in a lush valley framed by steep hills and dominated by a towering volcano. As you speed downhill toward Zunil on the

road from Quetzaltenango, you will see it framed as if in a picture, with its white colonial church gleaming above the red-tiled and rusted tin roofs of the low houses.

Winding down the hill from Los Baños, the road skirts Zunil and its fertile gardens before a road on the left leads across a river bridge and, 1km further, to Zunil's plaza.

Zunil, founded in 1529, is a typical Guatemalan highland town. What makes it so beautiful is its setting in the mountains and the traditional indigenous agriculture practiced here. The cultivated plots, divided by stone fences, are irrigated by canals; you'll see the farmers scooping up water from the canals with a shovel-like instrument and throwing it over their plants. Women wash their clothes near the river bridge in pools of hot water that come out of the rocks. In Zunil, the centuries-old life cycle thrives.

## SIGHTS

Another attraction of Zunil is its particularly striking **church**. Its ornate facade, with eight pairs of serpentine columns, is echoed inside by a richly worked altar of silver. On market day (Monday) the plaza in front of the church is bright with the predominantly red-and-pink traditional garb of the local K'iche' Maya people buying and selling.

Half a block downhill from the church plaza, the **Cooperativa Santa Ana** (☎ 7:30am-6pm) is a handicrafts cooperative in which more than 500 local women participate. Handicrafts, mainly superbly woven cloth, are displayed and sold here, and weaving lessons are offered.

While you're in Zunil, visit the image of **San Simón**, the name given here to the much-venerated non-Christian deity known elsewhere as Maximón. His effigy, propped up in a chair, is moved each year to a different house; ask any local where to find San Simón, everyone will know (local children will take you for a small tip). You'll be charged a few quetzals to visit him and US\$0.65 for each photograph taken. For more on San Simón, see the boxed text, p140.

## FESTIVALS

The **festival of San Simón** is held each year on October 28, after which he moves to a new house. The **festival of Santa Catarina Alejandri**, official patron saint of Zunil, is celebrated on November 25. In between, November 1 sees lots of kites flying above the cemetery.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

**Eco Saunas Las Cumbres** (☎ 7767 1746; Km 210; r US\$34; (P)) This hotel, about 500m south of Zunil village, is built on top of natural steam vents. It's one of the most comfortable in the region. Rooms come with fireplace, sauna and Jacuzzi, as well as cable TV and all the usual comforts. There's a good restaurant (mains US\$4 to US\$8), open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, serving up regional specialties and generous meat platters. Also on the grounds are a squash court, gymnasium and handicrafts store. Nonguests can use the public sauna (US\$3.50 per hour), which you'll have all to yourselves. It's a clean and modern pine-paneled installation and there are bathrooms, showers and change rooms attached.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

From Zunil, which is 10km from Quetzaltenango, you can continue to Fuentes Georginas (8km), return to Quetzaltenango via the Cantel road (16km), or alternatively, take Hwy 9S down through ever lush countryside to El Zarco junction on the Carretera al Pacífico. Buses depart Zunil for Xela from the main road beside the bridge.

**Fuentes Georginas**

The prettiest, most popular natural spa in Guatemala is **Fuentes Georginas** (admission US\$2.50; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, 8am-4pm Sun). Four pools of varying temperatures are fed by hot sulfur springs and framed by a steep, high wall of tropical vines, ferns and flowers. Fans of Fuentes Georginas were dismayed when a massive landslide in 1998 destroyed several structures, filled the primary bathing pool with trees, mud and rubble and crushed the angelic Greek goddess that previously gazed over the pools. But after the site was successfully restored, spa regulars realized that the landslide had opened a new vent that feeds the pools. As a result, the water here is hotter than ever. Though the setting is intensely tropical, the mountain air currents keep it deliciously cool through the day. There is a little 500m walk starting from beside the pool and worth doing to check out the birds and orchids. Bring a bathing suit, which is required.

Besides the **restaurant** (meals US\$6-8; ☎ 8am-6pm), which serves great *papas*, there are three sheltered picnic tables with cooking grills (you need to bring your own fuel). Big-time soak-

ers will want to spend the night: down the valley a few dozen meters are seven rustic but cozy **cottages** (s/d/tr/q US\$12/16/20/24), each with a shower, a barbecue area and a fireplace to ward off the mountain chill at night (wood and matches are provided; US\$3.25 for extra wood). Included in the price of the cottages is access to the pools all day and all night, when rules are relaxed.

Trails here lead to two nearby volcanoes: **Volcán Zunil** (15km, about three hours one way) and **Volcán Santo Tomás** (25km, about five hours one way). Guides are essential if you don't want to get lost; they are available for around US\$14 for either trip. Ask at the restaurant.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Take any bus to Zunil, where pickup trucks wait to give rides up the hill 8km to the springs, a half-hour away. Negotiate the price for the ride. It's very likely they'll tell you it's US\$4.50 roundtrip, and when you arrive at the top, tell you it's US\$4.50 each way – this is an annoying game the pickup drivers play. If there are many people in the group, they may charge US\$1 per person. Unless you want to walk back down the hill, arrange a time for the pickup driver to return to pick you up. You can walk from Zunil to Fuentes Georginas in about two hours (it's 12km). If you're the mountain-goat type, you may enjoy this; it's a strenuous climb.

Hitchhiking is not good on the Fuentes Georginas access road, as there are few cars and they are often filled to capacity with large Guatemalan families. The best days to try for a ride are Saturday and Sunday, when the baths are busiest.

If you're driving, walking or hitching, go uphill from Zunil's plaza to the Cantel road (about 60m), turn right and go downhill 100m to a road on the left marked 'Turicentro Fuentes Georginas, 8km.' (This road is near the bus stop on the Quetzaltenango–Retalhuleu road – note that there are three different bus stops in Zunil.) This road heads up to Fuentes Georginas. You'll know you're approaching the baths when you smell the sulfur in the air.

Alternatively, make it all simple and take a shuttle or a tour from Quetzaltenango. Monte Verde Tours and Adrenalina Tours (see p169) in Quetzaltenango offer shuttle services directly here from Xela for US\$5, including waiting time.



## El Palmar Viejo

The turnoff to El Palmar Viejo is signposted immediately before the Puente Samala III bridge, about 30km down the Retalhuleu road from Xela. It's 4km west from the main road to the village itself – or rather the overgrown remnants of the village are, for El Palmar was destroyed by a mudslide and floods emanating from Santiaguito volcano at the time of Hurricane Mitch in the 1990s. Its inhabitants were resettled at a new village, El Palmar Nuevo, east of the main highway, but some still come here to tend plantations. A river has cut a deep ravine through the heart of the old village, slicing the **church** in two. A pair of **swing bridges** cross the ravine. Downstream, to the right of the river, you can see the top of the village cemetery **chapel** poking up through the trees – but beware, reaching the cemetery involves crossing an unstable bridge. Atop the hill behind the **cemetery** is a modern Mayan **altar**. Buses bound for Retalhuleu can drop you at the El Palmar Viejo turnoff, but it's probably best to come with a guide, as this is an isolated place. Adrenalina Tours (p169) is one agency that comes here.

## Salcajá

Seven kilometers from Xela, this is an apparently unremarkable town that everyone passes through en route to all points north. However, behind all the traffic and dust lurk some special qualities to which Salcajá alone can lay claim.

Salcajá's **Iglesia de San Jacinto**, two blocks west on 3a Calle from the main road (3a Av, Zona 1), dates from 1524. It was the first Christian church in Central America. The facade retains some character, with carved lions and bunches of fruit, but the real treat (if you find the church open) is inside, where you'll find several original paintings and a pretty, ornate altar.

Salcajá is famed for its traditional *ikat*-style textiles, remarkable for the hand-tied and dyed threads that are laid out in the preferred pattern on a loom. Shops selling bolts of this fabric are ubiquitous in Salcajá, and you can usually visit their workshops before purchasing.

Salcajá is also known for its production of two alcoholic beverages that locals consider akin to magic elixirs. *Caldo de frutas* (literally, fruit soup) is like a high-octane sangria that will knock your socks off. It's made by

combining *nances* (cherry-like fruits), apples, peaches, and pears and fermenting them for years. You can purchase fifths of it for around US\$3 after viewing the production process. *Rompopo* is an entirely different type of potent potable, made from rum, egg yolks, sugar and spices. A sickly yellow *rompopo* costs around US\$4 a fifth. Little liquor shops all over Salcajá peddle the stuff, but you may like to try the friendly **Rompopo Salcajá** (4a Calle 2-02), a block east of the main road along 4a Calle.

All buses headed north from Quetzaltenango pass through Salcajá, so it's easy to hop off here en route to other destinations.

## San Andrés Xecul

A few kilometers past Salcajá and less than 1km before Cuatro Caminos, the road from Quetzaltenango passes the Morería crossroads, where the road to San Andrés Xecul branches off to the west. After about 3km on this uphill spur, you'll start seeing rainbow cascades of hand-dyed thread drying on the roofs and you'll know you have arrived in San Andrés Xecul. This small town is boxed in by fertile hills and boasts the most bizarre, stunning **church** imaginable. Technicolored saints, angels, flowers and climbing vines fight for space with whimsical tigers and frolicking monkeys on the shocking yellow facade. The red, blue and yellow cones on the bell tower are straight from the circus big top.

Sitting on the wall overlooking the entire Quetzaltenango valley and contemplating this wild combination of Catholic and Mayan iconography, it's hard to believe hallucinogenic substances didn't somehow figure in. Why and how this church came to resemble the inside of a lunatic's mind has been lost, though the church doors are inscribed 1917. Inside, a carpet of candles illuminate bleeding effigies of Christ. These are unabashedly raffish, with slabs of thick makeup trying to make him look alive and boyish. In one especially campy display, a supine Jesus is surrounded by gold and satin trimmings that hang thick inside his glass coffin. The pews are generally packed with praying indigenous women. The outside of the church was vibrantly refurbished in late 1999.

Continue walking up the hill and you'll come to a smaller (and decidedly more sedate) **yellow church**. Mayan ceremonies are

still held here, and the panoramic view across the valley is phenomenal. The **annual festival** is November 29 and 30 – a good time to visit this town. There are no facilities; the easiest way to get here is by taking any northbound bus from Xela, alighting at the Esso station at the Morería crossroads and hailing a pickup or walking the 3km uphill. Buses returning to Xela line up at the edge of the plaza and make the trip until about 5pm.

## Totonicapán

pop 94,700 / elev 2500m

San Miguel Totonicapán is a pretty Guatemalan highland town known for its artisans. Shoemakers, weavers, tinsmiths, potters and woodworkers all make and sell their goods here. Market days are Tuesday and Saturday; it's a locals' market, not a tourist affair, and it winds down by late morning.

The ride from Cuatro Caminos is along a pine-studded valley. From Totonicapán's bus station it's a 600m walk up 4a Calle to the twin main plazas. The lower plaza has a statue of Atanasio Tzul, leader of an indigenous rebellion that started here in 1820, while the upper one is home to the requisite large **colonial church** and a wonderful **municipal theater**, built in 1924 in neoclassical style and recently restored.

## ACTIVITIES

The **Casa de la Cultura Totonicapense** (☎ 7766 1575; www.larutamayaonline.com/aventura.html; 8a Av 2-17), next door to Hospedaje San Miguel 1½ blocks off the lower plaza, has displays of indigenous culture and crafts and administers a fascinating 'Meet the Artisans' program to introduce tourists to some of the town's many artisans and local families. A one-day program, usually for a minimum of four people and requiring a week's advance booking, includes visits to various craft workshops (including potters, carvers of wooden masks and musical instruments, and weavers), a concert of traditional instruments and a traditional lunch in a private home. Prices range from US\$49 per person for four people down to US\$24 per person for 15 to 20 people. An alternative program, costing US\$15/10/6 per person for two/six/10 people, takes you on foot to nearby villages to visit community development projects, natural medicine projects, schools, artisans workshops and Mayan sacred sites. All tours are in Spanish.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The festival of the **Apparition of the Archangel Michael** is on May 8, with fireworks and traditional dances. The **Feria Titular de San Miguel Arcángel** (Name-Day Festival of the Archangel Saint Michael) runs from September 24 to 30, peaking on September 29. Totonicapán keeps traditional masked dances very much alive with its **Festival Tradicional de Danza** – dates vary but recently it was over a week-end in late October.

## SLEEPING & EATING

Casa de la Cultura clients can stay with local families for around US\$18 per person including dinner and breakfast.

**Hospedaje Paco Centro** (☎ 7766 2810; 3a Calle 8-22, Zona 2; s/d US\$5.50/11, with bathroom US\$8/16) A clean, tidy place with big bare rooms, a couple of blocks from the lower plaza. Rooms with bathroom have TV. Front rooms get a bit of street noise.

**Hotel Totonicapán** (☎ 7766 4458; www.hoteltotonicapan.com; 8a Av 8-15, Zona 4; s/d with bathroom US\$18/30) The fanciest digs in town are reasonable for the price, with big, modern rooms featuring carpeted floors, a few bits of furniture and some good views.

**Restaurante Bonanza** (4a Calle 8-16, Zona 2; meals US\$4-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Totonicapán's most formal restaurant won't blow your mind, but it will fill your stomach. Mostly meat, with a few seafood and veggie options.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses between Totonicapán and Quetzaltenango (passing through Cuatro Caminos) run frequently throughout the day. Signs in the bus window say 'Toto'. The ride from Cuatro Caminos is along a beautiful pine-studded valley. The last direct bus to Quetzaltenango (US\$0.50, one hour) leaves Toto at 6:30pm.

## San Francisco El Alto

pop 45,000 / elev 2630m

High on a hilltop overlooking Quetzaltenango (17km away) stands the town of San Francisco El Alto.

**Banco Reformador** (2a Calle 2-64; ☎ 8:30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) changes US dollars and traveler's checks and has a Visa ATM.

San Francisco's big party is the **Fiesta de San Francisco de Asís**, celebrated around October 4 with traditional dances such as La Danza de Conquista and La Danza de los Monos.

This whole town is Guatemala's garment district: Every inch is jammed with vendors selling sweaters, socks, blankets, jeans, scarves and more. Bolts of cloth spill from storefronts packed to the ceiling with miles of material, and this is on the quiet days! On Friday, the real market action kicks in. The large plaza in front of the 18th-century church is covered in goods. Stalls are crowded into neighboring streets, and the press of traffic is so great that a special system of one-way roads is established to avoid colossal traffic jams. Vehicles entering the town on market day must pay a small fee, and any bus ride within town is laborious.

San Francisco's market is regarded as the biggest, most authentic market in the country, and it's not nearly as heavy with handicrafts as those in Chichicastenango and Antigua. As in any crowded market, beware of pickpockets and stay alert.

Around mid-morning, when the clouds roll away, panoramic views can be had from throughout town, but especially from the roof of the **church**. The caretaker will let you go up (on the way through, have a look at the church's six elaborate gilded altarpieces and remains of what must once have been very colorful frescoes).

**Hotel Vista Hermosa** (2a Calle & 3a Av; s/d with bathroom US\$8/16) does indeed have beautiful views, out over the valley to the Santa María volcano. Rooms are spacious, with TV, balconies and (thankfully) hot showers.

For food, **El Manantial** (☎ 738 4373; 2a Calle 2-42; mains US\$2.50-3), a couple of blocks below the plaza, is pleasant and clean, serving up steaks and a few *tipica* dishes.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses to San Francisco leave Quetzaltenango (passing through Cuatro Caminos) frequently throughout the day. The trip takes about one hour and costs US\$0.60. Because of San Francisco's one-way streets, arriving from Quetzaltenango you'll want to get off on 4a Av at the top of the hill (unless you like walking uphill) and walk towards the church. To go back to Cuatro Caminos, buses run downhill along 1a Av.

### Momostenango

pop 28,000 / elev 2200m

Beyond San Francisco El Alto, 15km from Cuatro Caminos and 26km from Quetzaltenango, this town, set in a pretty mountain

valley along a road through pine woods, is famous for the making of *chamarras*, or thick, heavy woolen blankets. The villagers also make ponchos and other woolen garments. The best days to look for these are Wednesday and Sunday, the main market day. A basic good blanket costs around US\$13; it's perhaps twice as much for an extra-heavy 'matrimonial.'

Momostenango is noted for its adherence to the ancient Mayan calendar and for its observance of traditional rites. Hills in the town are the scene of ceremonies enacted on the important dates of the calendar. Visits on important celestial days – such as the summer solstice, the spring equinox, the start of the Mayan solar year (February 24), or Wajshakib Batz, the start of the 260-day *cholq'ij* or *tzolkin* year – can be particularly powerful and rewarding. But few Mayan ceremonies are open to outsiders, so don't assume showing up means you'll be able to participate. Should you be so fortunate as to observe a ceremony, be sure to treat altars and participants with the utmost respect.

**Banrural** (1a Calle, Zona 2; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sun), a block south of the plaza, changes US dollars and traveler's checks and has a Visa ATM.

The **Centro Cultural** (☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm, 2-5pm Sat), in the *municipalidad* building, is good for tourist information. It also has interesting local art exhibitions from time to time, so it's worth dropping in and checking it out.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

**Los Riscos**, a set of strange geological formations on the edge of town, are worth the little walk it takes to see them. Technically eroded pumice, these bunches of tawny spires rising into the air look like something from Star Trek. To get there, head downhill on 3a Av, Zona 2, from beside Kikotemal shop, which is two blocks east along 1a Calle from Banrural. Turn right after 100m at the bottom of the hill, go left at a fork (signed 'A Los Riscos'), then after 100m turn right along 2a Calle and walk 300m to Los Riscos.

**Takiliben May Wajshakib Batz** (☎ 7736 5537; 3a Av 'A' 6-85, Zona 3) is at the southern entrance to town – turn up a signed path just north of the Texaco station to find it. Takiliben May, a 'Maya Mission,' is dedicated to studying and teaching Mayan culture and sacred traditions. Its director, Rigoberto Itzep Chanchavac, is a *chuchkajau* (Mayan priest) responsible for advising the community on when special days of

the Mayan calendars fall. Rigoberto also does Mayan horoscopes (US\$5) and leads day or half-day workshops where groups of around eight can gain an understanding of customs that usually remain hidden from outsiders. His **chuj** (traditional Mayan sauna; per person US\$10; ☎ 3-6pm Tue & Thu) requires advance bookings. The Takiliben May can also provide tourist guides for US\$10 an hour.

### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Picturesque *diablo* (devil) **dances** are held here in the plaza a few times a year, notably on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. The homemade devil costumes can get quite campy and elaborate: all have masks and cardboard wings, and some go the whole hog with fake fur suits and heavily sequined outfits. Dance groups gather in the plaza with a five- to 13-piece band, drinking alcoholic refreshments during the breaks. For entertainment, they are at their best around 3pm, but the festivities go on late into the night. The annual fair, **Octava de Santiago**, is celebrated from July 28 to August 2.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Accommodations here are very basic.

**Posada de Doña Pelagia** (☎ 7736 5175; 2a Av 'A' 2-88, Zona 1; s/d US\$2/3) Very basic, door-bumps-bed type rooms set around a courtyard. They're good enough for a night.

**Hospedaje y Comedor Paclom** (2a Av & 1a Calle, Zona 2; d US\$7) This serviceable *hospedaje*, a block uphill from the first plaza, has rooms facing a courtyard crammed with plants and birds.

**Restaurante La Cascada** (1a Calle 1-35, Zona 2; meals US\$3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A bright and clean upstairs eatery serving up good-value set meals. The food is simple and filling and there are some good views of the church spires and surrounding hills.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

You can get buses to Momostenango from Quetzaltenango's Terminal Minerva (US\$0.80, 1½ hours), from Cuatro Caminos (US\$0.50, one hour), or from San Francisco El Alto (US\$0.40, 45 minutes). Buses run about every half-hour, with the last one back to Quetzaltenango normally leaving Momostenango at 4:30pm.

### Laguna Chicabal

This magical, sublime lake is nestled in the crater of Volcán Chicabal (2712m) on the

edge of a cloud forest. Laguna Chicabal is billed as the 'Center of Maya-Mam Cosmopolitan' on huge signs, both on the path leading out of town and at the crater itself. As such, it is a very sacred place and a hotbed of Mayan ceremonial activity. There are two active Mayan altars on its sandy shores, and Mayan priests and worshipers come from far and wide to perform ceremonies and make offerings here, especially on and around May 3. The lake is 575m wide and 331m deep.

Adding to the atmosphere of mystery, a veil of fog dances over the water, alternately revealing and hiding the lake's placid contours. Amid the thick, pretty vegetation are picnic tables and one of Guatemala's most inviting campsites, right on the lakeshore. Because the lake and grounds have great ceremonial significance, campers and hikers are asked to treat them with the utmost respect. In addition, Laguna Chicabal is pretty much off-limits to tourists during the entire first week of May, so that ceremonial traditions can be observed without interference.

Laguna Chicabal is a two-hour hike from San Martín Sacatepéquez (also known as San Martín Chile Verde), a friendly, interesting village about 22km from Xela. This place is notable for the elaborate traditional dress worn by the village men, who sport a white tunic with red pinstripes that hangs to mid-shin and has densely embroidered red, pink and orange sleeves. A thick, red sash serves as a belt. The tunic is worn over pants that nearly reach the ankles and are similarly embroidered.

To get to the lake, head down from the highway towards the purple-and-blue church and look for the Laguna Chicabal sign on your right (you can't miss it). Hike 5km (about 45 minutes) uphill through fields and past houses until you crest the hill. Continue hiking, going downhill for 2km (15 minutes) until you reach the rangers station, where you pay the US\$2.50 entrance fee. From here, it's another 3km (about 30 minutes) uphill to a *mirador* and then a whopping 615 steep steps down to the edge of the lake. Start early for best visibility. Coming back up, allow two hours.

For bus information, see p173. For the return, there are fairly frequent minibuses from San Martín or you can hail a pickup. There are a few basic cookshacks on the square in San Martín, though you may prefer to hop off in San Juan Ostuncalco for a meal. In this

interesting town, halfway between San Martín and Xela, the artisans are renowned for their wicker furniture and fine handcrafted instruments. San Juan's market day is Sunday. A taxi from Quetzaltenango to San Martín Sacatepéquez costs around US\$16.

## HUEHUETENANGO

pop 99,300 / elev 1902m

Mostly a stopping-off point for more interesting places, Huehuetenango, or Huehuc (way-way), offers few charms of its own, but some people do love it for its true Guatemalan character. Either way, there are enough eating and sleeping options here to keep you happy, and the sight of the Cuchumatanes mountain range (highest in Central America) in the background makes for some striking scenery.

The lively *indígena* market is filled daily with traders who come down from surrounding villages. Surprisingly, the market area is about the only place you'll see traditional costumes in this town, as most of its citizens are ladinos wearing modern clothes. Coffee growing, mining, sheep raising, light manufacturing and agriculture are the region's main activities.

For travelers, Huehuc is usually a leg on the journey to or from Mexico – the logical place to spend your first night in Guatemala. The town is also the perfect staging area for forays deeper into the Cuchumatanes or through the Highlands on back roads.

## History

Huehuetenango was a Mam Maya region until the 15th century, when the K'iche', expanding from their capital K'umarcaaj, which is near present-day Santa Cruz del Quiché, pushed them out. Many Mam fled into neighboring Chiapas, Mexico, which still has a large Mam population near its border with Guatemala. In the late 15th century, the weakness of K'iche' rule brought about civil war, which engulfed the Highlands and provided a chance for Mam independence. The turmoil was still unresolved in 1525 when Gonzalo de Alvarado, the brother of Pedro, arrived to conquer Zaculeu, the Mam capital, for Spain.

## Orientation & Information

The town center is 4km northeast of the Interamericana, and the bus station is off the road linking the two, about 2km from each. Almost every service of interest to tourists is in Zona 1 within a few blocks of the Parque Central.

Huehuc has no official tourist office, but folks in the *municipalidad* can generally answer any queries you might have.

**Banrural** (cnr 6a Av & 3a Calle; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) and **Corpobanco** (cnr 6a Av & 3a Calle; ☎ 8:30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-12:30pm Sat) both change US dollars and traveler's checks. There are Visa ATMs at Bancafé and Banco Industrial, a block further north.

The **post office** (2a Calle 3-54; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) is half a block east of the Parque.

**Génesis Internet** (2a Calle 6-37; ☎ 8:30am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat) and **Interhuehuc** (3a Calle 6-65B; ☎ 9am-12:30pm & 2-6pm) charge US\$0.60 per hour for internet access.

The **Mexican Consulate** (5a Av 4-11; ☎ 9am-noon, 3-5pm Mon-Fri) is in the same building as the Farmacia del Cid.

## Sights & Activities

### PARQUE CENTRAL

Huehuetenango's main plaza is shaded by old trees and surrounded by the town's imposing buildings: the *municipalidad* (with its band shell on the upper floor) and the huge colonial church. For a bird's-eye view of the situation, check out the little relief map of Huehuetenango department, which lists altitudes, language groups and populations of the various municipal divisions.

### ZACULEU

With ravines on three sides, the late postclassic religious center Zaculeu ('White Earth' in the Mam language) occupies a strategic defensive location that served its Mam Maya inhabitants well. It finally failed, however, in 1525, when Gonzalo de Alvarado and his conquistadors laid siege to the site for two months. It was starvation that ultimately defeated the Mam.

The park-like **Zaculeu archaeological zone** (admission US\$4.50; ☎ 8am-6pm), about 200m square, is 4km west of Huehuetenango's main plaza. Cold soft drinks and snacks are available. A small museum at the site holds, among other things, skulls and grave goods found in a tomb beneath Estructura 1, the tallest structure at the site.

Restoration by the United Fruit Company in the 1940s has left Zaculeu's pyramids, ball courts and ceremonial platforms covered by a thick coat of graying plaster. It's oddly stark and clean. Some of the restoration methods were not authentic to the buildings, but the



town, even if the bathrooms do look like improvised afterthoughts.

**Hotel Mary** (☎ 7764 1618; 2a Calle 3-52; s/d with bathroom US\$14/17) This is really the cutting edge of the budget hotel payoff – you can have clean, central, spacious or well equipped, but not all four. Grungy rooms and an odd smell are the only problems here.

#### MIDRANGE

**Hotel Zaculeu** (☎ 7764 1086; 5a Av 1-14; s/d US\$28/32; **P**) Not a bad deal, and certainly a great location, the Zaculeu's big, clean rooms are gradually getting done up. The fresh paint-work and new beds are a welcome addition. Ground-floor rooms are darker and some are damp-affected, unfortunately including some of those around the plant-filled front patio, which is the prettiest area.

**Hotel San Luis de la Sierra** (☎ 7764 9216; hsanluis@intellnet.net.gt; 2a Calle 7-00; s/d US\$30/40; **P**) Another good choice. The clean, medium-sized rooms have pine furniture, TV, hot-water bathroom and nice touches such as fan, reading lamp and shampoo. There's a restaurant here, too.

**Hotel Casa Blanca** (☎ 7769 0777; 7a Av 3-41; s/d US\$32/38; **P**) The bright attractive courtyard here leads onto spacious modern rooms with

pine ceilings and good hot showers. The restaurant out back serves up good-value set lunches (US\$3)

There are plenty of hotels near the bus station: leave the east side of the station between the Díaz Álvarez and Transportes Fronterizos offices, and walk left up the street outside to come out on 3a Av, Zona 5. Within 300m or so in each direction here there's a total of at least seven hotels. Try **Hotel California** (☎ 7769 0500; 3a Av 4-25; s US\$10, s/d with bathroom US\$18/34) or **Hotel Cascata** (☎ 7764 1188; Lote 4 4-42; s/d US\$10/18, with bathroom US\$14/28).

#### Eating & Drinking

**Pastelería Monte Alto** (cnr 4a Av & 2a Calle; cakes & pastries US\$0.50-0.80; ☎ 9am-9pm) For some fine pastry munching right on the plaza, check this place out, where your decision will probably be aided by the menus with food photos on them.

**La Cabaña del Café** (2a Calle 6-50; dishes US\$2-3; ☎ 8am-9pm) Huehue's best coffee (and donuts, incidentally) can be found in this imitation log cabin a short walk from the plaza.

**Hotel Casa Blanca** (7a Av 3-41; set lunches US\$2.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) For lovely surroundings, you can't beat the two restaurants at this classy hotel, one indoors, the other in

#### LOCAL LORE: THE SACRED GRAIN

There was once a poor feather collector called Quiché Wanak, who fell in love with a beautiful weaver, Xajal mama'. Xajal's parents thought she was too good for him and opposed their marriage.

One night, Quiché, who could transform himself, turned into a bird and flew into Xajal's house so they could elope.

Xajal's parents hired a hunter to track the couple down. They ran for a long time, eventually coming to an old man's house, who was a friend of Quiché's.

Quiché asked him to hide Xajal in a cave on Mount Paxil. He said that after seven years they would reunite, and then he rose to the heavens and became the sun, as was his destiny.

The old man took Xajal to the cave where she stayed, eventually becoming corn, as was her destiny.

Years passed. There was not much food in the lands and people were starving. A mountain cat found Xajal's cave and began eating the corn.

People began to notice that the mountain cat was strong and well fed, and soon they followed him to see what he was eating. But the entrance to the cave was too narrow for people, so they asked the 13 lightning brothers to break the rock. The 12 oldest tried, but could not. The youngest tried and succeeded, but when he broke the rock, a fire started in the cave. Some of the corn was burnt, some singed and some remained white.

People rushed into the cave and took the corn to plant it. Some took the black corn, others the red and white.

Since then, Quiché Wanak, the sun, and Xajal mama', the corn, express their love every day, feeding the people.

the garden. Breakfasts cost US\$3 to US\$5 (on Sunday, from 8am to 11am, it's a big buffet for US\$4), burgers and croissants are around US\$3, and steaks (try filet mignon or cordon bleu) are around US\$6.

**Mi Tierra Café** (4a Calle 6-46; mains US\$3-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☒) An informal café-restaurant serving good homemade soups and burgers. It also takes a good crack at some international dishes, muffins and a range of other goodies. Good, cheap and filling set lunches are available.

**Café Bougambilias** (5a Av north of 4a Calle; breakfast US\$3; ☺ breakfast & lunch) One of three *comedores* in a line along the southern part of the Parque Centrale, the Bougambilias has a team of busy cooks preparing food on the ground floor, while the two upper floors have tables with views over the park and plenty of fresh air. It's good for all meals, with large serves of straightforward food.

**La Fonda** (2a Calle 5-35; mains US\$3-5; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A few steps from the Parque Central, this clean, reliable place serves varied Guatemalan and international fare including good-value pizzas.

**Restaurante Las Brasas** (4a Av 1-36; mains US\$5-8; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Half a block from the Parque Central, this is one of Huehuetenango's best restaurants. With a good combination of steaks and Chinese on the menu, it should be pushing multiple buttons.

**Kaktus Disco** (6a Calle 6-38; ☺ 9pm-late Fri & Sat) There's not a whole lot going on in the center, nightlife-wise. This little disco is about your best bet after hours.

## Getting There & Away

Linea Dorada has a central office (☎ 7764-1617; 4a Calle 6-62, Zona 1) inside the Hotel Imperial in the center of town.

The bus terminal is in Zona 4, 2km southwest of the plaza along 6a Calle. Buses serving this terminal include the following:

**Antigua** (230km) Take a Guatemala City bus and change at Chimaltenango.

**Aguacatán** (US\$1, one hour, 22km, 12 daily, 6am to 7pm) Covered by the Mendoza and Rivas companies.

**Barillas** (US\$6, seven hours, 139km, 10 daily, 2am to 10pm) Run by Transportes Josué and Autobuses del Norte.

**Cobán** (142km) No direct service; take a minibús to Aguacatán, change there for Sacapulas, change there for Uspantán and then change there for Cobán. The road is paved up to Uspantán and the entire trip could be done in seven hours with good connections.

**Cuatro Caminos** (US\$2, 1½ hours, 77km) Take any bus heading for Guatemala City or Quetzaltenango.

**Gracias a Dios** (US\$4, 1½ hours) Four departures daily.

**Guatemala City** (Five hours, 266km) Los Halcones Pullman buses (US\$8) leave at 4:30am, 7am and 2pm from their town-center terminal on 7a Av; Linea Dorada (US\$10) buses leave from in front of the Hotel California opposite the terminal at 2:30pm and 11pm. From the main terminal, around 20 buses (US\$4 to US\$6) leave between 2am and 4pm by Transportes El Condor, Díaz Álvarez and Transportes Velásquez.

**La Mesilla (Mexican border)** (US\$2, two hours, 84km) At least 20 buses depart from 5:45am to 6:30pm, by various companies.

**Nebaj** (68km) Take a bus to Sacapulas, or a bus to Aguacatán and a pickup on to Sacapulas, then another bus from Sacapulas to Nebaj.

**Nentón** (US\$3, three hours, six daily, 3:30am to 1pm)

**Panajachel** (159km) Take a Guatemala City bus and change at Los Encuentros.

**Quetzaltenango** (US\$2, two hours, 90km) At least 14 buses depart between 6am and 2:30pm, by various companies.

**Sacapulas** (US\$2, 2½ hours, 42km) Buses at 11:30am (Rutas García) and 12:45pm (Transportes Rivas).

**San Mateo Ixtatán** (US\$5, six hours, 111km) Take a Barillas bus.

**Soloma** (US\$3, three hours, 70km) About 16 buses daily, from 2am to 10pm, by Transportes Josué and Autobuses del Norte.

**Todos Santos Cuchumatán** (US\$3, three hours, 40km) Buses at approximately 3:45am, 5:30am, 11:30am, 12:45pm, 1:30pm, 1:45pm, 2pm, 2:45pm and 3:45pm by the Flor de María, Mendoza, Pérez, Todosantera, Concepcionera and Chicoyera companies; some buses do not run on Saturday.

**Tabarini** (☎ 7764 9356) has a car rental office in Sector Brasilia in the west of town.

## Getting Around

For city buses from the bus station to the town center, leave the east side of the bus station through the gap between the Díaz Álvarez and Transportes Fronterizos offices. During hours of darkness until 11pm and after 2am, 'Centro' buses (US\$0.40) go intermittently from the street outside; in daylight hours, cross this street and walk through the covered market opposite to a second street, where 'Centro' buses (US\$0.20) depart every few minutes. To return to the bus station from the center, catch the buses outside Barbería Wilson (6a Av 2-22).

A taxi between the bus terminal and town center costs US\$4, which is outrageous, but what are you gonna do?



## AROUND HUEHUETENANGO

Except for Todos Santos Cuchumatán, the mountainous far northwest of Guatemala is little visited by travelers. The adventurous few will often be a novelty to the local Mayan folks they meet. Spanish skills, patience and tact will pave the way in these parts.

### Chiantla

Just before the climb into the Cuchumatanes, this little village is about 5km out of Huehuetenango. Its church holds the Virgen del Rosario, a silver statue donated by the owner of a local silver mine. The virgin is believed to have mystical healing powers and people come from all over the country to seek her assistance. The main date for the pilgrimage is February 2, when the town packs out with supplicants and the infirm.

Also in the church are some interesting murals painted in the 1950s, showing local Maya having miraculous experiences while working in the silver mines. You can get here on any bus headed towards Todos Santos, Barillas or Salama.

### El Mirador

Overlooking Huehuetenango, another 4km on from Chiantla, this is a lookout point up in the Cuchumatanes, 12km from town (one hour by bus). On a sunny day it offers a great view of the entire region and many volcanoes. A beautiful poem, *A Los Cuchumatanes*, is mounted on plaques here. Any bus from Huehue heading for Todos Santos, Soloma or Barillas comes past here.

### Laguna Magdalena

This beautiful lagoon, 35km north of Huehuetenango, is nestled between two mountains. The scenery is dramatic – the mineral-rich waters are a deep shade of turquoise, and scattered around the lakeshore are massive boulders and ancient, gnarled trees.

It's nearly impossible to get here independently – the best you can do is get to the village of Paquix, 20km out of Huehue (regular buses depart from the terminal) and then hire a guide who can take you out on horseback (three to four hours) or foot (six to eight hours). Otherwise, **Unicornio Azul** (☎/fax 5205 9328; www.unicornioazul.com) does horse rides out here, and Adrenalina Tours (p169) in Quetzaltenango can get you out here in a 4WD, weather and roads permitting.

### Unicornio Azul

This Guatemalan- and French-run **horse riding ranch** (☎/fax 5205 9328; www.unicornioazul.com) at Chancol, about 25km by road northeast of Huehuetenango, offers riding in the Cuchumatanes from one hour (US\$15 per hour) to one/three/nine days (US\$78/340/970). The nine-day trip crosses the mountains to the Ixil Triangle and back.

### Todos Santos Cuchumatán

pop 3500 / elev 2450m

Way up in the Highlands, Todos Santos is as raw as Guatemalan village life gets – dramatic mountain scenery, mud streets, beans and tortillas and everything shut by 9pm. There are a couple of language schools operating here and this is the end point for the spectacular hike from Nebaj.

Todos Santos lies in the bottom of a deep valley, and the last 1½ hours of the approach by bus are down a bone-shaking dirt road that leaves the paved Huehuetenango–Soloma road after a 1½-hour climb up from Huehue.

Traditional clothing is very much in use here and, unusually, it's the male costume that is the more eye-catching. Men wear red-and-white-striped trousers, small flat hats with blue ribbon around them, jackets with multicolored stripes and thick woven collars. Saturday is the main market day, and by the end of it the main street is half-full of inebriated *todosanteños* staggering they know not where. There's a smaller market on Wednesday.

Reasons to visit Todos Santos include good walking in the hills, learning Spanish (there are two schools) and getting to know a traditional and close-knit but friendly community. Todos Santos suffered terribly during Guatemala's civil war and is still very poor. To supplement their subsistence from agriculture, families from here still travel in the early part of the year to work for meager wages in very tough conditions on coffee, sugar and cotton plantations on the Pacific Slope. Working in the US is, however, proving a more lucrative alternative for some *todosanteños* today, as the amount of new construction in the valley demonstrates.

Todos Santos gained notoriety in 2000 when a Japanese tourist and his Guatemalan bus driver were murdered by a mob of villagers after the tourist attempted to take photos of a young village girl. By all accounts this was an isolated incident sparked by rumors that

child-sacrificing Satanists were in the area at the time. But it's confirmation, if such were needed, that one should never photograph Maya people without permission.

If you're coming to Todos Santos in the wet season (mid-May to November), bring warm clothes, as it's cold up here, especially at night.

#### ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Todos Santos' main street is about 500m long. Towards its west end are the church and market on the north side, with the central plaza raised above street level on the south side. Buses stop at this west end of the street. A side street going uphill beside the plaza leads to most of the accommodations. No street names are in common use, but businesses and sights are either well signposted or known by everyone.

To make telephone calls look for signs saying 'Se alquila teléfono' or 'Llamadas Nacionales y Internacionales' in the area around the church.

**Banrural** On the central plaza; changes cash US dollars and traveler's checks.

**Post office** (✉) 8:30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) On the central plaza.

**Todos Santos Internet** (per hr US\$1.60; (✉) 9am-9pm) Located 30m off the main street, 400m back towards Huehue from the church.

#### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

A set of small ancient **ruins** is 500m up the uphill street beside the central plaza. Among trees on the left of the road, it consists of a few grassy mounds and two crosses with indications of contemporary Mayan offerings. Todos Santos' **Museo Cultural** (US\$0.65 or larger donation) is in a two-story house, 125m down a dirt street off the main street. It comes to life when Fortunato, its creator and a community leader, is there to explain the assembled clothes, photos and antique artifacts.

**Walking** around Todos Santos provides superb opportunities to check out the rugged countryside. All the language schools offer guided walks – usually two or three mornings a week – which are free for students and usually US\$1.30 for nonstudents. If you want to walk on your own, invest a few quetzals in the leaflets describing several of the best routes, with sketch maps, sold by Nuevo Amanecer language school. January to April are the best months for walking, with the best and warmest weather, but you can usually walk in the

morning, before the weather closes in, year-round (except maybe in July).

One of the most spectacular destinations is **La Torre** (3837m), the highest nonvolcanic point in Central America. Take a bus east up the valley to the hamlet of La Ventosa (US\$0.60, 50 minutes) from where it's a trail walk of 8km (about 1¼ hours) through limestone and pines to the top. At the summit (marked by a radio mast), the southern horizon is dotted with almost a dozen volcanoes from Tacaná on the Mexican border to Volcán Agua near Antigua.

**Las Letras**, on a hillside above town, is a good morning walk (14km, about 1½ to two hours roundtrip). The 'Letters' spell out Todos Santos, but may be illegible; it depends on when the stones were last rearranged. Still, it's a hale hike and affords beautiful views, especially in the morning after the fog lifts. You can continue up beyond Las Letras to the villages of **Tuicoy** and **Tzichim** (30km, about five hours from Todos Santos). A bus leaves Tzichim for Todos Santos at noon on Thursday. From Tuicoy you can detour to the Puerta del Cielo, an outstanding lookout.

Other walk destinations include **Las Cuevas**, a sacred cave still used for Mayan rituals (this walk starts from 'La Maceta,' a tree growing out of rock, 30 minutes by bus up the Huehue road from Todos Santos), and the village of **San Juan Atitán**, over the mountains to the south of Todos Santos (32km, about five hours one way). From here you can continue on to Santiago Chimaltenango, 15km away (around 2½ hours), another small traditional village with cobbled streets where the women wear dazzling red *huipiles*.

Todos Santos' chilly climate makes it a great place to try the traditional **Mayan sauna** called a *chuj*. This is a small adobe building (traditionally with space for three small people) with wooden boards covering the entrance. A wood fire burns in a stone hearth inside, and water is sprinkled on the stones or heated in a ceramic jug to provide steam. Sometimes herbs are used to create aromatic vapors. A *chuj* can be claustrophobic, and the fire burning within the enclosed space is throat-tightening, so it's not an experience everyone will enjoy. Still, if you're into it, check out the large *chuj* at the Hotel Casa Familiar (opposite).

#### LANGUAGE COURSES

Todos Santos' two language schools are controlled by villagers and all make major

contributions to community projects – funding a library, medicines, school materials, scholarships for village kids to go to high school in Huehuetenango, and so on.

**Academia Hispano Maya** (www.personal.umich.edu/~kakened/) Opposite Hotelito Todos Santos.

**Nuevo Amanecer** (escuela\_linguistica@yahoo.com) Down the main street 150m, opposite the church.

The standard weekly price for 25 hours' one-on-one Spanish tuition, with lodging and meals in a village home, is US\$115. Included are usually guided walks, movies, seminars on local life and issues, and saunas. The schools also offer classes in Mam and in Mayan weaving (weaving costs around US\$1 an hour or US\$35 for a week's course). Individual language classes are usually \$4 an hour. The schools can put you in touch with volunteer work in reforestation and English teaching.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Todos Santos is famous for the annual **horse races** held on the morning of November 1 (El Día de Todos los Santos), which are the culmination of a week of festivities and an all-night male dancing and *aguardiente*-drinking spree on the eve of the races. Traditional foods are served throughout the day, and there are mask dances.

## SLEEPING & EATING

You can arrange **rooms with families** (r per person US\$2-2.50, with 3 meals US\$4.50) through the language schools irrespective of whether you're studying. You'll get your own bedroom, and share the bathroom and meals with the family. A week's full board should cost US\$25.

**Hotel Casa Familiar** (☎ 7783 0656; s/d US\$4/8) The simple wooden rooms here are far from luxurious, but the place is run by a friendly family and there are plenty of extra blankets on hand. The rooms here are clean and have windows and fine views. The hotel also has a sauna and a restaurant where chicken dishes cost around US\$3, and *mosh* (porridge), granola and banana costs US\$2.

**Hotel Mam** (s/d US\$8/12) Just downhill from the Hotelito Todos Santos, this is the newest hotel in town. They were still working on it at the time of research, but it looks like it will be one of the more comfortable options available once it opens.

**Hotelito Todos Santos** (☎ 7783 0603; s/d with bath-room US\$8/12) Along a side street that goes off

to the left a few meters up the hill beside the plaza, this has Todos Santos' most comfortable rooms – bare but clean, with tile floors and firm beds. Three of the four rooms with a private bathroom open onto the street, separate from the main part of the hotel upstairs. The hotel has a casual café, sinks for washing clothes, and hot water.

**Comedor Martita** (meals around US\$2.25) This simple family-run *comedor*, opposite Hotel Mam, serves the best food in town, prepared with fresh ingredients by friendly hosts. You walk through the kitchen to get to the eating area, which has a nice view over the town and valley. A typical meal might be boiled chicken, rice, vegetables, beans, a *refresco* (soft drink or fruit juice) and coffee.

**Restaurante Cuchumatlan** (meals US\$2-8) Todos Santos' most formal restaurant is nothing flash, but it takes a good stab at pizzas, stir fries and curries. It's also the only place in town you'd really want to have a beer, and there's a good selection of used books on sale.

## ENTERTAINMENT

All the language schools show movies on Guatemala, Mayan and Latin American themes in the evening, with a small admission charge (usually US\$0.65) for nonstudents. The English-language documentaries *Todos Santos* and *Todos Santos: The Survivors*, made in the 1980s by Olivia Carrescia, are particularly fascinating to see here on the spot. They deal with the traditional life of Todos Santos and with the devastation and terror of the civil war, when by some accounts 2000 people were killed in the area.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses and minibuses depart from the main street between the plaza and the church. Half a dozen buses leave for Huehuetenango (US\$3, three hours) between 4:45am and 6:30am, then usually three others between noon and 1pm. Occasional minibuses leave throughout the day, whenever they fill up. Daily buses head northwest to Concepción Huista, San Antonio Huista and Jacaltenango. Times are erratic, but the 5am departure is fairly reliable.

## Soloma

pop 12,700

This agricultural town, 70km north of Huehuetenango by paved road, is one of the biggest towns in the Cuchumatanes. The Maya

here speak Q'anjob'al, but most of the ladino cowboys will greet you in English! The town's prosperity and its residents' language skills can be attributed to the migratory laborers who annually make the arduous trip to the US, working as cowhands, auto detailers or landscapers. The populace is very gregarious here, and visitors will fast make friends. There's a Banrural on Soloma's plaza. For phone calls, use the international services at the Caucaso Hotel. Market day is Sunday.

The **cemetery** south of town is worth a look, as most of the colorful tombs are bigger than the average Guatemalan home. You can make good day trips to nearby villages such as **San Juan Ixcay** (7km), where the women wear traditional white *huipiles* embroidered at the collar and hanging almost to their ankles.

A rough 10km track leads to the **Pepajáú waterfalls** from the village of San Lucas Quisil, just north of San Juan. Their 250m drop is an impressive sight, particularly after the rains. The walk itself is a delight, crossing swing bridges, with jaw-dropping scenery en route.

Closer to San Juan Ixcay are the **Pajaj waterfalls**, a much more humble affair at 30m, but easier to get to, on a moderate 6km path. Along the way, you pass the Bacau Maya ceremonial center, where shamans gather every Thursday to perform rituals. Visitors are welcome, photography is not.

Attending to the town's prosperity is a fine choice of accommodations. **Hotel Don Chico** (4a Calle 3-55; s/d with bathroom US\$10/20), a pink-and-pastel palace, is the most comfortable option in town. Rooms are big and bare, with good firm beds and TV.

With its heavy wooden doors and black marble tiles, **Hotel Real del Valle** (☎ 7880 6412; cr 5a Calle & 4a Av; s/d with bathroom US\$8/16) pulls out a bit of class in this otherwise workaday town.

For a real cheapie, check into the basic rooms at **Hospedaje Katy** (r US\$3). Rooms are arranged around a concrete courtyard and have shared bathroom. Lots of local cowboys hang out here.

A big, warm and sunny (when applicable) place right next to the park, **Comedor Chiantlequita** (mains US\$2-4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) is the best and friendliest eating option in town.

See under Huehuetenango (p184) for details on buses to Soloma. Minivans serving San Juan Ixcay and other nearby villages leave from beside the plaza.

## Santa Eulalia

pop 6100

A surprisingly large village just over the hill from Soloma, Santa Eulalia is deeply traditional and can get very cold. This is sheep-farming territory, and you'll see shepherds wearing *capixays* (short woolen ponchos) in the fields. The town has a reputation for producing some of the finest marimbas in the country, and horningo trees (from which the marimba is traditionally made) grow on the outskirts of town. Factories and workshops producing marimbas line the streets around the plaza. If you're interested in the production process, wander in and ask to be shown around – tourists are rare here and chances are you'll be treated well.

If you want to stay the night, Soloma is a much more comfortable option, but you could try the **Hotel Eulalense** (☎ 7765 9634; s/d US\$4/8), which is just off the plaza and has a fine *comedor* attached.

A couple of buses per day make the run from Soloma to Santa Eulalia (US\$0.30, 30 minutes) and minibuses leave from the plaza whenever full.

## San Mateo Ixtatán

pop 16,850

From Santa Eulalia, the bad dirt road keeps climbing, through pasturelands and occasional pine forest – sit on the left and you can see all the way to Mexico – and after 30km reaches San Mateo Ixtatán, perched on a ridge overlooking the valley. The women of this small Chuj town wear perhaps the most colorful *huipiles* in all Guatemala – gorgeous red-dominated affairs with large concentric star patterns.

As in most of the Cuchumatanes, the mist can descend early here, wiping out visibility by early afternoon.

San Mateo is the logical place to break the journey if you're heading for Laguna Lachuá from Huehuetenango – it's smaller but better looking than Barillas down the road, and there are a couple of interesting sights around town.

The church is worth a quick look in for its red-painted saints – the whole set-up being much more a homage to Mayan than Christian religion, as the smoking altar out in the courtyard attests.

Just to the east of town is a **salt mine** (admission free; ☎ 1-4pm) that was used by the Mam Maya, dating from the Classic period. The salt is disturbingly black in color, but is believed to have medicinal qualities.

Just below town, the unrestored ruins of **Wajxaklajunh** have excellent views out over the valley. It's a decent-sized site, featuring some stelae, a ball court and a few pyramid-shaped temples.

**Hotel Ixtateco** (☎ 7756 6586; s/d US\$) above the police station is the best of the basic hotels in town and the showers are thankfully hot. Basic *comedores* around the plaza should keep you fed.

Buses leave regularly for Huehue (US\$5, six hours) and Barillas (US\$2, 45 minutes).

### East to Playa Grande

Leaving San Mateo, the road drops and weather becomes slightly kinder. After 28km, you'll reach **Barillas**, an unremarkable coffee-growing town. If you're moving on (recommended), start organizing transportation immediately – at the time of writing, only one bus was leaving daily at 11am (US\$6, five hours) for Playa Grande, but if you miss it, there are regular pickups and the occasional minibus. This section of the road is probably the worst, and bad weather can extend the travel time by two or three hours. Ask around to see what conditions are like before committing to this trip.

### Nentón, Los Huistas & Gracias a Dios

In a lower-lying, more lushly vegetated zone between the Cuchumatanes and the Mexican border, Nentón and the Los Huistas area to its south suffered grievously during the civil war. Reconstruction is happening, including a paved road to Nentón from the Interamericana, and the area has a few archaeological remains and a distinctive culture including the Popti' (Jakalteko) Mayan language. North of Nentón it's possible to cross into Mexico (near the Lagos de Montebello) at remote Gracias a Dios, but there are no border facilities there and you would have to head to Mexican immigration at Comitán or San Cristóbal de Las Casas to get your passport stamped. There are places to stay in Gracias a Dios if you get stuck. For details on buses to Nentón and Gracias a Dios, see p184.

### Huehuetenango to Cobán

This spectacular and often rugged cross-country route on mostly paved roads is an exciting way of getting into the center of the country from the northwest highlands. It can be done in a day, if you're in a hurry. You climb up out of Huehuetenango to **Agucatán** (which has a bank and other services, including the Hospedaje Nuevo Amanecer, should you need them). Here you are treated to panoramic views of pine-studded slopes and the fertile valleys below. The trip continues via a snaking road down to Sacapulas (see p157) and climbs again to Uspantán (p157). At the time of writing, the paved road ended here, so there's six hours of dirt track ahead of you. Along the way you have the option of diverting to Nebaj (p158).

### LA MESILLA

The Guatemalan and Mexican immigration posts at La Mesilla and Ciudad Cuauhtémoc are 4km apart, and you must take a collective taxi (US\$0.50) between the two. This town gets chaotic on weekends – it's best to try to cross midweek. The strip in La Mesilla leading to the border post has a variety of services, including a police station, post office and a bank. There are also moneychangers who will do the deal – at a good rate if you're changing dollars, a terrible one for pesos or quetzals.

With an early start from Huehuetenango (or from Comitán or San Cristóbal de Las Casas in Mexico) you should have no trouble getting through this border and well on into Mexico (or Guatemala) in one day. During daylight hours fairly frequent buses and combis run from Ciudad Cuauhtémoc to Comitán (US\$3 to US\$4, 1¼ hours) and San Cristóbal (US\$7, 2½ hours). From La Mesilla buses leave for Huehuetenango (US\$1, two hours) at least 20 times between 5:45am and 6pm. If you get marooned in La Mesilla, try **Hotel Mily's** (d US\$15), which has rooms with fan, cable TV and hot-water bathroom; bargaining may be in order here. Further down the hill is the super-basic **Hotel El Pobre Simón** (r per person US\$2).

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