

Colombia

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Cartagena** – experience the jaw-dropping beauty of South America's most romantic city, famed for its history and its good looks (p582)
- **Zona Cafetera** – get buzzed on Colombia's finest coffee in this beautiful region of rolling plantations and steaming volcanoes (p601)
- **Bogotá** – visit splendid museums, dine in Colombia's best restaurants and salsa till dawn in the booming capital city (p553)
- **San Agustín** – explore the rolling hills of this unique ceremonial funeral site littered with hundreds of anthropomorphic stone statues (p612)
- **Off-the-beaten track** – make like Indiana Jones and hike to Ciudad Perdida, the lost city, the remains of an ancient culture hidden deep in the jungle (p581)
- **Best journey** – Cartagena to Bucaramanga: a two-day trip through backwoods and bayous of northern Colombia. The trip involves a combination of bus, jeep and riverboat, plus an overnight stay in the intriguing town of Mompós

FAST FACTS

- **Area:** 1,141,748 sq km
- **Budget:** US\$15-25 a day
- **Best bargain:** scuba diving at Taganga
- **Best street snack:** juice smoothies
- **Capital:** Bogotá
- **Costs:** double room in a budget hotel US\$5-15, set meal in a budget restaurant US\$1.50-2.50, 100km intercity bus fare US\$3-4
- **Country code:** ☎ 57
- **Famous for:** Gabriel García Márquez, coffee, emeralds, cocaine, plastic surgery, FARC
- **Language:** Spanish
- **Money:** US\$1 = 2355 pesos
- **Phrases:** *chévere/bacano* (cool), *asqueroso* (disgusting, horrible), *rumba* (party)
- **Population:** 43 million
- **Time:** GMT minus 5hr (no daylight-savings time)
- **Tipping:** customary (not compulsory) 10% in upmarket restaurants
- **Visas:** not required from nationals of major Western countries



TRAVEL HINTS

Tickets for long-distance buses are not fixed so always bargain for a better deal. For both safety and scenery, travel by day only.

OVERLAND ROUTES

The main border crossings with Venezuela are at San Antonio del Táchira (near Cúcuta) and Paraguachón. From Ecuador, cross at Túlcan (near Ipiales).

After traveling around Colombia for a while you may feel like you've stepped onto the set of a Hollywood dramatic thriller – in one scene you're exploring a lost city and the next dancing the salsa till dawn. Later you're running a wild river, scaling an active volcano and paragliding through the skies, all to a backdrop of soaring Andean peaks, lush Amazonian jungle and clear Caribbean waters.

No film is complete without a colorful cast and Colombia has its share of characters, but it's unlikely you'll bump into any next day Pablo Escobars, budding Shakiras or gun-toting insurgents. Most Colombians are pretty darn normal, except that they are some of the friendliest and most animated people you might ever meet.

Opportunities to create your own version of *Romancing the Stone* are growing better each year: rock climbing, scuba diving and cycling are just a few activities on offer. Nightlife is legendary, and no trip to Colombia is complete without a few all-night rumbas. Security improvements mean that Colombia is no longer the traveler pariah that it was a few years ago and once-forbidden travel routes are opening up. Now is the time to go: costs are low, the welcome is warm and Colombia's sour reputation has kept it off the 'gringo trail.'

Adventure and romance may stir your blood, but what will really sweep you off your feet are the spirited and stimulating people that live here. Take some time to meet a few Colombians and this former no-go zone may become the highlight of your South American odyssey.

CURRENT EVENTS

Young, popular and seemingly unstoppable, Colombian president Álvaro Uribe managed to win a constitutional amendment that has almost guaranteed his political domination until 2010. In November 2005 the Constitutional Court approved Uribe's amendment to allow Colombian presidents to run for a second four-year term. The decision paved the way for an easy victory in May 2006 – Uribe won 62%, according to the *New York Times*, of the popular vote.

Pundits believe that Uribe's second term in office is likely to mirror his first four years, marked by hardline military tactics that crippled Colombia's primary insurgent group, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). Yet there are also expectations that Uribe's conservative government will reposition itself from its past war policy and diversify the largely agrarian economy.

One area of economic development that has experienced remarkable growth is tourism. No longer considered the kidnapping capital of the world (Iraq having stolen that title, thank you very much), tourists are opening up to the idea of a holiday in Colombia. Nearly one million foreigners visited Colombia in 2005, a 21% jump over the previous year. The World Tourism Organization seems to be impressed: it will hold its 2007 conference in Cartagena.

Coffee, always a popular export item, is also expanding, with revenues up by 58% during the 2004–05 coffee-growing season. Mining, another growth area, has become a US\$488

million a year business. Overall, Colombia's 'official' economy is growing at around 5% each year. Meanwhile, Colombia's shadow economy (mainly cocaine and emeralds) is worth upwards of US\$6.5 billion annually.

Despite success in Colombia's triangular war with leftist rebels and right-wing paramilitaries, the country still faces massive social problems, including widespread poverty and the internal displacement of peoples. The US-backed Plan Colombia (which is attempting to eradicate coca farming) has had devastating effects on the environment and the lives of people caught up in the war, although the surplus of cocaine and its price has remained stable in the US and even increased in Europe.

HISTORY

Pre-Columbian Times

Colombia's original inhabitants, tribes that migrated from what is now Panama, settled down in small groupings and, in time, reached a remarkably high level of development. They left behind three important archaeological sites – San Agustín, Tierradentro and Ciudad Perdida – and an impressive collection of gold work, considered the continent's best, both for the techniques used and for its artistic design.

Scattered throughout the Andean region and along the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, these cultures developed independently. Among the most outstanding were the Calima, Muisca, Nariño, Quimbaya, San Agustín, Sinú, Tayrona, Tierradentro, Tolima and Tumaco.

There Goes the Neighborhood

In 1499, Alonso de Ojeda was the first conquistador to set foot on Colombian soil and to see indigenous people using gold objects. Several short-lived settlements were founded, but it was not until 1525 that Rodrigo de Bastidas laid the first stones of Santa Marta, the earliest surviving town. In 1533, Pedro de Heredia founded Cartagena, which soon became the principal center of trade.

In 1536, a general advance toward the interior began independently from the north and south. Jiménez de Quesada set off from Santa Marta and founded Santa Fe de Bogotá two years later. On the way he conquered the Muisca, a blow that would foretell the ultimate ruin of civilizations throughout the New World.

Quesada didn't actually find gold, despite the elaborate rituals of the Indians, who threw gold offerings into the waters of their sacred lake, Laguna de Guatavita, and thus gave birth to the mysterious legend of El Dorado.

Sebastián de Benalcázar (known in Colombia as Belalcázar) deserted from Francisco Pizarro's army, which was conquering the Inca empire, and mounted an expedition from Ecuador. He subdued the southern part of Colombia, founding Popayán and Cali along the way, and reached Bogotá in 1539.

The two groups fought tooth and nail for supremacy, and it was not until 1550 that King Carlos V of Spain, in an effort to establish law and order, created the Real Audiencia del Nuevo Reino de Granada, a tribunal based in Bogotá. Administratively, the new colony was subject to the Viceroyalty of Peru.

With the growth of the Spanish empire in the New World a new territorial division was created in 1717, and Bogotá became the capital of its own viceroyalty, the Virreinato de la Nueva Granada. It comprised the territories of what are today Colombia, Panama, Ecuador and Venezuela.

Independence Wars

Toward the end of the 18th century, the general disillusionment with Spanish domination gave rise to open protests and rebellions. This, together with events such as the North American and French revolutions and, more importantly, the invasion of Spain by Napoleon Bonaparte, paved the way to independence. When Napoleon placed his own brother on the Spanish throne in 1808, the colonies refused to recog-

nize the new monarch. One by one Colombian towns declared their independence.

In 1812 Simón Bolívar, who was to become the hero of the independence struggle, arrived in Cartagena to take the offensive against the Spanish armies. In a brilliant campaign to seize Venezuela he won six battles but was unable to hold Caracas, and had to withdraw to Cartagena. By then Napoleon had been defeated at Waterloo, and Spain set about reconquering its colonies. Colonial rule was reestablished in 1817.

Bolívar doggedly took up arms again. After assembling an army of horsemen from the Venezuelan Llanos, strengthened by a British legion, he marched over the Andes into Colombia. The last and most decisive battle took place at Boyacá on August 7, 1819. Colombia's independence was won.

Independence...& Civil War

Two years after declaring independence, revolutionaries sat down Villa del Rosario (near Cúcuta) to hash out a plan for their new country. It was there that the two opposing tendencies, centralist and federalist, came to the fore. Bolívar, who supported a centralized republic, succeeded in imposing his will. The Gran Colombia (which included modern-day Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela and Panama) came into being and Bolívar was elected president.

From its inception, the state started to disintegrate. It soon became apparent that a central regime was incapable of governing such a vast and diverse territory. The Gran Colombia split into three separate countries in 1830.

The two political currents, centralist and federalist, were formalized in 1849 when two political parties were established: the Conservatives (with centralist tendencies) and the Liberals (with federalist leanings). Colombia became the scene of fierce rivalries between the two forces, resulting in complete chaos. During the 19th century the country experienced no less than eight civil wars. Between 1863 and 1885 there were more than 50 anti-government insurrections.

In 1899 a Liberal revolt turned into a full-blown civil war, the so-called War of a Thousand Days. That carnage resulted in a Conservative victory and left 100,000 dead. In 1903, the USA took advantage of the country's internal strife and fomented a secessionist movement in Panama (at that time

a Colombian province). By creating a new republic, the USA was able to build a canal across the Central American isthmus.

La Violencia

After a period of relative peace, the struggle between Liberals and Conservatives broke out again in 1948 with La Violencia, the most destructive of Colombia's many civil wars, which left a death toll of some 300,000. Urban riots broke out on April 9, 1948 in Bogotá following the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a charismatic populist Liberal leader. Liberals soon took up arms throughout the country.

By 1953, some groups of Liberal guerrillas had begun to demonstrate a dangerous degree of independence. As it became evident that the partisan conflict was taking on revolutionary overtones, the leaders of both the Liberal and Conservative parties decided to support a military coup as the best means to retain power and pacify the countryside. The 1953 coup of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla was the only military intervention the country experienced in the 20th century.

The dictatorship of General Rojas was not to last. In 1957, the leaders of the two parties signed a pact to share power for the next 16 years. The party leaders, however, repressed all political activity that remained outside the scope of their parties, thus sowing the seeds for the appearance of guerrilla groups.

Say You Want a Revolution

During the late 1950s and early '60s Colombia saw the birth of perhaps a dozen different guerrilla groups, each with its own ideology and its own political and military strategies. The movements that have had the biggest impact on local politics (and left the largest number of dead) include the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional) and the M-19 (Movimiento 19 de Abril).

Until 1982 the guerrillas were treated as a problem of public order and persecuted by the military forces. President Belisario Betancur (1982–86) was the first to open direct negotiations with the guerrillas in a bid to reincorporate them into the nation's political life. Yet the talks ended in failure. The rupture was poignantly symbolized by the takeover of Bogotá's Palacio de Justicia by the M-19 guerrillas in November 1985.

The Liberal government of President Virgilio Barco (1986–90), after long and complex negotiations with the M-19, signed an agreement under which this group handed over its arms, ceased insurgent activity and transformed itself into a political party. However, the two other major groups – the 17,000-strong FARC and the 5000-strong ELN – remain under arms and currently control about 35% to 40% of the country. Having lost support from Moscow and Havana, they now rely on extortion and kidnapping to finance their struggle. They are also deeply involved in the production and trafficking of drugs, principally cocaine.

Since the state has been unable to control areas lost to the guerrillas, private armies – the so-called *paramilitares* or *autodefensas* – have mushroomed, with the army turning a blind eye or even supporting them. These right-wing armies operate against rebels in many regions, including Urabá, Cesar, Córdoba, Antioquia, Magdalena Medio, Santander, Cundinamarca and Caquetá, and have committed some horrendous massacres on civilians allegedly supporting the guerrillas. They form a loosely woven alliance known as the AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia), with an estimated 20,000 militants nationwide.

A White-Powder Market

Colombia controls 80% of the world's cocaine market. The mafia started in a small way in the early 1970s but, within a short time, developed the trade into a powerful industry with its own plantations, laboratories, transport services and protection.

The boom years began in the early 1980s. The Medellín Cartel, led by Pablo Escobar, became the principal mafia and its bosses lived in freedom and luxury. They even founded their own political party and two newspapers, and in 1982 Escobar was elected to the Congress.

In 1983 the government launched a campaign against the drug trade, which gradually turned into an all-out war. The cartel responded violently and managed to liquidate many of its adversaries. The war became even bloodier in August 1989 when Luis Carlos Galán, the leading Liberal contender for the 1990 presidential election, was assassinated. The government responded with the confiscation of nearly 1000 mafia-owned properties, and announced new laws on extradition – a nightmare for the drug barons. The cartel

resorted to the use of terrorist tactics, principally car bombs.

The election of the Liberal President César Gaviria (1990–94) brought a brief period of hope. Following lengthy negotiations, which included a constitutional amendment to ban extradition of Colombians, Escobar and the remaining cartel bosses surrendered and the narcoterrorism subsided. However, Escobar escaped from his palacelike prison following the government's bumbling attempts to move him to a more secure site. An elite 1500-man special unit hunted Escobar for 499 days, until it tracked him down in Medellín and killed him in December 1993.

Despite this, the drug trade continued unaffected. While the military concentrated on hunting one man and persecuting one cartel, the other cartels were quick to take advantage of the opportune circumstances. The Cali Cartel, led by the Rodríguez Orejuela brothers, swiftly moved into the shattered Medellín Cartel's markets and became Colombia's largest trafficker. Although the cartel's top bosses were captured in 1995 and put behind bars the drug trade continued to flourish, with other regional drug cartels, paramilitaries and, principally, the guerrillas filling the gap left by the two original mafias.

In 1999, then President Andrés Pastrana launched Plan Colombia with US\$3.3 billion in backing from the US. The plan called for the total eradication of the coca plant from Colombia by spraying fields with herbicide. Colombian coca growers and traffickers, not wanting to walk away from US\$6 billion a year business, have in many cases moved their fields elsewhere, oftentimes into national parks which are protected against the spraying. Despite increased drug seizures and arrests of low-level traffickers, the availability of cocaine in the US and Europe remains stable.

A New Hope

Álvaro Uribe, an independent hardliner, won a 2002 presidential election, running on a strong antiguerrilla ticket and swearing also to break the history of governmental cronyism and patronage.

Uribe's hard-work ethic paid off and his first term in office gave the country marked improvements in security and the (legal) economy. The armed forces are now better equipped and have 60% more combat-ready soldiers than in 2002. The government has re-

claimed much of the land that was effectively ceded to the guerrillas in the late 1990s, and has disarmed numerous rebel fighters.

With approval ratings that consistently reach 80% Uribe is the most popular elected leader in Latin America, but he is still faced with a daunting task to secure a lasting peace. He considers the civil conflict a terrorist threat – making little differentiation therefore between the FARC and the Cali Cartel. The guerrillas want Uribe to first recognize Colombia's internal conflict before any talks. Both the UN and human-rights groups recognize the conflict as political. Uribe, however, needs to maintain his recognition of the status of the conflict as a bargaining chip and has offered that he will revise his view of internal conflict so long as the ELN calls a ceasefire.

The AUC is the only group that has offered to stand down; however, it is not in direct opposition to the government and actually shares many similar goals. Its purpose is simply defense of the status quo. There are many people concerned – some in the UN, EU and US government – that the AUC is being given unduly generous terms for demobilization and it's clear that many members are simply getting away with murder. As of late 2005, some 10,000 AUC have laid down their weapons but it remains to be seen if they will dismantle their political, economic and drug-trafficking structures.

THE CULTURE

The National Psyche

The headlines may speak unfavorably about Colombia, its civil war and the high level of crime, but this is by no means a reflection on the character of its people, who are naturally gregarious, social and courteous. It's hard to find a Colombian who isn't willing to help a person in need or just chat on the street to pass the time. It soon becomes clear to the visitor that Colombians simply love to talk and you can strike up a conversation with anyone – don't be surprised when strangers approach at a restaurant and start gabbing. Full of respect, Colombians are kind not just to foreigners but to each other, and you can always expect a pleasant response if you approach a Colombian in a pleasant manner. Even bargaining, it is said, is merely an excuse to chat, so expect nothing but short shrift if all you want to do is talk money.

Colombians are used to living for the moment; decades of civil strife have that effect.

Dancing, drinking and partying till dawn seems to take off the edge of an otherwise precarious existence. Their passion for life is obvious and many Colombians dream of traveling abroad, even if most can't afford it. But they are refreshingly passionate about their own country too, and speak lovingly about the beauty of the Colombian countryside.

While many Colombians may fit nicely into this profile, there are other folk, especially those who live in war-torn villages in the Amazon or impoverished slums outside Bogotá, who have a less optimistic outlook on life. One thing that always shines through, though, is the indomitable spirit of the Colombian people who have overcome so much tumult in the past and know that they will prevail, one way or another, over current hardships.

Lifestyle

The divide between rich and poor in Colombia is enormous. The wealthiest 10% of the country controls 46% of the country's wealth (they also earn 80 times more money than the poorest 10%). Around 60% of urban Colombians live in poverty (the figure is 80% in rural areas).

Such a divide has created a bizarre mix of the first and third worlds. Young professionals living in northern Bogotá might spend their leisure time playing golf or tennis while on the other side of town, hundreds of thousands of people are trying to eke out an existence in the overcrowded slums of Ciudad Bolívar.

The new urban elite can be very cosmopolitan – eating at sushi bars, communicating through laptops and driving expensive foreign cars – while Colombians in remote villages live without electricity or running water.

Yet despite their privileged status wealthy Colombians face high levels of insecurity. Most members of the upper tier know someone who has been assassinated, kidnapped, robbed or held for ransom. At the other end of the spectrum, Colombia's poor are often caught between various factions – FARC, the government and the paramilitaries, occasionally with deadly results.

Inside the home you may find a large, extended family cohabitating under one roof. Grandparents are often assigned childcare duties while parents, aunts and uncles go to work. The increasing middle class, however, shows a tendency toward larger homes with single family units.

No matter their level of income, all Colombians are bound by a handful of shared interests, namely *fútbol*, salsa and any opportunity to join a raucous *rumba*. A Colombian festival is celebrated with equal aplomb across all corners of the country.

Population

The Colombian national population currently hovers at around 43 million people, making it the third-most populous country in Latin America, after Brazil and Mexico. Population is spread fairly evenly from north to south while eastern Colombia, the Amazon, is only sparsely populated. The largest cities are Bogotá (7.5 million), Medellín (2.5 million), Cali (2.25 million) and Barranquilla (1.3 million).

Colombia's diverse population, an amalgam of three main groups – indigenous, Spanish and African – reflects its colorful history. While 58% of the country claims *mestizo* (mixed white and indigenous) heritage, other ethnicities include: 20% white, 14% mixed white and black, 4% black, 3% mixed black and indigenous, and only 1% indigenous. Colombia's indigenous population speak about 65 languages and nearly 300 dialects belonging to several linguistic families.

Colombia has started to see more immigration from the Middle East, particularly from Turkey and Lebanon, but also from other parts of Latin America including Peru, Ecuador and the Caribbean. Meanwhile the conflict in the southern areas of the country has displaced tens of thousands of Colombians into neighboring Ecuador.

SPORTS

Soccer and cycling are the most popular spectator sports. Colombia regularly takes part in international events in these two fields, such as the World Cup and the Tour de France, and has recorded some successes. Baseball is limited to the Caribbean coast. The national soccer league has matches most of the year.

Colombians are passionate about *corrida* (bullfighting), which was introduced by the Spaniards. Most cities and towns have *plaza de toros* (bullrings). The bullfighting season usually peaks in January, when the top-ranking matadors are invited from Spain.

RELIGION

The great majority of Colombians are Roman Catholic. Other creeds are officially permitted

but their numbers are small. However, over the past decade there has been a proliferation of various Protestant congregations, which have succeeded in converting some three million Catholics. Many indigenous groups have adopted the Catholic faith, sometimes incorporating some of their traditional beliefs. There are small numbers of Colombian Jews and synagogues in most big cities.

ARTS

Architecture

The most outstanding example of pre-Columbian urban planning is the Ciudad Perdida of the Tayronas in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Although the dwellings haven't survived, the stone structures, including a complex network of terraces, paths and stairways, remain in remarkably good shape.

After the arrival of the Spaniards, bricks and tiles became the main construction materials. The colonial towns followed rigid standards laid down by the Spanish Crown. They were constructed on a grid plan, centered on the Plaza Mayor (main square). This pattern was applied during the colonial period and long after, and is the dominant feature of most Colombian cities, towns and villages.

Spain's strong Catholic tradition left behind loads of churches and convents in the colony – the central areas of Bogotá, Cartagena, Popayán and Tunja are fine examples.

In the 19th century, despite independence the architecture continued to be predominantly Spanish in style. Modern architectural trends only began to appear in Colombia after WWII. This process accelerated during the 1960s when city skyscrapers appeared.

The latest architectural phenomenon in Colombia is urban planning. The success of the TransMilenio, car-free Sundays, bike lanes and the expansion of parks in Bogotá has become a model for other cities in South America, Africa and Asia. The self-proclaimed architect of this urban redevelopment plan, former Bogotá mayor Enrique Peñalosa, has taken the Bogotá scheme on the road, promoting it as a model for other third-world cities.

Cinema

The most internationally famous of recent Colombian films, *Maria, llena eres de gracia* (Maria Full of Grace; 2004) joined American and Colombian production in a moving film about a pregnant 17-year-old flower-industry

employee who leaves her small-town existence to smuggle heroin into the US as a mule.

Two other recent films that looked at Colombian issues of drugs and violence are *Sumas y Restas* (2004) and *Rosario Tijeras* (2005). Though both films were extremely popular in Colombia they lacked international backing and therefore didn't garner the same global attention as *Maria Full of Grace*.

Hollywood has had its own take on Colombia, including *Romancing the Stone* (1984), starring Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner, as well as *Clear and Present Danger* (1994) starring Harrison Ford.

Literature

During the independence period and up to WWII, Colombia produced few internationally acclaimed writers other than José Asunción Silva (1865–96), perhaps the country's best poet, considered the precursor of modernism in Latin America.

A postwar literary boom thrust many great Latin American authors into the international sphere, including the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez (born 1928). Gabo's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, published in 1967, immediately became a worldwide best seller. It mixed myths, dreams and reality, and amazed readers with a new form of expression that critics dubbed *realismo mágico* (magic realism). In 1982 García Márquez won the Nobel Prize for literature. His most recent book, titled *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, was released in 2005.

There are several contemporaries who deserve recognition including poet, novelist and painter Héctor Rojas Herazo, and Álvaro Mutis, a close friend of Gabo. Of the younger generation, seek out the works of Fernando Vallejo, a highly respected iconoclast who has been surprisingly critical of García Márquez.

Music

In broad terms Colombia can be divided into four musical zones: the two coasts, the Andean region and Los Llanos. The Caribbean coast vibrates with hot African-related rhythms such as the *cumbia*, *mapalé* and *porro*. The coast is also the cradle of the *vallenato*, based on the European accordion, which emanated a century ago from the regions of La Guajira and Cesar and has successfully conquered just about the whole of the country. This is the most popular Colombian musical genre today.

HEAVY METAL

César López has a vision for Colombia: more music, less murder. As an antiwar activist and musician, the 32-year-old Bogotáno has always believed that he could promote peace through soothing guitar riffs. This belief led to the formation of the 'Battalion of Immediate Artists Reaction,' a group of musicians and artists dedicated to peaceful reconciliation between Colombia's many warring factions.

As part of its agenda, the Battalion will occasionally take to the streets, playing impromptu concerts at former scenes of violence. In 2003 the group shouldered up with gun-toting soldiers inspecting the wreckage of the El Nogal country club, where a devastating car bomb had just killed more than 30 people. It was here that López noticed how the soldiers held their guns in the same way that he held his guitar, and an idea was born. The result was the *escopetarra*, a gun transformed into a guitar.

The original *escopetarra* was fashioned out of an old Winchester lever-action rifle. Since then López has created several dozen other guitar-guns, some built from AK-47 assault rifles donated by the peace commissioners office. Battalion members use the guitars during their peace concerts, but some have been donated to likeminded celebrities hoping to wage peace. Shakira, Santana, Paul McCartney and Carlos Vives are but a few musicians to try out this new brand of 'heavy metal.'

López's latest headline-grabbing project includes the formation of a new band, the Experimental Reconciliation Group, made up of seven musicians from various paramilitary, army, left-wing guerrilla and gang backgrounds. You can read more about César López at www.cesarlopez.org.

The music of the Pacific coast, such as the *currulao*, is based on a strong African drum pulse, but tinged with Spanish influences. Colombian Andean music has been strongly influenced by Spanish rhythms and instruments, and differs notably from the indigenous music of the Peruvian and Bolivian highlands. Among the typical forms are the *bambuco*, *pasillo* and *torbellino*, all of which are instrumental and predominantly feature string instruments. The music of Los Llanos, *música llanera*, is sung and usually accompanied by a harp, *cuatro* (a sort of four-string guitar) and maracas.

Colombia's most famous musical export is Shakira, whose album *Fijación Oral Vol 2* (2005) cemented her as a global superstar with staying power. Other Colombian artists known beyond the country's borders include Carlos Vives (a Latin-pop vocalist), Totó La Momposina (a traditional Afro-Caribbean music singer), Juanes (Latin rock vocalist) and Los Aterciopelados (Colombia's most popular rock group).

Visual Arts

The colonial period was dominated by Spanish religious art, and although the paintings and sculptures of this era were generally executed by local artists, they reflected the Spanish trends of the day. With the arrival of independence visual arts departed from strictly religious themes, but it was not until the turn-of-the-19th-century revolution in European

painting that Colombian artists began to experiment and create original work.

Among the most distinguished modern painters and sculptors are Pedro Nel Gómez, known for his murals, oils and sculptures; Luis Alberto Acuña, a painter and sculptor who used motifs from pre-Columbian art; Alejandro Obregón, a painter tending to abstract forms; Rodrigo Arenas Betancur, Colombia's most famous monument creator; and Fernando Botero, the most internationally renowned Colombian artist, whose somewhat ironic style of painting and sculpture is easily recognizable by the characteristic fatness of the figures.

The recent period has been characterized by a proliferation of schools, trends and techniques. The artists to watch out for include Bernardo Salcedo (conceptual sculpture and photography), Miguel Ángel Rojas (painting and installations), and the talented Doris Salcedo (sculpture and installations).

ENVIRONMENT The Land

Colombia covers 1,141,748 sq km, roughly equivalent to the area of France, Spain and Portugal combined. It occupies the north-western part of the continent and is the only South American country with coasts on both the Pacific (1448km long) and the Caribbean (1760km). Colombia is bordered by Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru and Ecuador.

Colombia's physical geography is amazingly diverse. The western part, which comprises almost half of the total territory, is mountainous, with three Andean chains – the Cordillera Occidental, Cordillera Central and Cordillera Oriental – running roughly parallel north–south across most of the country. More than half of the territory east of the Andes is a vast lowland, which is divided into two regions: the savanna-like Los Llanos in the north and the mostly rainforest-covered Amazon in the south.

Colombia has several small islands. The major ones are the archipelago of San Andrés and Providencia (in the Caribbean Sea, 750km northwest of mainland Colombia), the Islas del Rosario (near the Caribbean coast) and Isla Gorgona (in the Pacific Ocean).

Wildlife

Colombia has more plant and animal species per unit area than any other country in the world. This abundance reflects Colombia's numerous climatic zones and microclimates, which have created many different habitats and biological islands in which wildlife has evolved independently.

Colombia is home to the jaguar, ocelot, peccary, tapir, deer, armadillo, spectacled bear and numerous species of monkey, to mention just a few of the 350-odd species of mammals. There are more than 1920 recorded species of birds (nearly a quarter of the world's total), ranging from the huge Andean condor to the tiny hummingbird. Colombia's flora is equally impressive and includes some 3000 species of orchid alone. The national herbariums have classified more than 130,000 plants.

National Parks

Colombia has 38 national parks and 12 other state-run nature reserves. Their combined area constitutes 9% of the country's territory. Only a handful of parks provide accommodations and food for visitors. The remaining parks have no tourist amenities at all and some, especially those in remote regions, are virtually inaccessible. Many parks can be unsafe for tourists because of guerrilla presence.

National parks are operated by the Unidad Administrativa Especial del Sistema de Parques Nacionales, a department of the Ministry of the Environment. Its central office is in Bogotá, and there are regional offices in other cities. The Bogotá office handles all parks, whereas subsidiary offices only service

the parks in their regions. Parks include the following:

Parque Nacional Tayrona (p580) Coastal rainforest and beaches: monkeys, corals, walking, trekking and snorkeling.

Parque Nacional Amacayacu (p625) Accessible Amazon: reptiles, monkeys, canoe trips and trekking.

Parque Nacional el Cocuy (p571) Spectacular alpine peaks and lakes; walking trekking.

Parque Nacional Los Nevados (p602) Snowcapped Andean volcanoes and cloud forest. Hiking and mountaineering.

Parque Nacional Santuario de Iguaque (p571) Mountain lakes, historical sites, walking.

Environmental Issues

Colombia's environment is under various serious threats, one of which is deforestation. Every year vast areas of rainforest and other fragile habitats are indiscriminately cleared for industry, housing, farming, ranching and, recently, growing coca. Even national parks are not safe because of lack of funds and personnel to properly guard them. In many areas, simply decreeing a national park has not eliminated settling, logging, ranching and poaching.

For over 20 years guerrillas have targeted oil pipelines in order to stop multinationals depleting natural resources. Since 1986 there have been over 950 attacks that have spilled more than two million barrels of crude oil into the environment (11 times the amounts spilled by *Exxon Valdez*), polluting rivers and land.

On the other hand the US has made its military aid to Colombia conditional on the aerial fumigation of coca and poppy crops. Every year tens of thousands of hectares of coca and poppy are fumigated with a herbicide containing glyphosate, an ingredient that, besides coca plants, kills traditional crops, impoverishing and displacing thousands of peasants and indigenous people and compromising their health. Furthermore many scientists claim that the herbicide is killing microbes and fungi necessary within the rainforest ecosystem and that therefore it is altering the whole nutrient cycling system.

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Sitting on the northwestern edge of the continent, Colombia is a convenient and reasonably cheap gateway to South America from the USA and Central America, and even from

DEPARTURE TAX

The airport tax on international flights out of Colombia is US\$30 if you have stayed in the country up to 60 days, and US\$50 if you have stayed longer. The tax is payable either in US dollars or pesos at the exchange rate of the day. This tax applies to all airports, however, in Cali you can ask for a tourist tax exemption form, available on the 2nd floor. Just make sure to tell the ticket agent that you are a 'tourist' and not a 'businessperson.' While this tax exemption is not available at all airports, it's worth asking about as policies do change.

Europe. Bogotá has Colombia's major international airport, but some other cities including Cartagena, Medellín and Cali also handle international flights. The country is serviced by a number of major intercontinental airlines including British Airways, Air France, Iberia and American Airlines, and a dozen national carriers.

BRAZIL & PERU

Direct flights between these countries and Colombia are expensive. It will be cheaper to fly through Leticia in the Colombian Amazon. See the Leticia section (p624).

CENTRAL AMERICA

Colombia has regular flight connections with most Central American capitals. Sample fares include: Guatemala City–Bogotá US\$390 to US\$410, San José (Costa Rica)–Bogotá US\$370 to US\$400 and Panama City–Bogotá US\$200 to US\$250. At the time of writing there were no direct connections between Central America and the Colombian island of San Andrés, but this could change so it's worth asking about.

ECUADOR

There are daily flights between Quito and Bogotá with Avianca and Continental Airlines (one way US\$200 to US\$250). Tame (an Ecuadorian carrier) has flights between Cali and Tulcán in Ecuador (one way US\$95) and between Cali and Quito (US\$140).

VENEZUELA

There are several daily flights between Caracas and Bogotá, with Avianca and Aerpostal.

The regular one-way fare is US\$200 but there may be a promotion that could knock an additional US\$50 off the price.

Boat**BRAZIL & PERU**

The only viable border crossing between these two countries and Colombia is via Leticia in the Colombian Amazon. Leticia is reached from Iquitos (Peru) and Manaus (Brazil) by boat; see p625.

PANAMA

There are sailboats between Colón in Panama and Cartagena in Colombia. See the Cartagena section (p587).

Bus**ECUADOR**

Almost all travelers use the Carretera Panamericana border crossing through Ipiales and Tulcán. See Ipiales (p620) and Tulcán (Ecuador).

VENEZUELA

There are several border crossings between Colombia and Venezuela. By far the most popular with travelers is the route via Cúcuta and San Antonio del Táchira, on the main Bogotá–Caracas road. See p577 and p1019.

Another border crossing is at Paraguachón, on the Maicao–Maracaibo road. There are buses and shared taxis between Maicao and Maracaibo, and direct buses between Cartagena and Caracas. See Maracaibo (p1011) and Cartagena (p587).

There's also a popular little border crossing between Colombia's Puerto Carreño and either Puerto Ayacucho (p1048) or Puerto Páez (both in Venezuela).

Car & Motorcycle

There is no overland route between Colombia and Panama, but it is possible to deliver a car between the two countries on a cargo ship. The pick-up and drop-off points are Colón and Cartagena. In Cartagena the contact is **Seaboard Marine** (☎ 5-677-2410; www.seaboardmarine.com), which charges US\$850 to ship a car.

GETTING AROUND**Air**

Colombia has a well-developed airline system and a solid network of domestic flights. Main

passenger airlines include **Avianca** (www.avianca.com), **SAM**, **Aires** (www.aires.com.co), **AeroRepública** (www.aerorepublica.com.co) and **Satena** (www.satena.com), most of which also have international flights.

Fares and services between the companies are pretty similar; the only real reason to choose one over the other is because it better fits your schedule. In most cases you'll be flying with Avianca or AeroRepública. Fares depend on seat availability so if you are trying to get on a flight that is nearly full the price might be astronomical. Try to book well in advance to secure the lowest fare.

There's a US\$4 airport tax on domestic flights, which you normally pay while buying your ticket (this tax is included in the airfares listed in this chapter). Always reconfirm your booking at least 72 hours before departure.

Boat

With more than 3000km of Pacific and Atlantic coastline, there is a considerable amount of shipping traffic, consisting mostly of irregular cargo boats that may also take passengers. Rivers are important transport routes in the Chocó and the Amazon, where there is no other way of getting around. Few riverboats run on regular schedules, and as most are primarily cargo boats they are far from fast and conditions are primitive.

Bus

Buses are the main means of getting around Colombia. The bus system is well developed and extensive, reaching even the smallest villages. Bus categories range from ordinary bangers to modern-day luxury liners.

The best buses (*climatizado*) have plenty of leg room, reclining seats, large luggage compartments and toilets. Carry warm clothes – drivers usually set the air-con to full blast.

On the main roads buses run frequently, so there is little point in booking a seat in advance. In some places off the main routes, where there are only a few buses daily, it's better to buy a ticket some time before departure. The only time you really need to book is during the Christmas and Easter periods, when hordes of Colombians are on holiday.

There is one more kind of bus – the *chiva*. This trolley-type vehicle was the principal means of transport several decades ago. Its body is made almost entirely of wood, covered with colorful decorative patterns. Today the *chivas* have disappeared from the main roads,

but they still play an important role on back-roads between small villages.

Colectivos are a cross between a bus and a taxi. They are usually large cars (sometimes jeeps or minibuses) that cover fixed routes, mainly over short and medium distances. They leave when full, not according to a schedule, and are a reasonable option if there is a long wait for the next bus or if you are in a hurry.

Bus travel is reasonably cheap in Colombia. As a rule of a thumb, the *climatizado* bus costs roughly US\$4 every 100km. If various companies service the same route, the fare is much the same with all of them (though some may offer temporary promotions, so shop around).

Car & Motorcycle

Getting around with your own vehicle is not as crazy as it sounds – during our research we met a number of foreigners braving Colombia's highways and they seemed to be getting by OK, or maybe they were just lucky.

The major risk is security. Car theft is serious business so you must remain vigilant, though there is not much you can do in the case of highway robbery. Safety is another consideration. Driving, especially in cities, is chaotic and wild. Paying attention to rules won't do you much good when everyone else is breaking them.

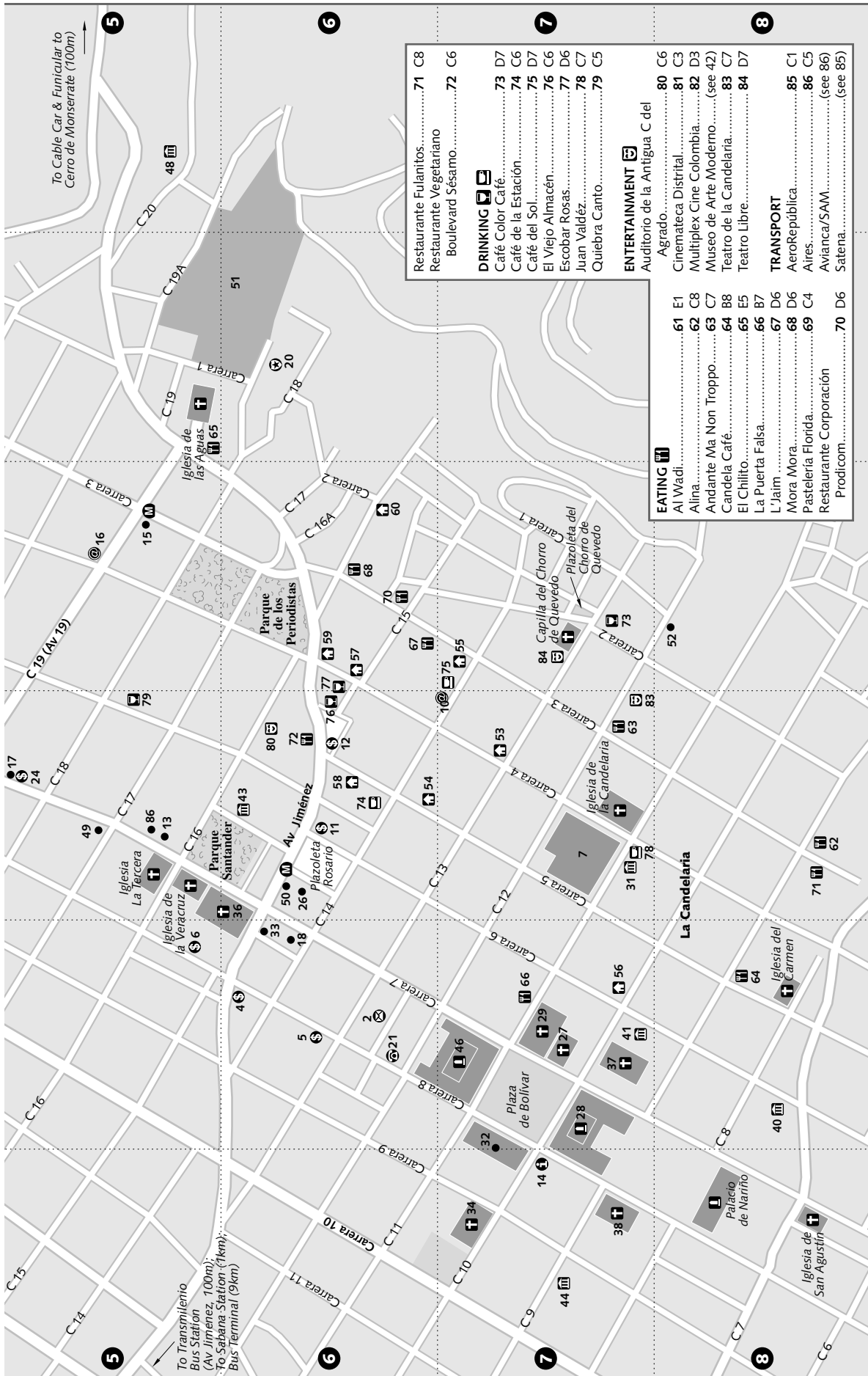
If you do plan to drive in Colombia, make sure you bring an International Driving Permit. It's possible that one from your home country is valid but it's a very gray area and not everyone knows the rules so it's best to have an International license to flash around.

BOGOTÁ

📍 1 / pop 7.5 million

Bogotá is on the move. Once considered a good place to avoid, the Colombian capital has done much to clean up its act and is fast becoming one of Latin America's urban highlights. Improved security, infrastructure projects and a citywide clean-up campaign have all helped to bring a new face to the once-beleaguered metropolis.

Graceful churches, excellent museums and thriving nightlife can keep you busy for several days. Bogotá is also the political and financial center of the country, not to mention its



Restaurante Fulanitos.....	71	C8
Restaurante Vegetariano		
Boulevard Sésamo.....	72	C6
DRINKING		
Café Color Café.....	73	D7
Café de la Estación.....	74	C6
Café del Sol.....	75	D7
El Viejo Almacén.....	76	C6
Escobar Rosas.....	77	D6
Juan Valdéz.....	78	C7
Quebra Canto.....	79	C5
ENTERTAINMENT		
Auditorio de la Antigua C del		
Agrado.....	80	C6
Cinemateca Distrital.....	81	C3
Multiplex Cine Colombia.....	82	D3
Museo de Arte Moderno.....	(see 42)	
Teatro de la Candelaria.....	83	C7
Teatro Libre.....	84	D7
TRANSPORT		
AeroRepública.....	85	C1
Aires.....	86	C5
Avianca/SAM.....	(see 86)	
Satena.....	(see 85)	

EATING		
Al Wadi.....	61	E1
Alina.....	62	C8
Andante Ma Non Troppo.....	63	C7
Candela Café.....	64	B8
El Chilito.....	65	E5
La Puerta Falsa.....	66	B7
L'Jaim.....	67	D6
Mora Mora.....	68	D6
Pastería Florida.....	69	C4
Restaurante Corporación		
Prodicom.....	70	D6

GETTING INTO TOWN

El Dorado airport is relatively easy to navigate. You can change money outside customs (rates are competitive) and catch a taxi into the center (13km). There is a small taxi booth at the exit where you describe your destination and get a slip with the address and fixed price (US\$7 to the center), which you then pass to the taxi driver. It's all very safe and sane. You can save money by taking *busetas* (small buses) or *colectivos* marked 'Aeropuerto'; they park about 50m from the terminal. From the center to the airport, you catch them on Calle 19 or Carrera 10.

If arriving in Bogotá by bus at the main bus terminal, you can get to the center (9km) by a *buse* or *colectivo*, or by taxi (US\$5).

geographic heart, making it a useful base from which to explore other regions of the country.

Colombians still flock to Bogotá, home to more than seven million people, from other parts of the country in search of opportunities for education and work. Many rural poor find that the streets are not exactly paved with gold and end up eking out an existence in one of the vast shantytowns that line the southern portion of the city.

Most travelers spend the bulk of their time in or around La Candelaria, the 470-year-old historic city center, a pleasant quarter awash with cafés, guesthouses and historic sites. Northern Bogotá stands in great contrast to the south, turning up its nose to history and moving forward as an ultramodern district of brash capitalist values.

Bogotá lies at an altitude of about 2600m, and at this height altitude sickness can occur. You may feel a bit dizzy when you arrive. Take it easy for a day or two – it should soon go away. The city's average temperature is 14°C year-round, with cool nights and warm days. The dry seasons are from December to February and June to September.

ORIENTATION

Bogotá has grown along its north–south axis and is bordered to the east by a mountain range topped by the two peaks of Cerro de Monserrate and Cerro de Guadalupe. Having expanded up the mountain slopes as far as possible, Bogotá is now developing to the west and north.

The city center divides the metropolis into two very different parts. The northern sector consists mainly of upmarket residential districts, while the southern part is a vast spread of undistinguished lower-income suburbs. The western part, away from the mountains, is the most heterogeneous and is more industrial. This is where the airport and the bus terminal are located.

Bogotá has enough sights to keep you busy for several days. It also has a far more vibrant and diversified cultural and artistic life than any other city in the country. Most major attractions are in the city center, within easy walking distance of each other.

Note that street names including 'A,' such as Carrera 7A, represent a half block. (Carrera 7A is a street halfway between a Carrera 7 and 8.)

INFORMATION

Bookstores

Gaviot @ Libros (☎ 1-256-5621; Carrera 15 No 82-54) Imported books and magazines.

Pan Americana (☎ 1-341-7420) Carrera 7 (Carrera 7 No 18-48); Carrera 7A (Carrera 7A No 14-09) Books, office supplies and electronics. Two central locations.

Emergency

Emergency numbers operate 24 hours.

Ambulance (☎ 125)

Fire (☎ 119)

Police (☎ 112)

Police station (Carrera 1A No 18A-96) If documents or valuables have been lost or stolen, go here.

Tourist police (☎ 1-337-4413; Carrera 13 No 26-62; ☎ 7am-noon & 2-7pm) The bilingual staff can provide advice and assist travelers.

Internet Access

Central Bogotá has plenty of internet facilities (most cost US70¢ to US\$1 per hour).

Café Internet Doble-Click (Carrera 7A No 19-03;

☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun)

Candelaria Net (Calle 14 No 3-74; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat)

OfficeNET (Carrera 4 No 19-16, Oficina 112; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Sat)

Laundry

Most hotels provide this service for their guests.

Lavandería Espumas (Calle 19 No 3A-37, Local 104)

There are several budget *lavanderías* in the center.

Libraries

Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango (☎ 1-343-1212; Calle 11 No 4-14; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 4pm Sun) Library and temporary art exhibits.

Biblioteca Nacional (☎ 1-243-5969; Calle 24 No 5-60; 🕒 7:45am-5pm Mon-Fri) You will need a library card to visit.

Medical Services

Clínica de Marly (☎ 1-343-6600; Calle 50 No 9-67) Outpatient clinic with general doctors and specialties.

Centro de Atención al Viajero (☎ 1-215-2029, 1-612-0272; Carrera 7 No 119-14) A travelers' medical center that offers various vaccinations (including yellow fever and hepatitis A and B).

Hospital San Ignacio (☎ 1-288-8188; Carrera 7 No 40-62) University hospital with high medical standards, but lines are often long.

Money

Bogotá's banks keep different opening hours from the banks elsewhere in the country: they open 9am to 3pm Monday to Thursday, and 9am to 3:30pm Friday. Most banks have ATMs. Changing cash may be better and quicker in *casas de cambio*. The banks listed change traveler's checks.

Banco Unión Colombiano (Carrera 8 No 14-45)

Bancolombia (Carrera 8 No 13-17)

Banistmo Bank (Carrera 8 No 15-60)

Casa de Cambio Unidas (☎ 1-341-0537; Carrera 6 No 14-72)

Edificio Emerald Trade Center (Av Jiménez No 5-43) There are several exchange offices here.

Expreso Viajes & Turismo (☎ 1-593-4949; Calle 85 No 20-32). American Express is represented here. It doesn't cash checks but gives a replacement if your checks are lost or stolen.

Titán Intercontinental (☎ 1-336-0549; Carrera 7 No 18-42)

Post

Adpostal Centro Internacional (Carrera 7 No 27-54); La Candelaria (☎ 1-353-5666; cnr Carrera 7 & Calle 13) The main office is the La Candelaria branch.

Avianca Centro Internacional (☎ 1-342-6077; Carrera 10 No 26-53); City Center (☎ 1-342-7513; Carrera 7 No 16-36) The city center branch has poste restante.

DHL (☎ 1-212-9727; Calle 72 No 10-70)

FedEx (☎ 1-291-0100; Carrera 7 No 16-50)

Telephone

Most internet cafés have reasonably priced international and domestic phone services.

Telecom (☎ 1-561-1111; Calle 23 No 13-49; 🕒 7am-7pm) The main office is in the city center; other branch offices are scattered throughout the city.

Tourist Information

There are tourist information desks at the bus terminal and El Dorado airport.

Instituto Distrital de Cultura y Turismo (☎ 1-327-4916; www.culturayturismo.gov.co in Spanish; Carrera 8 No 9-83; 🕒 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) On the corner of Plaza de Bolívar.

Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia (☎ 1-243-3003, 1-341-0676, 1-341-5331; www.parquesnacionales.gov.co in Spanish; Carrera 10 No 20-30; 🕒 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Provides information about national parks, and issues permits and books accommodations in the parks.

Travel Agencies

Useful student agencies:

Trotamundos Centro Internacional (☎ 1-599-6413; www.trotamundos.com.co; Diag 35 No 5-73); La Candelaria

THE BULLETPROOF TAILOR OF BOGOTÁ

Miguel Cabellero is the self-styled Armani of bulletproof clothing. Yes, it may be a niche market but with princes, heads of state and diplomats as customers, he has seen profits soar.

Cabellero, who has a shop on Calle 70 in Bogotá, has been making bulletproof clothing for 12 years. His company started with US\$10 and a leather jacket; it now earns US\$3 million per year and has 80 employees.

The company specializes in suede- and leather-covered jackets and vests, but also sells knife-proof shirts, mine-resistant boots and shrapnel-deflecting blankets. All of it is designed for an increasingly style-conscious public. United States diplomats based in Bogotá have scooped up more than a dozen Cabellero items (which cost from US\$200 to US\$2000). Other buyers are Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, Colombian president Álvaro Uribe and the prince of Spain.

The decrease in violence in Colombia over the past three years has been bad for business, the company reports. New buyers, however, are being found in rough neighborhoods from Mexico City to Baghdad.

See Caballero's website at www.miguelcaballero.com.

(☎ 1-341-8986; Carrera 6A No 14-43, Oficina 208) Represents STA Travel and may have attractive discounted airfares for students and young people.

Viajes Vela (☎ 1-635-3827; www.travelstc.com; Calle 100 No 19-61, Oficinas 210 & 211)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Bogotá is not a perfectly safe place, but parts of the city center, including La Candelaria, are definitely safer now than they were a few years ago. The center has been largely restored over recent years and policing has improved. The northern districts are generally regarded as safer than the center, but it's best to observe some security precautions there as well.

Try to keep nighttime strolls to a minimum and don't carry money or other valuables, but don't get paranoid about going out at night. Just use common sense and travel by taxi. If you are on the street, stick to well-lit larger boulevards.

Be discreet when using your camera, even around Plaza Bolívar, as some travelers have had theirs stolen in broad daylight.

SIGHTS

Plaza de Bolívar & Around

Plaza de Bolívar is the heart of the historic town, but what you see around it is a mishmash of architectural styles. The massive stone building in classical Greek style on the southern side is the **Capitolio Nacional**, the seat of the Congress. Opposite is the equally monumental **Palacio de Justicia**. It replaces an earlier building that was taken by the M-19 guerrillas in November 1985 and gutted by fire in a fierce 28-hour offensive by the army that left more than 100 dead, including 11 Supreme Court justices.

The western side of the plaza is taken up by the French-style **Alcaldía** (mayor's office), dating from the early 20th century. The neoclassical **Catedral Primada**, on the eastern side of the square, was completed in 1823 and is Bogotá's largest church. Next door, the **Capilla del Sagrario** is the only colonial building on the square.

To the east of the plaza is the colonial quarter of **La Candelaria**. The sector preserves an agreeable old-world appearance, even though a number of modern edifices have replaced historic buildings. The best-preserved part of the district is between Calles 9 and 13 and Carreras 2 and 5. This is the best part of town to stow away this guidebook and let your senses do the navigating.

Museums

Bogotá has a great collection of museums. There's free entry to museums on the last Sunday of each month – be prepared for big crowds.

The star attraction is the **Museo del Oro** (Gold Museum; ☎ 1-284-7450; www.banrep.gov.co/museo; Calle 16 No 5-41; adults Tue-Sat US\$1, free Sun, children under 12 free; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun). It houses more than 34,000 gold pieces from all the major pre-Hispanic cultures in Colombia and is arguably the most important gold museum in the world.

Bogotá's other highlight is the **Donación Botero** (☎ 1-343-1331; Calle 11 No 4-41; admission free; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon & Wed-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun). The 208-piece collection contains 123 of Botero's own works, including his paintings, drawings and sculptures, plus 85 works by international artists, sporting such names as Picasso, Chagall, Miró, Dalí, Renoir, Matisse and Monet. For a good overview, take an audio headset for US\$2.

Museo Arqueológico (☎ 1-243-1048; Carrera 6 No 7-43; admission adult/student US\$1.50/US\$75¢; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Tue-Fri, 9:30am-5pm Sat, 10am-4pm Sun), located in a beautiful colonial mansion, has an extensive collection of pottery from Colombia's main pre-Hispanic cultures.

Museo de Arte Colonial (☎ 1-341-6017; Carrera 6 No 9-77; admission US\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) features a remarkable collection of colonial art, including 76 oil paintings and 106 drawings by Gregorio Vásquez de Arce y Ceballos (1638–1711), the most important painter of the colonial era.

In the northern part of the city center, be sure to visit the **Museo Nacional** (☎ 1-334-8366; www.museonacional.gov.co in Spanish; Carrera 7 No 28-66; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 10am-5:30pm Tue-Sun). Accommodated in an old prison, it gives an insight into Colombian history – from the first settlers to modern times – through a wealth of exhibits that include historic objects, photos, maps, artifacts, paintings, documents and weapons. Don't miss the mummies.

For contemporary art visit the **Museo de Arte Moderno** (☎ 1-286-0466; Calle 24 No 6-00; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, to 3pm Sun), which has frequently changing displays of national and foreign artists.

More offbeat, the **Museo Histórico Policía** (☎ 1-233-5911; Calle 9 No 9-27; admission free; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sat) includes a free guided tour that shows off all manner of police paraphernalia, but the real reason to visit is the basement

exhibit focusing on the 499-day hunt for the late Pablo Escobar. The keynote item here is Pablo's bloody jacket worn the day of his death.

The **Quinta de Bolívar** (☎ 1-336-6419; www.quinta.debolivar.gov.co; Calle 20 No 2-91 Este; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 9am-4:30pm Tue-Fri, 10am-3:30pm Sat & Sun) is an old country house that was donated to Simón Bolívar in gratitude for his services. Today it's a museum displaying documents, maps, weapons, uniforms and Bolívar's personal effects.

Churches

A center of evangelism since the early days of Spanish rule, Bogotá boasts many colonial churches, most dating from the 17th and 18th centuries. Bogotá's churches have quite austere exteriors, but their internal decoration is often elaborate.

One of the most impressive is the **Iglesia de Santa Clara** (Carrera 8 No 8-91; admission US\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun), now open as a museum. Its walls are entirely covered with paintings (more than 100 of them), statues of saints, and altarpieces, all dating from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Other churches worth a look include the lovely **Iglesia de San Francisco** (Av Jiménez at Carrera 7), for the extraordinary decoration of its chancel; **Iglesia de la Concepción** (Calle 10 No 9-50), home of Bogotá's most beautiful Mudejar vault; **Iglesia de San Ignacio** (Calle 10 No 6-35), distinguished by both its size and its valuable art collection; and **Iglesia de San Diego** (Carrera 7 No 26-37), a charming country church (it was well outside the town when built) which is now surrounded by a forest of high-rise buildings.

Cerro de Monserrate

To get a glimpse of the city from dizzying heights take a ride to the top of Cerro de Monserrate, the mountain overlooking the city center. There is a church on the summit, with a statue of the Señor Caído (Fallen Christ), to which many miracles have been attributed.

There are three ways to get to the top: by *teleférico* (cable car, US\$5 return, every 15 minutes from 9:30am to midnight Monday to Saturday, 6am to 5pm Sunday), funicular railway (US\$5 return, 6am to 6pm on Sundays and public holidays) or footpath.

If you want to do the trip on foot (one hour uphill), do it only on Sunday when crowds of pilgrims go; on weekdays you'll be a prime target for thieves who prowl the mountain-side. It's close to the city center, so you can

walk, take a short cab ride or hop on the bus marked 'Funicular.'

Other Sights

For another impressive bird's-eye view go to the **Mirador Torre Colpatria** (☎ 1-283-6697; Carrera 7 No 24-89; admission US\$1.25; ☎ 11am-5pm Sat, Sun & holidays) nearby Parque de la Independencia. The 360° lookout atop this 48-story 162m-high skyscraper (built in 1975-79) provides excellent views in all directions.

On Sunday check out the flea market held around the Parque de los Periodistas, near La Candelaria.

Jardín Botánico José Celestino Mutis (☎ 1-437-7060; www.jbb.gov.co in Spanish; Calle 57 No 61-13; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) has a variety of national flora from different climatic zones; some are in gardens, others in greenhouses. The airport *buseta* or *colectivo* will let you off nearby.

Maloka (☎ 1-427-2707; www.maloka.org in Spanish; Carrera 68D No 40A-51; adult/student US\$3.50/2; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Thu, 9am-7pm Fri-Sun) is an interactive center of science and technology, possibly the continent's largest and best. It features a variety of thematic exhibitions such as the universe, human beings, technology, life, water and biodiversity, plus a hi-tech Cine-Domo cinema. The best way to get here is via the airport *buseta* or *colectivo*.

ACTIVITIES

If you're looking for a place to kick around a football or go for a jog, try the Parque Simón Bolívar, a popular weekend hangout for *bogotáños*.

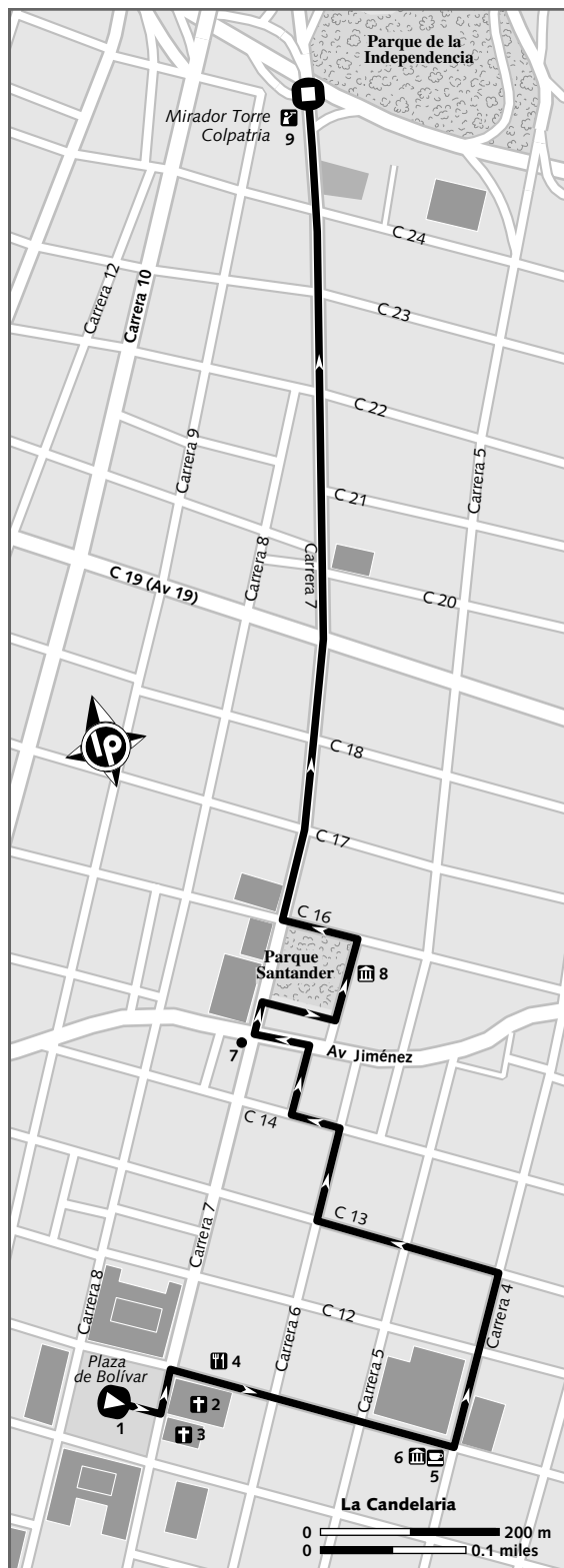
Mountain biking and rock climbing are organized at Suesca (p565), but if you want to hone your skills there is a climbing wall at **Gran Pared** (☎ 1-245-7284; www.granpared.com in Spanish; cnr Carrera 7 & Calle 50; per hr with equipment US\$5; ☎ 2pm-10pm Mon, 10am-10pm Tue-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun).

For paragliding contact **Esteban Noboa** (☎ 1-672-8447, 310-819-4316) who charges US\$30 for a 25-minute tandem flight.

Bowling purists simply must visit the **San Francisco Bolo Club** (☎ 1-342-3232; Av Jiménez No 6-71; per game US\$1; ☎ 10am-10pm). There's no automatic scorekeeper or even a pin setter – it's all done by hand.

WALKING TOUR

Central Bogota is fairly easy to get around by foot and this walking tour will help you get acquainted with the major sights. The obvious

WALK FACTS**Start** Plaza de Bolívar**Finish** Mirador Torre Colpatria**Distance** 2.4km**Duration** One hour

place to start is at the historical heart of the city, the **Plaza de Bolívar (1)**; p558). Here you can get your bearings, while taking in some of the city's most important historical points of interest, including the magnificent **Catedral Primada (2)**, arguably the most beautiful historical building in the city, and its smaller neighbor, the **Capilla del Sagrario (3)**. Duck past the divebomber pigeons that swarm around the square and head a half-block up Calle 11 to **La Puerta Falsa (4)**, a historic chocolate shop that will have your sweet tooth in ecstasy. If you prefer the buzz of coffee, head further uphill to the **Juan Valdéz coffee shop (5)**. It's located next to the magnificent **Donación Botero (6)**; p558), which you can explore at your leisure (entry is free).

You are now smack in the middle of La Candelaria, a barrio of narrow lanes, trendy cafés and plenty of students and artists lingering about on weekdays. People-watch, kill some time with a book or chat up some locals – it's the best part of the city to watch life roll by. Properly caffeinated, meander north to the **Emerald Traders' Market (7)** at Av Jiménez and Carrera 7. Here you'll find throngs of people trying to sell emeralds in what look like very shady operations. Even if you love bargaining, don't cut a deal here as you will almost certainly be ripped off – only a trained eye can tell the difference between a fake stone and the genuine article. If you really want to see some beautiful mineral wealth, head around the corner to the **Museo del Oro (8)**; p558).

Take in the rest of central Bogotá by strolling down Carrera 7, passing by its wealth of shops, churches, restaurants, craft markets and theaters. If it's a weekend, you can top off this tour by riding to the top of the **Mirador Torre Colpatria (9)**; p559), the unmistakable 48-story building that lies just south of Calle 26.

COURSES

For informal classes (Spanish, cooking, yoga or salsa), check the noticeboards at guesthouses or inquire at L'Jaim restaurant. For languages:

Universidad de los Andes (☎ 1-286-9211; Carrera 1 No 18A 10)

Universidad Externado de Colombia (☎ 1-282-6066; Calle 12 No 1-17)

Universidad Javeriana's Centro Latinoamericano (☎ 1-320-8320; Carrera 10 No 65-48) Bogotá's best-known school of Spanish language, which offers regular one-year courses and three-week intensive courses.

Universidad Nacional (☎ 1-316-5335; cnr Carrera 30 & Calle 45)

TOURS

Eco-Guías (☎ 1-347-5736, 1-212-1423; www.ecoguias.com; Carrera 7 No 57-39, Apt No 802B) An adventure-travel company that focuses on ecotourism and offers individualized tours to various regions of the country, including some national parks. It also organizes reasonably priced Sunday walks in Bogotá's environs.

Sal Si Puedes (☎ 1-283-3765; Carrera 7 No 17-01, Oficina 639) An association of outdoor-minded people who organize weekend walks in the countryside. These are mostly one-day excursions to Cundinamarca, though longer trips to other regions are also arranged during holiday periods and long weekends.

Other associations of this type:

Andarines del Senderismo (☎ 1-617-8857; Transversal 48 No 95A-32)

Colombia Ecoturística (☎ 1-241-0065, 1-366-3059; cominarcolombia@hotmail.com; Carrera 3 No 21-46, Apt 802B)

Viajar y Vivir (☎ 1-211-1368, 1-211-1205; www.viajaryvivir.com in Spanish; Carrera 13 No 61-47, Local 104)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro The theater festival featuring groups from Latin America and beyond takes place in March/April of every even-numbered year.

Festival de Cine de Bogotá Bogotá's film festival in October usually attracts a strong selection of Latin American films.

Expoartesanías This crafts fair in December gathers together artisans along with their crafts from all around the country. It's an excellent place to buy crafts.

SLEEPING

Bogotá has loads of places to stay in every price bracket. The historic suburb of La Candelaria is the most popular area with foreign travelers, and it has a reasonable choice of budget hotels. The alternative area is the northern part of the city, which has a fair selection of upmarket accommodations but very few budget hotels.

Platypus (☎ 1-341-2874, 1-341-3104; www.platypusbogota.com; Calle 16 No 2-43; dm/s/d US\$6/11/13; ☑) By far the most popular budget place among backpackers, Platypus has three four-bed dorms and several singles and doubles. Even though conditions are quite simple and only a couple of rooms have private bathrooms, the place is safe, clean and pleasant and has hot water. The hostel offers book exchange, free wi-fi, laundry and kitchen facilities and free coffee. The friendly owner, Germán (pronounced Hermann), a longtime traveler himself, speaks several languages and is an excellent source of practical information.

SPLURGE!

Hotel de la Ópera (☎ 1-336-2066; www.hotelopera.com.co; Calle 10 No 5-72; d/ste US\$95/115) By far the best lodging option in La Candelaria, accommodated in two meticulously restored historic buildings right next door to the Teatro Colón. This five-star hotel has much charm and character, and a rooftop restaurant with views over red-tiled roofs of the nearby colonial houses. The atmosphere and service are great, and the place is small enough that you receive personal attention.

Hotel Internacional (☎ 1-341-8731; Carrera 5 No 14-45; s/d/tr US\$5.50/11/16, without bathroom US\$5/10/13; ☑) A favorite among Israeli travelers, it provides internet access and the use of the kitchen.

Hotel Aragón (☎ 1-284-8325; Carrera 3 No 14-13; s/d/tr without bathroom US\$6.50/12/18) This well-located hotel has 24 private rooms, most with natural light and street views. It's quiet, with constant hot water and clean and well-maintained facilities.

Centro Plaza (☎ 1-243-3818; www.hotelcentroplaza.com; Carrera 4 No 13-12; dm/d/tr with bathroom US\$6.50/14.50/20; ☑) Another Israeli hangout, this place has a kosher restaurant and billiards table. Smallish rooms are clean, but without windows.

La Casona del Patio Amarillo (☎ 1-212-8805; Carrera 8 No 69-24; s/d/tr with bathroom US\$14/24/33, without bathroom US\$12/20/24; ☑) One of the cheapest options in northern Bogotá. The rooms are spotlessly clean and airy, and the place offers various services, including breakfast (US\$2).

Hotel El Dorado (☎ 1-334-3988; Carrera 4 No 15-00; d with/without bathroom US\$17/13.50) A convenient option close to nightspots. It has fairly small rooms, but most of them have private baths.

Hotel San Sebastián (☎ 1-480-0503; Av Jiménez No 3-97; s/d/tr US\$18/25/32) More comfortable than any of the above, San Sebastián has airy rooms with TV and private bathroom, and is well located just a couple of blocks from the Museo del Oro.

Hotel Ambala (☎ 1-342-6384; www.hotelambala.net; Carrera 5 No 13-46; s/d/tr US\$20/27/41; ☒) This friendly hotel has 22 immaculate but tiny rooms, each with TV and minibar. It's probably the best midrange option in La Candelaria.

EATING

Innumerable places have set lunches for US\$1.50 to US\$3 – the best way to choose is to drop into one, see what people are eating

SPLURGE!

Andrés Carne de Res (☎ 1-863-7880; www.andrescarnederes.com in Spanish; Calle 3 No 11A-56, Chía; meals US\$12-15; ☎ noon-3am Fri-Sun) Hang onto your hats, this legendary steakhouse aims to blow you away with its amazing food and a never-say-die party attitude. A trip to Andrés Carne de Res, located well north of Bogotá's city limits in Chía, is well worth the effort. It serves big steaks in a ranchero atmosphere and is a popular party spot, so bring your dancing shoes (and a thick wallet; it's not cheap). Well-known DJs, occasionally from Europe, have hosted late-night *rumbas*. To get there take the TransMilenio from the Portal del Norte and continue by frequent bus to Chía. A taxi from the center will cost around US\$15, and if you plan to party late you'll need to take one back as the TransMilenio stops at midnight. You could also visit as part of a trip to Zipaquirá.

and stay or move on to the next one. The bulk of these are on Carrera 7.

La Puerta Falsa (Calle 11 No 6-50; snacks US\$50¢-\$1.50) Bogotá's, and for that matter Colombia's, oldest operating place to eat serves typical local snacks (including *tamales* and chocolate *santafereño*) and sweets just as it has since 1816.

Mora Mora (Carrera 3a No 15-98; smoothie US\$1.25; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat) Literally 'Raspberry Raspberry,' this pastel-painted juice shop prepares fruit smoothies, sandwiches and snacks. The muesli and fruit is a nice choice for breakfast. Wi-fi equipped.

Restaurante Corporación Prodicom (Calle 15A No 2-21; set lunches US\$1.50-2) One of the local favorites thanks to its great-value tasty lunches.

Andante Ma Non Troppo (Carrera 3A No 10-92; dishes US\$1.50-3; ☎ 8am-8pm) Tranquil café and restaurant serving pastas and the best bread in La Candelaria.

Pastelería Florida (Carrera 7 No 21-46; snacks US\$50¢-\$1.50) In its new locale, Florida is famous for its chocolate *santafereño*. It's also a great place for breakfast.

Restaurante Vegetariano Boulevard Sésamo (Av Jiménez No 4-64; set meal US\$2-3; ☎ 8am-4pm) Vegetarian restaurant where a set lunch includes soup, juice and a plate of mixed veggies.

El Chilito (Carrera 3 No 18A-56; dishes US\$2-4; ☎ 9:30am-3:30pm Mon-Thu & Sat, 9:30am-7pm Fri) A burrito and quesadilla joint that caters to the gringo palate. The owner is a musician and can give you tips on the best places to hear live jam sessions.

L'Jaim (☎ 1-281-8635; Carrera 3 No 14-79; meals US\$3-5; ☎ noon-9pm Sun-Fri) This little bit of Israel transported to Bogotá serves great *shawarma* (chopped meat and veggies served with pita and hummus) plus falafel and baklava. The identical twin brothers who run the place provide travel advice and also organize language classes.

Alina (☎ 1-341-7208; Calle 9 No 2-81; pizzas US\$3-4; ☎ 11:30am-10pm) Reputedly the best pizza place in La Candelaria, Alina also has a dozen different pies, plus lasagna. It's run by a Colombian-American named Mario, who also rents out some rooms in his home behind the restaurant.

Restaurante Fulanitos (Carrera 3 No 8-61; mains US\$4-7) Beautifully arranged, informal place that offers food typical of the Valle del Cauca in southern Colombia.

Al Wadi (Calle 27 No 4A-14; dishes US\$4-6; ☎ 10am-9pm) Located in the hip neighborhood of La Macarena, this restaurant is decorated with *shisha* pipes (hookahs) and scenes from Lebanon. Try a falafel or kebab, finished off with an Arab confection. Around the corner on Carrera 4a you'll find other upscale restaurants.

Candela Café (Calle 9 No 4-93; mains US\$7-9; ☎ noon-3pm Mon-Sat) This exclusive lunch café is a major hit with the local suit-and-tie set. Try an excellent Mediterranean salmon, a spicy chili con carne or a tasty *gratinado* (cheese and chicken soup).

DRINKING Cafés

Juan Valdéz (cnr Calle 73 & Carrera 9; ☎ 7am-11pm Mon-Sat, 10am-7pm Sun) Caffeine junkies and expats love this chic outlet of the Juan Valdéz chain. Look for the glass-and-steel structure with the parasols outside. There's a second location at the Donación Botero (p558).

Café del Sol (Calle 14 No 3-60; ☎ 8am-8:30pm) This coffee shop brews up all manner of cappuccinos, espressos and even Irish coffee. Snacks, sandwiches and breakfast are also available.

Café de la Estación (Calle 14 No 5-14; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat) A unique address, this is an old train car converted into a tiny café in the middle of the city. Coffee and snacks available.

Bars

The main area of nighttime entertainment is the Zona Rosa, in the northern sector of the city, between Carreras 11 and 15, and Calles 81 and 84. There's a maze of music spots, bars, restaurants and cafés in the area, which become particularly vibrant on weekend nights.

The city center has revived over recent years and many nightspots have mushroomed all over the place, particularly in La Candelaria. Most are reasonably cheap, with a bottle of beer below a dollar.

Surikata (Calle 84 No 13-43, Zona Rosa; ☎ 6pm-3am Tue-Sat) This intimate bar is about the extent of Zona Rosa's alternative scene. It plays American and British rock from the '80s and '90s, but it's more of a chill-out spot than a place to dance.

Mister Babilla (Calle 82 No 12-15, Zona Rosa; admission US\$5; ☎ 7pm-3am Tue-Sat) Loud, colorful, party-place with everything but the kitchen sink nailed to the walls or hanging from the ceiling. Various musical rhythms include rock, merengue and salsa.

Pub (Carrera 12A No 83-48, Zona Rosa; ☎ noon-late) Irish addition to the Zona Rosa, which has become hugely popular with some more affluent locals and expats.

Saloon (Calle 51 No 7-69; ☎ 3pm-2am Mon-Sat) The most popular bar on the Calle 51 'student street.' The US\$4.50 admission charge includes vouchers for four beers. Up and down this street you'll find several other student-packed watering holes.

Café Color Café (Carrera 2 No 13-06; ☎ noon-11pm) At the Plazoleta del Chorro de Quevedo, this is one of several bohemian bars that features floor seating and cheap beer. This one also has about 50 types of coffee.

ENTERTAINMENT

For updated info on cultural fare, have a look at the entertainment columns of the leading local paper, *El Tiempo*. The Friday edition carries a 'what's-on' section called *Eskpe*. Also check **Terra** (www.terra.com.co/bogota in Spanish), which covers cinemas, theaters, nightclubs, cultural events and more.

Bogotá has plenty of nightspots offering a variety of moods and any musical rhythms you wish for, including rock, reggae, tango, samba, hip-hop and salsa. The latter is perhaps the most popular among the hot-blooded city dwellers, and a worthwhile experience for travelers. There are plenty of disco-type places called *salsotecas* – don't miss trying one, if only to listen to the music and watch people dancing.

Nightclubs

Salsotecas and clubs carry a US\$3 to US\$5 cover. Pricier places are in the Zona Rosa.

Salomé Pagana (Carrera 14A No 82-16, Zona Rosa; admission US\$3; ☎ 6pm-3am) Recommended *salsoteca*, with fine salsa and *son cubano* (traditional Cuban music).

Quebra Canto (Carrera 5 No 17-76, La Candelaria; ☎ 6:30pm-2:30am Wed-Sat) One of the most popular nighttime hangouts in the center, this raucous double level disco features various music beats on different days and has groups playing on some weekends.

El Viejo Almacén (Calle 15 No 4-18, La Candelaria; ☎ 7pm-3am Tue-Sat) Nostalgic tango bar with 4000-plus old tango vinyls.

Escobar Rosas (cnr Calle 15 & Carrera 4, La Candelaria; admission incl 3 drinks US\$5; ☎ 8pm-late Thu-Sat) Gritty and cramped, Escobar Rosas spins '70s and '80s rock. The upstairs bar leads down to a sweaty disco floor in the basement.

GAY & LESBIAN BOGOTÁ

Gay and lesbian life is pretty active in Bogotá. Travelers can browse www.guiagaycolombia.com/bogota in Spanish for more details. Note that the admission charge to some of the following places usually includes one or two drinks.

Chase (Calle 67 No 4A-91) Three-level restaurant-cum-bar, with a quiet atmosphere and decent grub.

Theatron (Calle 58 No 10-34; admission US\$7; ☎ 10pm-late) One of the most popular gay discos in town, but it's not that cheap. Lottus, next door, is exclusively open to male patrons.

Café Village (Carrera 8 No 64-29; ☎ 6pm-late) Quiet, reasonably-priced bar-cum-restaurant. Excellent coffee.

El Closet Lounge (☎ 1-520-7126; www.elclosetbogota.com in Spanish; Km5 Via Calera; 10pm-late Fri & Sat) This somewhat upscale place is located well east of town toward La Calera. A taxi there will cost around US\$14 from the center.

Punta Sur (Carrera 13 No 81-36, Zona Rosa; ☎ 4pm-3am Wed-Sat) It seems that half the people in this place are either dancing on top of the tables or passed out underneath them. Best of all, there's no cover charge.

Cinemas

Bogotá has dozens of cinemas offering the usual Hollywood fare.

Multiplex Cine Colombia (☎ 1-404-2463; Calle 24 No 6-01) The most convenient multiplex in the city center.

For something more thought provoking, check the programs of the *cinematecas* (art-house cinemas). Regular cinemas of that type:

Auditorio de la Antigua Calle del Agrado

(☎ 1-281-4671; Calle 16 No 4-75)

Cinemateca Distrital (☎ 1-283-5598; www.cinematecadistrital.gov.co in Spanish; Carrera 7 No 22-79)

Museo de Arte Moderno (☎ 1-286-0466; Calle 24 No 6-00)

Theater

Leading theaters:

Teatro de la Candelaria (☎ 1-281-4814; Calle 12 No 2-59)

Teatro Libre (☎ 1-281-4834; Calle 13 No 2-44 & ☎ 1-217-1988; Calle 62 No 10-65)

Teatro Nacional (☎ 1-217-4577; Calle 71 No 10-25)

Sports

Soccer is Colombia's national sport.

Estadio El Campín (Carrera 30 at Calle 55) The principal venue. Matches are on Wednesday nights and Sunday afternoons. Tickets can be bought at the stadium before matches (US\$4 to US\$40).

For local games, tickets can also be bought at **Millonarios** (Carrera 24 No 63-68) and **Santa Fe** (Calle 64A No 38-08). For international matches (and to watch Selección Colombia), you can buy tickets in advance at **Federación Colombiana de Fútbol** (www.colfutbol.org in Spanish; Av 32 No 16-22).

Bullfighting

Plaza de Toros de Santamaría (Carrera 6 at Calle 27) Bullfighting is invariably popular, with fights held here on most Sundays in January and February. Tickets are available from the bullring's box office (US\$10 to US\$100).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Bogotá's airport, Aeropuerto El Dorado, has two terminals and handles all domestic and international flights. The main terminal, **El**

Dorado (☎ 1-413-9053; Av El Dorado) is 13km northwest of the city center and offers plenty of facilities, including tourist information (in the luggage-claim area), internet access (in the Telecom office) and money exchange. Three *casas de cambio*, next to each other on the ground floor, change cash and are open 24 hours a day. The Banco Popular at the next window (also open 24 hours), changes both cash and traveler's checks. There are a dozen ATMs on the upper level.

The other terminal, **Puente Aéreo** (☎ 1-413-9511; Av El Dorado), is 1km from El Dorado toward the city center. It handles some of Avianca's international and domestic flights. Be sure to check which terminal your flight departs from.

There are plenty of domestic flights to destinations all over the country, including Cali (US\$80 to US\$110), Cartagena (US\$90 to US\$142), Leticia (US\$110 to US\$140), Medellín (US\$70 to US\$120) and San Andrés (US\$145 to US\$150). You can buy tickets from travel agents or directly from the airlines, most of which have their main offices in the city center:

AeroRepública (☎ 1-342-7221; www.aerorepublica.com.co; Carrera 10 No 27-51, Local 165)

Aires (☎ 1-336-6039; www.aires.com.co in Spanish; Carrera 7 No 16-36, piso 16)

Avianca/SAM (☎ 1-404-7862; Carrera 7 No 16-36)

Satena (☎ 1-281-7071; www.satena.com; Carrera 10 No 26-21, Oficina 210)

Bus

The **bus terminal** (☎ 1-428-2424; Calle 33B No 69-13) is 9km northwest of the city center. It's large, functional and well organized, and has a tourist office, restaurants, cafeterias, showers and left-luggage rooms.

The terminal handles buses to just about every corner of the country. On the main roads, buses run frequently around the clock to the following destinations: Bucaramanga (US\$24, 10 hours), Cali (US\$25, 12 hours) and Medellín (US\$20, nine hours). There are also direct buses to Cartagena (US\$47, 20 hours), Cúcuta (US\$32, 16 hours), Ipiales (US\$36, 23 hours), Popayán (US\$29, 15 hours), San Agustín (US\$17, 12 hours) and Santa Marta (US\$44, 16 hours). All prices are for air-con buses, the dominant class on such long-distance routes.

GETTING AROUND

Bus & Buseta

TransMilenio apart, Bogotá's public transport is operated by buses and *busetas*. They all run

the length and breadth of the city, usually at full speed if the traffic allows.

Except on a few streets, there are no bus stops – you just wave down the bus or *buseta* wherever you happen to be. The fare (US30¢ to US50¢ depending on the class and generation of the vehicle) is posted by the door or on the windscreen. The fare is flat, so you will be charged the same to go one block as to go across the city. There are also *colectivos*, which operate on the major routes and cost about US50¢.

Taxi

Bogotá's taxis all have meters and you should insist that the driver uses it. A 10km ride should cost no more than US\$4. There's a US\$1.25 surcharge on rides to the airport.

A word of warning – when taxiing from the bus terminal or the airport to a budget hotel, be wary of any driver who insists that your chosen hotel no longer exists, has burned down or suffered some other inglorious fate. They may be trying to steer you toward a hotel that pays them a commission.

TransMilenio

TransMilenio has revolutionized Bogotá's public transport. Begun in 2000, the system employs large buses that run on their own street lines, uninterrupted by other vehicles. The service is cheap (US40¢), frequent and fast, operating from 5am to 11pm. Tickets are bought at the station. Buses get very crowded at rush hour.

Some buses run on an express schedule, skipping stops on the way. Check the route map in the stations for the best bus to your destination.

The main TransMilenio route is Av Caracas, which links the center to both southern and northern suburbs. There are also lines on Carrera 30, Av 81, Av de Las Americas and a short spur on Av Jiménez up to Carrera 3. There are three termini, but the only one of real use to travelers is the **Portal del Norte** (northern terminus; Calle 170) which has bus links to Zipaquirá and Suesca.

AROUND BOGOTÁ

ZIQAQUIRÁ

☎ 1 / pop 70,000

One of Colombia's most fascinating attractions in the hauntingly beautiful underground **salt cathedral** (☎ 1-852-4035; www.catedraldesal.gov.co in

Spanish; admission US\$4, Wed US\$2; ☎ 9am-4:30pm Tue-Sun) at Zipaquirá, located 50km north of Bogotá.

The cathedral was born from an old salt mine, dug straight into a mountain outside the town. The mines date back to the Muisca period and have been intensively exploited, but they still contain vast reserves that will last another 500 years.

The cathedral was opened to the public in 1995. It's 75m long and 18m high and can accommodate 8400 people. Visits are by guided tours that take one hour. You can also visit the adjacent **salt museum** (admission US\$1; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Sun), which features the history of salt exploitation, the model of the local mine and other exhibits.

Buses from Bogotá to Zipaquirá (US80¢, 1¼ hours) run every 10 minutes, departing from the northern terminus of TransMilenio, known as Portal del Norte, on Autopista del Norte at Calle 170. TransMilenio from Bogotá's center will take you to Portal del Norte in 40 minutes. The mines are a 15-minute walk uphill from Zipaquirá's center.

The alternative is to take the **Turistren** (www.turistren.com.co in Spanish), which runs from Bogotá to Zipaquirá on weekends and holidays. It's bloody slow but loads of fun – there is even a band playing in the cars to entertain passengers. It's also one of the few chances you'll ever have to ride a genuine steam train.

The train (return US\$12) departs **Sabana station** (☎ 1-375-0556/7; Calle 13 No 18-24) at 8:30am, stops briefly at **Usaquen station** (Calle 100 & Carrera 9A) at 9:20am and reaches Zipaquirá at 11:30am. The train departs Zipaquirá 2pm and reaches Usaquen at 5pm. One day advance booking is essential.

SUESCA

☎ 1 / pop 14,000

Suesca is a good day trip from Bogotá if you are looking for a little adventure. It's fast becoming an adventure-sports center, with rock climbing, mountain biking and white-water rafting on offer. The town is best visited on weekends, when local outfitters open their doors.

Rock climbers should contact **Hernan Wilke** (☎ 310-216-8119; www.monodedo.com in Spanish; cnr Carrera 7 & Calle 50), who rents out equipment and gives climbing lessons. Full-day climbing trips are run by **Hugo Rocha** (☎ 315-826-2051; per day US\$40).

If you want to spend the night, most outfitters (including Hernan) will rent rooms for around US\$5 per person. The climbing school

Campo Base (deaventuraporcolombia@yahoo.com) also has a dormitory. Camping is another option if you have your own gear.

To get to Suesca, take the TransMilenio to its northern terminus at Portal del Norte, and catch a frequent direct bus (US\$2, 40 minutes, 67km) to Suesca.

GUATAVITA

☎ 1 / pop 2600

Also called **Guatavita Nueva**, this town was built from scratch in the late 1960s when the old colonial Guatavita was flooded by the waters of a reservoir. The town is an interesting architectural blend of old and new, and is a popular weekend destination for people from Bogotá.

About 15km from the town is the famous **Laguna de Guatavita**, the sacred lake and ritual center of the Muisca Indians, and a cradle of the myth of El Dorado. The lake was an object of worship, where gold pieces, emeralds and food were offered by the Muisca to their gods. The myth of incalculable treasures at the bottom gave rise to numerous attempts to salvage the riches. Despite enormous efforts by the Spanish and later the Colombians, very little has actually been recovered. Legend claims that the lake retains its treasures.

Permits are now required to visit the lake and these are given on a very limited basis. Only 20 people are allowed to visit each Saturday and Sunday. For a permit, contact the **Corporación Autónoma Regional de Cundinamarca** (in Bogotá ☎ 1-320-9000; www.car.gov.co in Spanish; Carrera 7 No 36-45, Bogotá).

Permit in hand, take a bus to the town of Guatavita (departing from Portal del Norte, the northern terminus of the TransMilenio) and get off 11km before reaching the town (6km past Sesquilé), where there is a sign directing you to the lake, and walk 7km uphill along a dirt road. There are several farms around so ask for directions if in doubt. On weekends it's possible to hitch a lift with tourists coming in their jeeps.

NORTH OF BOGOTÁ

This is Colombia's heartland. The region of deep gorges, fast-flowing rivers and soaring peaks was the first to be settled by the conquistadors, and a number of their colonial towns stand today. It's also the revolutionary heart of the country: it was here that Simón

Bolívar took on Spain in the decisive fight for Colombia's independence.

The departments of Boyacá, Santander and Norte de Santander are well set up for the domestic tourist market: they're within easy reach of Bogotá, fixed with a good network of roads and bus services, and there's much to see including 450-year-old colonial towns, craft markets and spectacular national parks.

TUNJA

☎ 8 / pop 150,000

Although overlooked by travelers eager to reach Villa de Leyva, Tunja, the capital of Boyacá, has plenty to offer the discerning tourist, including fine colonial architecture and elegant mansions adorned with some of South America's most unique artwork. The city was founded by Gonzalo Suárez Rendón in 1539 on the site of Hunza, the pre-Hispanic Muisca settlement. Though almost nothing is left of the indigenous legacy, much colonial architecture remains. Tunja is today a bustling student center with a population of 150,000.

Tunja sits at an altitude of 2820m and has a cool climate; you'll need warm clothing, especially at night.

Information

Bancolombia (Carrera 10 No 22-43) Changes traveler's checks and US dollars.

Giros & Finanzas (Carrera 10 No 16-81) This *casa de cambio* is at the back of the Supermercado Comfaboy.

Internet Cibertienda (Carrera 10 No 19-83; per hr US\$80; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 2-7pm Sat) Internet access and CD burning.

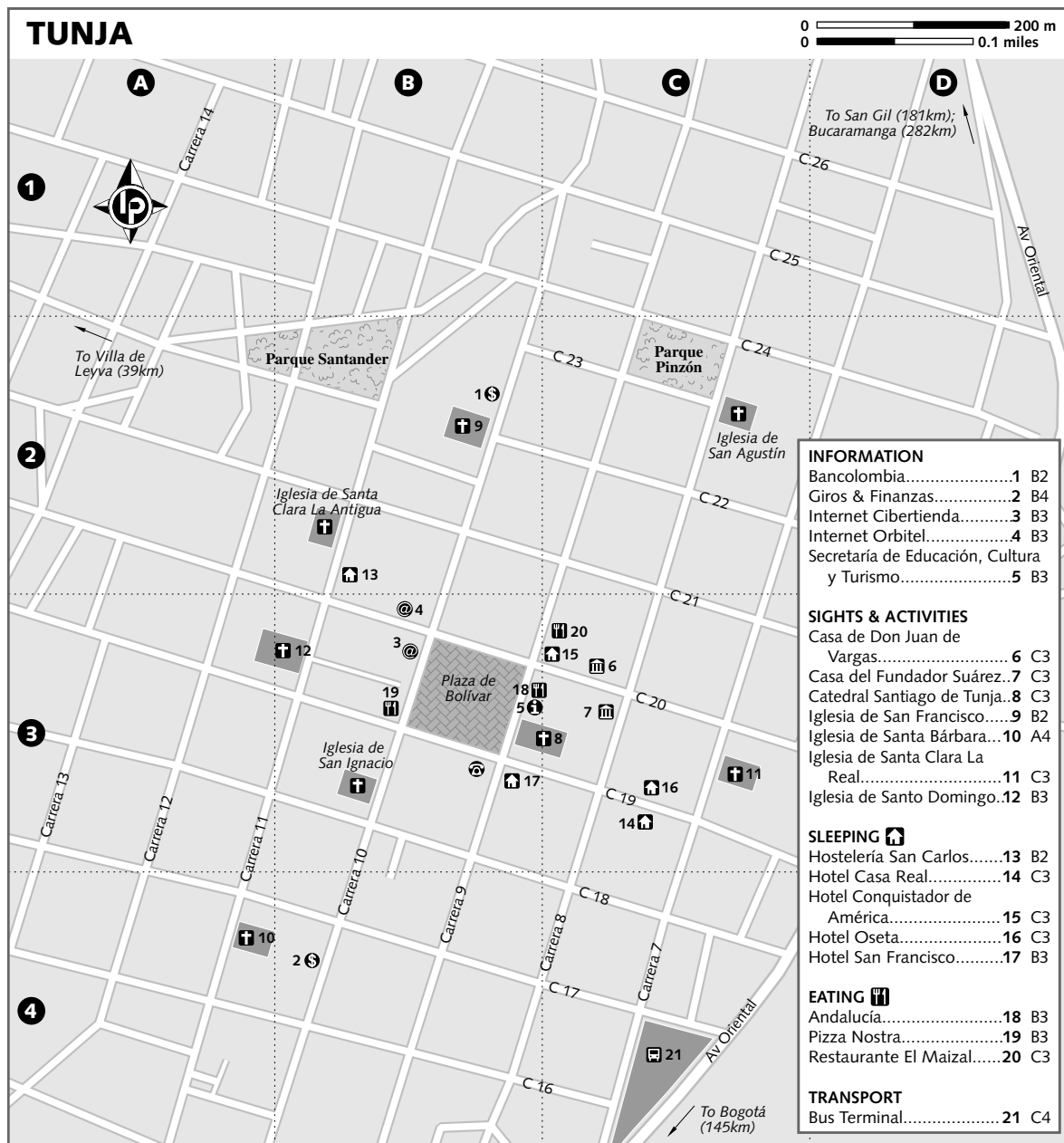
Internet Orbitel (Calle 20 No 10-26; ☎ 9am-7pm) Internet and international phone calls.

Secretaría de Educación, Cultura y Turismo (☎ 8-742-3272; Carrera 9 No 19-68; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm) Free maps of Tunja are available here.

Sights

The **Casa del Fundador Suárez Rendón** (☎ 8-742-3272; Carrera 9 No 19-68; admission US\$60; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm) and **Casa de Don Juan de Vargas** (☎ 8-742-6611; Calle 20 No 8-52; admission US\$1; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) have both been converted into colonial art museums. The ceilings in both houses are covered with paintings featuring human figures, animals, coats of arms and mythological scenes – an impressive and unusual view.

Iglesia de Santa Clara La Real (☎ 8-742-5659; Carrera 7 No 19-58; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm) is one of the most beautiful and richly decorated



churches in Colombia. It has been converted into a museum. The **Iglesia de Santo Domingo** (Carrera 11 No 19-55) is another example of Spanish colonial art; be sure to see the exuberant Capilla del Rosario, to the left as you enter the church.

Other churches worth a visit include the **Iglesia de Santa Bárbara** (Carrera 11 No 16-62), **Iglesia de San Francisco** (Carrera 10 No 22-23) and the **Catedral Santiago de Tunja** (Plaza de Bolívar). Tunja's churches are noted for their Mudejar art, an Islamic-influenced style that developed in Christian Spain between the 12th and 16th centuries. It is particularly visible in the ornamented, coffered vaults.

Sleeping

Hostería San Carlos (☎ 8-742-3716; Carrera 11 No 20-12; s/d/tr US\$9/13/18; ☒) Located in an atmospheric

old home and run by a friendly granny, the San Carlos is a pleasant budget option. There are just five rooms, but one contains five beds and is good for groups.

Hotel Casa Real (☎ 310-852-1636; Calle 19 No 7-65; hotelcasareal@yahoo.es; s/d/tr US\$9/13/20; ☒) Between the bus station and the main plaza, this new hotel has sparse furnishings but colorful ambience. Hotel Oseta, opposite, is similar.

Hotel San Francisco (☎ 8-742-6645; Carrera 9 No 18-90; s/d/tr US\$11/18/24) Rambling old place with threadbare furnishings, but mostly clean rooms.

Hotel Conquistador de América (☎ 8-742-3534; Calle 20 No 8-92; s/d/tr US\$12/15/22; ☒) At the corner of Plaza de Bolívar, this colonial building has 20 ample rooms with hot showers and small TVs. Some rooms are dim and boxy, but the larger

doubles (US\$23) that face the street suffer from noise pollution, so pick your poison.

Eating

Plenty of restaurants in Tunja serve inexpensive set lunches for US\$1.50 to US\$2.

Restaurante El Maizal (Carrera 9 No 20-30; mains US\$3-5; ☎ 10am-5pm) One of the local favorites for excellent regional dishes at budget prices.

Pizza Nostra (Calle 19 No 10-36; pizza US\$3-8; ☎ noon-11pm) Welcoming pizzeria just off Plaza de Bolívar.

Andalucía (☎ 300-273-4221; Carrera 9 No 19-92; mains US\$11-12; ☎ 7.30am-8pm) This new restaurant is set inside a colonial mansion on the square. It has mostly seafood on the menu plus an excellent selection of desserts. Ask about the concerts; mariachi bands occasionally play here.

Getting There & Away

The bus terminal is on Av Oriental, a short walk southeast of Plaza de Bolívar. Buses to Bogotá (US\$4.50, 2½ to three hours) depart every 10 to 15 minutes. If you're going to Bogotá's center, you could get off at Portal del Norte at Calle 170 and change for TransMilenio, but

during rush hour it's more comfortable to go to the bus terminal and take a taxi. Buses to Bucaramanga (US\$15, seven hours) run hourly and pass through San Gil (US\$9, 4½ hours). Minibuses to Villa de Leyva (US\$1.80, 45 minutes) depart regularly until about 6pm.

VILLA DE LEYVA

☎ 8 / pop 13,000

Villa de Leyva is a colonial town *par excellence*. Declared a national monument in 1954, it has been preserved in its entirety and virtually no modern architecture exists.

Founded in 1572, Villa de Leyva enjoys a healthy, dry and mild climate, far warmer than Tunja, just 39km away but 700m higher. It's a popular weekend getaway for *bogotáños*, a trend that has created a miniboom in hotels, craft shops and tourist-oriented restaurants. Come early in the week for better-value hotel deals. For more details check out www.villadeleyva.net (in Spanish) or www.expovilla.com.

Information

Banco Popular (Plaza Mayor, Calle 12 No 9-43) Has a 24-hour ATM.



Money Exchange & Photocopy Shop (☎ 8-732-1225; Plaza Mayor, Carrera 9 No 12-36; 🕒 9am-6pm) Changes US dollars, but at a poor rate.

Movistar (Calle 14 No 9-52; per hr US\$1.20; 🕒 9am-8pm) Internet café.

Oficina de Turismo (☎ 8-732-0232; cnr Carrera 9 & Calle 13; 🕒 8am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Sun) Can recommend activities and sells maps (US\$1).

Sights

The **Plaza Mayor**, the impressive central square (reputedly the largest of its kind in Colombia), is lined with whitewashed colonial houses. The **parish church**, on the plaza, and the **Iglesia del Carmen**, a block northeast, both have interesting interiors. Next to the latter is a museum of religious art, the **Museo del Carmen** (Plazuela del Carmen; admission US\$80¢; 🕒 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat, Sun & holidays), which contains valuable paintings, carvings, altarpieces and other religious objects dating from the 16th century onward.

Casa Museo de Luis Alberto Acuña (Plaza Mayor; admission US\$80¢; 🕒 10am-1pm & 3-5pm Tue-Sun) features works by this painter, sculptor, writer and historian who was inspired by influences ranging from Muisca mythology to contemporary art.

Museo Paleontológico (Vía Arcabuco; admission US\$80¢; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun), about 1km northeast of town on the road to Arcabuco, has a collection of locally found fossils dating from the period when the area was a seabed (100 to 150 million years ago).

Villa de Leyva is a decidedly chill-out destination, and really the best way to get a feel for the place is to ditch this guidebook and go for a trouble-free wander around the cobbled streets. Pop into the **Casa de Juan de Castellanos** and **Casona La Guaca**, two meticulously restored colonial mansions on Carrera 9 just off Plaza Mayor. They have beautiful patios and house cafés and craft shops.

Go and see the colorful **market**, held on Saturday on the square three blocks southeast of Plaza Mayor. It's best and busiest early in the morning. Walk further southeast and climb the hill to a **viewpoint** for a marvelous bird's-eye view of the town.

Activities

The area around Villa de Leyva is pleasant for **hiking**, and you can visit some of the nearby attractions along the way (see p570), or go trekking in the Santuario de Iguaque (p571). The region is also good for **cycling** and you

can hire a bicycle in Villa de Leyva – see the following Tours section.

Horse-riding is another popular activity. Many locals rent out horses (per hr US\$2.50) – ask at your hotel or go to the corner of Carrera 9 and Calle 16.

Tours

Taxis parking in front of the bus terminal offer return taxi trips around the surrounding sights. The standard routes include El Fósil, El Infiernito and Convento del Santo Ecce Homo (US\$25), and Ráquira and La Candelaria (US\$35). Prices are per taxi for up to four people and include stops at the sights.

Colombian Highlands (☎ 8-732-1379; colombianhighlands@hotmail.com; Carrera 9 No 11-02) Offers a variety of offbeat tours, including nocturnal hikes, rappelling and horse-riding trips. It also rents bikes and camping equipment. It's connected with Colombian Highlands Guesthouse.

Guías & Travesías (☎ 8-732-0742; Calle 12 No 8A-31) This agency rents out bicycles (per hour/half-day/day US\$1.50/5/9) and does regional tours.

Sleeping

Accommodations may become limited on weekends, and can fill up completely on *puentes* and during Easter week, despite the fact that the prices tend to rise, sometimes by a lot, at these times. Prices listed below are weekday rates.

Hospedería Colonial (☎ 8-732-1364; Calle 12 No 10-81; s/d US\$4.50/9) Basic but acceptable option, just a block off the plaza.

Colombian Highlands Guesthouse (☎ 8-732-1379, 311-308-3739; colombianhighlands@hotmail.com; dm/s/d US\$6/8/16, camping per person US\$2.50; 📞 📧 📺) This traveler-friendly guesthouse is connected to Colombian Highlands and run by the affable Oscar Gilede. It's located in a private home, about 1km northwest of the main square. The guesthouse contains five double rooms, two with private bathroom.

Hospedería La Roca (☎ 8-732-0331; Plaza Mayor; r per person US\$9; 📞) Rambling hallways on two stories lead to a variety of pleasant rooms, all of which have a TV, high ceilings and a modern bathroom. A popular upstairs café overlooks the square.

Posada San Martín (☎ 8-732-0428; Calle 14 No 9-43; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$13.50/22.50/34; 📞) This quaint hotel has bright, colorfully decorated rooms, each with a small TV. There is a charming common room where guests congregate in the morning for breakfast. You may want to call ahead as its often locked during the day.

Hostería del Molino La Mesopotamia (☎ 8-732-0235; Carrera 8 No 15A-265; s/d/tr incl breakfast US\$40/48/64; 📍 ☒) Legendary 435-year-old place (the oldest building in town), originally a flourmill, today an atmospheric hotel.

Eating & Drinking

Villa de Leyva has plenty of restaurants, though not all open on weekdays.

Restaurante Casa Blanca (Calle 13 No 7-16; set meals US\$2.50, mains US\$4-5; 📍 10am-5pm) One of the best budget restaurants in town.

Al Horno (Calle 13 No 7-95; mains US\$3-6; 📍 4-10pm) Colorful and atmospheric bistro has a menu stacked with 12 different types of pizza, plus pasta and great desserts.

Zarina (Casa Quintero; mains US\$6-8; 📍 12:30-9pm) In-the-know locals vote this Lebanese joint the best eatery in town. Try the falafel with tahini. This is but one of several excellent restaurants in the Casa Quintero.

Don D'Bill (Casa Quintero; 📍 7pm-2am) In most places, Bill Lynn is a trivia question. In Villa de Leyva he is a legend. The elderly drummer, who backed up Elvis Presley for four years, now plays almost nightly in this intimate bar.

Getting There & Away

The bus terminal is three blocks southwest of the Plaza Mayor, on the road to Tunja. Minibuses run regularly to Tunja (US\$1.80, 45 minutes) until around 6pm. There are two direct buses daily to Bogotá (US\$6, four hours), or you can go to Tunja and change.

AROUND VILLA DE LEYVA

Villa de Leyva is a good jumping-off place for the surrounding region, which has a variety of cultural and natural attractions including archaeological relics, colonial monuments, petroglyphs, caves, lakes and waterfalls. It is also a great place for fossil hunting.

You can walk to some of the nearest sights, or go by bicycle or on horseback (see p569). You can also use local buses or go by taxi, or arrange a tour (see p569).

A return taxi trip (for up to four people) from Villa de Leyva to El Fósil, El Infiernito and Ecce Homo will cost about US\$25, including waits allowing for visiting the three sights.

Ostrich Farm

Around 5km southwest of Villa de Leyva, in the direction of El Fósil, is a slightly incongru-

ous **Ostrich Farm** (admission US\$1.80; 📍 9am-5pm), home to more than 120 ostriches and a handful of llamas, horses and sheep. The farm has a restaurant where you can sample a plate of grilled ostrich (US\$9).

El Fósil

This is a reasonably complete **fossil of a kronosaurus** (admission US\$1; 📍 8am-6pm), a 120-million-year-old prehistoric marine reptile resembling an overgrown crocodile. It's off the road to Chiquinquirá, 6km east of Villa de Leyva. You can walk there by a path in just over an hour, or take the Chiquinquirá or Ráquira bus, which will drop you off 1km from the fossil.

Estación Astronómica Muisca (El Infiernito)

The **Muisca observatory** (admission US\$1; 📍 9am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun) dates from the early centuries AD and, like a sort of Stonehenge, was used by indigenous people to determine the seasons. The site contains 30-odd cylindrical stone monoliths sunk vertically into the ground about 1m from each other in two parallel lines 9m apart. The place was also a ritual site noted for a number of large, phallic stone monoliths.

The observatory is 2km north of El Fósil. You can walk there in 25 minutes. Bicycle, horse and taxi are other possible means of transport.

Convento del Santo Ecce Homo

The **Dominican convent** (admission US\$1; 📍 9am-5pm), founded in 1620, is a large stone and adobe construction with a lovely courtyard. It's 13km northwest of Villa de Leyva. The morning bus to Santa Sofía will drop you off a 15-minute walk from the convent.

Ráquira

☎ 8 / pop 1600

The brightly painted, jumble of craft shops and stacks of freshly fired clay pots make for a welcoming sight along the main street of this one-horse town. Located 25km southwest of Villa de Leyva, Ráquira is well known for its quality pottery – there are a number of small pottery workshops in the village itself and on its outskirts, where you can watch the production process and buy some products if you want. Plenty of craft shops around the main square also sell other crafts such as

hammocks, ponchos, baskets, woodcarving and jewelry.

There are three budget hotels near the main plaza and a handful of restaurants. Three or four minibuses run daily from Villa de Leyva to Ráquira (US\$1.50, 35 minutes) and back, plus occasional *colectivos* if there's a demand.

La Candelaria

☎ 8 / pop 300

This tiny hamlet set amid arid hills, 7km beyond Ráquira, is noted for the **Monasterio de La Candelaria** (🕒 9am-5pm). The monastery was founded in 1597 by Augustine monks and completed about 1660. Part of it is open to the public. Monks will show you through the chapel, a small museum, the library, and the courtyard flanked by the cloister with a collection of 17th-century canvases.

Only two buses a day call at La Candelaria, both of which come from Bogotá. Otherwise walk by a path from Ráquira (one hour). You can also go by taxi; a return taxi trip from Villa de Leyva to Ráquira and La Candelaria can be arranged for US\$30 (for up to four people), allowing some time in both villages.

Santuario de Iguaque

Iguaque is a 67.5 sq km nature reserve north-east of Villa de Leyva. It covers the highest part of the mountain range that stretches up to Arcabuco. There are eight small mountain lakes in the northern part of the reserve, sitting at an altitude of between 3550m and 3700m. The Laguna de Iguaque, which gave its name to the whole reserve, is the most important one, mostly because it was a sacred lake for the Muisca.

The **visitor center** (dm US\$9, 3 meals US\$8) is at an altitude of 2950m, 3km off the Villa de Leyva–Arcabuco road. It offers meals, accommodations in dorms, and collects the reserve's entrance fee (US\$9). If you plan on staying there overnight, check accommodations availability in advance at Bogotá's park office.

From Villa de Leyva take a bus to Arcabuco (four departures a day), get off after 12km at a place known as Los Naranjos and walk to the visitor center (3km). A walk from the visitor center uphill to the Laguna de Iguaque takes two to three hours. A leisurely return trip is likely to take four to six hours.

PARQUE NACIONAL EL COCUY

With snowcapped peaks, scintillating alpine lakes and glorious green valleys, Parque Nacional El Cocuy ranks as one of Colombia's most spectacular protected areas. Located in the highest part of the Cordillera Oriental, it tops out at Ritacumba Blanco, a 5330m peak.

The mountain chain is relatively compact and not difficult to reach – the gateway towns are Guicán and El Cocuy in northern Boyacá. It's an ideal place for trekking, although the routes are more suited to experienced walkers. There are no facilities in the park so you'll need to bring all your food and equipment including sleeping bags, warm clothing and a tent.

Some tour companies run trips this way. For a reliable private guide in Bogotá, contact **Rodrigo Arias** (☎ 310-211-4130; arias_rodrigo@hotmail.com), who can be reached through the Platypus Guesthouse.

SAN GIL

☎ 7 / pop 35,000

Tiny San Gil is building a reputation for itself as a center for ecotourism and adventure activities. It has a long way to go before it catches up with Queenstown, Durango or Interlaken, but the handful of tour operators can offer enough adventure to keep you busy for a few days.

The town itself is a bustling stop on the Bogotá–Bucaramanga road. It has a shady main square with huge old *ceibas* and an 18th-century cathedral. The main attraction is **Parque El Gallineral** (☎ 7-724-4372; Malecón at Calle 6; admission US\$1.80; 🕒 8am-6pm), a beautiful riverside park where the trees are covered with *barbas de viejo*, long silvery fronds of tillandsia that form spectacular transparent curtains of foliage.

If you stop in San Gil, be sure to make the short trip to Barichara, a charming colonial town in the nearby hills (p572).

Information

Bancolombia (Calle 12 No 10-44) Has 24-hour ATM.

CAI de Turismo (☎ 7-724-3433; cnr Malecón & Calle 7; 🕒 7:30am-noon & 1-6:30pm) The tourist office is near the entrance to the Parque El Gallineral. More reliable information can be found at one of the nearby ecotour companies.

Foxnet (Carrera 10 No 12-37; per hr US\$80¢; 🕒 7am-12:30pm & 2-8pm) Internet access in the Centro Comercial El Edén on the main plaza.

Tours

Several tour agencies in San Gil run white-water rafting on local rivers. A standard 10km run on Río Fonce (grades 1 to 3) costs US\$12 per person and takes 1½ hours, but longer, more adventurous trips on Río Chicamocha (grades up to 4) can be organized on request. Most operators also offer horse-riding, caving, paragliding, rappelling, rock climbing and ecological walks.

Colombia Rafting Expeditions (☎ 311-283-8647; colombiakayak5@hotmail.com; Carrera 10 No 7-83)

Macondo Adventures ((☎ 7-724-5646, 311-828-2905; macondohostal@hotmail.com; Macondo Guesthouse, Calle 10 No 7-66) Can organize all manner of tours. It's best to call ahead so it can put groups together (which lowers the cost).

Planeta Azul (☎ 7-724-0000; planetaazulsg@hotmail.com; Parque El Gallineral)

Xurvivors (☎ 7-724-1738; Calle 6 No 9-121; xurvivors@hotmail.com)

Sleeping & Eating

San Gil has plenty of hotels, predominantly budget ones, all across the center of town.

Macondo Guesthouse (☎ 724-4463, 311-828-2905; Calle 12 No 7-26; dm/s/d US\$4.50/6/9; 📺) This Australian-run place is located in a 180-year-old villa 1.5 blocks uphill from the main square. Amenities include kitchen facilities, book exchange and laundry service. Owner Shaun Carter also runs tours and rafting trips in the area.

Centro Real (☎ 7-724-0387; Calle 10 No 10-41; s/d/tr with bathroom US\$5/9/12; ☒) The Centro Real is a new place with 20 rooms. It's clean, comfortable, central and in high demand, so try calling ahead.

Hotel Mansión del Parque (☎ 7-724-5662; Calle 12 No 8-71; s/d/tr US\$16/21/25) Set in a colonial mansion at the corner of Parque Central, the Mansión del Parque has large rooms, the best of which have balconies overlooking the plaza.

Cafetería Donde Betty (cnr Carrera 9 & Calle 12; ☎ 7am-midnight) This pleasant café serves breakfast, sandwiches and thirst-quenching fruit shakes.

Getting There & Away

The bus terminal is 2km west of the town center on the road to Bogotá. Urban buses shuttle regularly between the terminal and the center, or take a taxi (US\$1).

Frequent buses run south to Bogotá (US\$15, 7½ hours) and north to Bucaramanga

(US\$5, 2½ hours). There are also half-hourly minibuses that run to Bucaramanga (US\$5, 2¼ hours). Buses to Barichara (US\$1.25, 40 minutes) leave every 45 minutes from the **Cotrasangil bus office** (Carrera 10 No 14-82), in the town center.

BARICHARA

☎ 7 / pop 4000

Barichara is the kind of town that Hollywood filmmakers dream about. A Spanish colonial town of striking beauty, the whitewashed buildings and stone streets look almost as new as the day they were created some 300 years ago. Granted, the movie-set appearance owes its debt to considerable reconstruction efforts made over the past 25 years, but all rebuilding has been done with taste in mind.

Strolling about, have a look at the massive 18th-century sandstone **Catedral de la Inmaculada Concepción**, on the main plaza, the largest and most elaborate single piece of architecture in town. The **Casa de la Cultura** (☎ 7-726-7002; Calle 5 No 6-29; admission US\$25¢; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) features a small collection of fossils and pottery of the Guane Indians.

From Barichara, you can visit the tiny old village of **Guane**, 10km to the northwest, where time seems to have frozen a couple of centuries ago. It has a fine rural church and a museum with a collection of fossils and Guane Indian artifacts.

Sleeping & Eating

Barichara has half-a-dozen hotels, plus some locals who rent rooms in their homes.

Aposentos (☎ 7-726-7294; Calle 6 No 6-40; r per person US\$9) This small, friendly hotel, right on the main plaza, offers five rooms. It's very good value and one of the cheapest places to stay.

Hotel Coratá (☎ 7-726-7110; Carrera 7 No 4-08; r per person US\$10) Historical hotel in a 280-year-old building decorated with antiques and wood furnishings. Spacious rooms have high ceilings and come with TV.

Hostal Misión Santa Bárbara (☎ 7-726-7163, in Bogotá 1-288-4949; Calle 5 No 9-12; s/d/tr US\$22/36/48, all incl breakfast; 📺) Housed in a beautiful, meticulously refurbished colonial mansion, this charming place has comfortable, old-fashioned rooms.

There are quite a number of simple, budget restaurants around the plaza and neighboring streets, including **Restaurante La Braza** (Carrera 6 No 6-31; ☎ noon-6pm), which serves cheap set meals

and typical local dishes. In the evening, try **Plenilunio Café** (Calle 6 No 7-74; dishes US\$3-4; ☎ 6:30-11pm) an Italian restaurant set in a small, cozy room with just four tables. You can hang out long after you've eaten, enjoying a book or a game of chess.

Getting There & Away

Buses shuttle between Barichara and San Gil every 45 minutes (US\$1, 40 minutes). Two buses a day (except Saturday) go to Guane, or you can walk there by an old Spanish trail in less than two hours.

BUCARAMANGA

☎ 7 / pop 560,000

Bucaramanga, the capital of Santander, is a fairly modern, busy commercial and industrial center of 600,000 people with an agreeable climate. It is noted for its numerous parks, cigars and the famous *hormiga culona*, a large ant that is fried and eaten. For the traveler, the only real reason to stop here is to break up an overland journey or change buses to reach nearby Girón.

Information

Bancolombia (☎ 7-630-4251; Carrera 18 No 35-02)

Click & Play (Calle 34 No 19-46, room 115, Centro Comercial La Triada; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-9pm) Internet and international phone calls.

Mundo Divisas (Calle 34 No 19-46, room 120, Centro Comercial La Triada; ☎ 8am-noon & 2:30-6pm) Money changer.

Telnet (☎ 7-670-5850; Calle 36 No 18-03; per hr US\$1; ☎ 7:30am-7:30pm) Internet and international phone call office.

Tourist Police (☎ 7-633-8342; Parque Santander; ☎ 24hr) This small police box hands out free city brochures and maps.

Sights

There is not much to see or do here, but it may be a refreshing stopover on the long route between Bogotá and the coast or Cúcuta. If you decide to stop here, visit the **Museo Casa de Bolívar** (☎ 7-630-4258; Calle 37 No 12-15; admission US\$0¢; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat), which contains ethnographic and historic collections.

Also, have some relaxing walks in the **Jardín Botánico Eloy Valenzuela** (☎ 7-648-0729; admission US\$25¢; ☎ 8am-5pm), in the suburb of Bucarica. To get there, take the Bucarica bus from Carrera 15 in the city center. Make

sure to take a side trip to Girón (p575), 9km away.

Sleeping

Budget hotels are centered on the Parque Centenario, particularly on Calle 31 between Carreras 19 and 22.

Residencias ABC (☎ 7-633-7352; Calle 31 No 21-44; s/d/tr US\$3/5/6) One of the cheapest in the area, rooms are basic and the street outside a bit noisy, but it's convenient to the center.

Hotel Morgan No 2 (☎ 7-630-4226; Calle 35 No 18-83; s/d/tr US\$13/18/20; ☎ ☎) Very central budget place with ample rooms equipped with TV and fans.

Hotel Ruitoque (☎ 7-633-4567; Carrera 19 No 37-26; s/d/tr US\$22/30/38, all incl breakfast; ☎ ☎) One of the cheapest hotels with air-con rooms.

Eating & Drinking

Typical regional dishes include *mute* and *cabro* or *cabrito*. The legendary *hormiga culona* is not a dish you order in restaurants but a kind of snack you buy by weight in shops (about US\$30 per kilogram). The ants appear only in season (roughly March to May) and are sold in delicatessens and in the shopping mall of **Sanandresito La Isla** (Diagonal 15 btwn Calles 55 & 56).

Most night entertainment revolves around the eastern suburbs, with the Zona Rosa being the major focus. It's centered on Carrera 31 between Calles 33 and 34, and Calle 33 between Carreras 31 and 33, but bars and discos spread along Carrera 33 up to Calle 45.

Restaurante Vegetariano Salud y Vigor (Calle 36 No 14-24; meals US\$1.50-3; ☎ 7:30am-6:30pm Sun-Fri) Inexpensive lunches are served here.

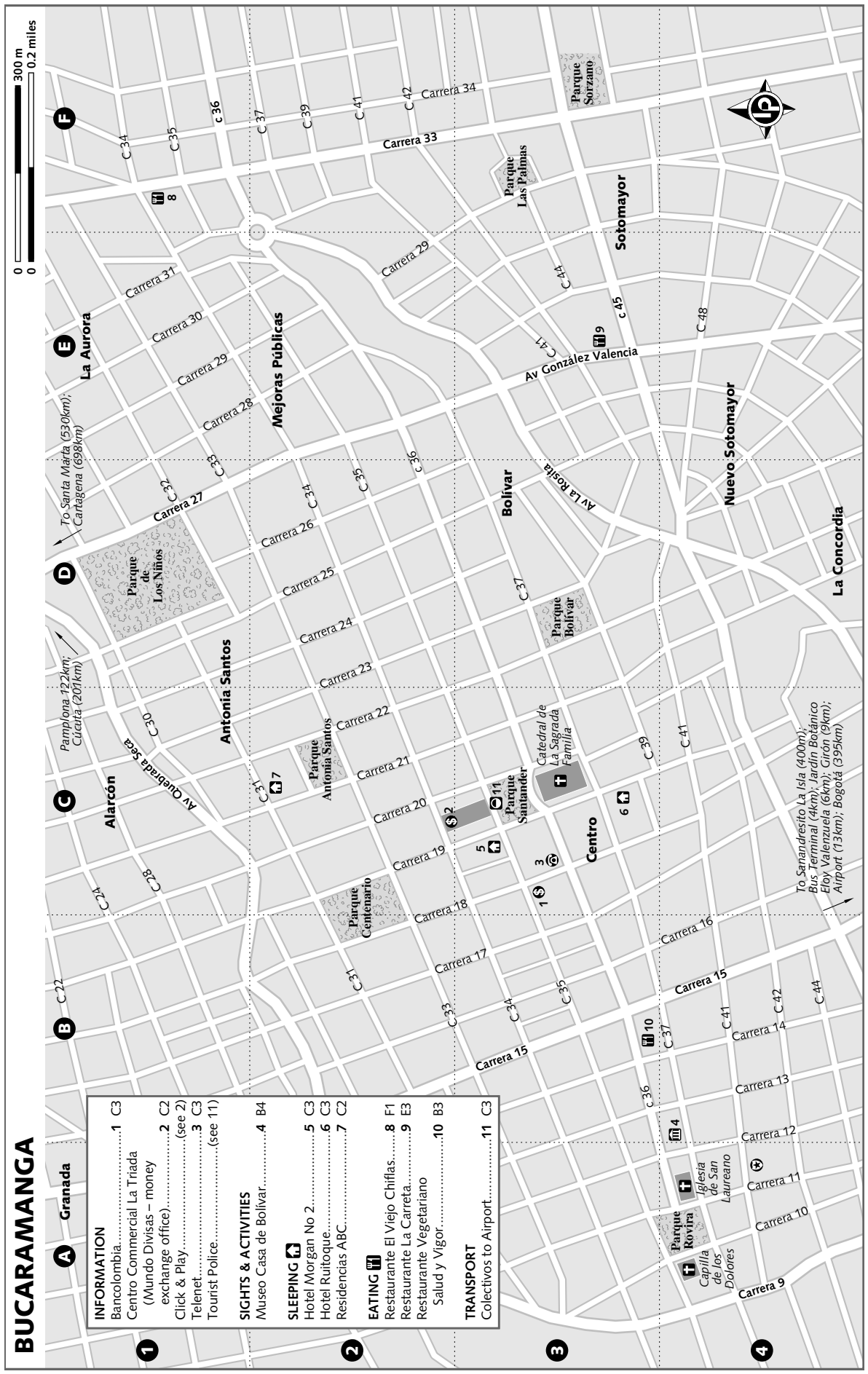
Restaurante El Viejo Chiflas (Carrera 33 No 34-10; mains US\$3-6; ☎ 11am-midnight) Good budget option, offering typical local food.

Restaurante La Carreta (Carrera 27 No 42-27; mains US\$6-12; ☎ noon-3:30pm & 6pm-midnight) This place has a 40-year-long tradition of fine food.

Getting There & Away

Bucaramanga's bus terminal is southwest of the center, midway to Girón; frequent city buses marked 'Terminal' go there from Carreras 15 and 33. Buses depart from here regularly for Bogotá (US\$22, 10 hours), Cartagena (US\$36, 12 hours), Cúcuta (US\$10, six hours) and Santa Marta (US\$31, nine hours).

COLOMBIA



BUCARAMANGA

- A** Granada
 - B** Alarcón
 - C** Centro
 - D** La Aurora
 - E** Mejoras Públicas
 - F** Sotomayor
- INFORMATION**
- 1 Bancolombia..... C3
 - 2 Centro Comercial La Triada (Mundo Divisas - money exchange office)..... C2
 - 3 Click & Play..... (see 2)
 - 4 Telenet..... C3
 - 5 Tourist Police..... (see 11)
- SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**
- 6 Museo Casa de Bolívar..... B4
- SLEEPING**
- 7 Hotel Morgan No 2..... C3
 - 8 Hotel Ruitoque..... C3
 - 9 Residencias ABC..... C2
- EATING**
- 10 Restaurante El Viejo Chiflas..... F1
 - 11 Restaurante La Carreta..... E3
 - 12 Restaurante Vegetariano Salud y Vigor..... B3
- TRANSPORT**
- 13 Colectivos to Airport..... C3

GIRÓN

☎ 7 / pop 45,000

The cobbled streets, horse carts and lazy atmosphere of San Juan de Girón are a world away in time but just 9km in distance from bustling Bucaramanga.

The tourist office, **Secretaría de Cultura y Turismo** (☎ 7-646-1337; Calle 30 No 26-64; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm) is in Casa de la Cultura. There are two ATMs on the eastern side of the Parque Principal. Internet facilities include **el port@l.net** (Carrera 25 No 30-86; per hr US\$60¢; ☎ 8am-11pm Mon-Fri).

The pleasant town center, founded in 1631, has been largely restored and preserves much of its historic character. The **Plazuela Peralta** and **Plazuela de las Nieves** are among its most enchanting spots. Also have a look at the eclectic **Catedral del Señor de los Milagros** on the main plaza.

For more sleeping options, Girón is just a short trip from Bucaramanga.

If you wish to stay in town longer, try the pleasant **Hotel Las Nieves** (☎ 7-646-8968; Calle 30 No 25-71; s/d/tr US\$11/18/22) on the main plaza. It has large, comfortable rooms. The hotel has a budget restaurant serving set meals and regional dishes.

You can also dine out in any of several finer restaurants that serve hearty, typical food in charming, colonial-style surroundings, including **Restaurante Villa del Rey** (Calle 28 No 27-49; mains US\$3-6; ☎ 8am-6pm), **Mansión del Fraile** (Calle 30 No 25-27; mains US\$4-6; ☎ noon-6pm) and **Restaurante La Casona** (Calle 28 No 28-09; mains US\$5-8; ☎ noon-6pm).

Frequent city buses from Carreras 15 and 33 in Bucaramanga will deposit you at Girón's main plaza in half an hour.

PAMPLONA

☎ 7 / pop 45,000

Spectacularly set in the deep Valle del Espíritu Santo in the Cordillera Oriental, colonial-era Pamplona is a delightful town of old churches, narrow streets and a bustling commerce. If you've just come up from the hot plains of Venezuela, it makes for a nice stopover en route to central Colombia.

Pamplona has quite a collection of museums and almost all are set in restored colonial houses. One of the best, the **Museo de Arte Moderno Ramírez Villamizar** (☎ 7-568-2999; Calle 5 No 5-75; admission US\$50¢; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun) features about 40 works by

Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar, one of Colombia's most outstanding artists, who was born in Pamplona in 1923.

One of the cheapest hotels in town is **Hotel Orsúa** (☎ 7-568-2470; Calle 5 No 5-67; s/d/tr US\$5/10/14) on the main plaza. The best place in town is **Hotel Cariongo** (☎ 7-568-1515; cnr Calle 9 & Carrera 5; d US\$22) located three blocks southwest of the plaza.

Pamplona's new bus terminal is 600m southwest of the main square. You can walk to town in about 10 minutes, or pay US\$1 for a cab.

Pamplona is on the Bucaramanga–Cúcuta road, and buses pass by regularly to both Cúcuta (US\$4, 1¼ hours, 72km) and Bucaramanga (US\$8, 4½ hours, 124km). You may need to inquire at several different bus company windows to find the next departing bus or shared taxi.

CÚCUTA

☎ 7 / pop 560,000

Cúcuta is a hot, uninspiring city of around half a million people. It's the capital of Norte de Santander and a busy commercial center, fueled by its proximity to Venezuela, just 12km away. The city doesn't have significant tourist attractions, so unless you're en route to or from Venezuela there's little reason to visit.

Information

There's a one-hour time difference between Colombia and Venezuela. Move your watch one hour forward when crossing from Colombia into Venezuela. Once in Venezuela, pick up a tourist card – it's issued directly by the DIEX office in San Antonio del Táchira, on Carrera 9 between Calles 6 and 7.

Adpostal (Calle 8A) North of Parque Nacional for post.

Bancolombia Av 0 (Av 0 No 14-50); Av 5 (Av 5 No 9-80)

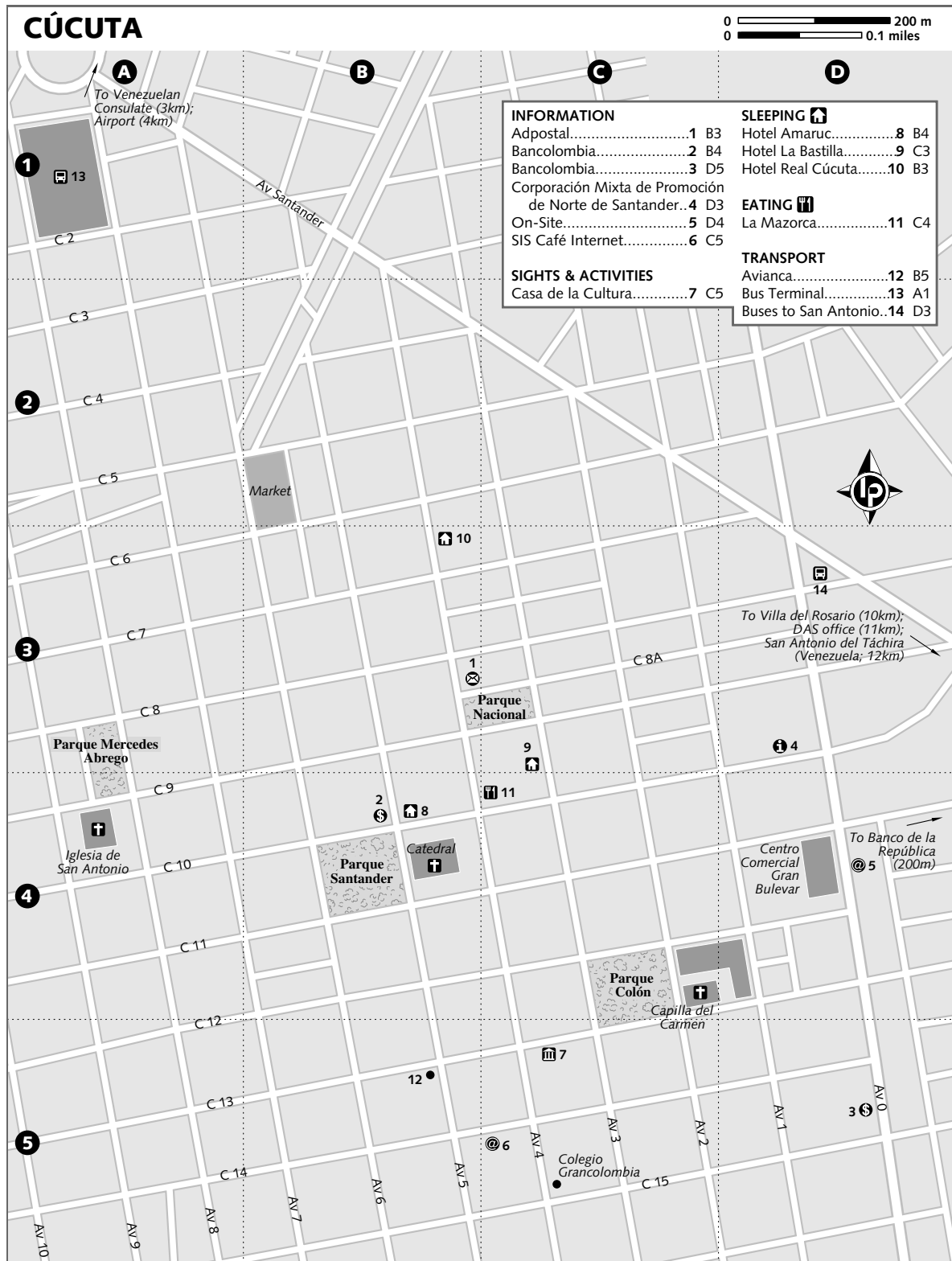
Changes traveler's checks.

Corporación Mixta de Promoción de Norte de Santander (☎ 7-571-3395; Calle 10 No 0-30) For tourist information.

Immigration The Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (DAS) immigration post (where you have to get an exit/entry stamp in your passport) is just before the border on the Río Táchira, on the left side of the road going toward Venezuela.

On-Site (Av 0 No 11-55; per hr US\$50¢; ☎ 8am-10pm) Internet café.

SIS Café Internet (Calle 14 No 4-47; per hr US\$50¢; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9:30am-6pm Sun)



COLOMBIA

Sights

If you have a few hours to spare, a visit to **Casa de la Cultura** (☎ 7-571-6689; Calle 13 No 3-67; ☒ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) is recommended. Casa de la Cultura is noted for its impressive clock tower, which has temporary art exhibitions. **Banco de la República** (☎ 7-575-0131; Av Diagonal Santander at Calle 11; ☒ 8am-noon & 2-6pm

Mon-Fri) also stages temporary exhibitions in its Area Cultural.

You can also take a short trip to **Villa del Rosario**, 10km southeast of Cúcuta, on the road to the border, where the constitution of Gran Colombia was drawn up and passed in 1821. To commemorate the event, the Parque de la Gran Colombia was laid out. It features

the ruins of the Templo del Congreso (the church where sessions of the congress were held, which was destroyed by an earthquake in 1875) and Casa de Santander (the house where Santander was born, now a small museum). To get to these sights from Cúcuta, take a San Antonio bus, not the Villa del Rosario bus.

Sleeping & Eating

Avoid any hotel within six blocks of the bus station; the area is grimy and unsafe at night.

Hotel La Bastilla (☎ 7-571-2576; Av 3 No 9-42; s/d/tr US\$7/9/14) This budget option has reasonably clean rooms with a central location two blocks from the central square. Rooms have windows which is rare for this price range.

Hotel Real Cúcuta (☎ 7-583-2014; Av 4 No 6-51; s/d/tr with fan US\$8/11/15, with air-con US\$11/14/18; 🚽) One of the cheapest options providing air-con, the Real Cúcuta has mostly spacious triple rooms.

Hotel Amaruc (☎ 7-571-7625; cnr Calle 10 & Av 5; s/d with fan US\$18/23, with air-con US\$24.50/32; 🚽 🚻) Very central place overlooking the Parque Santander.

La Mazorca (Av 4 No 9-67; set meals US\$2; mains US\$5-7) Enjoy Creole meals and a choice of wines in this sunny courtyard restaurant.

Getting There & Away

The airport is 4km north of the city center. Minibuses marked 'El Trigal Molinos,' which you catch on Av 1 or Av 3 in the center, will drop you 350m from the terminal, or take a taxi (US\$3). Cúcuta is connected to most

major Colombian cities, including Bogotá (US\$90 to US\$120) and Cartagena (US\$90 to US\$130). There are no direct flights to Venezuela – go to San Antonio del Táchira (p1017), the Venezuelan border town, 12km from Cúcuta.

The **bus terminal** (Av 7 at Calle 1) is very dirty and very busy – one of the poorest in Colombia. Watch your belongings closely and ignore official-looking men wanting to sell you travel insurance, bus tickets, contraband or anything else (they are conmen). Buy tickets directly from company offices.

There are frequent buses to Bucaramanga (US\$13, six hours). At least two dozen buses daily run to Bogotá (US\$32, 16 hours).

CARIBBEAN COAST

Soaked with sunshine and steeped in history, the Caribbean coast offers a wealth of attractions that make it Colombia's biggest draw for both domestic and international visitors.

The crown jewel along the coast is Cartagena, a colonial city with a beauty and romance unrivaled anywhere else in the country, if not the continent. If natural beauty is more your thing, try Parque Nacional Tayrona, a spectacular stretch of deserted beach and virgin rainforest. Or if you prefer Indiana Jones-style adventures, try the grueling three-day jungle trek to Ciudad Perdida, the Lost City.

The 1760km coast covers a range of ecosystems, from the dense jungles of the Darién Gap on the border with Panama in the west, to the desert of La Guajira near Venezuela in the east. There is also a string of beautiful coral reefs – some of the best diving is at Taganga, near Santa Marta.

Local inhabitants, the *costeños*, are easy-going, fun-loving folks of mainly African descent. Their quiet lifestyle is sometimes interrupted by raucous festivals, including the most colorful and wild of Colombian feasts, the Carnaval de Barranquilla; the Carnaval de Cartagena is only marginally less mad.

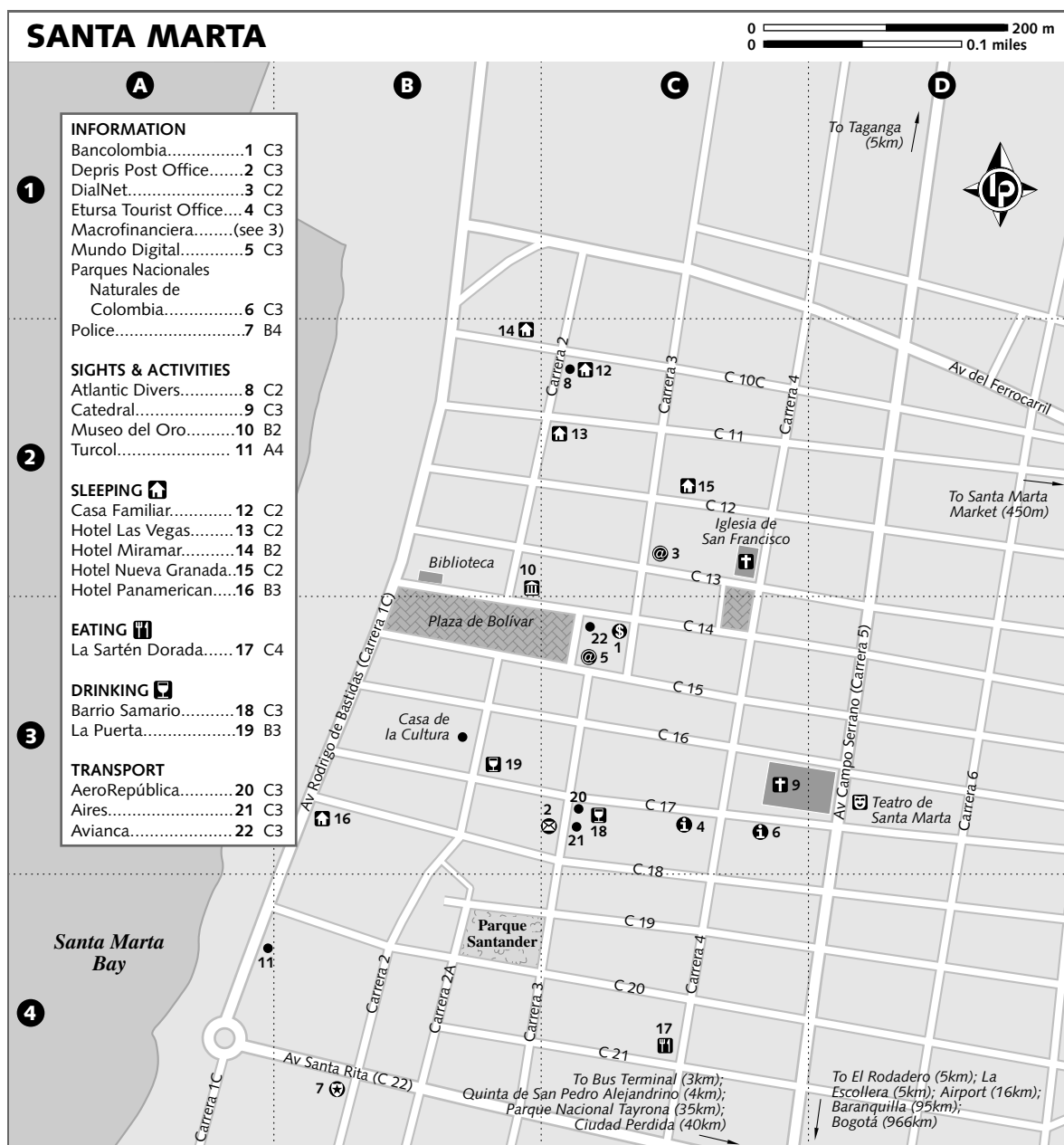
SANTA MARTA

☎ 5 / pop 410,000

Santa Marta's grace as a colonial city has faded under newer concrete buildings, but its proximity to the sea still makes it an attractive destination. For Colombians this is one of the most popular tourist towns in the country,

GETTING TO VENEZUELA

If you're heading to Venezuela, take one of the frequent buses or shared taxis that run from Cúcuta's bus terminal to San Antonio del Táchira (around US\$50¢ respectively, paid in either pesos or bolivars). You can also catch *colectivos* and buses to San Antonio from the corner of Av Diagonal Santander and Calle 8, in the center. Changing transport is not necessary. Don't forget to get off just before the bridge to have your passport stamped at DAS. This border is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For information on entering Colombia from Venezuela, see p1019.



offering liberal amounts of sun, rum and long stretches of sandy beachfront property.

Among the city's attractions are an aquarium and the grand hacienda where Simón Bolívar died. El Rodadero, just to the south (today within the city limits) is a fashionable beach resort. Santa Marta is also the jumping-off point for the attractive fishing village of Taganga and the beautiful Parque Nacional Tayrona. Santa Marta is also the place to organize a trip to Ciudad Perdida, Tayrona's great pre-Hispanic city.

Information

Some *casas de cambio* (currency-exchange offices) are located on Calle 14 between Carreras 3 and 5.

Bancolombia (Carrera 3 No 14-10) Changes traveler's checks.

Depris Post Office (Carrera 3 No 17-26; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat)

DialNet (Calle 13 No 3-13, San Francisco Plaza, Local 205; per hr US\$0.50; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9:30am-5pm Sun) Internet café.

Etursa Tourist Office (☎ 5-421-1833; Calle 17 No 3-120) The city tourist office.

Macrofinanciera (Calle 13 No 3-13, San Francisco Plaza, Local 206) Private money changer.

Mundo Digital (Calle 15 No 2B-19, Local 108; per hr US\$1.20; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-8pm Sat, 9am-5pm Sun) Internet café.

Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia (☎ 5-423-0704; www.parquesnacionales.gov.co in Spanish; Calle 17 No 4-06)

Sights

The **Museo del Oro** (☎ 5-421-0953; Calle 14 No 2-07; admission free; 🕒 8-11:45am & 2-5:45pm Mon-Fri) has an interesting collection of Tayrona objects, mainly pottery and gold. Don't miss the impressive model of Ciudad Perdida, especially if you plan on visiting the real thing.

The massive whitewashed **Catedral** (Carrera 4 at Calle 17) claims to be Colombia's oldest church, but work was not actually completed until the end of the 18th century. It holds the ashes of the town's founder, Rodrigo de Bastidas (just to the left as you enter the church).

The **Quinta de San Pedro Alejandrino** (☎ 5-433-0589; admission US\$4; 🕒 9:30am-4:30pm) is the hacienda where Simón Bolívar spent his last days and died. You can visit the house, arranged in the style of Bolívar's day, and the Museo Bolivariano, which features works of art donated by Latin American artists. The Quinta is in the far eastern suburb of Mamatoco; take the Mamatoco bus from the waterfront to get there.

Activities

Santa Marta is an important **scuba-diving** center. Most dive schools have settled in nearby Taganga (see p580), but there are also some operators in the city center, including **Atlantic Divers** (☎ 5-421-4883; Calle 10C No 2-08).

Tours

Santa Marta's tour market mainly revolves around Ciudad Perdida (p581). Tours are organized by **Turcol** (☎ 5-421-2256, 5-433-3737; turcol24@hotmail.com; Carrera 1C No 20-15). You can book and pay for the tour through some hotels (eg the Hotel Miramar or Casa Familiar), which will then transfer your application and payment to Turcol.

Sleeping

There are plenty of hotels in the city center.

Hotel Miramar (☎ 5-423-3276; elmiramar_santa_marta@yahoo.com; Calle 10C No 1C-59; dm/s/d US\$4/4.50/9; 📺) Some of the cheapest accommodations in town. The place has long been the archetypal gringo hotel, with a noisy, hippie-type atmosphere, but it's very basic and unkempt. It has a café serving budget meals and drinks.

Casa Familiar (☎ 5-421-1697; www.hospederiacasa.familiar.freeservers.com; Calle 10C No 2-14; dm/s/d/tr US\$4/5/8/10) This friendly and clean high-rise hotel is a popular backpacker hangout, with

both private rooms and dorms. There's a nice rooftop terrace for lounging.

Hotel Las Vegas (☎ 5-421-5094; Calle 11 No 2-08; s/d US\$5.50/10, with air-con US\$9.50/13.50; 📺) Small but functional, Las Vegas has some of the cheapest air-con rooms in town. Streetside rooms have a window and balcony but do get noisy.

Hotel Nueva Granada (☎ 5-421-1337; www.hotel.nuevagrana.com; Calle 12 No 3-17; s/d US\$11/16, with air-con US\$16/23; 📺 📺 📺) Value for money; probably the best mid-range place in town. It's well maintained (rare in Santa Marta); there is a pretty courtyard and a small swimming pool.

Eating & Drinking

There are a lot of cheap restaurants around the budget hotels, particularly on Calles 11 and 12 near the waterfront, where you can get a basic set meal for at most US\$2.

Santa Marta's nightlife really heats up on weekends and you'll have no trouble finding a place to salsa.

La Sartén Dorada (cnr Carrera 4 & Calle 21; mains US\$4-7; 🕒 11:15am-3:30pm) One of the cheaper restaurants that does good seafood.

Hotel Panamerican (Carrera 1C; dishes US\$2-3) For something more upscale, try the restaurant here.

La Puerta (Calle 17 No 2-29; 🕒 6pm-3am Tue-Sat) An unsigned, lively student place offering a mix of rock and salsa music, and it gets very crowded.

El Garaje (Taganga; 🕒 10pm-late Wed-Sat) Well worth visiting on a Wednesday when the rest of Santa Marta is quiet, El Garaje is a fun, open-air bar at the back end of Taganga. It's best after midnight.

Barrio Samario (Calle 17 No 3-36; 🕒 6pm-3am) This Belgian-run salsa bar reels in a slightly more mature crowd.

Entertainment

La Escollera (Calle 5 No 4-107, El Rodadero; admission US\$13; 🕒 9pm-4am Wed-Sun) Trendy and expensive disco on a small islet in the northern end of El Rodadero.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport is 16km south of the city on the Barranquilla-Bogotá road. City buses marked 'El Rodadero Aeropuerto' will take you there in 45 minutes from Carrera 1C. **Avianca** (☎ 5-421-4018; Carrera 2A No 14-47), **AeroRepública**

GETTING TO VENEZUELA

Half-hourly buses depart for Maicao (US\$10, four hours), where you change for a *colectivo* to Maracaibo (Venezuela; p1008). *Colectivos* depart regularly from about 5am to 3pm (US\$10, 2½ hours) and go as far as Maracaibo's bus terminal. Maicao is not the safest of towns – stay there as briefly as possible and don't move outside the bus terminal.

There are also three buses daily from Santa Marta direct to Maracaibo (US\$29, seven hours), operated by Expreso Brasilia, Expresos Amerlujo and Unitransco/Bus Ven. They come through from Cartagena, go to Maracaibo and continue to Caracas.

Venezuelan entry formalities are done in Paraguachón, on the Venezuelan side of the border. Wind your watch one hour forward when crossing from Colombia to Venezuela. For information on traveling from Maracaibo, Venezuela to Colombia, see p1011.

(☎ 5-421-0120; cnr Carrera 3 & Calle 17) and **Aires** (Carrera 3) service Santa Marta. Flights include Bogotá (US\$80 to US\$130 one way) and Medellín (US\$80 to US\$130).

BUS

The bus terminal is on the southeastern outskirts of the city. Frequent minibuses go there from Carrera 1C in the center.

Half-a-dozen buses run daily to Bogotá (US\$41, 16 hours) and about the same number travel to Bucaramanga (US\$28, nine hours). Buses to Barranquilla (US\$4, 1¾ hours) depart every 15 to 30 minutes. Some of them go direct to Cartagena (US\$10, four hours), but if not, there are immediate connections in Barranquilla.

AROUND SANTA MARTA

Taganga

(☎ 5 / pop 2500

Lured by sun, sand and cheap diving courses, the relaxed fishing village of Taganga is growing as a backpacker hideaway. Taganga, located 5km northeast of Santa Marta, is easily accessible by frequent minibuses from Carrera 1C. The village's beach is packed with boats and open-air restaurants. Locals offer boat excursions along the coast, or you can walk around the surrounding hills, which provide good views.

Playa Grande is a magnificent bay northwest of the village. You can either walk there (20 minutes) or take a boat from Taganga (US\$1). The beach is lined with palm-thatched restaurants serving fried fish.

Taganga is a popular scuba-diving center, with half-a-dozen dive schools offering dives and courses. Local services are among the cheapest you can find in Colombia. A four-day open-water PADI/NAUI course including

six dives costs US\$200 and a minicourse with two dives is US\$45. The best local schools include **Centro de Buceo Tayrona** (☎ 5-421-9195; www.buceotayrona.net; Calle 18 No 1-39) and **Centro de Buceo Poseidon** (☎ 5-421-9224; www.poseidondivecenter.com; Calle 18 No 1-69).

La Casa de Felipe (☎ 5-421-9101; www.lacasadefelipe.com; Carrera 5A No 19-13; dm/s/d/tr US\$4/10/13/18; ☎) is a quiet and pleasant place that offers four rooms with bath and three suites with bathroom and kitchenette. Run by a friendly Frenchman, Jean-Philippe, the hotel is a few blocks uphill from the beach, past the soccer pitch.

Casa Blanca (☎ 5-421-9232; barbus85@latinmail.com; Carrera 1 No 18-161; r per person US\$6; ☎) hotel is right on the beach. Each of its 10 rooms has a private bath and a balcony with a hammock overlooking the bay. Guests can use the kitchen free of charge.

Rooms with private bathroom are clean and comfortable at **Techos Azules** (Blue Roofs ☎ 5-421-9141; cacabelofreddy@yahoo.com.mx; r per person US\$6.50), and it has good beach access. It's located uphill from the Casa Blanca, between the sea and the road into town.

There is a string of open-air restaurants along the waterfront, where a fresh fried fish with rice and salad shouldn't cost more than US\$5.

For entertainment, check out El Garaje (p579).

Parque Nacional Tayrona

One of Colombia's most popular national parks, **Tayrona** (admission US\$9) is on the jungle-covered coast just east of Santa Marta. The park's beaches, set in deep bays and shaded with coconut palms, are among the loveliest in Colombia. Some are bordered by coral reefs, and snorkeling is good (bring your own

equipment) but be careful of the treacherous offshore currents. The region was once the territory of the Tayrona Indians and some remnants have been found in the park, the most important being the ruins of the pre-Hispanic town of Pueblito.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The park's main entrance is in **El Zaíno** (where you pay the entrance fee), 35km from Santa Marta on the coastal road to Riohacha. From El Zaíno, a 4km paved side road goes to **Cañaveral**, on the seaside. Here you'll find the park's administrative center, a campground, cabañas, a restaurant and a small museum.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Cañaveral's small **Museo Arqueológico Chairama** displays some archaeological finds excavated in Pueblito. From Cañaveral, most visitors take a 45-minute walk west to Arrecifes, where there are budget lodging and eating facilities and the coast is spectacular, dotted with **massive boulders**.

From Arrecifes, a 20-minute walk northwest along the beach will bring you to La Piscina, a deep bay partly cut off from the open sea by an underground rocky chain. It's a good place for **snorkeling**. Another 20-minute walk will take you to the Cabo San Juan de la Guía, a beautiful cape with **good beaches** and views. From the Cabo, a scenic path goes inland uphill to Pueblito, a 1½-hour walk away, providing some splendid **tropical-forest scenery**.

SLEEPING & EATING

Most travelers stay in Arrecifes, where there are three places to stay and eat. Most backpackers end up at Cabo San Juan de la Guía, where there are cheap accommodations in hammocks (US\$2).

Rancho Lindo (Arrecifes; per person campsites/hammocks US\$1.50/2.50) Offers a campsite, rents out hammocks under the roof and has a restaurant (meals US\$4 to US\$6).

Finca El Paraíso (Arrecifes; ☎ 310-691-3626; campsites US\$4.50, per person hammocks/cabañas US\$2.50/9) Just behind the Rancho Lindo, this place has cabañas, undercover hammocks, campsites and a restaurant (meals US\$5 to US\$7).

Bucarú (Arrecifes) A 10-minute walk further west along the beach is Bucarú, an offspring of El Paraíso offering similar facilities to its parent.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

You can get to El Zaíno (US\$2.50, one hour) by Palomino buses which depart regularly from Santa Marta's market (Map p578, corner Carrera 11 and Calle 11). From El Zaíno, walk for 50 minutes to Cañaveral or catch the jeep that shuttles between the two places (US60¢, 10 minutes). Alternatively a tourist bus departs most days from outside the Hotel Miramar at 10am, driving direct to Cañaveral.

CIUDAD PERDIDA

Ciudad Perdida (literally the 'Lost City') is one of the largest pre-Columbian towns discovered in the Americas. It was built between the 11th and 14th centuries on the northern slopes of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and was most probably the Tayronas' biggest urban center. During their conquest, the Spaniards wiped out the Tayronas, and their settlements disappeared under the lush tropical vegetation. So did Ciudad Perdida for four centuries, until its accidental discovery in 1975 by *guaqueros* (robbers of pre-Columbian tombs).

Ciudad Perdida sits at an altitude of between 950m and 1300m, about 40km southeast of Santa Marta as the crow flies. The central part of the city is set on a ridge, from which various stone paths descend to other sectors on the slopes. There are about 150 stone terraces – some in remarkably good shape – that once served as foundations for the houses. Originally the urban center was completely cleared of trees, before being reclaimed by the jungle. Today the city is quite overgrown, which gives it a somewhat mysterious air.

Ciudad Perdida is hidden deep in the thick forest amid rugged mountains, far away from any human settlements and without access roads. The way to get there is by foot and the return trip takes six days. The trail begins in El Mamey and goes up along the Río Buritaca. The section between Santa Marta and El Mamey is done by vehicle.

Access to Ciudad Perdida is by tour only, organized by Turcol in Santa Marta. You cannot do the trip on your own, nor hire an independent guide. The all-inclusive six-day tour (about US\$180 per person) includes transport, food, accommodations (in hammocks), porters, guides and permits. Tours are in groups of four to 12 people, and depart

year-round as soon as a group is assembled. You carry your own personal belongings. Take a flashlight, water container and insect repellent.

The trip takes three days uphill to Ciudad Perdida, one day at the site and two days back down. The hike may be tiring due to the heat, and if it's wet (as it is most of the year) the paths are pretty muddy. The driest period is from late December to February or early March. There are several creeks to cross on the way; be prepared to get your shoes wet and carry a spare pair.

Guerrilla activity is prevalent – be extra careful when traveling around these parts.

BARRANQUILLA

📞 5 / pop 1.3 million

A maze of concrete blocks and dusty streets, Barranquilla is an industrial giant and key port that ranks as Colombia's fourth-biggest city. There are few tourist attractions and little reason to visit, unless you enjoy touring obscure Latin American port cities or happen to be around during Barranquilla's explosive four-day Carnival, one of the biggest and best of Colombia's many festivals.

If you're stuck, you could kill some time at the **Catedral Metropolitana** (cnr Calle 53 & Carrera 46), which has a bunkerlike facade but a remarkable interior decorated with stained-glass pieces imported from Germany.

The city center is run down and unattractive, but if you are looking for some cheap accommodations this is your best bet; try the **Hotel Colonial Inn** (📞 5-379-0241; Calle 42 No 43-131; s/d/tr US\$11/16/18; 🚽), an atmospheric building with fairly comfortable rooms with TV. If you have a little more cash to spend it is better to stay in El Prado, 3km northwest of the center. Here you will find **Hotel Sima** (📞 5-358-4600; hotelsima@enred.com; Carrera 49 No 72-19; s/d incl breakfast US\$30/36; 🚽), a reasonable place with air-con rooms and cable TV.

The bus terminal is located 7km from the city center. It's not convenient, and it may take up to an hour to get to the terminal by urban bus. It's much faster to go by taxi (US\$4, 20 minutes).

CARTAGENA

📞 5 / pop 1.1 million

A fairytale city of romance, legends and sheer beauty, Cartagena de Indias is an addictive place that can be hard to escape.

Routine sightseeing tours won't do it justice so throw away your checklist of museums and instead just stroll through Cartagena's maze of cobbled alleys, where enormous balconies are shrouded in bougainvillea and massive churches cast their shadows across leafy plazas.

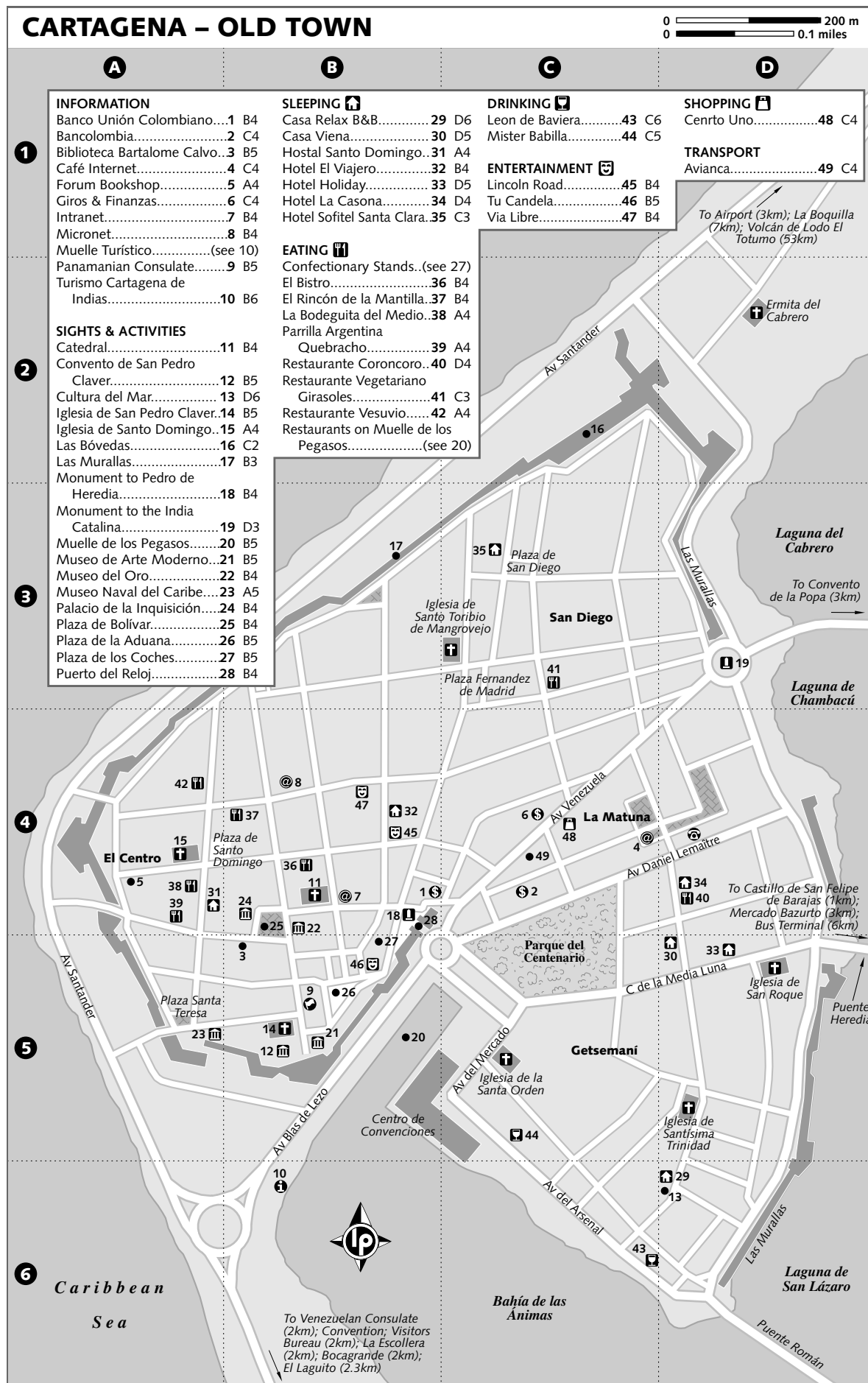
Founded in 1533, Cartagena swiftly blossomed into the main Spanish port on the Caribbean coast and the gateway to the north of the continent. Treasure plundered from the indigenous people was stored here until the galleons were able to ship it back to Spain. As such it became a tempting target for pirates and, in the 16th century alone, it suffered five dreadful sieges, the best known of which was that led by Francis Drake in 1586.

In response to pirate attacks, the Spaniards decided to make Cartagena an impregnable port and constructed elaborate walls encircling the town, and a chain of forts. These fortifications helped save Cartagena from subsequent sieges, particularly the fiercest attack of all led by Edward Vernon in 1741. In spite of these attacks Cartagena continued to flourish. During the colonial period, the city was the key outpost of the Spanish empire and influenced much of Colombia's history.

Today Cartagena has expanded dramatically and is surrounded by vast suburbs. It is now Colombia's largest port and an important industrial center of 1.1 million inhabitants. Nevertheless the old walled town has changed very little. It's a living museum of 16th- and 17th-century Spanish architecture with narrow winding streets, churches, plazas and large mansions.

Over the past decades, Cartagena has become a fashionable seaside resort. A modern tourist district has sprung up on Bocagrande and El Laguito, an L-shaped peninsula south of the old town. This sector, packed with top-class hotels and expensive restaurants, has become the main destination for moneyed Colombians and international charter tours. Most backpackers, however, stay in the historic part of town.

Cartagena's climate is hot but a fresh breeze blows in the evening, making this a pleasant time to stroll around the city. Theoretically the driest period is from December to April, while October and November are the wettest months.



Information

BOOKSTORES

Biblioteca Bartolome Calvo (☎ 5-660-0778; Calle de la Inquisición; ☎ 8:30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) City library.

Forum Bookshop (☎ 5-664-8290; cnr De Los Estribos & Paseo del Triunfo; ☎ 9am-8:30pm Mon-Sat, 4-8pm Sun) Good selection of books on Cartagena. It also serves coffee and snacks.

INTERNET ACCESS

The 2nd floor of Centro Uno has several small internet cafés.

Café Internet (Calle Roman No 34-02; per hr US\$1.20; ☎ 8am-7:30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun)

Intranet (Av Daniel Lemaitre; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat)

Micronet (Calle de la Estrella No 4-47; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8:30am-7:30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat)

MONEY

Cartagena is the only city in Colombia where you are likely to be propositioned (sometimes persistently) by street money changers offering fantastic rates. Don't be fooled. They are con artists and are very skilled at stealing your money. Central banks that change traveler's checks and/or cash:

Banco Unión Colombiano (Av Venezuela)

Bancolombia (Av Venezuela, Edificio Sur Americana)

Giros & Finanzas (Av Venezuela No 8A-87) This *casa de cambio* in the old town represents Western Union.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Turismo Cartagena de Indias (☎ 5-655-0211; www.turismocartagena.com in Spanish; Av Blas de Lezo; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) The tourist office is situated in the Muelle Turístico.

Sights

Cartagena's old town is its principal attraction, particularly the inner walled town consisting of the historical districts of El Centro and San Diego. Almost every street is worth strolling down. Getsemaní, the outer walled town, is less impressive and not so well preserved, but it is also worth exploring. Be careful – this part of the city may not be safe, especially after dark.

The old town is surrounded by **Las Murallas**, the thick walls built to protect it. Construction was begun toward the end of the 16th century, after the attack by Francis Drake; until that time, Cartagena was almost completely unprotected. The project took two centuries

to complete, due to repeated storm damage and pirate attacks.

The main gateway to the inner town was what is now the **Puerta del Reloj** (the clock tower was added in the 19th century). Just behind it is the **Plaza de los Coches**, a square once used as a slave market. Note the fine old houses with colonial arches and balconies and the monument to Pedro de Heredia, the founder of the city.

A few steps southwest is the **Plaza de la Aduana**, the oldest and largest square in the old town. It was used as a parade ground and all governmental buildings were gathered around it. At the southern outlet from the plaza is the **Museo de Arte Moderno** (☎ 5-664-5815; Plaza de San Pedro Claver; admission US\$0.50; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat), which presents temporary exhibitions.

Close by is the **Convento de San Pedro Claver**, built by the Jesuits, originally under the name of San Ignacio de Loyola. The name was changed in honor of the Spanish-born monk Pedro Claver, who lived and died in the convent. He spent his life ministering to the slaves brought from Africa. The convent is a monumental three-story building surrounding a tree-filled courtyard and part of it, including Claver's cell, is open to visitors as a **museum** (☎ 5-664-4991; Plaza de San Pedro Claver; admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 4pm Sun).

The church alongside, **Iglesia de San Pedro Claver**, has an imposing stone façade. The remains of San Pedro Claver are kept in a glass coffin in the high altar. Behind the church the **Museo Naval del Caribe** (☎ 5-664-7381; Calle San Juan de Dios; admission US\$3.50; ☎ 9am-7pm Tue-Sun) traces the naval history of Cartagena and the Caribbean.

Nearby, the **Plaza de Bolívar** is in a particularly beautiful area of the old town. On one side of the square is the **Palacio de la Inquisición**, a fine example of late-colonial architecture dating from the 1770s with its overhanging balconies and magnificent baroque stone gateway. It is now a **museum** (☎ 5-664-4113; Plaza de Bolívar; admission US\$1.60; ☎ 9am-7pm) that displays Inquisitors' instruments of torture, pre-Columbian pottery and works of art from the colonial and independence periods.

Across the plaza, the **Museo del Oro** (☎ 5-660-0778; Plaza de Bolívar; admission free; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Tue-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat) has a good collection of gold and pottery from the Sinú culture. The **Catedral** was begun in 1575 but was partially

destroyed by Drake's cannons in 1586, and not completed until 1612. The dome on the tower was added early in the 20th century.

One block west of the plaza is **Calle Santo Domingo**, a street that has hardly changed since the 17th century. On it stands the **Iglesia de Santo Domingo**, the city's oldest church. It is a large, heavy construction, and buttresses had to be added to the walls to support the naves.

At the northern tip of the old town are **Las Bóvedas**, 23 dungeons built in the defensive walls at the end of the 18th century. This was the last construction done in colonial times, and was destined for military purposes. Today the dungeons are tourist shops.

While you're wandering around call in at the **Muelle de Los Pegasos**, a lovely old port full of fishing, cargo and tourist boats, just outside the old town's southern walls.

Several forts were built at key points outside the walls to protect the city from pirates. By far the greatest is the huge stone fortress **Castillo de San Felipe de Barajas** (☎ 5-656-0590, 5-666-4790; Av Arévalo; admission US\$3; 🕒 8am-6pm), east of the old town, begun in 1639 but not completed until some 150 years later. Don't miss the impressive walk through the complex system of tunnels, built to facilitate the supply and evacuation of the fort.

The **Convento de La Popa** (☎ 5-666-2331; admission US\$2.50; 🕒 9am-5pm), perched on top of a 150m hill beyond the San Felipe fortress, was founded by the Augustinians in 1607. It has a nice chapel and a lovely flower-filled patio, and offers panoramic views of the city. There have been some cases of armed robbery on the zigzagging access road to the top – take a taxi (there's no public transport).

Activities

Taking advantage of the extensive coral reefs along Cartagena's coast, Cartagena has grown into an important **scuba-diving** center. Most local dive schools are in Bocagrande and El Laguito.

Caribe Dive Shop (☎ 5-665-3517; www.caribedive.shop.com; Hotel Caribe, Bocagrande)

Cultura del Mar (☎ 5-664-9312; Calle del Pozo 25-95, Getsamani)

Dolphin Dive School (☎ 5-660-0814; www.dolphin.diveschool.com; Edificio Costamar, Av San Martín No 6-105, Bocagrande)

Eco Buzos (☎ 5-655-5449; Edificio Alonso de Ojeda, Av Almirante Brion, El Laguito)

Festivals & Events

Cartagena's major annual events:

Festival Internacional de Cine International film festival, held in March/April, usually shortly before Easter.

Feria Artesanal y Cultural Regional craft fair taking place in June/July, accompanied by folk-music concerts and other cultural events.

Reinado Nacional de Belleza National beauty pageant held on November 11 to celebrate Cartagena's independence day. The fiesta strikes up several days before and the city goes wild. The event, also known as the Carnaval de Cartagena or Fiestas del 11 de Noviembre, is the city's most important annual bash.

Sleeping

Cartagena has a reasonable choice of budget accommodations and despite its touristy status, the prices of its hotels are no higher than in other large cities. The tourist peak is from late December to late January but, even then, it's relatively easy to find a room.

Most backpackers stay in Getsemaní. There are lots of small lodges here where you can get a bed for US\$5 or less. However, even if you are on a tight budget Cartagena is one city where you may want to upgrade and stay in the nicer barrio of El Centro or San Diego, especially if you can get a room with air-con. All hotels listed below have rooms with fans, unless specified.

Hotel Holiday (☎ 5-664-0948; Calle de la Media Luna, Getsemaní; s/d with bathroom US\$4.50/9) A popular and friendly traveler hangout. Its 13 neat, airy double rooms with bath are good value, and there are four smaller rooms without private facilities.

Casa Viena (☎ 5-664-6242; www.casaviena.com; Calle San Andrés, Getsemaní; dm with air-con US\$3, d with/without bathroom US\$10/5; 🕒 📺) One of the most popular and cheapest backpacker haunts has simple rooms, most with shared bathrooms. The hotel offers a typical range of facilities including laundry, book exchange, individual strongboxes and tourist information.

Hotel La Casona (☎ 5-664-1301; Calle Tripita y Media No 31-32, Getsemaní; s/d with air-con US\$12/16.50, without air-con US\$7/12; 🕒 📺) This family-run hotel consists of several boxy rooms with private bathroom. There's a friendly monkey in residence, as well as some tropical birds.

Hotel Las Vegas (☎ 5-664-5619; Calle San Agustín No 6-08; s/d/tr US\$14/19/23; 🕒 📺) Just round the corner from El Viajero, Las Vegas is another decent choice in this central area. Rooms are clean

SPLURGE!

Hotel Sofitel Santa Clara (☎ 5-664-6070; www.hotelsantaclara.com; Calle del Torno, San Diego; d US\$300, ste US\$360-400; P ☒ ☄ ☑ ☒) The sumptuous hotel shows little of its bland past – it used to be the Convento de Santa Clara (dating from 1621), and was later a charity hospital. Now the essence of luxury, it has 162 rooms and 18 suites, a gym, business center and two restaurants (French and Italian). As the premier place in town, it has seen its share of famous faces – even President Clinton lunched here in 2000. If you can't afford to spend the night it's still worth coming in for a drink; try the atmospheric El Coro bar, which is dressed up like an antiquarian library.

and come with TV. But those that face the street are noisy day and night.

Hotel El Viajero (☎ 5-664-3289; Calle del Porvenir No 35-68; s/d US\$16/21; ☒) One of the best budget bets in the area, this recently renovated 14-room hotel has a spacious courtyard and free use of the kitchen.

Hostal Santo Domingo (☎ 5-664-2268; Calle Santo Domingo No 33-46; s/d/tr with bathroom US\$20/28/34; ☒) On a lovely street in El Centro, this one offers few amenities for the price. For air-con, tack on another US\$6 per person.

Casa Relax B&B (☎ 5-664-1117; www.cartagenarela.com; Calle de Pozo No 20-105; s/d US\$36/45; ☒ ☑ ☒) The best place to stay in Getsemaní, this French-run B&B has 10 well-appointed rooms with TV and modern bathroom. A French breakfast is served around a communal table, allowing you to get to know the other guests.

Eating

Cartagena is a good place to eat, particularly at the upmarket level, but cheap places are also plentiful. Dozens of simple restaurants in the old town serve set *almuerzos* for less than US\$2, and many also offer set *comidas*. Among the most reliable is **Restaurante Coroncoro** (Calle Tripita y Media, Getsemaní; ☒ 8am-8pm). For veggie meals, try **Restaurante Vegetariano Girasoles** (Calle Quero, San Diego; ☒ 11:30am-5pm).

A dozen stalls on the Muelle de los Pegasos operate around the clock and offer plenty of local snacks, plus an unbelievable selection of fruit juices – try *nispero* (round fruit with soft flesh), *maracuyá* (passion fruit), *lulo* (prickly fruit with very soft flesh), *zapote* (eggplant-shaped fruit with orange, fibrous flesh) and *guanábana* (soursop). You can also try some typical local sweets at the confectionery stands at El Portal de los Dulces on the Plaza de los Coches.

Plaza Santo Domingo hosts six open-air cafés, serving a varied menu of dishes, snacks,

sweets and drinks. The cafés are not that cheap but the place is trendy and invariably fills up in the evening.

El Bistro (Calle de Ajos No 4-42; sandwiches US\$2.50; ☒ 8am-11pm Mon-Sat) Run by a pair of Germans, El Bistro offers useful travel tips and serves budget lunches and excellent dinners.

La Bodeguita del Medio (Calle Santo Domingo; mains US\$6-9; ☒ noon-midnight) Eat, drink and be merry under the watchful eyes of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro.

Restaurante Vesuvio (Calle de la Factoria No 36-11; mains US\$5-8; ☒ 11am-3pm & 6pm-1am Mon-Sat, 6pm-1am Sun) Run by a friendly Neapolitan named Mariano, this place serves authentic Italian meals and desserts. It's a favorite among Italian expats living in Cartagena.

El Rincón de la Mantilla (Calle de la Mantilla No 3-32; mains US\$6-9; ☒ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat) This atmospheric Colombian place serves meals both hot and fast. To cool off, try their excellent *sapote*, an addictive milk and fruit shake.

Parrilla Argentina Quebracho (Calle de Baloco; mains US\$8-12; ☒ noon-3pm & 7pm-midnight Mon-Thu, noon-midnight Fri & Sat) Argentine cuisine including famous juicy steaks in appropriately decorated surroundings, plus tango shows in the evening.

Drinking

A number of bars, taverns, discos and other venues stay open late. Plenty of them are on Av del Arsenal in Getsemaní, Cartagena's Zona Rosa.

Leon de Baviera (Av del Arsenal No 10B-65; ☒ 4pm-3am Tue-Sat) Run by an expat German named Stefan, this place is a little heavy on the Bavarian atmosphere, but still a great place to start a night of boozing. Expect lots of '80s and '90s rock music.

Entertainment

You can go on a night trip aboard a *chiva*, a typical Colombian bus, with a band playing

vallenato, a popular local rhythm. *Chivas* depart around 8pm from Av San Martín between Calles 4 and 5 in Bocagrande for a three- to four-hour trip, and leave you at the end of the tour in a discotheque – a good point from which to continue partying for the rest of the night.

Mister Babilla (Av del Arsenal No 8B-137; admission US\$6; ☎ 9pm-4am) This is one of the most popular discos in this area, yet also one of the most expensive ones. You will find cheaper venues nearby; just walk along the street, as everybody does, and take your pick.

Tu Candela (Portal de los Dulces No 32-25; admission US\$4; ☎ 8pm-4am) The upstairs portion of this club is great for salsa dancing while the downstairs is better for a quiet drink. It has a great location in the old town.

GAY & LESBIAN VENUES

Lincoln Road (Centro Calle del Porvenir No 35-18; admission US\$4; ☎ 10:30pm-3am Thu-Sat) Ultraflash gay club with lasers, strobe lights and pumping music, plus the occasional striptease.

Via Libre (Centro Calle de la Soledad No 5-52; admission US\$4; ☎ 10pm-4am Sat) Only open one night a week, this gay and lesbian-friendly discotheque is more casual than Lincoln Rd.

Getting There & Away

AIR

All major Colombian carriers operate flights to and from Cartagena. There are flights to Bogotá (US\$90 to US\$120), Cali (US\$120 to US\$150), Medellín (US\$80 to US\$125) and San Andrés (US\$230 to US\$250 return) among others.

The airport is in the suburb of Crespo, 3km northeast of the old city, and is serviced by frequent local buses that depart from various points, including India Catalina and Av Santander. *Colectivos* to Crespo depart from India Catalina; the trip costs US\$3 by taxi. The terminal has two ATMs and the Casa de Cambio América (in domestic arrivals) changes cash and traveler's checks.

BOAT

There's no ferry service between Cartagena and Colón in Panama, and there are very few cargo boats. A more pleasant way of getting to Panama is by sailboat. There are various boats, mostly foreign yachts, that take travelers from Cartagena to Colón via San Blas Archipelago (Panama) and vice versa, but this is not a

regular service. The trip takes four to six days and normally includes a couple of days at San Blas for snorkeling and spear fishing. It costs between US\$220 to US\$270, plus about US\$30 for food.

Check the advertising boards at Casa Viena and Hotel Holiday in Cartagena for contact details. Boats include the **Golden Eagle** (☎ 311-419-0428) and the **Melody** (☎ 315-756-2818; freshaircharters@yahoo.com); both have semiregular departures.

Beware of any con men attempting to lure you into 'amazing' Caribbean boat trips. We've heard horror stories of boats breaking down midvoyage, barely able to reach land because of a damaged mast or some other equipment failure. The most reliable boats trips will be organized via Casa Viena.

BUS

The bus terminal is on the eastern outskirts of the city, a long way from the center. Large green-and-white air-con Metrocar buses shuttle between the two every 10 minutes (US\$50¢, 40 minutes). In the center, you can catch them on Av Daniel Lemaitre. Catch the one with red letters on the board, which goes by a more direct route and is faster.

Half-a-dozen buses go daily to Bogotá (US\$43, 20 hours) and another half-a-dozen to Medellín (US\$40, 13 hours). Buses to Barranquilla run every 15 minutes or so (US\$4, two hours), and some continue on to Santa Marta; if not, just change in Barranquilla. Unitransco has one bus to Mompós at 7am (US\$15, eight hours); see Mompós (p590).

Three bus companies – **Expreso Brasilia** (☎ 5-663-2119), **Expresos Amerlujo** (☎ 5-653-2536) and **Unitransco/Bus Ven** (☎ 5-663-2065) – operate daily buses to Caracas (US\$68, 20 hours) via Maracaibo (US\$37, 10 hours). Unitransco is a bit cheaper than the other two, but you have to change buses on the border in Paraguachón. All buses go via Barranquilla, Santa Marta and Maicao. You'll save if you do the trip to Caracas in stages by local transport, with changes in Maicao and Maracaibo.

AROUND CARTAGENA

Islas del Rosario

This archipelago, about 35km southwest of Cartagena, consists of 27 small coral islands, including some tiny islets only big enough for a single house. The whole area has been decreed a national park, the Corales del Rosario.

Cruises through the islands are well established. Tours depart year-round from the Muelle Turístico in Cartagena. Boats leave between 8am and 9am daily and return about 4pm to 6pm. The cruise office at the Muelle sells tours in big boats for about US\$18, but independent operators hanging around may offer cheaper tours in smaller vessels, for US\$16 or even less. It's probably best (and often cheapest) to arrange the tour through one of the budget gringo hotels. Tours normally include lunch, but not the entrance fee to the aquarium (US\$5) on one of the islands, the port tax (US\$2) and the national-park entrance fee (US\$2).

Playa Blanca

This is one of the most beautiful beaches around Cartagena. It's about 20km southwest of the city, on the Isla de Barú, and it's the usual stop for the boat tours to the Islas del Rosario. The place is also good for snorkeling as the coral reef begins just off the beach (take snorkeling gear).

The beach has some rustic places to stay and eat. The most popular with travelers is **Campamento Wittenberg** (☎ 311-436-6215), run by a Frenchman named Gilbert. It offers accommodations in beds (US\$4) or hammocks (US\$3) and serves meals.

The easiest way of getting to the beach is with Gilbert, who comes to Casa Viena in Cartagena once a week (usually on Wednesday) and takes travelers in his boat (US\$6, 45 minutes). If this doesn't coincide with your itinerary, go to Cartagena's main market, Mercado Bazurto, and go by boat or bus. Boats depart from about 8am to 10:30am daily except Sunday, when an early-morning bus runs directly to the beach.

La Boquilla

This small fishing village is 7km north of Cartagena on a peninsula between the sea and the seaside lagoon. There's a pleasant place known as El Paraíso, a five-minute walk from the bus terminus, where you can enjoy a day on the beach. The locals fish with their famous *atararrayas* (a kind of net) at the lagoon, and you can arrange boat trips with them along the narrow water channels cutting through the mangrove woods. Negotiate the price and only pay after they bring you back.

Plenty of beachfront palm-thatched restaurants attract people from Cartagena on weekends; most are closed at other times.

Frequent city buses run to La Boquilla from India Catalina in Cartagena (US\$40¢, 30 minutes).

Volcán de Lodo El Totumo

About 50km northeast of Cartagena, on the bank of the shallow Ciénaga del Totumo, is an intriguing 15m mound, looking like a miniature volcano. It's indeed a volcano but instead of lava and ashes it spews mud, a phenomenon caused by the pressure of gases emitted by decaying organic matter underground.

El Totumo is the highest mud volcano in Colombia. Lukewarm mud with the consistency of cream fills its crater. You can climb to the top by specially built stairs, then go down into the crater and have a refreshing mud bath (US\$50¢). It's a unique experience – surely volcano-dipping is something you haven't yet tried! The mud contains minerals acclaimed for their therapeutic properties. Once you've finished your session, go down and wash the mud off in the *ciénaga* (lagoon).

To get to the volcano from Cartagena, take a bus from Mercado Bazurto, from where hourly buses depart in the morning to Galerazamba. They travel along the old Barranquilla road up to Santa Catalina then, shortly after, turn north onto a side road to Galerazamba. Get off on the coastal highway by the petrol station at Lomita Arena (US\$1.50, 1½ hours) and walk along the highway 2.5km toward Barranquilla (30 minutes), then to the right (southeast) 1km to the volcano (another 15 minutes). The last direct bus from Lomita Arena back to Cartagena departs at around 5pm.

Several tour operators in Cartagena organize minibus trips to the volcano (transport only US\$11; with lunch in La Boquilla US\$14), which can be booked through popular backpacker hotels.

Jardín Botánico Guillermo Piñeres

A pleasant half-day escape from the city rush, this **botanical garden** (☎ 5-663-7172; admission US\$4; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun) is on the outskirts of the town of Turbaco, 15km southeast of Cartagena. Take the Turbaco bus departing regularly from next to the Castillo de San Felipe in Cartagena and ask the driver to drop you at the turnoff to the garden (US\$75¢, 45 minutes). From there it's a 20-minute stroll down the largely unpaved side road. The 20-acre garden features plants typical of the coast, including two varieties of coca plant.

MOMPÓS

☎ 5 / pop 28,000

In the evenings, when the residents of Mompós rock calmly in their rocking chairs and the bats flutter through the eaves, you may feel like you've stepped into the pages of *Huckleberry Finn* or *Gone with the Wind*.

The atmosphere evoked in the Mompós environs is unique in Colombia (it may feel more like Mississippi) and is worth experiencing, despite the hardships of getting here. Surrounded by muddy rivers and thick vegetation, Mompós is 230km southeast of Cartagena, and reached by a combination of bus, boat and car.

Founded in 1537 on the eastern branch of the Río Magdalena, the town soon became an important port through which all merchan-

dise from Cartagena passed to the interior of the colony. Several imposing churches and many luxurious mansions were built.

Toward the end of the 19th century shipping was diverted to the other branch of the Magdalena, ending the town's prosperity. Mompós has been left in isolation and little has changed since. Its colonial character is very much in evidence.

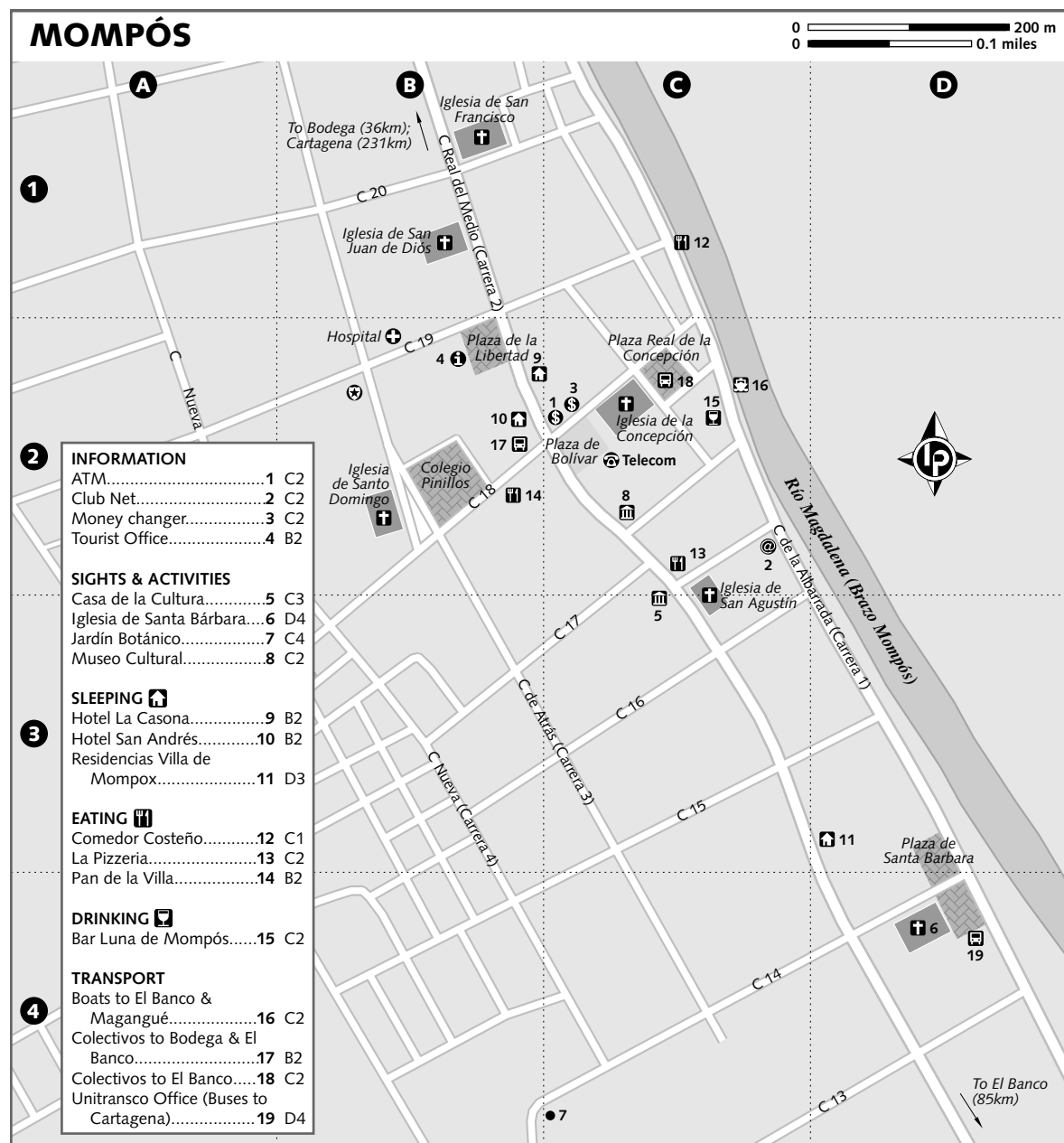
Mompós also has a tradition in literature and was the setting for *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* by Gabriel García Márquez.

Information

ATM (BBVA; Plaza de Bolívar)

Club Net (Carrera 1 No 16-53; per hr US80¢;

☑ 6am-9:30pm) Internet café.



Money changer (Plaza de Bolívar) May change your US dollars at a very poor rate.

Tourist office (☎ 5-685-5738; Plaza de la Libertad) Located in the Alcaldía building. Ask where to find artisans workshops where you can see and buy local jewelry.

Sights

Most of the central streets are lined with fine whitewashed colonial houses with characteristic metal-grill windows, imposing doorways and lovely hidden patios. Six colonial churches complete the scene; all are interesting, though rarely open. Don't miss the **Iglesia de Santa Bárbara** (Calle 14) with its Moorish-style tower, unique in Colombian religious architecture.

The **Casa de la Cultura** (Calle Real del Medio; admission US\$50¢; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) displays memorabilia relating to the town's history. **Museo Cultural** (Calle Real del Medio; admission US\$1.50; 🕒 9:30am-noon & 3-5pm Tue-Fri, 9:30am-noon Sat & Sun) features a collection of religious art. There's a small **Jardín Botánico** (Calle 14), with lots of hummingbirds and butterflies. Knock on the gate to be let in.

Festivals & Events

Holy Week celebrations are very elaborate in Mompós. The solemn processions circle the streets for several hours on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday nights.

Sleeping

Hotel Celeste (☎ 5-685-5875; Calle Real del Medio No 14-174; s/d with fan US\$7/13.50) This family-run place with nanna atmosphere has good service, though the rooms are a tad small.

Residencias Villa de Mompox (☎ 5-685-5208; Calle Real del Medio No 14-108; s/d with fan US\$7/13.50, with air-con US\$10/19; 🛏) Low-priced air-con rooms.

Hotel La Casona (☎ 5-685-5307; Calle Real del Medio No 18-58; s/d with fan US\$8/13.50, with air-con US\$13.50/23; 🛏) This *residencia* has well-appointed rooms, a welcoming common area and a friendly staff.

Hotel San Andrés (☎ 5-685-5886; Calle Real del Medio No 18-23; s/d with fan US\$9/13.50, with air-con US\$13.50/23; 🛏) Bland rooms are somewhat enlivened by parakeets and parrots that inhabit the courtyard.

Eating & Drinking

Comedor Costeño (Calle de la Albarrada No 18-45; 🕒 5:30am-4:30pm) One of several rustic, river-front restaurants in the market area to provide cheap meals.

Pan de la Villa (Calle 18 No 2-53; 🕒 7am-10pm) Specializes in ice cream, cakes and baked goods, but also serves crêpes.

La Pizzeria (Carrera 2 No 16-02; pizzas US\$6-9; 🕒 5-10pm) In the evenings you can sit at tables set in the middle of the street and enjoy a cold drink or pizza.

Bar Luna de Mompós (Calle de la Albarrada; 🕒 6pm-late) This low-key bayou drinking hole will keep you entertained until you pass out or the doors close.

Getting There & Away

Mompós is well off the main routes, but can be reached relatively easily by road and river. Most travelers come here from Cartagena. Unitransco has one direct bus daily leaving Cartagena at 7:30am (US\$15, eight hours). It's faster to take a bus to Magangué (US\$11, four hours); Brasilia has half-a-dozen departures per day – change for a boat to Bodega (US\$2, 20 minutes) with frequent departures until about 3pm, and continue by *colectivo* to Mompós (US\$2.50, 40 minutes). There may also be direct *chalupas* (river boats) from Magangué to Mompós.

If you depart from Bucaramanga, take a bus to El Banco (US\$13.50, seven hours) and continue to Mompós by jeep or boat (either costs US\$5 and takes about two hours).

SAN ANDRÉS & PROVIDENCIA

Located 750km northwest of Cartagena (but just 230km east of Nicaragua), this tidy bead of islands is Colombia's smallest department. It's made up of a southern group, with San Andrés as its largest and most important island, and a northern group, centered on the mountainous island of Providencia.

In the past, travelers used the islands as a stepping-stone between Central America and South America. Nowadays, however, connections are less frequent.

While San Andrés is not quite paradise on earth, Providencia is certainly unique and worth a visit in its own right (provided you can afford all the flights needed to get there and back). Both islands offer excellent scuba-diving and snorkeling opportunities.

A glance at history shows that the islands were once a colony of Britain. Although Co-

lombia took possession after independence, the English influence on language, religion and architecture remained virtually intact until modern times. Local lifestyle only started to change from the 1950s, when a regular domestic air service was established with the Colombian mainland. Providencia has managed to preserve much more of its colonial character.

The tourist season peaks from mid-December to mid-January, during the Easter week, and from mid-June to mid-July. All visitors staying more than one day are charged a local government levy of US\$8 on arrival.

SAN ANDRÉS

☎ 8 / pop 75,000

Covered in coconut palms and cut by sharp ravines that turn into rivers after rain, the seahorse-shaped San Andrés is the main commercial and administrative center of the archipelago and, as the only transport hub to the mainland, it's the first and last place you are likely to see.

The island, 12.5km long and 3km wide, is made accessible by a 30km scenic paved road that circles the island, and several roads that cross inland. The main urban center and capital of the archipelago is the town of San Andrés (known locally as El Centro), in the northern end of the island. It has two-thirds of the island's 60,000 inhabitants and is the principal tourist and commercial area, packed with hotels, restaurants and stores.

Information

All of the following are in San Andrés town. Details for the Costa Rica and Honduras consulates can be found on p630.

Bancolombia (Map p592; Av Atlántico) Changes traveler's checks and cash.

Café Internet Sol (Map p592; Av Duarte Blum; ☎ 8am-10pm)

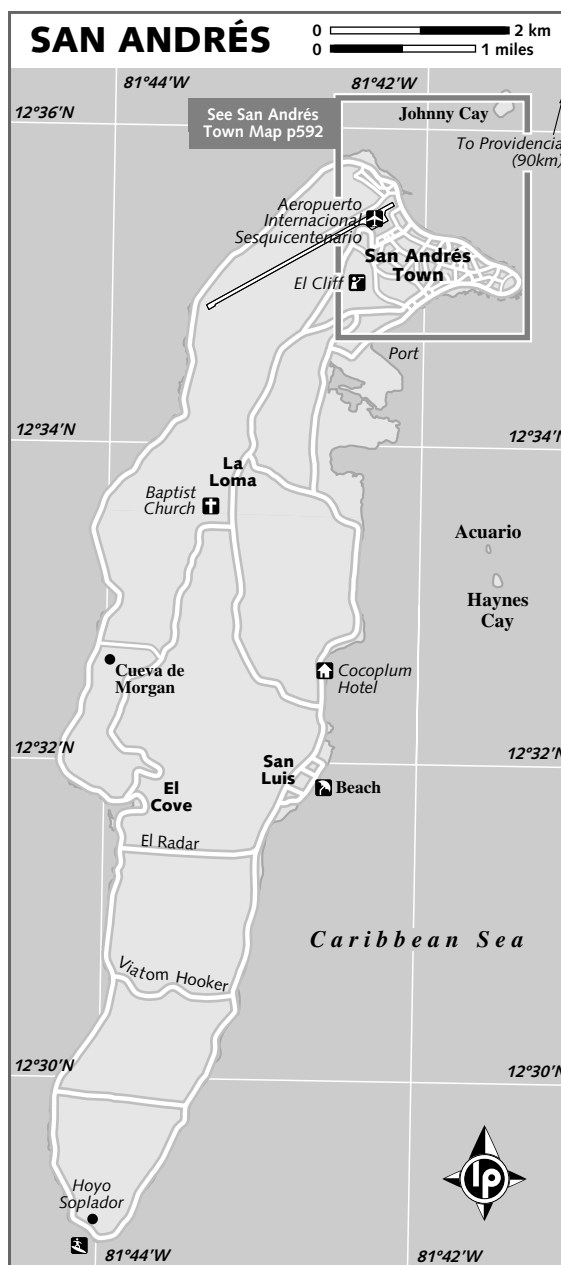
Creative Shop (Map p592; Av Las Américas) Internet café located below the Hotel Hernando Henry.

Giros & Finanzas (Map p592; Centro Comercial San Andrés, Local 12, Av Costa Rica) The local agent of Western Union.

Macrofinanciera (Map p592; Edificio Leda, Av Providencia No 2-47) Changes US dollars.

Secretaría de Turismo Departamental (Map p592; ☎ 8-512-5058; www.sanandres.gov.co; Av Newball)

In the building of the Gobernación, Piso 3. At the time of research it had a temporary office across from the Restaurante La Regatta.



Sights

Most people stay in El Centro, but take some time to look around the island. El Centro's beach, along Av Colombia, is handy and fine but it may be crowded in tourist peak seasons. There are no beaches along the island's western shore, and those along the east coast are nothing special, except for the good beach in San Luis.

The small village of **La Loma** (Map p591), in the central hilly part of the island, is noted for its Baptist church, the first established on San Andrés.

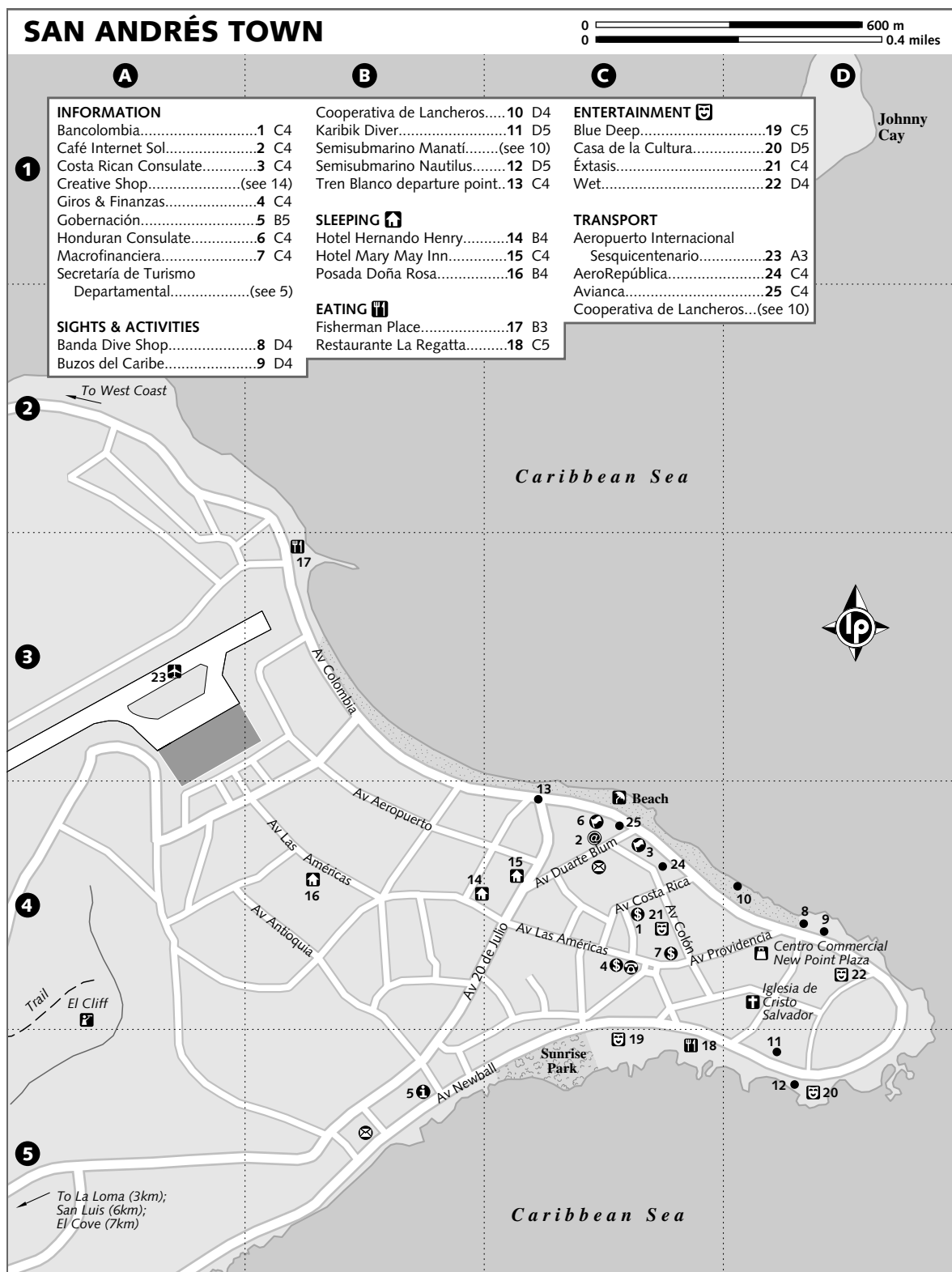
The **Cueva de Morgan** (Map p591) is an underwater cave where the Welsh pirate Henry Morgan is said to have buried some of his treasure. **Hoyo Soplador** (Map p591), at the southern tip of the island, is a sort of small

geyser where the sea water spouts into the air through a natural hole in the coral rock. This phenomenon can be observed only when the winds and tide are right.

There are several small cays off San Andrés, of which the most popular are **Johnny Cay** (Map p591), opposite El Centro, and **Acuario** (Map p591), off the island's eastern coast.

Activities

Thanks to the coral reefs all around, San Andrés has become an important **diving** center with more than 35 different diving spots. The following are some of the best diving schools: **Banda Dive Shop** (Map p592; ☎ 8-512-2507; www.bandadiveshop.com; Hotel Lord Pierre, Av Colombia, San Andrés Town)



Buzos del Caribe (Map p592; ☎ 8-512-8931; www.buzosdelcaribe.com in Spanish; Av Colombia No 1-212, San Andrés Town) The oldest and largest facility. It has a fine reputation, but it's expensive (US\$250 for the open-water PADI or NAUI course).

Karibik Diver (Map p592; ☎ 8-512-0101; www.karibikdiver.com; Av Newball No 1-248, San Andrés Town) This small school is also expensive (US\$300), but provides quality equipment and personalized service.

Tours

Cooperativa de Lancheros (Map p592; Av Colombia) On the town's beach; provides trips to Johnny Cay (US\$3) and Acuario (US\$4), plus a combined tour to both cays (US\$5).

Semisubmarino Manatí (Map p592; tickets Cooperativa de Lancheros; 1½hr tours per person US\$13.50) A specially designed boat with large windows below the waterline. It departs once or twice daily for a 1½-hour tour around the nearby reefs. If you are not planning on scuba diving or snorkeling, this trip is probably the next-best option for having a look at San Andrés' rich marine life.

Semisubmarino Nautilus (Map p592; wharf; 2hr trips US\$13.50) Does similar trips to *Semisubmarino Manatí* from the wharf just west of the Casa de la Cultura.

Taxi tours (up to 4 people US\$18) The same route as Tren Blanco (following) can be done by taxi. Other, shorter or longer arrangements with taxi drivers are available.

Tren Blanco (3hr trips US\$3) A sort of road train pulled by a tractor dressed up like a locomotive; departs every morning from the corner of Av Colombia and Av 20 de Julio (Map p592) to circle the island, stopping at several sights along the way.

Sleeping

On the whole, accommodations in San Andrés are plentiful but more expensive than on the mainland.

Posada Doña Rosa (Map p592; ☎ 8-512-3649; Av Las Américas; s/d US\$9/18) The low prices make this the obvious choice for solo budget travelers. The Doña Rosa has eight rooms, all of which have bathrooms and fans.

Hotel Mary May Inn (Map p592; ☎ 8-512-5669; ketlenan@yahoo.com; Av 20 de Julio; s/d/tr US\$15/18/22; 🏠) This small and friendly place offers eight, well-appointed rooms within a quiet courtyard. The double is a good deal but solo travelers may want to bargain for a more reasonable price.

Hotel Hernando Henry (Map p592; ☎ 8-512-3416; Av Las Américas No 4-84; s/d with fan US\$12/20, with air-con US\$14/23; 🏠) It may not look like much from the outside, but this is one of the best-value options in town. Clean, antiquated rooms come with TV, fridge and balcony.

Cocoplum Hotel (Map p591; ☎ 8-513-2121; www.cocoplumhotel.com; Carretera a San Luis No 43-39; s/d US\$44/60;

🏠 🏠 🏠) Located on a private beach in San Luis, this low-key resort is a great place to get away from the crowds. There's a restaurant that serves fresh meals all day, and is open to nonguests.

Eating

There are a number of simple restaurants in San Andrés Town that serve the usual set lunches and dinners for US\$2 to US\$3.

Fisherman Place (Map p592; Av Colombia; meals from US\$3; 🕒 noon-4pm) This open-air, beachside restaurant offers some of the best seafood in town, including crab soup (US\$3), fried fish (US\$3) and seafood stew (US\$7).

Restaurante La Regatta (Map p592; Av Newball; dishes US\$11-26; 🕒 noon-10pm) One of the islands' best restaurants, offering patrons excellent seafood and sweeping views of the Caribbean.

Entertainment

There are several nightspots on Av Colombia between Hotel Lord Pierre and Hotel Aquarium Decameron.

Wet (Map p592; Edificio Big Point, Av Colombia; 🕒 4pm-midnight) This flashy place has a dance floor, video screens and blaring music.

Casa de la Cultura (Map p592; Av Newball) Organizes 'Caribbean Evenings' on Friday, which are folklore shows featuring live music and local food.

Some of the upmarket hotels have discotheques, the most trendy (and expensive) of which is **Blue Deep** (Map p592; Av Newball) in Sunrise Beach Hotel, followed by **Éxtasis** (Map p592; Av Colón) in Hotel Sol Caribe San Andrés.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport is in San Andrés Town, a 10-minute walk northwest of the center, or US\$3 by taxi. Colombian airlines that service San Andrés include **Avianca/SAM** (Map p592; ☎ 8-512-3211; cnr Avs Colombia & Duarte Blum) and **AeroRepública** (Map p592; ☎ 8-512-7334; Av Colón 3-64) and there are direct connections with Bogotá (US\$140), Cali (US\$140), Cartagena (US\$128) and Medellín (US\$140). At the time of research there were no direct flights between San Andrés and Central America, but Avianca does offer a flight three times a week to Panama City via Bogotá (one way US\$207).

The airport tax on international departures from San Andrés is the same as elsewhere in Colombia: US\$30 if you have stayed in the

country fewer than 60 days and US\$50 if you've stayed longer. You can pay in pesos or US dollars.

Satena Airways (☎ 8-512-6867; satenaadz@yahoo.com; Aeropuerto Internacional Sesquicentenario) operates two or three flights per day between San Andrés and Providencia (return US\$124), serviced by a 19-seater plane. Note that West Caribbean Airways had formerly flown this route but had suspended operations at the time of research.

BOAT

There are no ferries to the Colombian mainland or elsewhere. Cargo boats to Cartagena and Providencia don't take passengers.

Getting Around

Local buses run along the circular coastal road, and along the inner road to La Loma and El Cove, and can drop you near any of the sights. Otherwise, rent a bicycle (from US\$1.50/5 per hour/day). Motorbikes, scooters and cars can also be rented at various locations throughout the town. Shop around, as prices and conditions vary.

PROVIDENCIA

☎ 8 / pop 4500

Providencia is the type of place that fulfils your every expectation of paradise. Quiet, laid-back hamlets nestle softly against white-sand beaches shaded by palm trees. The sea is warm, the locals are friendly and the topography is gorgeous. If you're looking to get away from it all, Providencia is about as far as you can get.

Located 90km north of San Andrés, Providencia is the second-largest island in the archipelago at 7km long and 4km wide. It is a mountainous island of volcanic origin, much older than San Andrés. The highest peak is El Pico (320m).

Santa Isabel, a village at the northern tip of the island, is the administrative seat. Santa Catalina, a smaller island just to the northwest, is separated from Providencia by the shallow Canal Aury, spanned by a pedestrian bridge.

Providencia is much less affected by tourism than San Andrés. English is widely spoken, and there's still much Caribbean English-style architecture to be seen. There is some development, but the integrity of the island has not yet been compromised.

Activities include beachcombing, scuba diving and walking. The trail to El Pico begins from Casabaja, on the south side of the island. It's a steady 1½ hours' walk to the top.

Getting around the island is pretty straightforward – just wave down any of the *taxi-colectivos* or pickups that run the circular road (US\$1 for any distance). Many locals get around by hitching on motorbikes – you could do the same.

Information

There are no *casas de cambio* (money-exchange offices) on Providencia, but some businesses (including a couple of supermarkets in Santa Isabel) may change your dollars although rates will be poor. It's best to bring enough pesos with you from San Andrés.

Banco Agrario de Colombia (Santa Isabel; ☎ 8am-1:30pm Mon-Thu, to 2pm Fri) Gives cash advances on Visa cards; the ATM next door to the bank services MasterCard.

Net Crawler (Santa Isabel; ☎ 8:30am-noon & 2:30-9pm) Internet café.

Tourist information (☎ 8-514-8054; providencia2004@yahoo.com; Santa Isabel) Located in the building of the Gobernación.

Activities

The coral reefs around Providencia are more extensive than those around San Andrés and the turquoise sea is beautiful. You can rent snorkeling gear in Aguadulce (or better, buy some in San Andrés and bring it along).

Recommended dive schools include **Centro de Buceo Scuba Town** (☎ 8-514-8481) in Pueblo Viejo and **Sonny Dive Shop** (☎ 8-514-8231) in Aguadulce. Each offers an open-water or advanced course for about US\$180 to US\$200. Most of the diving is done along the west side of the island.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodations and food are expensive on Providencia, even more so than on San Andrés. Most travelers stay in the tourist hamlet of Aguadulce, although Santa Isabel offers more conveniences. Small restaurants are found in Santa Isabel and Aguadulce.

Mr Mac (☎ 8-514-8366; jujentay@hotmail.com; s/d US\$11/19) Mr Mac is one of the cheapest hotels, mostly because it's unkempt and neglected. Some rooms overlook the beach.

Hotel Flaming Trees (☎ 8-514-8049; Santa Isabel; s/d US\$13.50/23; ☺) The best choice in Santa Isabel,

this welcoming guesthouse offers nine spacious air-con rooms with bathroom, fridge and TV.

Cabañas Miss Elma (☎ 8-514-8229; s/d/ste US\$16/32/68; 🚽) Miss Elma has both fan-cooled rooms and spacious air-conditioned suites. It's right on the beach and has its own restaurant, which is fine but not cheap.

Posada del Mar (☎ 8-514-8168; inforeservas@posadadelmarprovidencia.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$32/46; 🚽) Midrange option with well-maintained rooms. All rooms have bathrooms and balconies with hammocks, and face the beach.

Café Studio (meals US\$5-20; 🕒 11am-9pm Mon-Sat) On the main road in Bahía Suroeste is this pleasant, Canadian-run café. It has excellent espresso and cakes, plus a full restaurant menu with some of the best food on the island (traditional local cuisine).

Getting There & Away

Satena Airways flies between San Andrés and Providencia (return US\$124) two or three times per day. You are most likely to buy a return in San Andrés before arriving, but buy your ticket in advance in the high season and be sure to reconfirm the return trip at Providencia's airport.

NORTHWEST COLOMBIA

From the coffee fields of Zona Cafetera to the sleek metro and the malls of Medellín, northwest Colombia offers a sweep of landscapes and economies. Here you can bathe in hot springs, ride horses, scale volcanoes and travel to the spectacular Valle de Cocora, home of the famed wax palm.

The department of Antioquia dominates the region in terms of its size, population and wealth. Its inhabitants, commonly known as *paisas*, have traditionally been reluctant to mix with either blacks or the indigenous population, and consequently, this is the country's 'whitest' region, with a large creole population.

Antioquia, or the *país paisa* (*paisa* country) as its inhabitants call it, is a picturesque mountainous land, spread over parts of the Cordillera Occidental and the Cordillera Central. It's crisscrossed by roads linking little *pueblos paisa* (*paisa* towns) noted for their distinctive architectural style.

Zona Cafetera, Colombia's major coffee-growing area, is a great place to unwind for a

few days and can be used as a gateway to some high peaks of the Andes. West of Antioquia is troubled Chocó department, which is rife with guerrilla activity – check the latest travel postings if you are thinking of heading there.

MEDELLÍN

☎ 4 / pop 2.5 million

Somewhat overshadowed by the airy sophistication of Bogotá and the romantic aura of Cartagena, Medellín has been slow to develop as a tourist hot spot. 'The City of Eternal Spring,' however, does have its own unique character and has made a big turnaround since its notorious days as the center of Colombia's drug trade.

With Pablo Escobar and company now a part of Medellín's history, the streets are safe again and you'll find easy access to most parts of the city. Although drugs are no longer the dominant economy of trade, the city has managed to build up other commercial and industrial interests (mainly textiles and cut flowers), and even boasts an ultramodern subway and top-notch cultural and science centers. Streets teem with life as the busy *paisas* scuttle between work and play.

The town was founded in 1675 and in its early days consisted mostly of individual haciendas that later became the basis for the many beautiful suburbs that surround the city center. Neighborhoods are infused with winding streets and much greenery. The entire city is surrounded by lush mountains that harbor quaint *pueblos* and weekend getaways.

Medellín is moving from strength to strength – with recent civic development projects spearheaded by its progressive mayor Sergio Fajardo Valerrama. There has been a clean up of the Medellín River and a cable-car extension of the subway that connects low-income barrios to the center. The mayor's latest pet project is to make Medellín a 'bilingual city' – millions of pesos are being spent to get the *paisas'* English up to speed.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

There are plenty of cybercafés in the center of town (most charge approximately US\$1 per hour).

Café Internet Doble-Click (Calle 50 No 43-135; 🕒 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, 7am-7pm Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) One of very few that opens on Sunday.

EPM.Net (Carrera 45 No 52-49; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12:30pm Sat)

Punto Net (Carrera 50 No 52-50, Centro Comercial Unión Plaza, Local 133; ☎ 8:30am-8pm Mon-Sat)

MONEY

Banks listed are likely to change traveler's checks at reasonable rates. The banks may also

change cash, but you'll probably get similar or even better rates (and will save time) at *casas de cambio*.

Bancolombia (Carrera 49 No 49-74)

Banco Santander (Carrera 49 No 50-10)

Giros & Finanzas (Centro Comercial Villanueva, Calle 57 No 49-44, Local 241) The Western Union agent. There are half-a-dozen *casas de cambio* in this center.

MEDELLÍN

0 200 m
0 0.1 miles

INFORMATION		ENTERTAINMENT 🎪	
Banco Santander.....	1 C5	Centro Colombo Americano..	22 D4
Bancolombia.....	2 C5	TRANSPORT	
Café Internet Doble-Click.....	3 D5	Guayabal Bus Stop	
Ecuadorian Consulate.....	4 A4	(Ruta 143).....	23 C5
EPM.Net.....	5 D4	Minibuses to José María	
Giroz & Finanzas.....	6 D2	Córdoba Airport.....	24 B3
Police.....	7 B4	Trinidad Bus Stop (Ruta 160)..	25 C5
Punto Net.....	8 C4		
Titán Intercontinental.....	9 C4		
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES			
Basílica de la Candelaria.....	10 B4		
Catedral Metropolitana.....	11 D3		
Murals by Pedro Nel Gómez..	12 B4		
Museo de Antioquia.....	13 B3		
Parque de los Periodistas.....	14 D4		
SLEEPING 🛏			
Hostal Odeón.....	15 C3		
Hotel El Capitolio.....	16 D2		
EATING 🍴			
Café Colombo.....	(see 22)		
Chevicheria Juice.....	17 B4		
Restaurante Mango Maduro ..	18 C4		
Restaurante Vegetariano			
Govinda's.....	19 A4		
Salón Versalles.....	20 C3		
Su Menu.....	21 D4		

TOURIST INFORMATION:

- To Terminal del Norte (1km)
- To Casa Museo Pedro Nel Gomez (3km); Acevedo Metro Station, for Metro Cable (3.5km); Parque de las Aguas (20km)
- To Jardín Botánico Joaquín Antonio Uribe (200m)
- To Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín (700m); Palm Tree Hostel (1.2km); Boomerang (4km)
- To Parque de los Pies Descalzos (700m); Fomento y Turismo (1km); Cerro Nutibara (2km); Brazilian Consulate (2km); Venezuelan Museo Interactivo (700); Consulate (3km); Zoológica de Santa Fe (3km); Casa Kiwi (4km); El Poblado (4km); Panamanian Consulate (4km); Zona Rosa (4km); Terminal del Sur (4km); Black Sheep Hostel (4.5km); Olaya Herrera Airport (4km); Casa Jerusalem (5.5km); José María Córdoba Airport (35km); Marinilla (46km); Rionegro (48km)
- To Teatro Matacandeleles (250m)
- To El Pequeño Teatro de Medellín (100m); Teatro Pablo Tobón Uribe (350m)

Titán Intercontinental (Edificio Coltejer, Carrera 46 No 52-65, Local 103) *Casa de cambio*.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Fomento y Turismo Airport (☎ 4-562-2885; 🕒 6am-7pm Mon-Sat); Palacio de Exposiciones (☎ 4-232-4022; Av Alfonso López; 🕒 7:30am-12:30pm & 1:30-5:30pm Mon-Fri) Medellín's main tourist office is in the Palacio de Exposiciones, 1km southwest of the center.

Dangers & Annoyances

Although no longer the world's cocaine-trafficking capital, Medellín isn't the safest place you'll ever visit; like any large Colombian city, it has security problems so take the usual precautions. The city center appears quite safe during the daytime, but keep your evening strolls to a minimum. If you're going to *rumba* at night, use taxis.

Sights

The **Museo de Antioquia** (☎ 4-251-3636; www.mu.seodeantioquia.org in Spanish; Carrera 52 Carabobo No 52-43; admission US\$3; 🕒 9:30am-5pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) features pre-Hispanic, colonial, independence and modern art collections, spanning Antioquia's 400-year-long history, plus Fernando Botero's donation of 92 of his own works and 22 works by other international artists. Additionally his 23 large bronze sculptures have been placed in front of the museum, in what is known as Plazoleta de las Esculturas.

Across the Parque Berrío are two large murals depicting Antioquia's history, the 1956 work by another of Medellín's illustrious sons, Pedro Nel Gómez (1899-1984). The **Casa Museo Pedro Nel Gómez** (☎ 4-233-2633; Carrera 51B No 85-24; admission US\$2; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat), set in the house where the artist lived and worked, shelters nearly 2000 of his works including watercolors, oil paintings, drawings, sculptures and murals. Pedro Nel Gómez is said to have been Colombia's most prolific artist.

Another important city museum, the **Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín** (☎ 4-230-2622; Carrera 64B No 51-64; admission US\$2; 🕒 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat) stages changing exhibitions of contemporary art.

Apart from a few old churches, the city's colonial architecture has virtually disappeared. The most interesting of the historic churches is the **Basílica de la Candelaria** (Parque Berrío), built in the 1770s and functioning as the city's cathedral until 1931. Also worth a visit is the gigantic neo-Romanesque **Catedral Metro-**

politana (Parque de Bolívar), completed in 1931 and thought to be South America's largest brick church (1.2 million bricks were used).

Medellín has a fine botanical garden, the **Jardín Botánico Joaquín Antonio Uribe** (☎ 4-233-7025; Carrera 52 No 73-182; admission US\$1; 🕒 9am-5pm).

If you've had it with sightseeing, a good place to chill out is the **Parque de los Pies Descalzos** (Barefoot Park; Carrera 57 No 42-139) where citizens are encouraged to kick their shoes off, wade into shallow pools and enjoy the zen ambience. Next to the park are restaurants and the **Museo Interactivo** (☎ 4-380-6956; Carrera 57 No 42-139; 🕒 8am-8pm Tue-Sun) featuring 200 interactive science displays – one of Medellín's more kid-friendly attractions.

For views of the city, go to the **Cerro Nutibara**, an 80m-tall hill 2km southwest of the city center. The **Pueblito Paisa**, a replica of a typical Antioquian village, has been built on the summit and is home to several handicrafts shops. For another view of the city, take a ride on the newly installed **Metrocable**, from Acevedo metro station.

Activities

Medellín is regarded as Colombia's main center of **paragliding** thanks to favorable conditions provided by the winds and rugged topography.

Boomerang (☎ 4-254-5943, 311-774-1175; _x@hotmail.com; Calle 38B No 79-16, Barrio Laureles) offers courses (about US\$300 for a weeklong course), equipment rental, and tandem flights over the city (US\$25).

Festivals & Events

Mercado de San Alejo Colorful craft market held in the Parque de Bolívar on the first Saturday of every month.

Feria Nacional de Artesanías Craft fair held in July at the Atanasio Girardot sports complex. Good for cheap buys.

Feria de las Flores Held for a week in early August, this is Medellín's biggest event. Its highlight is the Desfile de Silleteros, on 7 August, when hundreds of *campesinos* come down from the mountains and parade along the streets carrying *silletas* full of flowers on their backs.

Alumbrado (Christmas Light Festival) Each year at Christmas time the city ignites the riverfront with a spectacular lightshow, attracting Colombian families for evening strolls. It lasts from December 7 until the second week in January.

Sleeping

Palm Tree Hostel (☎ 4-260-2805; www.palmtreeemedellin.com; Carrera 67 No 48D-63; dm/s/d US\$6/9/12; 📶) This is

Medellín's oldest (and still cheapest) traveler haunt, offering a range of facilities typical of a Western hostel, including laundry service, bicycle rental, book exchange and the use of the kitchen. It's in the suburb of Suramericana, about 1.5km west of the center, easily accessible by metro (Suramericana Station) or by bus along Calle 50 Av Colombia. A taxi from either bus terminal is US\$2.

Casa Kiwi (☎ 4-268-2668; www.casakiwi.net; Carrera 36 No 7-10, El Poblado; dm US\$7, s/d with bathroom US\$18/23, without bathroom US\$13.50/18; 📺) This New Zealander-run guesthouse has a fun, youthful vibe and a nice location near the nightlife area of Zona Rosa. Rooms are reasonably clean and there is a lounge and a patio with a BBQ. The best way to get here is by taxi.

Black Sheep Hostel (☎ 4-311-1589, 311-341-3048; www.blacksheepmedellin.com; Transversal 5a No 45-133; dm/s/d US\$7/13/14.50; 📺) Well-managed guesthouse with every conceivable amenity including two TV rooms, BBQ, Spanish-language classes, kitchen and clean rooms. It's in the swanky neighborhood of Barrio Patio Bonito, a 20-minute walk from the Zona Rosa.

Casa Jerusalem (☎ 4-321-5230, 316-348-8000; jerusalem_medellin@yahoo.com; Carrera 36 No 7-10; dm/s/d US\$7/9/13.50; 📺 📺) Offering comfort, space and convenience, this Israeli-run backpacker is set in a large house, just minutes away from the Aguacatala Metro station (call ahead and they will meet you at the station). There is a supermarket nearby, but little else in this neighborhood.

Medellín Homestays (☎ 4-477-1966; medellinhomestays@yahoo.com; per week US\$360) This organization sets you up with a local family for a weeklong homestay. Prices include two meals per day plus five days of Spanish-language classes (three hours per day). Contact Juan Fernando Trujillo.

CITY CENTER

The city center has plenty of cheap hotels, although many double as love hotels and raise prices on the weekend.

Hostal Odeón (☎ 4-513-1404; Calle 54 No 49-38; s/d/tr with bathroom US\$9/14/19) Small, quiet and very central. Rooms come with fridge, TV and stereo. Recommended place if you need to be in the center.

Hotel El Capitolio (☎ 4-512-0012; Carrera 49 Venezuela No 57-24; s/d with bathroom incl breakfast US\$16/19/23) Fully renovated and affordable accommodations right behind the cathedral.

Eating

Like every big city, Medellín has hundreds of places to eat for every budget. The center is literally flooded with restaurants, snack bars and cafés and provides some of the cheapest meals. Restaurants in the Zona Rosa at El Poblado are more upscale. For an amazing fruit smoothie, try Chevicheria Juice stand, next to the police station outside Parque Barío metro.

Restaurante Vegetarian Govinda's (Calle 51 No 52-17; meals US\$2; 🕒 8am-2:30pm Mon-Sat) For decent vegetarian cuisine served by friendly Hare Krishnas, try this bright, upstairs restaurant near the Museo de Antioquia.

Su Menu (Calle 53 No 43-44, meals US\$2-3; 🕒 noon-8pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat) Student hangout serving typical Colombian fare.

Restaurante Mango Maduro (Calle 54 No 47-5; meals US\$2.50; 🕒 lunch Mon-Sat) Adding a splash of color to the downtown restaurant scene, this place serves *paisa* meals made from fresh ingredients. It's popular with young professionals, artists and intellectuals.

Salón Versalles (Pasaje Junín No 53-39; set lunches US\$3; 🕒 7am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8am-6pm Sun) Two-level restaurant-cum-café invariably popular with the locals. It has a varied menu including tasty set lunches, delicious Argentine and Chilean *empanadas* (US\$60¢ each) and a choice of high-calorie cakes and pastries.

Ay! Caramba (Carrera 37A No 8A-60, Parque Lleras; mains US\$6-9; 🕒 noon-11pm Mon-Sat) Excellent open-air Mexican restaurant serving tacos, enchiladas and the like. If this place does not suit, there are a dozen other options around the park, just be prepared to fork out a little extra as this is the most upscale part of town.

Café Colombo (Carrera 45 No 53-24, piso 10; mains US\$7-9; 🕒 noon-2:30pm & 5:30-11pm Mon-Sat) This bright, minimalist eatery offers great city views and a classy menu. It's on the top floor of the building that also houses the Centro Colombo Americano.

Drinking

The major scene of nighttime dance and drink is the Zona Rosa in El Poblado, spreading approximately between Calles 9 and 10A, and Carreras 36 and 42. The area is packed with restaurants, cafés, clubs, bars, pubs and discos, which become vibrant after about 10pm, particularly on weekends. A taxi from the center will bring you to the Zona Rosa from the center of town for US\$2.

Berlin (Calle 10 No 41-65) Misfit biker bar and billiards hall in the middle of Medellín's club district.

Entertainment

Check the local dailies, *El Colombiano* and *El Mundo*, for what's going on. Get a copy of the **Opción Hoy** (www.supernet.com.co/opcionhoy; price US\$1), a local what's-on monthly that lists art exhibitions, theater, concerts, arthouse cinema and sports and cultural events. You can read it online.

Museo de Arte Moderno (☎ 4-230-2622; Carrera 64B No 51-64) Medellín's best *cinemateca* (arthouse cinema) with a diverse and interesting program.

Centro Colombo Americano (☎ 4-513-4444; Carrera 45 No 53-24) Also has an arthouse cinema.

Teatro Matacandelas (☎ 4-239-1245; Carrera 47 No 43-47) One of the best experimental groups in town.

Teatro Pablo Tobón Uribe (☎ 4-239-2674; Carrera 40 No 51-24) Medellín's major mainstream theater.

El Pequeño Teatro de Medellín (☎ 4-269-9418; Carrera 42 No 50A-12) The varied repertoire here combines the traditional with more contemporary performances.

Vinacuré (☎ 4-278-1633; www.vinacure.com; Carrera 50 No 100D Sur-7, Caldas) Located a long way south of the city, this is a bizarre mix of sin, circus acts and experimentation. You can sit back and enjoy the psychedelic ambience or be a spectacle yourself in the 'clothing optional' room. Visit on a Friday or Saturday when it's livelier. A cab ride there costs around US\$8.

Circus Bar (Km 1, Las Palmas; www.circusfunpalace.com; admission US\$5) High-energy club playing rock music to a yuppie-type crowd. The occasional circus act is performed over the dance floor, so mind the flying leotard-clad performers. There are a few other places along this strip, including the grungy rock 'Pub' across the street.

Mango's (Carrera 42 No 67A-151) Arguably Medellín's best disco, with charming decor, five bars and a ragbag of good music. It's on Autopista Sur in Itagüí, away from El Poblado.

El Blue (Calle 10 No 40-20) Just off Parque Lleras, this place is devoted to rock, often hosting live bands. It has a large outdoor patio and a laid-back vibe.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The main José María Córdoba airport, 35km southeast of the city, takes all international

and most domestic flights except for some regional flights on light planes, which use the old Olaya Herrera airport right inside the city. Frequent minibuses shuttle between the city center and the main airport from the corner of Carrera 50A and Calle 53 (US\$2, one hour). A taxi costs US\$15.

There are domestic flights throughout the country. **Avianca** (☎ 4-251-7710; Calle 52 No 45-94, local 9912) flies to Bogotá (US\$70 to US\$120), Cali (US\$70 to US\$120), Cartagena (US\$90 to US\$140) and San Andrés (US\$150 to US\$160).

BUS

Medellín has two bus terminals. The Terminal del Norte, 2km north of the city center, handles buses to the north, east and southeast, including Santa Fe de Antioquia (US\$4, three hours), Bogotá (US\$20, nine hours), Cartagena (US\$39, 13 hours) and Santa Marta (US\$35, 16 hours). It's easily reached from the center by metro in seven minutes, or by taxi (US\$2).

The Terminal del Sur, 4km southwest of the center, handles all traffic to the west and south including Manizales (US\$11, five hours), Cali (US\$18, nine hours) and Popayán (US\$22, 12 hours). It's accessible from the center by the Guayabal bus (Ruta 143) and the Trinidad bus (Ruta 160), both of which you catch on Av Oriental next to the Éxito San Antonio store. Alternatively, go by taxi (US\$2).

Getting Around

Medellín's metro consists of the 23km north-south line and a 6km western leg, and has 25 stations. The trains run on ground level except in the 5km stretch through the central area where they go on viaducts above the streets, providing good views. The Metrocable connects the line to low-income barrios in the hills; you can go for a joy ride by connecting at Acevedo station.

The metro operates 5am to 11pm Monday to Saturday, 7am to 10pm Sunday and holidays, with trains running every five to 10 minutes. Single/double tickets cost US45/80¢, or buy a 10-ride *multiviaje* for US\$4.

Apart from the metro, urban transport is serviced by buses and *busetas*, and is quite well organized. All buses are numbered and display their destination point. The majority of routes originate on Av Oriental and Parque Berrío, from where you can get to almost anywhere within the metropolitan area.

DETOUR: RÍO CLARO

Thanks to Colombia's improving security situation, it is once again safe to visit the Río Claro valley in eastern Antioquia, where a crystal-clear river has carved stunning shapes into its marble bed. It's also a favorite spot for bird-watchers, who come to see everything from hummingbirds to herons to vultures.

You can stay in the lodge known as El Refugio, which is about 1km from the river and near the town of Puerto Triunfo. Río Claro is located just off the main road that connects Bogotá (US\$14, five hours) and Medellín (US\$10, three hours). Most buses that connect the two cities will drop you off in Puerto Triunfo. Note that nighttime travel in this area remains risky; check current conditions.

At the time of writing, Medellín was set to launch 'Metroplus', a fast bus service similar to Bogotá's TransMilenio. The first buses will run along Calle 30 and Carrera 45.

AROUND MEDELLÍN

The picturesque, rugged region surrounding Medellín is sprinkled with haciendas and lovely little *pueblos paisas*. With a few days to spare, take a trip around Medellín to see what Antioquia is really like. Before you set off, however, check travel-safety conditions.

The last addition to the region's attractions is the **Parque de las Aguas**, an enjoyable amusement park full of waterslides, pools and other distractions. It's about 20km northeast of Medellín and has good transportation links with the city. Take the metro to the northern end of the line at Niquía and change to a bus.

A tour of the following towns is known as the Circuito de Oriente. Each town offers *hospedajes* (budget hotels) that charge around US\$4 to US\$5 per bed. Frequent buses connect these towns to Medellín.

Marinilla

 4 / pop 14,000

Some 46km southeast of Medellín on the road to Bogotá, Marinilla is a remarkably well-preserved example of Antioquian architecture and city planning, with a pleasant main plaza and adjacent streets. Dating from the first half of the 18th century, it's one of the oldest towns in the region. Stroll around the central streets and call at the **Capilla de Jesús Nazareno** (cnr Carrera 29 & Calle 32), a fine, whitewashed gem of a church erected in the 1750s.

There are at least half-a-dozen budget hotels in town, all of which are located on or just off the main plaza. Buses to Medellín depart frequently from the plaza (US\$1, one

hour), as do *colectivos* to Rionegro (US40¢, 15 minutes).

El Peñol

Reminiscent of the famous Sugar Loaf of Rio de Janeiro, El Peñol (literally 'the Stone') is a huge, 200m-high granite monolith that rises straight up from the banks of Embalse del Peñol, an artificial lake about 30km east of Marinilla. An ascent up the 649 steps will reward you with magnificent bird's-eye views of the entire region, including the beautiful lake at your feet. There's a snack bar at the top.

Buses to and from Medellín run every one to two hours (US\$3, 2½ hours) and they all pass through Marinilla (US\$2, 1¼ hours).


Rionegro

 4

Founded in 1663, Rionegro is the oldest and most populous town of the Circuito de Oriente. Surrounded by a patchwork of farms and lush orchards, it has a number of classic, *paisa*-style buildings. It is also the town nearest to Medellín's main airport.

In 1863, politicians convened in the **Casa de la Convención** (Calle 51 No 47-67) to write the most liberal constitution in the country's history. The house is now a museum that features a collection of documents and period exhibits related to the event. One block from the Casa is the 1740 **Capilla de San Francisco** (cnr Calle 51 & Carrera 48), the town's oldest existing church.

Carmen de Viboral

 4 / pop 15,000

This small town 9km southeast of Rionegro is known nationwide as a producer of handpainted ceramics. There are a few large factories on the outskirts of the town – including Continental, Capiro and Triunfo – and several small workshops that are still largely

unmechanized. Almost all tours from Medellín include a visit to one of the factories.

La Ceja

☎ 4 / pop 25,000

Founded in 1789, La Ceja has developed into a handsome *pueblo paisa*. It has a pleasant, spacious main plaza lined with balconied houses, a number of which have preserved their delicate door and window decorations. There are two churches on the plaza, the smaller of which has a remarkably elaborate interior, complete with an extraordinary baroque retable carved in wood.

Note that 9km northwest of La Ceja on the road to Medellín is the **Salto de Tequendamita waterfall**. There is a pleasant restaurant ideally located at the foot of the falls. Many tours organized from Medellín stop here for lunch.

Retiro

☎ 4 / pop 6000

Founded around 1800, this tiny town remains one of the most picturesque in the region. It's set amid verdant hills 33km southeast of Medellín, 4km off the road to La Ceja. The main plaza is a good example of Antioquian architecture, as are many houses lining the surrounding streets.

SANTA FE DE ANTIOQUIA

☎ 4 / pop 12,500

With its cobbled streets, churches, wood balconies and lavish doorways, Santa Fe de Antioquia is a step into the past. The white-washed town, founded in 1541, is the oldest in the region. It was an important and prosperous center during Spanish days and the capital of Antioquia until 1826. But when the capital moved to Medellín the town fell into a long slumber that seems to have continued until today. Santa Fe de Antioquia is 79km northwest of Medellín, on the road to Turbo.

Sights

Give yourself a couple of hours to wander about the streets to peruse the houses' carved decorated doorways and flower-bedecked patios. Of the town's churches, the 18th-century **Iglesia de Santa Bárbara** (Calle 11 at Carrera 8) is the most interesting, noted for its fine wide baroque stone facade.

The **Museo de Arte Religioso** (☎ 4-853-2345; Calle 11 No 8-12; admission US\$1; ☎ 10am-5pm Sat, Sun & holidays), next door to Santa Bárbara church,

has a collection of religious objects, including paintings by Gregorio Vásquez de Arce y Ceballos.

The **Puente de Occidente**, an unusual 291m bridge over the Río Cauca, is 5km east of town. When completed in 1895, it was one of the first suspension bridges in the Americas. Walk there or negotiate a taxi in Santa Fe.

Festivals & Events

Festival de Cine (www.festicineantioquia.com) This four-day film festival is held outdoors in early December on the streets of Santa Fe de Antioquia. All the films are free to watch and there is plenty of alcohol to go with it. (But avoid drinking a local booze called Candela; it can cause temporary or even permanent blindness.)

Fiesta de los Diablitos The last four days of the year are celebrated with music, dancing, a craft fair, bullfights and, of course, a beauty contest. Held from December 27 to 31.

Sleeping & Eating

The town has a dozen hotels catering for different budgets and they are usually empty except for weekends, when Medellín's city dwellers come to warm up. Apart from the hotel restaurants, there are a dozen other places to eat. Don't miss the *pulpa de tamarindo*, a local tamarind sweet sold in the market on the main plaza.

Hospedaje Franco (☎ 4-853-1654; Carrera 10 No 8A-14; r with/without bath per person US\$6/4) This basic but acceptable place is one of the cheapest in town and also serves some of the cheapest meals.

Hostal del Viejo Conde (☎ 4-853-1091; Calle 9 No 10-56; r with bath per person US\$5.50) A small budget place with clean, fan-cooled rooms, although it does get a bit stuffy. Cheap meals sold here.

Hotel Caserón Plaza (☎ 4-853-2040; halcaraz@edatel.net.co; Plaza Mayor; d from US\$33; 📺) Rooms are ranged around an attractive courtyard and there is a nice pool and garden in the back, plus a decent restaurant.

Getting There & Away

There are half-a-dozen buses daily (US\$4, three hours) and another half-a-dozen minibuses (US\$5, 2½ hours) to and from Medellín's northern terminal.

ZONA CAFETERA

However you take your coffee, or even if you just prefer decaf, the Zona Cafetera is a region not to be missed. There is a sublime beauty

about the coffee-covered hillsides, set to a backdrop of volcanoes, but just as welcoming is the hospitality you are likely to receive at the numerous plantations spread over the region. Zona Cafetera also makes for a convenient rest stop when traveling between Bogotá, Cali and Medellín.

Manizales

☎ 6 / pop 420,000

An important axis point for the coffee trade, the prosperity of Manizales is displayed on its bustling streets. It's not a beautiful city (earthquakes having destroyed most of the original architecture) but it does make a useful base for exploring the region. It's worth looking at the impressive **Catedral de Manizales** (Plaza de Bolívar), which sports a 106m tall main tower, the highest in the country.

Useful facilities include the **Café Internet Fundadores** (Carrera 23 No 30-59) and the **Bancolombia** (cnr Calle 21 Carrera 22). The **Centro de Información Turística de Caldas** (tourist information; ☎ 6-884-2400, ext 153; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) is located on the ground floor of the Palacio de Gobierno, next to the Plaza de Bolívar.

A good place to stay in Manizales is the **Mountain House** (☎ 6-887-4736, 300-789-8840; www.mountainhousemanizales.com; Calle 65 No 24-97; s/d US\$13/19; 📺), a backpacker-orientated place with laundry service, hot showers, book exchange and bikes to rent.

Tours of the area can be organized through **Bioturismo Arte y Café** (☎ 6-884-4037; Centro Comercial Parque Caldas), managed by Omar Vargas. The agency also offers other tours to Parque Nacional Los Nevados and beyond to Valle de Cocora and Parque del Café.

The bus terminal is on Av 19 between Carreras 14 and 17, a short walk northwest of Plaza de Bolívar. The airport is about 8km southeast of the city center, off the road to Bogotá.

Parque Nacional Los Nevados

This snow-caked range of volcanic peaks offers some of the most stunning views in the Colombian Andes, plus some fine hiking trails through cloud forest. The Nevado del Ruiz (5325m) is the largest and the highest volcano of the chain.

The only road access into the park is from the north. This road branches off from the Manizales-Bogotá road in La Esperanza, 31km from Manizales, and winds its way up

to the snowline at about 4800m at the foot of Nevado del Ruiz. From here the hike to the top of the volcano takes about three hours.

Entrance to the park is at Las Brisas (4050m) where foreign visitors pay a US\$9 admission fee. There are basic chalets here for US\$3 per person, but you'll need a good sleeping bag. About 4km uphill from Las Brisas is the Chalet Arenales, which has dorm beds for US\$5 per night.

There is no public transportation for the park so the best way to visit is on a tour. Try Bioturismo Arte y Café (p601) in Manizales.

Salamina

☎ 6 / pop 19,000

This quaint country town has the look and feel of a typical *pueblo paisa*, and makes for a pleasant day trip from Manizales. There are some fine old houses here, and a single-nave cathedral.

Regular minibuses (US\$4, 2½ hours) and *colectivos* (US\$5, 2¼ hours) operate between Manizales and Salamina, and all pass through Neira, another historic town that's worth a look if you're a devotee of colonial-style *paisa* architecture.

Pereira

☎ 6 / pop 455,000

Mother Nature has been unkind to Pereira. The city of 455,000 souls has suffered a number of devastating earthquakes since its founding in 1863, causing most of the early architecture to vanish. It's no garden spot but it does make a convenient base if you are touring in the nearby coffee plantations.

While you're in Pereira, be sure to check out Arenas Betancur's **Bolívar Desnudo**, an 8.5m-high, 11-ton bronze sculpture of the naked Bolívar on horseback, in the Plaza de Bolívar – one of Colombia's most unusual monuments to El Libertador.

The **Hotel Cataluña** (☎ 6-335-4527; Calle 19 No 8-61; s/d US\$14/18) makes for a quiet night if you need a place to stay, it's just a half-block from Plaza de Bolívar.

The Matecaña airport is 5km west of the city center, 20 minutes by urban bus, or US\$2 by taxi. Avianca operates eight flights a day to Bogotá.

The bus terminal is about 1.5km south of the city center, at Calle 17 No 23-157. Many urban buses will take you there in less than 10 minutes.

Marsella

☎ 6 / pop 9000

This pleasant *paisa* village, set in the hills 29km northwest of Pereira, has a well-manicured **botanical garden** (admission US\$1.25; ☎ 8am-6pm) and a quirky cemetery. The **cemetery** (admission free; ☎ 8am-6pm), built on a slope 1km from the town plaza, contains a series of elaborate terraces where bodies are interred for four years before their remains are moved to family ossuaries.

Minibuses to and from Pereira run approximately every 15 minutes until about 7pm (US\$1.50, one hour).

Termales de Santa Rosa

Also known as the Termales Arbeláez, these popular hot springs are around 9km east of Santa Rosa de Cabal, a town on the Pereira–Manizales road. A tourist complex including thermal pools, a hotel, restaurant and bar has been built near the springs amid splendid scenery at the foot of a 170m-high waterfall.

The **thermal baths** (admission US\$5; ☎ 8am-midnight) can get very busy on weekends. To reach the baths, first get to Santa Rosa de Cabal from where you can catch a *chiva* from the market at 7am, noon and 3pm (US\$80¢, 45 minutes).

Armenia

☎ 6 / pop 245,000

Like Manizales and Pereira, this departmental capital offers few sights, most of its early architecture having been wiped out by earthquakes.

Today Armenia has reasonable facilities and a worthwhile **gold museum** (☎ 6-749-8433; cnr Av Bolívar & Calle 40N; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) located in Centro Cultural, 5km northeast of the center, on the road to Pereira.

There is internet access at **Valencia Comunicaciones** (Calle 21 No 15-53; ☎ 8am-10pm) and a money-changing facility at **Bancolombia** (Calle 20 No 15-26).

Cheap hotels are to be found between Carreras 17 and 18 and Calles 17 and 19. Try **Hotel Casa Real** (☎ 6-741-4550; Carrera 18 No 18-36; s/d with bathroom US\$10/17), a small, basic place with cable TV and new beds.

The bus terminal is on the corner of Carrera 19 and Calle 35, around 1.5km southwest of the center.

Parque Nacional del Café

A sort of coffee-bean Disneyland, the **Parque Nacional del Café** (☎ 6-753-6095; www.parquenacional

delcafé.com in Spanish; basic admission US\$6; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun) provides an interesting and hassle-free – if slightly sanitized – introduction to the history, culture and science of coffee. Attractions include a museum, a small coffee plantation and some thrills, including a roller coaster and water slide. Some travelers may be put off commercialization of it all, but in the right frame of mind it can be a fun and unique experience.

The park is near the small town of Pueblo Tapao, about 15km west of Armenia, and is easily accessible by frequent minibuses from the city. In the high season (mid-December to mid-January, Easter, mid-June to mid-July) the park may be open daily; check its website. Don't bother to come if it's raining, as most attractions are outdoors.

Salento

☎ 6 / pop 3500

This small town is a one-hour drive from Armenia though it might as well be 100 years. Salento, founded in 1850, boasts plenty of fine old houses, many of which have been turned into shops, restaurants and hotels catering to weekend visitors. Be sure not to miss Alto de la Cruz, a hill topped with a cross at the end of Calle Real. It's a bit of a climb, but from here you'll see the verdant Valle de Cocora as well as the high mountains that surround it.

The best place to stay in Salento is the **Plantation House** (☎ 315-409-7039; theplantationhouse.salento@yahoo.co.uk; Calle 7 No 1-04) a British-run backpacker set inside a 120-year-old restored plantation, complete with coffee plants and orange trees growing in the garden.

Buses to Salento from Armenia (US\$1.50 minutes) run every 15 minutes.

Valle de Cocora

Stretching from Salento eastwards to the tiny hamlet of Cocora and beyond, the stunning Valle de Cocora is like a lush version of Switzerland, with a broad, green valley floor framed by rugged peaks. However, you'll remember you're a few degrees from the equator when, a short walk past Cocora, you suddenly encounter hills covered with the *palma de cera*, or wax palm. The trees tower above the cloud forests in which they thrive. It is an astonishing sight.

The most spectacular part of the valley is east of Cocora. Take the rough road heading downhill to the bridge over the Río Quindío

(just a five-minute walk from the restaurants) and you will see the strange palms. Walk further uphill and enjoy the scenery – you won't find this kind of landscape anywhere else.

The town of Cocora consists of a few houses, three restaurants serving delicious trout, and a trout-breeding station. The palms have made Cocora a tourist destination, with visitors mainly arriving on the weekends. On these days locals gather around the three restaurants to rent out horses (US\$2.50 per hour).

Two jeeps a day, normally around 7:30am and 4pm, depart from Salento's plaza and go up the rough 11km road to Cocora (US\$1, 35 minutes). There may be more departures if there's a demand. On weekends there are usually at least four departures daily.

SOUTHWEST COLOMBIA

Southwest Colombia covers a range of geographies and cultures. The biggest city in the region, Cali, has a distinctly Colombian feel, with salsa music and romantic, sultry nights. As you head closer to the Ecuadorian border, the landscape buckles into more mountainous terrain. Culturally and geographically, the cities of Pasto and Ipiales feel more like Ecuador than Colombia. The biggest tourist attractions are the two outstanding archaeological sites of San Agustín and Tierradentro, and the colonial city of Popayán.

CALI

☎ 2 / pop 2,250,000

Cali grooves to a beat all its own. By day the hot and sultry city seems to be on an extended siesta; slow-paced compared to its counterparts Bogotá and Medellín. By night *calenõs* break out of their torpor and lace up their dancing shoes. Salsa music is a citywide addiction and the basis for all-night parties that rock Juanchito district.

Tourist attractions are few on the ground in Cali, although there are a few museums and churches to keep you busy for a day or two. Try not to miss the Zoológico de Cali, Colombia's finest zoo. Above all, Cali is fine place to soak in the Latino ambience, learn some salsa steps and people-watch, an activity made all the easier by the famously good-looking *calenãs* (Cali women). Beauty, one soon realizes, is an obsession second only

to salsa, and has become a major industry in itself – Cali is recognized as a world leader in plastic surgery and the results of this phenomenon are stunning.

Orientation

The city center is split in two by the Río Cali. To the south is the historic heart – laid out on a grid plan and centered around the Plaza de Caycedo – which contains most tourist sights including historic churches and museums.

To the north of the river is the new center, whose main axis is Av Sexta (Av 6N). This modern sector contains trendy shops and restaurants, and comes alive in the evening when a refreshing breeze tempers the daytime heat. This is the area to come to dine, drink and dance after a day of sightseeing on the opposite side of the river.

Information

Internet access is fast and cheap (US\$1 to US\$1.50 per hour). Most cybercafés open 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday and 8am to 6pm Saturday. In addition to the following there are several on Av Sexta.

Bancolombia (cnr Calle 15N & Av 8N) Changes cash and traveler's checks.

Banco Unión Colombiano (Carrera 3 No 11-03) Changes cash.

Comunicaciones Novatec (Av 8N No 20-46) For internet.

Centro Cultural Comfandi (Calle 8 No 6-23, Piso 5)

In the historic center.

Giros & Finanzas (Carrera 4 No 10-12) Changes cash and is a Western Union Agent.

SCI Sala de Internet (Av 6N No 13N-66) Largest central internet facility.

Secretaría de Cultura y Turismo (☎ 2-886-0000 ext 2410) The city tourist office is on the 2nd floor of the building of Gobernación del Valle del Cauca.

Dangers & Annoyances

Even though Cali may look quieter and more relaxed than Bogotá or Medellín, don't be deceived by its easy-going air, summery heat and beautiful women. Muggers and thieves aren't inactive here, nor are they less clever or violent than elsewhere. Be careful while wandering around the streets at night. Avoid the park along Río Cali in the evening, and don't walk east of Calle 13 after dark.

Sights & Activities

The beautiful, mid-16th-century **Iglesia de la Merced** (cnr Carrera 4 & Calle 7) is Cali's oldest church.

The adjacent monastery houses the good **Museo Arqueológico La Merced** (☎ 2-889-3434; Carrera 4 No 6-59; admission US\$1; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) featuring an extensive collection of pre-Hispanic pottery left behind by the major cultures from central and southern Colombia.

One block away, the **Museo del Oro** (☎ 2-684-7757; Calle 7 No 4-69; admission free; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) has a small but well-selected collection of gold and pottery pieces of the Calima culture.

The **Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia** (☎ 2-893-2942; Av Colombia No 5 Oeste-105; admission US\$1; 🕒 10am-6pm) presents temporary exhibitions of contemporary painting, sculpture and photography.

Zoológico de Cali (☎ 2-892-7474; Carrera 2A Oeste at Calle 14 Oeste; admission US\$2.50; 🕒 9am-5pm) is Colombia's best zoo. Its 10 hectares are home to about 1200 animals (belonging to about 180 species), both native and imported from other continents.

If you've had enough churches and museums you could always go flying; contact **German Air** (☎ 312-266-5943; germanair@bjnrock.com), which does paragliding courses and tandem flights.

Festivals & Events

The **Feria de Cali** is Cali's main event, beginning annually on December 25 and extending to the end of the year with parades, salsa concerts, bullfights and a beauty pageant.

Sleeping

Cali has two budget backpacker hostels (Guest House Iguana and Calidad House) conveniently located in the new city center. They are close to the nightclubs and restaurants and are popular with travelers.

Guest House Iguana (☎ 2-661-3522; iguana_cali@yahoo.com; Calle 21N No 9N-22; dm/s/d US\$6/9/13.50; 📺) Quiet, Swiss-run place with a variety of rooms, some with private bathroom. There is a great-value private double upstairs with lots of privacy. It has a backpacker-friendly atmosphere and the owner is a mine of information on the region.

Calidad House (☎ 2-661-2338; Calle 17N No 9AN-39; dm/s US\$6/7) This British-run guesthouse offers spacious dorms and private singles with shared bathroom, plus a communal kitchen and laundry facilities. At the time of writing the management was planning on renovating the private rooms. Along with the Iguana, this is the main backpacker hangout in Cali.

Hotel Camino Real (☎ 2-884-2525; Calle 9A No 3-54; s/d US\$13.50/18) It's not glamorous, but Camino Real still offers some reasonable rooms at competitive rates. There are a few other hotels on this street if you feel like shopping around.

Hotel Sator (☎ 2-668-6482; hotelsator@yahoo.com; Av 8N No 20-50; s/d US\$15/23) If you need more privacy than the Iguana or Calidad can offer try this nearby hotel, with smallish rooms set around a courtyard.

Hotel Astoria (☎ 2-883-0140; Calle 11 No 5-16; s/d US\$18.50/24) Midrange option with a good location off the main plaza.

Pensión Stein (☎ 2-661-4999; www.hotelstein.com.co; Av 4N No 3N-33; s/d with fan US\$27/45, with air-con US\$38/52, all incl breakfast) Castlelike mansion with character and style. Run by a Swiss couple, the hotel offers spotlessly clean rooms with bathroom and has a restaurant.

Eating

You'll find loads of cafés and restaurants on and around Av Sexta, offering everything from simple snacks, burgers and pizzas to regional Colombian specialties and ethnic cuisines. The historic center also has plenty of budget eateries, but not many upmarket restaurants.

Café au Lait (Calle 2 No 4-73; coffee US\$1.50) This small French-run café is located in the pleasant barrio of San Antonio. Excellent coffee and snacks.

Comedor Vegetariano Girasol (Av 5BN No 20N-30; set meals US\$1.75) Another vegetarian option, this one is in the new center.

Restaurante Vegetariano Sol de la India (Carrera 6 No 8-48; set meals US\$2) Vegetarian restaurant in a central location.

El Arca (Calle 13 No 8-44; mains US\$2-4; 🕒 noon-10pm Mon-Fri, 6-11pm Sat) Good Colombian-European fusion grub in a chill-out atmosphere, popular with the singles crowd.

Kiwis (Calle 12 No 3-36; crepes US\$3; 🕒 9am-8pm) Specializing in ice cream and smoothies, this place also serves very good ham-and-cheese crepes.

D'Toluca (Calle 17N No 8N-46; dishes US\$3-4; 🕒 noon-midnight) Close to the Iguana and Calidad, this small Mexican restaurant has become a popular hangout for the backpacker set.

Archie's (Av 9N No 14N-22; mains US\$5-8; 🕒 noon-10pm) Gourmet pizzas and salads are made with fresh ingredients at this casual location. Have a wander around this neighborhood and you'll find a dozen other upscale options.

Restaurante Carambolo (Calle 14N No 9N-18; mains US\$6-10) This chic bar-restaurant is spread over two levels and is full of flowers. It cooks fine Mediterranean cuisine.

Drinking

Cali's streets are lined with bars, although most double as *salsotecas*. One area to go for a drink is around Calle 17N between Av 8N and Av 9N. Most places don't have an admission fee, so it's easy to move from one to the next. Another area to trawl is Calle 17N between Av 8N and Av 9N.

Centro Comercial de Chipichape (www.chipichape.com in Spanish; Calle 38N No 6N-35) *Caleños* of all ages come to launch their evening with a *cerveza* (beer) or two at one of the many outdoor cafés at this mall. Locals have nicknamed it 'Silicon Valley' because of the high proportion of augmented women that it attracts. It is located just north of the main drag along Av Sexta.

Entertainment

Check the entertainment columns of the local newspaper *El País*.

Cali is the mecca of salsa dancing and you'll need some fast feet to keep up with the crowds. For a casual eve near the guesthouses, check out the handful of discos around the corner of Av 6N and Calle 16N.

The city's best-known salsa nightlife is in the legendary Juanchito, a popular, predominantly black outer suburb on the Río Cauca. Far away from the center, Juanchito was traditionally an archetypal salsa haunt dotted with dubious cafés and bars. Today sterile and expensive *salsotecas* have replaced most of the old shady but charming watering holes.

Juanchito's most famous salsa place is Changó, which is also probably the priciest. Agapito, next door, is cheaper but just as good. Parador is frequented by some of the most acrobatic dancers in town. Come on the weekend and take a taxi. Note that the action starts late: places open at around 10pm and get rowdy by midnight, peaking at about 2am.

Las Brisas de la Sexta (Av 6N No 15N-94) One of the largest and most popular *salsotecas*.

Zaperoco (Av 5N No 16N-46) Tucked away a bit, this cozy and likable *salsoteca* has magnetic salsa rhythms and a hot atmosphere.

Kukuramakara (Calle 28N No 2bis-97; admission US\$5) ☎ 9pm-4am Thu-Sat) This live-music venue at-

tracts a slightly more mature crowd. At the time of writing it was one of the most popular places in town.

Cinemateca La Tertulia (☎ 2-893-2939; Av Colombia No 5 Oeste-105) Cali's best arthouse cinema, in the Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia.

Teatro Experimental de Cali (TEC; ☎ 2-884-3820; Calle 7 No 8-63) Colombia's national theater started with the foundation of this company. It continues to be one of the city's most innovative theater companies.

Another center of nighttime entertainment is on and around Calle 5 in southern Cali. The best of this lot is **Tin Tin Deo** (Carrera 22 No 4A-27), which is frequented by university students and professors, adding an intellectual feel to the action.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The Palmaseca airport is 16km northeast of the city. Minibuses between the airport and the bus terminal run every 10 minutes until about 8pm (US\$1, 30 minutes), or take a taxi (US\$12).

There are plenty of flights to most major Colombian cities, including Bogotá (US\$80 to US\$110), Cartagena (US\$120 to US\$150), Medellín (US\$70 to US\$120), Pasto (US\$70 to US\$100) and San Andrés (US\$140 to US\$150). Aires and Satena fly to Ipiales (US\$80 to US\$100). Domestic carriers include **Satena** (☎ 2-885-7709; Calle 8 No 5-14) and **AeroRepública** (☎ 2-660-1000; Calle 26N No 6N-16).

Avianca (☎ 2-667-6919; Av Colombia No 2-72, Hotel Intercontinental) flies to Panama City (60-day return ticket US\$329), while Tame has three flights a week to Tulcán in Ecuador (one way US\$86) and to Quito (US\$123). **American Airlines** (☎ 2-666-3252; Av Colombia No 2-72, Hotel Intercontinental) has flights to the US.

BUS

The bus terminal is a 25-minute walk northeast of the city center, or 10 minutes by one of the frequent city buses. Buses run regularly to Bogotá (US\$25, 12 hours), Medellín (US\$18, nine hours) and Pasto (US\$14, nine hours). Pasto buses will drop you off at Popayán (US\$5, three hours) and there are also hourly minibuses to Popayán (US\$6, 2½ hours).

Getting Around

The new and old centers are close enough that most places of interest will be within walking

distance. The easiest way between the bus terminal and the center is by taxi (US\$1.30). From the terminal, buses (flat fare US\$20¢) head south on Calle 5.

AROUND CALI

Historic Haciendas

There are a number of old haciendas in the Cauca Valley around Cali. Most of them date from the 18th and 19th centuries and were engaged in the cultivation and processing of sugar cane, the region's major crop. The two best known are the **Hacienda El Paraíso** (☎ 2-256-2378; admission US\$1.75; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) and **Hacienda Piedechinche** (☎ 2-550-6076; admission US\$1.25; 🕒 9am-4pm Tue-Sun), both about 40km northeast of Cali and open as museums. There are tours from Cali on weekends, or you can visit them on your own using public transport, though both places are off the main roads. Take any bus to Buga and get off on the outskirts of **Amaime** (the drivers know where to drop you). Then walk to Piedechinche (5.5km) or negotiate a taxi. El Paraíso is still further off the road.

San Cipriano

This village is lost deep in the tropical forest near the Pacific coast, off the Cali-Buenaventura road. There's no road leading to the village, just a railway with occasional trains, but the locals have set up their own rail network with small trolleys propelled by mopeds. This ingenious means of transport is a great attraction and justifies a San Cipriano trip if only for the ride.

San Cipriano has a crystal-clear river, ideal for swimming, informal budget accommo-

dations and some simple places to eat. The village is a popular weekend destination with *caleños*, but it's quiet on weekdays.

To get there from Cali, take a bus or *colectivo* to Buenaventura, get off at the village of Córdoba (US\$3, two hours) and walk down the hill into the village to the railway track. From here, locals will take you to San Cipriano in their railcars (US\$1) – a great journey through the rainforest.

ISLA GORGONA

Lying 56km off the mainland, the 9km-long and 2.5km-wide Isla Gorgona is Colombia's largest Pacific island. It's a mountainous island of volcanic origin, with the highest peak reaching 330m. It's covered with lush tropical rainforest and shelters diverse wildlife, including various monkeys, lizards, turtles, snakes and bird species, a number of which are endemic. There are some beaches and coral reefs along the shores, and the surrounding waters seasonally host dolphins, humpback whales and sperm whales. The climate is hot and wet, with high humidity and no distinctive dry season.

The island was a cruel high-security prison during La Violencia until 1984, but is now a **national park** (admission US\$7.50; dm US\$12; 3 set meals US\$12). It offers accommodations in a four-bed dorm with bath, food and trips around the island (all excursions are accompanied by guides). You can also swim, sunbathe and snorkel (bring your own gear).

To visit Isla Gorgona, you need a permit from the national-park office in Bogotá. Booking long in advance is advisable, especially for

DETOUR: BUENAVENTURA

It may not be Colombia's most beautiful city, but with some 6m of rainfall a year, Buenaventura is by far the wettest. With a population largely made up of descendants of African slaves, its culture remains distinct from the rest of Colombia. The region's isolation has enabled the people to retain much of their African heritage, though at a price. Poverty is rampant, and much of the city consists of unpaved streets and wooden shacks. Isolation has also made the region a bastion for both paramilitaries and leftist rebels, though the situation has improved in recent years.

There are some fine beaches a short water taxi-ride from the city. In addition, the mouth of the nearby Río San Juan attracts humpback whales and dolphins from August to October. There are a number of places to stay, but the real standout is the **Hotel Estación** (☎ 2-243-4070; www.hotelestacion.com; Calle 2 No 1A-08; d from US\$70), a neoclassical confection with deluxe rooms, a good restaurant and three-day, all-inclusive whale-watching packages from US\$300 per person.

At the time of writing, the Cali-Buenaventura highway was heavily patrolled and considered safe, though be sure to check current conditions before setting out. Buses and *colectivos* leave frequently from Cali's bus station (US\$4 to US\$5, three hours).

Colombian vacation periods. All visits are fixed four-day/three-night stays, which must be paid for in advance.

The usual departure point for Isla Gorgona is Buenaventura (a three-hour bus trip from Cali), where you catch a (usually overcrowded) cargo boat for a 10- to 12-hour night trip to the island (about US\$30). It can be a hellish experience if the sea is rough.

Some travelers and most tours use Guapí as a launching pad for Gorgona. Guapí is a seaside village in Cauca, just opposite Gorgona. Guapí is not connected by road with the rest of the country but can be reached by air on daily flights from Cali with Satena (US\$50). From Guapí, boats take up to 10 tourists to Gorgona in less than two hours (about US\$200 per boat). For information and reservations, call ☎ 2-825-7137 or ☎ 2-825-7136.

If you desire more comfort, several Cali tour companies organize trips to Gorgona for US\$250 to US\$300. Book through **Aviatur** (☎ 2-664-5050; Av 6N No 37BN-94). Another option, if you are into scuba diving, is to join a dive safari. A weekend trip including seven dives and a visit to the island will set you back around US\$385. Contact **Arecifes del Pacífico** (☎ 315-410-8018; fico5@telesat.com.co).

Ecolombia Tours (☎ 2-557-1957; ecolombiatours@yahoo.com; Carrera 37A No 6-18) is arguably Cali's best specialist for tours to Isla Gorgona.

POPAYÁN

☎ 2 / pop 240,000

The whitewashed city of Popayán is one of Colombia's most beautiful old towns. But unlike many other historic places, this one has not been tarted up for the tourist hordes; it's a living, breathing city, with bustling streets and a sizable student population.

Founded in 1537, the town quickly became an important political, cultural and religious center, and was an obligatory stopover on the route between Cartagena and Quito. Its mild climate attracted wealthy Spanish settlers from the sugar haciendas of the hot Cali region. Several imposing churches and monasteries were built in the 17th and 18th centuries, when the city was flourishing.

During the 20th century while many Colombian cities were caught up in the race to industrialize, Popayán somehow managed to retain its colonial character. Ironically, many historic structures, including most of the churches, were seriously damaged by an

earthquake in March 1983, just moments before the much-celebrated Maundy Thursday religious procession was about to depart. The difficult and costly restoration work continued for nearly two decades, but the results are admirable.

Despite the small size of the city, it can be surprisingly easy to get lost here, as every street appears identical. Finding your way back to where you started is just part of the fun.

Information

Celnet.com (Carrera 8 No 5-13; per hr US\$1; 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun) Internet café.

Cyber Center (Calle 5 No 9-31; per hr US\$1; 9am-9pm) Another internet café.

Oficina de Turismo de Popayán (☎ 2-824-2251; Carrera 5 No 4-68; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat & Sun) Tourist info.

Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia (National Park Office; ☎ 2-823-1212, 2-823-1279; www.parquesnacionales.gov.co in Spanish; Carrera 9 No 25N-6)

Policía de Turismo (Tourist Police; ☎ 2-822-0916; Edificio de Gobernación, Parque Caldas)

Titán Intercontinental (Carrera 7 No 6-40, Centro Comercial Luis Martínez, Interior 106)

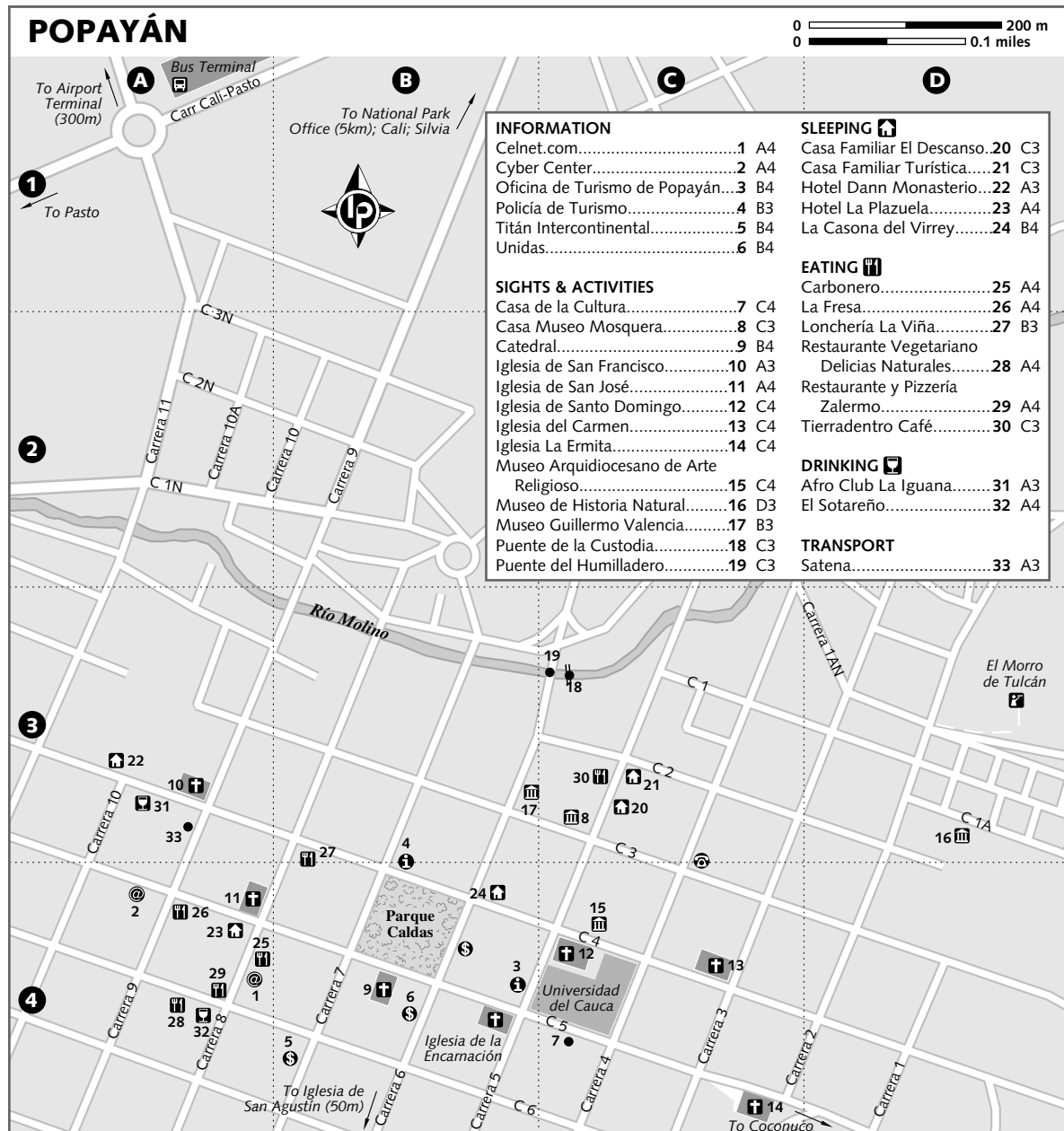
Unidas (Carrera 6 No 5-44) Will change cash.

Sights

Popayán has some good museums, most of which are set in splendid historic buildings. **Casa Museo Mosquera** (☎ 2-824-0683; Calle 3 No 5-38; admission US\$1; ☎ 8:30am-noon & 2-5pm) is a great colonial mansion that was home to General Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera, Colombia's president between 1845 and 1867. The museum contains personal memorabilia and a collection of colonial art, including some religious objects.

Museo Arquidiocesano de Arte Religioso (☎ 2-824-2759; Calle 4 No 4-56; admission US\$1; ☎ 9am-12:30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) has an extensive collection of religious art including paintings, statues, altarpieces, silverware and liturgical vessels, most of which date from the 17th to 19th centuries. **Museo Guillermo Valencia** (☎ 2-824-2081; Carrera 6 No 2-65; admission US\$1; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun), dedicated to the Popayán-born poet who once lived here, is full of period furniture, paintings and old photos related to him.

Museo de Historia Natural (☎ 2-820-1952; Carrera 2 No 1A-25; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 8:30am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun) is noted for its collections of insects,



butterflies and, in particular, stuffed birds. Part of the top floor is taken up by an archaeological display of pre-Columbian pottery from southern Colombia.

All the colonial churches were meticulously restored after the 1983 earthquake. The **Iglesia de San Francisco** (Carrera 9 at Calle 4) is the city's largest colonial church and arguably the best, with its fine high altar and a collection of seven amazing side altarpieces. Other colonial churches noted for their rich original furnishings include the **Iglesia de Santo Domingo** (Carrera 5 at Calle 4), **Iglesia de San José** (Calle 5 at Carrera 8) and the **Iglesia de San Agustín** (Calle 7 at Carrera 6).

Iglesia La Ermita (Calle 5 at Carrera 2) is Popayán's oldest church (1546), worth seeing for its fine main retable and for the fragments of old

frescoes, which were only discovered after the earthquake. The neoclassical **Catedral** (Parque Caldas) is the youngest church in the center, built between 1859 and 1906. It was almost completely destroyed by the earthquake and subsequently rebuilt from the ground up.

Walk to the river to see two unusual old bridges. The small one, the **Puente de la Custodia**, was constructed in 1713 to allow the priests to cross the river to bring the holy orders to the sick of the poor northern suburb. About 160 years later the 178m-long 12-arch **Puente del Humilladero** was built alongside the old bridge, and it's still in use.

Museums, churches and bridges are only a part of what Popayán has to offer. The best approach is to take a leisurely walk along the

streets lined with whitewashed colonial mansions, savor the architectural details and drop inside to see the marvelous patios (many are open to the public).

Festivals & Events

If you are in the area during **Holy Week** you'll have the chance to see the famous nighttime processions on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Popayán's Easter celebrations are the most elaborate in the country. The festival of religious music is held concurrently.

Sleeping

Popayán has an array of accommodations to suit every pocket. Many hotels are set in old colonial houses and are stylish and atmospheric.

Casa Familiar Turística (☎ 2-824-4853; Carrera 5 No 2-07; dm/s/d US\$4.50/7/11) One of the cheapest hotels in town. It has just four rooms, all with shared facilities. It's a good place to meet other travelers.

Casa Familiar El Descanso (☎ 2-824-0019; Carrera 5 No 2-41; s/d US\$7/13.50) This place rents out small but neat rooms in a grand house. Piping hot water and a comfortable interior with soft couches and lots of natural light.

La Casona del Virrey (☎ 2-824-0836; Calle 4 No 5-78; r with/without bathroom per person US\$16/8) Colonial building with style and character. Choose one of the ample rooms facing the street.

Hotel La Plazuela (☎ 2-824-1084; hotellaplazuela@hotmail.com; Calle 5 No 8-13; s/d US\$35/50) This splendid mansion has been turned into a stylish midrange hotel.

Hotel Dann Monasterio (☎ 2-824-2191; www.hoteldann.com in Spanish; Calle 4 No 10-14; s/d US\$54/60; 🚿) In a great colonial building with a vast courtyard that was once a Franciscan monastery, this is Popayán's top-notch offering. It has 48 spacious refurbished rooms and a fine restaurant that is worth visiting even if you are not staying here.

Eating

Popayán has plenty of places to eat and the food is relatively cheap.

La Fresa (Calle 5 No 8-89; 🕒 8am-8pm) From a small cubbyhole with no sign on the door, delicious, cheap *empanadas de papián* (a type of fried pastry) are served.

Tierradentro Café (Carrera 5 No 2-12) The best choice of espressos and cappuccinos in town, with 90 different flavors. An important stop for coffee addicts.

Restaurante Vegetariano Delicias Naturales (Calle 6 No 8-21) Offers good, budget vegetarian meals.

Carbonero (Carrera 8a No 5-15; dishes US\$3; 🕒 noon-9:30pm) A great place to go if you have a big appetite, this spacious restaurant serves big portions of Colombian fare. One of the owners speaks English and can impart useful advice on the area.

Lonchería La Viña (Calle 4 No 7-79; mains US\$3-5; 🕒 9am-midnight) One of the best and most popular budget eateries. It has tasty food, generous portions and is open late. Recommended.

Restaurante y Pizzeria Zalermo (Carrera 8 No 5-100; mains US\$3-7; 🕒 9am-10pm) Patrons can choose from a dozen types of pizza in this friendly restaurant. Chicken and pasta are also available.

Drinking

El Sotareño (Calle 6 No 8-05; 🕒 4pm-late Mon-Sat) Legendary rustic bar with a 40-year history. It plays nostalgic old rhythms such as tango, bolero, *ranchera* and *milonga* from scratched vinyls probably as old as the place itself, and serves some of the cheapest beer in town.

Afro Club La Iguana (Calle 4 No 9-67; 🕒 8pm-late Mon-Sat) Bar with excellent salsa and Cuban *son* music at high volume. It can get jam-packed and heaves with hot salsa action, especially on weekends.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport is just behind the bus terminal, a 15-minute walk north of the city center. Satena has daily flights to Bogotá (US\$70 to US\$80).

DETOUR: RESERVA NACIONAL NATURAL PURACÉ

Trekking opportunities exist just outside Popayán at the Reserva Nacional Natural Puracé, an 83,000-hectare reserve that includes the sometimes-snowy Nevado de Puracé (4750m) as well as natural hot springs, mountain lakes, waterfalls and fields of multicolored grasses. The reserve is located about 45km southeast of Popayán. Entrance fees are US\$8, dorms are US\$6 and three meals a day cost another US\$5. For information and reservations in Popayán, contact the Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia (p609).

BUS

The bus terminal is a short walk north of the city center. Plenty of buses run to Cali (US\$5, three hours), and there are also minibuses and *colectivos* every hour or so. Buses to Bogotá run every hour or two (US\$26, 15 hours).

Buses to Pasto (US\$10, six hours) leave every hour. It's a hazardous road best traveled by day. For information on getting to Tier-radentro see p616 and for San Agustín see p614.

SILVIA

📍 2 / pop 5000

Travelers hoping to catch a glimpse of the indigenous way of life should look no further than this small town, located 53km north-east of Popayán. Silvia is the center of the Guambianos, one of the most traditional Indian communities in Colombia. Though the Indians don't live in the town, they come to Silvia for the Tuesday market to sell fruit, vegetables and handicrafts. This is possibly the most colorful Indian gathering in the country and the best day to visit Silvia. You'll see plenty of Indians in traditional dress, the women in handwoven garments and beaded necklaces, busily spinning wool. Bring a sweater – it can get cold when the weather is cloudy. If you decide to stay longer in Silvia, there are at least half-a-dozen budget hotels.

To get to Silvia from Popayán, take the Coomotoristas bus or Tax Belalcázar minibus (US\$2, 1½ hours). On Tuesday, there are also *colectivos* between Popayán and Silvia.

SAN AGUSTÍN

📍 8 / pop 2000

Long before Europeans came to the Americas, the rolling hills around San Agustín attracted a mysterious group of people who came here to bury their dead and honor them with magnificent statues. The legacy that they left behind is now one of the continent's most important archaeological sites. Hundreds of freestanding monumental statues carved in stone were left next to the tombs of tribal elders. Pottery and gold objects were left behind, although much of it was robbed over the centuries.

San Agustín culture flourished between the 6th and 14th centuries AD. The best statuary was made only in the last phase of the development, and the culture had presumably vanished before the Spaniards came. The

statues were not discovered until the middle of the 18th century.

So far some 500 statues have been found and excavated. A great number are anthropomorphic figures – some of them realistic, others very stylized, resembling masked monsters. Others are zoomorphic, depicting sacred animals such as the eagle, the jaguar and the frog. The statues vary both in size, from about 20cm to 7m, and in their degree of detail.

Orientation & Information

The statues and tombs are scattered in groups over a wide area on both sides of the gorge formed by the upper Río Magdalena. The main town of the region, San Agustín, shelters most of the accommodations and restaurants. From there, you can explore the region on foot, horseback or by jeep; give yourself three days for leisurely visits to the most interesting places.

Banco Ultrahuilca (Calle 3 No 12-73) It's best to bring as much cash as you're likely to need, since this is the only ATM in town. No-one reliably accepts traveler's checks, and rates for cash tend to be poor.

Internet Galería Café (Calle 3 No 12-16; ☎ 8am-10pm) Internet café right across from the tourist office.

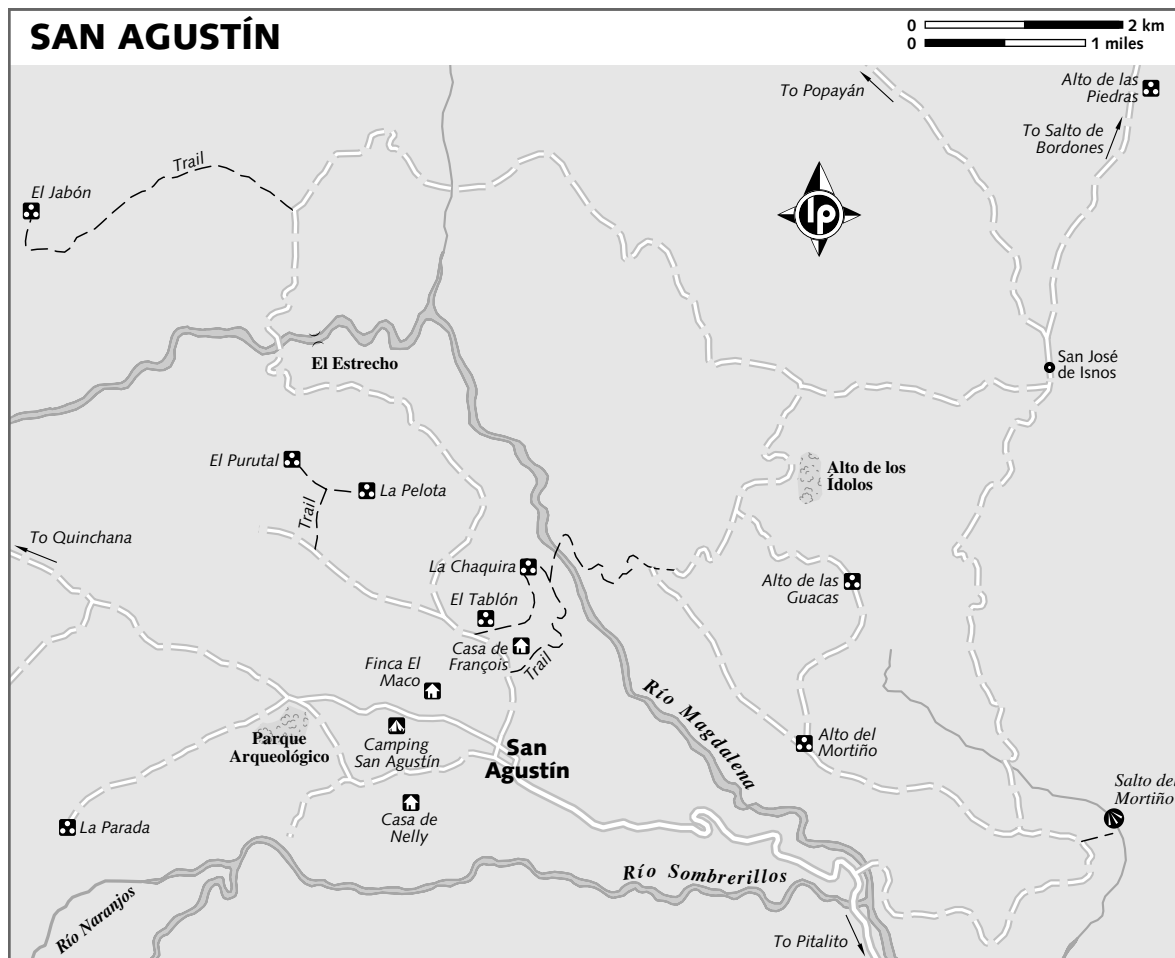
Tourist office (☎ 8-837-3062 ext 15; cnr Calle 3 & Carrera 12; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Information and maps are available.

Sights & Activities

The 78-hectare **Parque Arqueológico** (admission US\$2; ☎ 8am-6pm), 2.5km west of the town of San Agustín, features some of the best of San Agustín statuary. The park covers several archaeological sites that include statues, tombs and burial mounds. It also has the **Museo Arqueológico** (☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Sun) which displays smaller statues and pottery, and the **Bosque de las Estatuas** (Forest of Statues), where 35 statues of different origins are placed along a footpath that snakes through the woods.

The **Alto de los Ídolos** (☎ 8am-4pm) is another archaeological park, noted for burial mounds and large stone tombs. The largest statue, 7m tall, is here. The park is a few kilometers southwest of San José de Isnos, on the other side of the Río Magdalena from San Agustín town. The ticket bought at the Parque Arqueológico also covers entry to the Alto de los Ídolos and is valid for two consecutive days.

A dozen other archaeological sites are scattered over the area including **El Tablón**, **La Chaquira**, **La Pelota** and **El Purutal**, four sites



relatively close to each other that can be conveniently visited on one trip. The region is also noted for its natural beauty, with two lovely waterfalls, **Salto de Bordonos** and **Salto del Mortiño**. **El Estrecho**, where the Río Magdalena passes through 2m narrows, is an attractive sight.

There is good scope for white-water rafting and kayaking in San Agustín. **Magdalena Rafting** (☎ 311-271-5333; magdalenarafting@yahoo.fr; Via Parque No 4-12) runs half-day trips on the river for US\$18 including drinks. Kayaking is also possible. The best time of the year for rafting is June and July. Other activities including horse-riding, jeep tours and trekking are organized through Finca El Maco guesthouse (right).

Sleeping

There are a dozen budget hotels in and around San Agustín, most of which are clean and friendly and have hot water.

There are more budget options outside the town, and these are possibly the most popular with travelers.

Camping San Agustín (☎ 8-837-3192; per site US\$3) Camping is available here, about 1km outside town on the way to the archaeological park.

Casa de François (☎ 8-837-3847; per person US\$4) Pleasant French-run hostel 1km north of town, off the road to El Tablón. It has two rooms and a four-bed cabin; guests can use the kitchen.

Hospedaje El Jardín (☎ 8-837-3159; Carrera 11 No 4-10; per person US\$3.50) Basic but neat option near the bus offices, offering rooms with and without bathrooms.

Hotel Colonial (☎ 8-837-3159; Calle 3 No 11-54; per person US\$4) Close to the bus offices, Hotel Colonial has rooms with and without bathrooms, and a reasonable restaurant.

Casa de Nelly (☎ 8-837-3221; r per person with/without bathroom US\$6/4) An agreeable French-run place 1km west of the town off the dirt road to La Estrella.

Finca El Maco (☎ 8-837-3437; www.elmaco.ch; per person US\$5.50) Ecological ranch off the road to the Parque Arqueológico. It offers accommodations in cabins, great organic meals, laundry service and use of the kitchen. This is also a good place to organize horse-riding or rafting trips.

Eating

You'll find several budget eateries around Calle 5. There are some eating outlets on the

road to the Parque Arqueológico, including Restaurante La Brasa, serving tasty grilled meat.

Restaurante Brahma (Calle 5 No 15-11; set meals US\$2) This place serves cheap set meals, vegetarian food and fruit salads.

Donde Richard (Via al Parque Arqueológico; mains US\$5-6) Specializing in grilled meats, including the restaurant's signature marinated pork, this is hands-down the best place in town. Don't miss the homemade sausages.

Getting There & Away

All bus offices are clustered on Calle 3 near the corner of Carrera 11. Three buses a day (departing early in the morning) go to Popayán via a rough but spectacular road through Isnos (US\$8, six to eight hours). Coomotor has two buses daily to Bogotá (US\$16, 12 hours).

There are no direct buses to Tierradentro; go to La Plata (US\$8, five hours) and change for a bus to El Cruce de San Andrés (US\$4, 2½ hours), from where it's a 20-minute walk to the Tierradentro museum. La Plata has several cheap hotels.

Getting Around

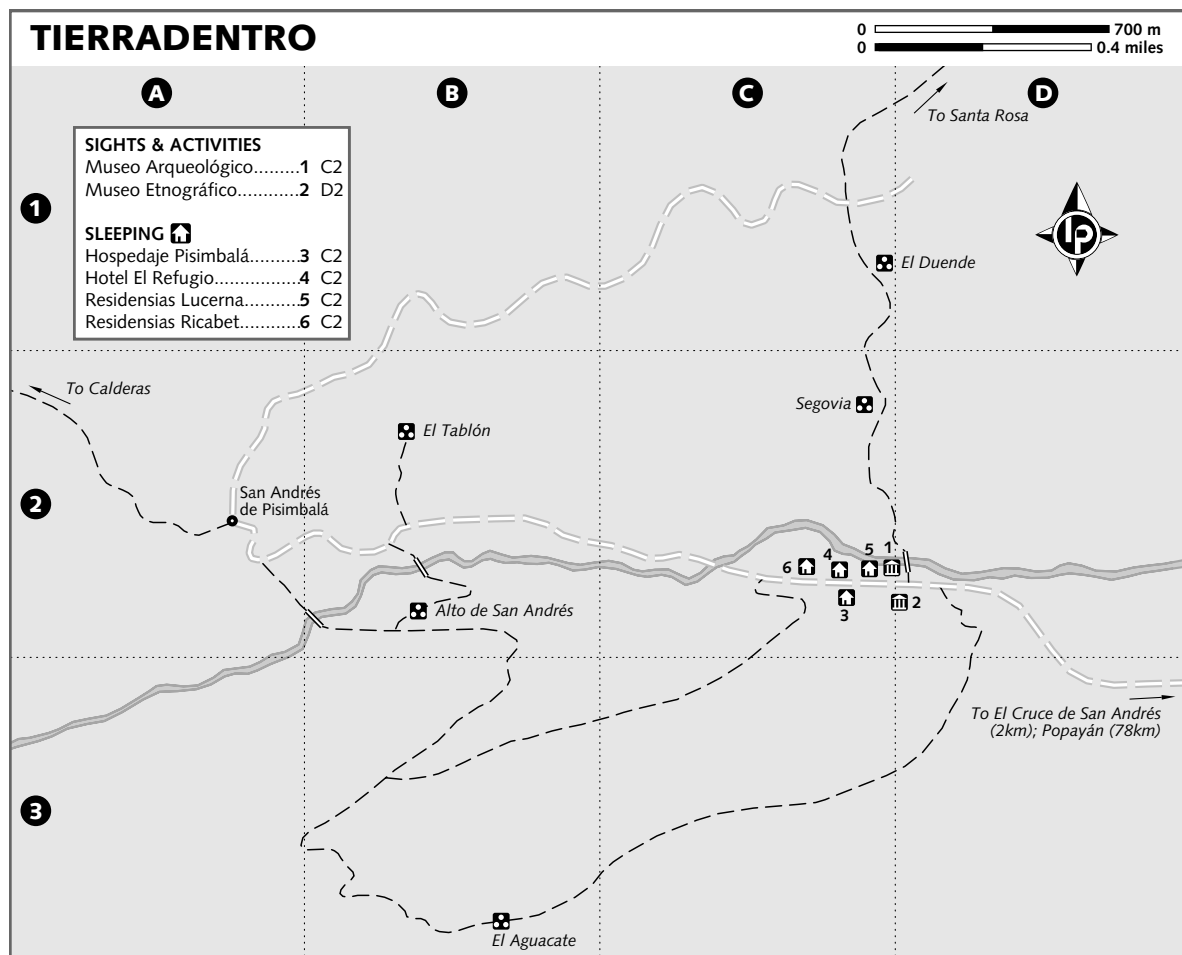
The usual way of visiting San Agustín's sights (apart from the Parque Arqueológico) is by jeep tours and horse-riding excursions. The standard jeep tour includes El Estrecho, Alto de los Ídolos, Alto de las Piedras, Salto de Bordonos and Salto de Mortiño. It takes seven to eight hours and costs US\$12 per person if there are six people to fill the jeep. There are few jeep tours since few tourists come here these days, so you pay for the empty seats.

Horse rental can be arranged through hotel managers or directly with horse owners who frequently approach tourists. Horses are hired out for a specific route, for a half-day (US\$7) or full day (US\$12). One of the most popular horse-riding trips (US\$7 per horse, around five hours) includes El Tablón, La Chaquirá, La Pelota and El Purutal. If you need a guide to accompany your party, add US\$6 for the guide and another US\$6 for his horse.

TIERRADENTRO

☎ 2 / pop 1500

To the original inhabitants of Tierradentro, the high cliffs and lush scenery must have seemed



like a good place to depart for the afterlife, evinced by the numerous underground burial chambers scattered around. These tombs, the only such examples in the Americas, are elaborate circular rooms ranging from 2m to 7m in diameter, scooped out of the soft rock in the slopes and tops of hills. The domelike ceilings of the larger vaults are supported by massive pillars. The chambers house the cremated remains of tribal elders. They were painted in geometric patterns in red and black (representing life and death) on a white background, and the decoration in some of them has been remarkably well preserved.

About 100 tombs have been discovered to date, as well as several dozen stone statues similar to those of San Agustín, probably the product of a broad cultural influence. Not much is known about the people who built the tombs and statues. Most likely they were from different cultures, and the people who scooped out the tombs preceded those who carved the statues. Today the region is inhabited by the Páez Indians, who have lived here since before the Spanish conquest, but it is doubtful whether they are the descendants of the statue sculptors.

Tombs aside, Tierradentro is a relaxed place and less touristy than San Agustín. Facilities are more limited but you'll get a great feel for Colombian country life.

Orientation & Information

Tierradentro is far away from any significant urban centers and is only accessible by dirt roads. You can get there from Popayán and San Agustín, but in each case it's a rough half-day bus ride.

Once in Tierradentro you have four sites with tombs and one with statues, as well as two museums and the village of San Andrés de Pisimbalá. Except for the burial site of El Aguacate, all the sights are within easy walking distance. You can also visit them on horseback; horses are rented out near the museums and in San Andrés (US\$8 per day). A flashlight is necessary for almost all the tombs – make sure to bring one with you.

There are no tourist office or money-changing facilities in Tierradentro. General information is available from the museum staff and hotel managers.

Sights

Begin your visit from the two museums, right across the road from one another. One com-

bined ticket (US\$3) is valid for two consecutive days to all archaeological sites and the museums (open 8am to 4pm). The **Museo Arqueológico** contains pottery urns that were found in the tombs, whereas the **Museo Etnográfico** has utensils and artifacts of the Páez Indians.

A 20-minute walk up the hill north of the museums will bring you to **Segovia**, the most important burial site. There are 28 tombs here, some with well-preserved decoration. Twelve of the tombs are lit; for the others you'll need a flashlight.

Other burial sites include **El Duende** (four tombs without preserved decoration) and the **Alto de San Andrés** (five tombs, two of which have their original paintings). **El Aguacate** is high on a mountain ridge, a two-hour one-way walk from the museum. There are a few dozen tombs there, but most have been destroyed by the *guaqueros* (grave robbers). Statues have been gathered together at **El Tablón**.

The tiny village of **San Andrés de Pisimbalá**, a 25-minute walk west of the museums, is noted for its beautiful thatched church.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodations and food in Tierradentro are simple but cheap – expect to pay around US\$3.50 per bed. You can stay close to the museums, which is fine for a short visit. If you are thinking of staying more than a couple of days you may want to stay in San Andrés de Pisimbalá. The best place is Hotel El Refugio, next to Residencias Ricabet. It was closed for renovations at the time of research but when it opens should be Tierradentro's first midrange hotel, complete with swimming pool and restaurant. Residencias Lucerna, just up the road from the museums, is clean and friendly.

Hospedaje Pisimbalá (☎ 311-605-4835) About 150m beyond Residencias Lucerna, this is one of the cheapest places for accommodations and food.

Residencias Ricabet (☎ 312-279-9751) Another 150m further up the road is the budget option.

Viajero (☎ 312-746-5991; Calle 6 No 4-09, San Andrés de Pisimbalá) This is the cheapest of three budget *residencias* in San Andrés de Pisimbalá. If it doesn't suit ask around for Los Lagos de Tierradentro, which has some private rooms.

La Portada (🕒 7am-8pm; meals US\$1-2) The only restaurant in San Andrés de Pisimbalá serves delicious *jugos* (fruit drinks) and fresh Colombian meals.

Getting There & Away

Each day several Sotracauca buses head for Tierradentro (US\$6, five to six hours) from Popayán. Those that depart at 5am, 8am, 9:30am and 1pm travel only to El Cruce de San Andrés, from where it's a 20-minute walk to the museums. A 10:30am bus travels an additional 4km all the way to San Andrés de Pisimbalá, passing the museums en route.

Getting back to Popayán, a solitary bus leaves San Andrés de Pisimbalá each morning at around 6:20am, also passing the museums. If you don't catch this one, walk to El Cruce de San Andrés and flag down a bus passing at around 8am, 1pm and 4pm. It's also possible to flag down the odd bus passing El Cruce de San Andrés toward La Plata (US\$2.50, 2½ hours), where you can catch onward transport to Bogotá or San Agustín.

PASTO

☎ 2 / pop 420,000

Pastusos (Pasto residents) have never had it easy. Living at the base of the temperamental Volcán Galeras, city residents have witnessed volcanic explosions and endured devastating earthquakes. The weather is almost always cold and blustery, and city streets feel rather forlorn and neglected. *Pastusos* also have a dubious reputation among other Colombians and often find themselves at the butt of many light-bulb jokes – fortunately they are good-humored about it and will happily tell you the latest gag. Despite its shortcomings, Pasto does make for a handy stopover on the Pan-American Hwy or as a base to visit the beautiful Laguna de la Cocha.

Information

Bancolombia (Plaza de Nariño) Has an ATM and changes traveler's checks.

Ciber C@fe PC Rent (Calle 18A No 25-36; per hr US80¢
☎ 8am-10pm)

Infonet (Calle 18 No 29-15; per hr US80¢; ☎ 8am-7pm
Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun)

Macrofinanciera (Carrera 26 No 17-12, Centro Comercial El Liceo, Local 203)

Oficina Departamental de Turismo de Nariño
(☎ 2-723-4962; Calle 18 No 25-25) Just off Plaza de Nariño.

Sights

Pasto has some small but interesting museums. **Museo del Oro** (☎ 2-721-9108; Calle 19 No 21-27; admission free; ☎ 8:30am-noon Mon, to noon & 2-6pm Tue-Fri), in the building of the Banco de la

República, features gold and pottery of the pre-Columbian cultures of Nariño.

Museo Taminango de Artes y Tradiciones (☎ 2-723-5539; Calle 13 No 27-67; admission US80¢; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat), accommodated in a meticulously restored *casona* (large house) from 1623 (reputedly the oldest surviving house in town), displays artifacts and antique objects from the region.

Museo Juan Lorenzo Lucero (☎ 2-731-4414; Calle 18 No 28-87; admission US80¢; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) is the museum of the city's history, featuring antiques, old weapons, photos, documents, furniture and paintings. All visits are by guided tours, which normally begin at 8am, 10am and 2pm.

There are a dozen colonial churches in town, most of which are large constructions with richly decorated interiors. The **Iglesia de San Juan Bautista**, with its ornate interior, is the city's oldest church, dating from Pasto's early days. The **Iglesia de Cristo Rey** has beautiful stained-glass windows.

Festivals & Events

The city's major event, the **Carnaval de Blancos y Negros**, is held at the beginning of January. Its origins go back to the times of Spanish rule when slaves were allowed to celebrate on January 5 and their masters showed approval by painting their faces black. The following day the slaves painted their faces white. On these two days the city goes wild, with everybody painting and dusting one another with anything available. It's a serious affair – wear your least favorite outfit.

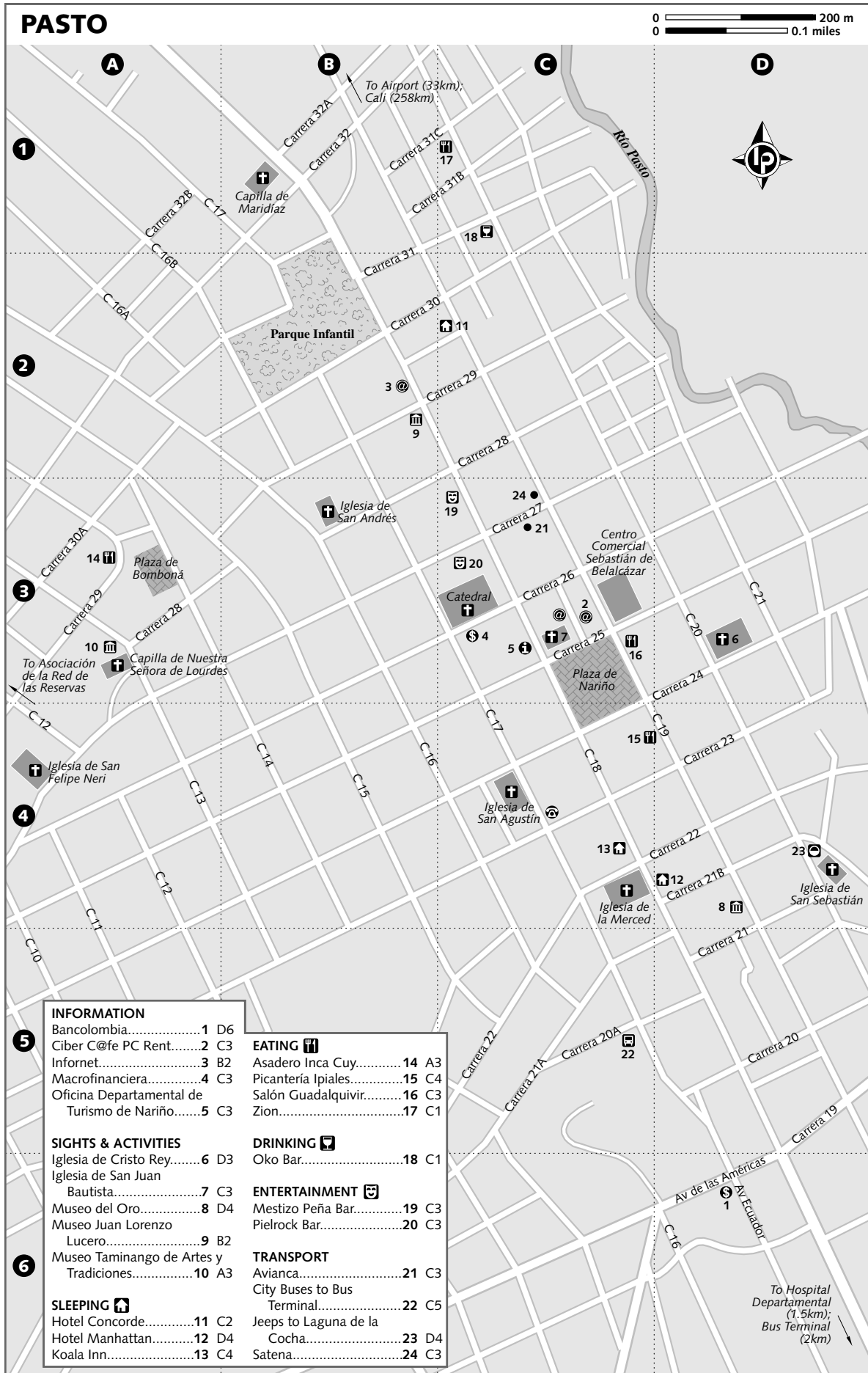
Sleeping

There are plenty of hotels throughout the central area.

Koala Inn (☎ 2-722-1101; Calle 18 No 22-37; r with/without bathroom per person US\$8/5.50) This excellent backpacker place has a very friendly staff and spacious rooms in a fine historic building. The hotel offers laundry facilities, book exchange, a budget restaurant and satellite TV on the patio.

Hotel Manhattan (☎ 2-721-5675; Calle 18 No 21B-14; per person US\$5.50) This old building is starting to fall apart, but it's central and can be used as a back up if the Koala is full.

Hotel Concorde (☎ 2-731-0658; Calle 19 No 29A-09; s/d US\$12/16) Small hotel close to the entertainment area. It's nothing luxurious but rooms are cozy, have cable TV and hot water.



INFORMATION	
Bancolombia.....	1 D6
Ciber C@fe PC Rent.....	2 C3
Infornet.....	3 B2
Macrofinanciera.....	4 C3
Oficina Departamental de Turismo de Nariño.....	5 C3
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
Iglesia de Cristo Rey.....	6 D3
Iglesia de San Juan Bautista.....	7 C3
Museo del Oro.....	8 D4
Museo Juan Lorenzo Lucero.....	9 B2
Museo Taminango de Artes y Tradiciones.....	10 A3
SLEEPING	
Hotel Concorde.....	11 C2
Hotel Manhattan.....	12 D4
Koala Inn.....	13 C4

EATING	
Asadero Inca Cuy.....	14 A3
Picantería Ipiales.....	15 C4
Salón Guadalquivir.....	16 C3
Zion.....	17 C1
DRINKING	
Oko Bar.....	18 C1
ENTERTAINMENT	
Mestizo Peña Bar.....	19 C3
Pielrock Bar.....	20 C3
TRANSPORT	
Avianca.....	21 C3
City Buses to Bus Terminal.....	22 C5
Jeeps to Laguna de la Cocha.....	23 D4
Satena.....	24 C3

COLOMBIA

To Hospital Departamental (1.5km); Bus Terminal (2km)

Eating

There are loads of cheap restaurants and cafés in the city center, where you can get a set meal for under US\$2.

Salón Guadalquivir (Plaza de Nariño; ☎ 7am-7:30pm Mon-Sat) Café widely known for its *tamales* (chopped meat with vegetables wrapped in banana leaves) and addictive *empanadas* (three for US\$1).

Zion (Calle 20 No 31B-47; meals US\$2-4; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Sat) Excellent pizzas served in a somewhat incongruous Rasta atmosphere.

Picantería IpiALES (Calle 19 No 23-37; meals US\$3; ☎ 9:30am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) Local specialist in *lapingachos* (fried pancakes made from mashed potato and cheese).

Asadero Inca Cuy (☎ 2-723-8050; Carrera 29 No 13-65; meal for 2 US\$10; ☎ 9am-10pm) One of the best central restaurants serving *cuy* (grilled guinea pig). The dish (the whole animal plus accompaniments) is big enough for two people; order it one hour in advance.

Drinking

Oko Bar (Calle 20 & Carrera 31; ☎ 7pm-late Mon-Sat) This popular bar gets packed to the gills, especially on Thursday nights when women drink for free from 7pm to 10pm. It's in Pasto's Zona Rosa so there are plenty of other places nearby if you feel like a pub crawl.

Entertainment

Pielrock Bar (Carrera 27 No 17-88; ☎ 7pm-late Mon-Sat) Proof that psychedelia can find its way anywhere on earth, this very alternative rock bar plays 1960s and 1970s funk and psychedelic rock. Expect to hear live music on weekends.

For some Andean rhythms try **Mestizo Peña Bar** (Calle 18 No 27-67; ☎ 4pm-late Tue-Sat) or **Canto Andino Peña Bar** (Calle 20 No 30-41; 7pm-late Tue-Sat); both have live music on weekends.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport is 33km north of the city on the road to Cali. *Colectivos* go there from Calle 18 at Carrera 25 (US\$2.50, 45 minutes). Pay the day before your flight at the airline office or at a travel agency, and the *colectivo* will pick you up from your hotel.

Avianca and Satena service Pasto, with daily flights to Bogotá (US\$90 to US\$120) and Cali (US\$80 to US\$100), and connections to other cities.

BUS

The bus terminal is 2km south of the city center. Urban buses go there from different points in the central area including Carrera 20A at Calle 17, or take a taxi (US\$1.25).

Frequent buses, minibuses and *colectivos* go to IpiALES (US\$3.50, 1½ to two hours); sit on the left for better views. Plenty of buses ply the spectacular road to Cali (US\$14, nine hours). A dozen direct buses depart daily to Bogotá (US\$35, 21 hours). Always travel by day in these parts – both for safety and the views.

AROUND PASTO

Volcán Galeras

The active Galeras volcano (4267m) is 8km west of Pasto as the crow flies or 22km by rough road (no public transport). Puffs of smoke occasionally rise from its crater, although there has not been a major eruption since 1993 when 10 people were killed. When seismic activity is low, tourists are allowed to hike or ride to the top; the hike from Pasto takes four to five hours. At the time of writing, special permits were needed to approach the crater – check with the tourist office in Pasto, which has information on permits and can organize guides (US\$20) and vehicles (US\$35).

Laguna de la Cocha

This is one of the biggest and most beautiful lakes in Colombia, about 25km east of Pasto. The small island of La Corota is a nature reserve, covered by dense forest and home to highly diverse flora. You can row yourself to the island in a six-seat boat (US\$7.50); locals hire these out from the small town on the lakeshore.

Scattered around the lake are two dozen small private nature reserves, collectively known as the Reservas Naturales de la Cocha, established by locals on their farms. They will show you around, and some provide accommodations and food.

Jeeps for the lake (US\$1.50, 45 minutes) depart on weekdays from the Iglesia de San Sebastián in central Pasto, and on weekends from the back of the **Hospital Departamental** (Calle 22 at Carrera 7).

IPIALES

☎ 2 / pop 75,000

IpiALES is not the most inspiring place to start or end a trip to Colombia, but you may need to spend the night if it's late.

There's little to do in town, besides the colorful **Saturday market** where the *campesinos* from surrounding villages buy and sell goods.

The only real reason to stop here is to catch a glimpse of the magnificent **Santuario de las Lajas** (p620).

Information

There are lots of money changers and private *casas de cambio* in the town's center. There are also money changers at the border in Rumichaca.

All passport formalities are processed in Rumichaca, not in Ipiales or Tulcán. The DAS office is on the Colombian side of the border and the Ecuadorian post is just across the Rumichaca River. Few nationals need a visa for

Ecuador, but if you do need one the consulate (p630) is in the center of Ipiales.

Banco de Bogotá (Carrera 6 at Calle 15) ATM.

Bancolombia (Plaza La Pola) Has an ATM and cashes traveler's checks.

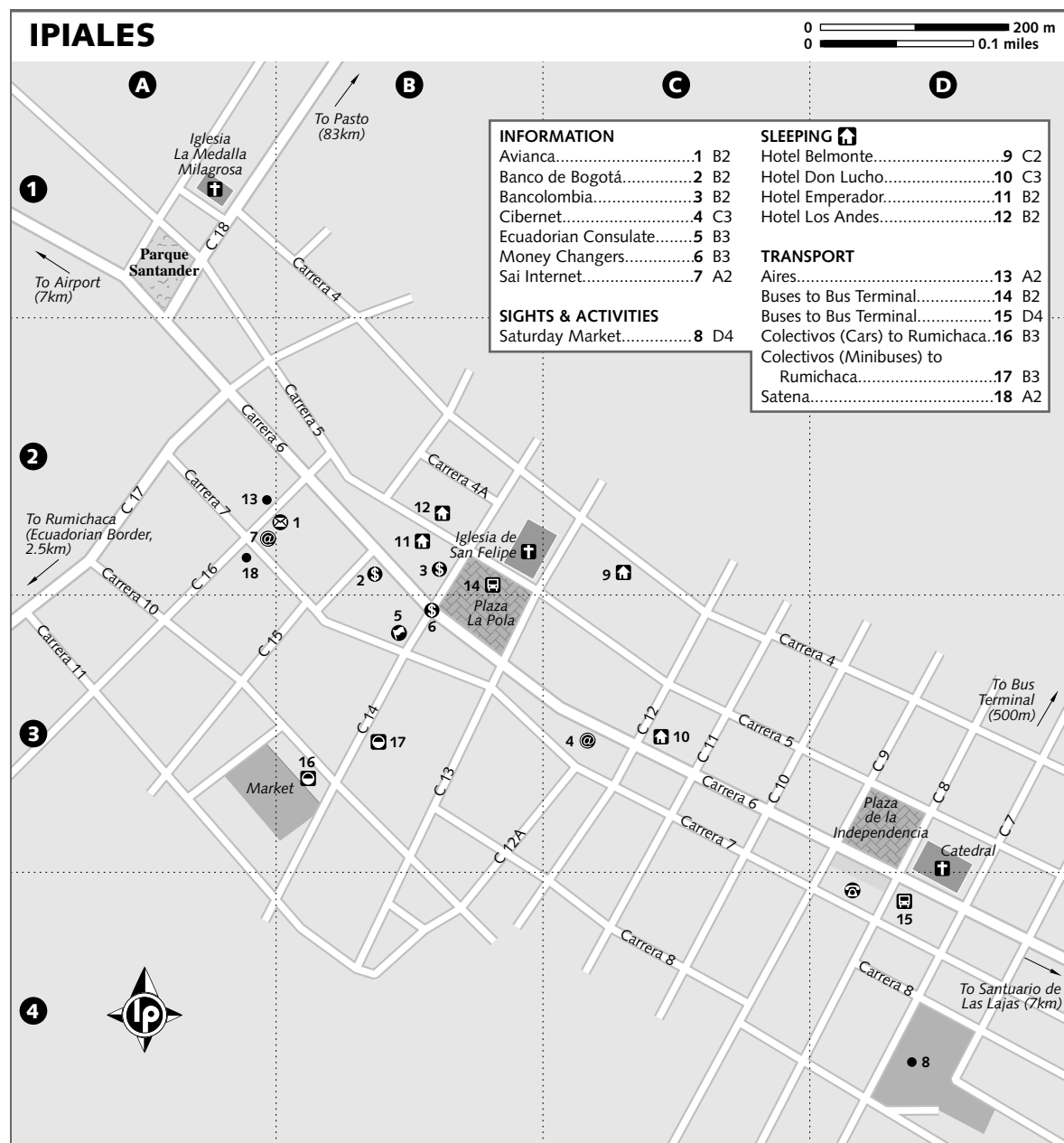
Cibernet (Carrera 6 No 12-43, Centro Comercial Polo; per hr US\$1; 9am-7pm Mon-Sat)

SAI Internet (Calle 16 No 6-46; per hr US\$1; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat)

Sleeping & Eating

There are plenty of budget hotels and restaurants all across the town's center.

Hotel Belmonte (☎ 2-773-2771; Carrera 4 No 12-111; s/d US\$5/7) One of the cheapest acceptable hotels. It's small, friendly, family run and popular with backpackers.



Hotel Emperador (☎ 2-773-2311; Carrera 5 No 14-43; s/d US\$6.50/10.50) It's not the most memorable hotel you'll stay in, but the Emperador has decent enough rooms close to the center.

Hotel Don Lucho (☎ 2-773-2164; Carrera 6A No 11-64; s/d US\$8/13.50) New, fairly clean hotel with bright rooms and welcoming staff that tends to attract business travelers.

Hotel Los Andes (☎ 2-773-4338; www.hotellosandes.com; Carrera 5 No 14-44; s/d US\$23/34) One of Ipiales' best hotels, offering neat, quiet rooms, a gym, sauna and a restaurant, which is also among the best in town.

You'll find numerous budget restaurants all over town, but don't expect too much as they are all pretty basic.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport is 7km northwest of Ipiales, on the road to Cumbal, accessible by taxi (US\$6). Satena and Aires have flights to Cali (US\$80 to US\$100) and Bogotá (US\$100 to US\$130).

BUS

Ipiales has a large bus terminal, about 1km northeast of the center. It's linked to the center by urban buses (US\$20¢) and taxis (US\$1).

Expreso Bolivariano has a dozen buses daily to Bogotá (US\$35, 25 hours) and several companies run regular buses to Cali (US\$14, 10 hours). All these buses will drop you in Popayán in eight hours. Daytime travel is safest.

There are plenty of buses, minibuses and *colectivos* to Pasto (US\$2 to US\$3, 1½ to two hours). They all depart from the bus terminal. Sit on the right to experience better views.

GETTING TO ECUADOR

Frequent *colectivos* (cars and minibuses) travel the 2.5km to the border at Rumichaca (US\$50¢), leaving from the Ipiales bus terminal and the market area near the corner of Calle 14 and Carrera 10. It's necessary to change transport at the border – after crossing on foot, take another *colectivo* to Tulcán (6.5km). This border is open 24 hours. For information on getting to Colombia, see p676.

SANTUARIO DE LAS LAJAS

The Santuario de las Lajas, 7km southeast of Ipiales, is a **neo-Gothic church** built between 1926 and 1944 on a bridge spanning a spectacular river gorge. The church was constructed to commemorate the appearance of the Virgin, whose image, according to a legend, appeared on an enormous vertical rock 45m above the river. The church is set up against the gorge cliff in such a way that the rock with the image forms its main altar.

Pilgrims from all over Colombia and from abroad come here year-round. Many leave thanksgiving plaques along the alley leading to the church. Note the number of miracles that are said to have occurred.

Colectivos run regularly from Ipiales to Las Lajas (US\$50¢, 15 minutes), leaving from Carrera 6 at Calle 4. A taxi from Ipiales to Las Lajas costs US\$2.50. A return taxi trip (for up to four people), including one hour of waiting in Las Lajas, shouldn't cost more than US\$6.

AMAZON BASIN

Colombia's Amazon is unknown territory. This thickly forested region accounts for a third of the national territory, as large as California but with hardly a trace of modernity or infrastructure. It's mostly rainforest – a biologist's dream, crisscrossed by rivers and only lightly populated by scattered indigenous communities whose only link to the outside world is through the odd transport plane. Much of the Amazon territory is held by guerrilla groups and is basically inaccessible to the casual tourist. The only place realistically accessible is the border town of Leticia, which has a small but bustling tourist industry.

LETICIA

☎ 8 / pop 35,000

Sitting quietly along the Amazon River, this amazingly hot speck of civilization is the largest town for hundreds of miles. It may appear on your map to be well off the beaten trail, but it certainly does not seem so when lounging on the spruce little main drag with an ice cream or a cold beer. Most travelers use Leticia as a transit point for onward travel – there are boat connections to Iquitos (Peru) and Manaus (Brazil), but there are plenty of activities to keep you busy for a few days, including

PARADISE LOST

The arrival of Europeans in the New World triggered a pandemic that ended up killing millions of indigenous peoples throughout the Americas. That this fact is so well known makes the plight of the Nukak-Makú Indians all the more tragic.

When the Nukak-Makú first came into contact with white people in 1988 this nomadic tribe of indigenous peoples, living in Colombia's eastern Amazon, numbered around 1000 people. But diseases introduced by the outsiders (namely measles and the flu) had a devastating effect, killing off half the tribe. In 1997 a campaign to save the tribe succeeded in granting them legal protection of their land.

Since then the Nukak-Makú have attempted to maintain their hunter-gatherer way of life, but this has been threatened by poor Colombian farmers who have moved onto their territory to plant coca. Their plight took another turn for the worse in early 2006 when fighting between left-wing guerrillas and the Colombian army encroached on their land, forcing 150 of the indigenous people to flee.

With disease and violence stacked against them, the very survival of the Nukak-Makú tribe now hangs in the balance.

jungle treks and Amazon boat rides and trips to indigenous villages.

The town has reasonable tourist facilities and flight connections with Bogotá. Importantly, Leticia is a secure and easygoing place – guerrillas are not active in the region. Tourists arriving at Leticia's airport are charged a compulsory US\$5 tax.

July and August are the only relatively dry months. The wettest period is from February to April. The Amazon River's highest level is in May to June, while the lowest is from August to October. The difference between low and high water can be as great as 15m.

Orientation

Leticia lies on the Colombia–Brazil border. Just south across the frontier sits Tabatinga (p624), a Brazilian town much the same size as Leticia, with its own port and airport. Leticia and Tabatinga are virtually merging together, and there are no border checkpoints between the two. Frequent *colectivos* link the towns, or you can walk. Locals and foreigners are allowed to pass between the towns without visas, but if you plan on heading further into either country you must get your passport stamped at DAS in Leticia and at Policía Federal in Tabatinga.

On the island in the Amazon opposite Leticia–Tabatinga is Santa Rosa, a Peruvian village. Boats go there from both Tabatinga and Leticia.

On the opposite side of the Amazon from Leticia, about 25km downstream, is the Brazilian town of Benjamin Constant, the main port for boats downstream to Manaus. Tabatinga

and Benjamin Constant are connected by regular boats.

Of the four border towns, Leticia has the best-developed tourist facilities and is the most pleasant – the best place to hang your hat no matter which way you are headed. Nonetheless we've included in the following sections information on various Tabatinga services (money exchange, internet access, hotels, restaurants) to allow you to move easily around the place and flexibly plan your itinerary.

Information

IMMIGRATION

DAS officials at Leticia's airport (open daily) give entry or exit stamps.

Entry and exit stamps for Brazil must be obtained at the Policía Federal in Tabatinga, Av da Amizade 650, near the hospital. A yellow-fever vaccination certificate is likely to be required by officials when you enter Brazil.

If heading for or coming from Iquitos, you get your entry or exit stamp in Santa Rosa.

For details of consulates in Leticia and Tabatinga, see p630.

INTERNET ACCESS

The cybercafés listed here will charge US\$1 to US\$1.50 an hour.

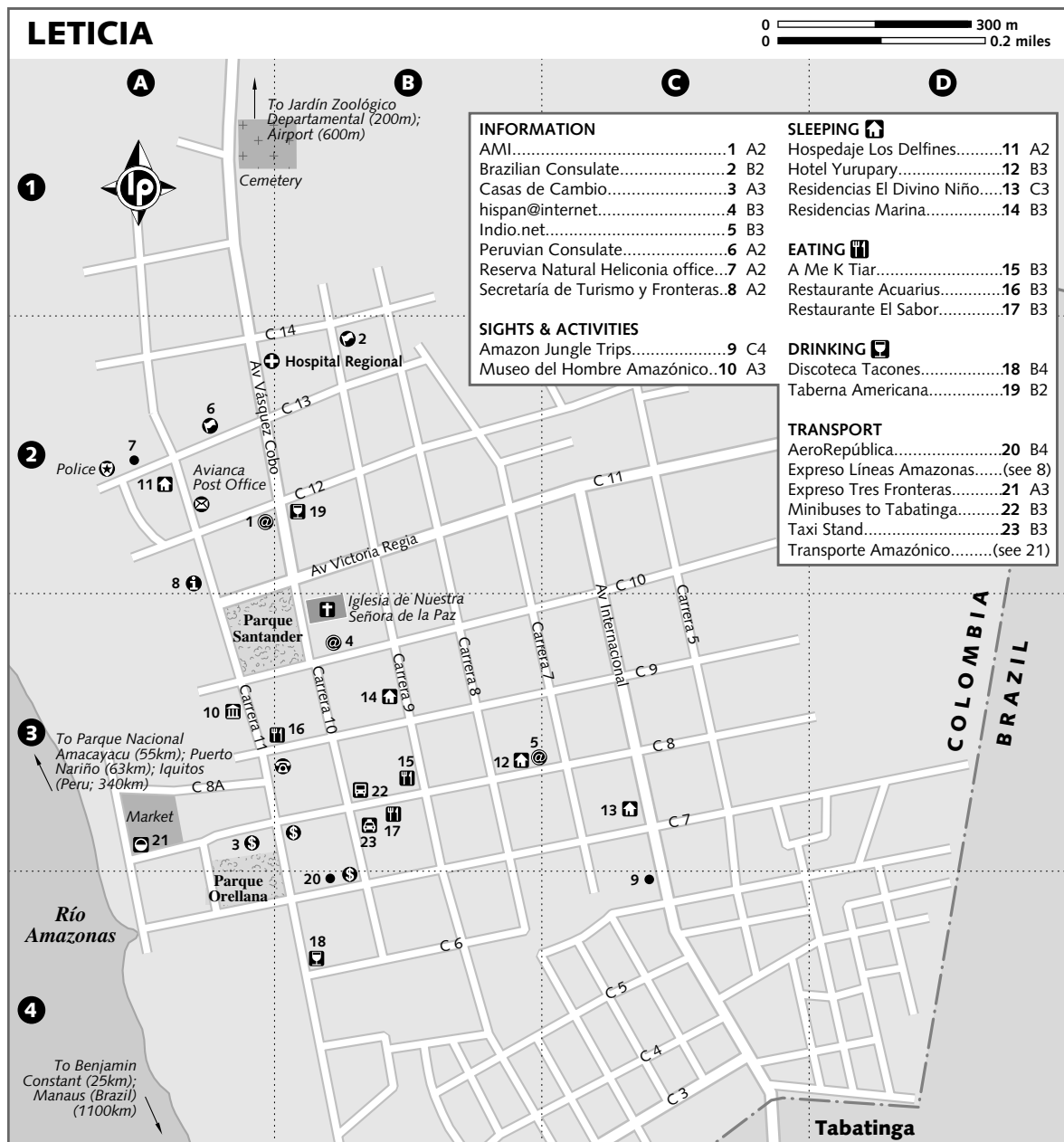
AMI (Carrera 10 No 11-119)

hispan@internet (Calle 10 No 9-82)

Indio.net (Centro Comercial Acuarios, Carrera 7 at Calle 8)

MONEY

Don't carry pesos further into Brazil or Peru as it will be difficult to change them. By the same



token, don't bring reals to Bogotá. Change all the money of the country you're leaving in Leticia-Tabatinga.

There are *casas de cambio* on Calle 8 between Carrera 11 and the market. They change US dollars, Colombian pesos, Brazilian reals and Peruvian soles. They open weekdays from 8am or 9am until 5pm or 6pm and Saturday until around 2pm. Shop around; rates vary.

Money-changing facilities in Tabatinga:

Banco do Brasil (Av da Amizade 60) Offers cash advances in reals on Visa.

Banco Ganadero (cnr Carrera 10 & Calle 7) Changes Amex traveler's checks (but not cash) and gives peso advances on Visa.

Cambios El Opita (Carrera 11 No 7-96) Changes traveler's checks.

CNM Câmbio e Turismo (Av da Amizade 2017) About 500m from the border, exchanges cash and traveler's checks and pays in reals or pesos, as you wish, but the rate may be a bit lower than in Leticia.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Secretaría de Turismo y Fronteras (☎ 8-592-7569; Calle 8 No 9-75; 🕒 7am-noon & 2-5:30pm Mon-Fri)

Sights

The **Jardín Zoológico Departamental** (Av Vásquez Cobo; admission US\$1; 🕒 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-5:30pm Sat & Sun), near the airport, houses animals typical of the region including anacondas, tapirs, monkeys, caimans, ocelots, eagles, macaws and a friendly manatee named Polo.

The small **Museo del Hombre Amazónico** (☎ 8-592-7729; Carrera 11 No 9-43; admission free; 🕒 9am-noon & 2:30-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) features artifacts and household implements of indigenous groups living in the region.

Have a look around the **market** and stroll along the waterfront. Visit the **Parque Santander** before sunset for an impressive spectacle, when thousands of small screeching parrots (locally called *pericos*) arrive for their nightly rest in the park's trees.

JUNGLE TRIPS

There are a dozen tour operators in Leticia focusing on jungle trips. Most agencies offer standard one-day tours, which go up the Amazon to Puerto Nariño and include lunch, a short walk in the forest and a visit to an indigenous village. These excursions are usually well organized, comfortable and trouble-free, but will hardly give you a real picture of the rainforest or its inhabitants.

The real wilderness begins well off the Amazon proper, along its small tributaries. The further you go the more chance you have to observe wildlife in relatively undamaged habitat and visit indigenous settlements. This involves more time and money, but the experience can be much more rewarding.

Multiday tours are run from Leticia by several companies, three of which have established small nature reserves and built jungle lodges. All three reserves are along the lower reaches of the Río Yavarí, on the Brazil-Peru border.

Reserva Natural Zacambú is the nearest to Leticia, about 70km by boat. Its lodge is on Lake Zacambú, just off Río Yavarí on the Peruvian side of the river. The lodge is simple, with small rooms without bathrooms, and the total capacity for about 30 guests. The lodge and tours are run from Leticia by **Amazon Jungle Trips** (☎ 8-592-7377; amazonjungletrips@yahoo.com; Av Internacional No 6-25).

Reserva Natural Palmari is another 20km further upstream of Río Yavarí, about 110km by river from Leticia. Its rambling lodge sits on the high south (Brazilian) bank of the river, overlooking a wide bend where pink and gray dolphins are often seen. The lodge features several cabañas with baths and a round *maloca* with hammocks. The reserve is managed from Bogotá by its owner, **Axel Antoine-Feill** (☎ 1-531-1404, 310-786-2770; www.palmari.org; Carrera 10 No 93-72, Bogotá), who speaks several

languages, including English. His representative in Leticia is **Francisco Avila** (☎ 8-592-4156, 310-596-0203).

Reserva Natural Heliconia, about 110km from Leticia, provides room and board in thatched-covered cabins, plus tours via boat or on foot of the river, creeks and jungle. There are also organized visits to indigenous villages and special tours devoted to bird-watching and dolphin-watching. The reserve is managed from an **office** (☎ 311-508-5666; www.amazonheliconia.com; Calle 13 No 11-74) in Leticia.

All three operators offer three- to six-day all-inclusive packages, based at the lodges. The packages include accommodations (in beds), meals, excursions with guides and return transport from Leticia. The cost largely depends on the number of people in the party, length of the stay, season etc; count on US\$40 to US\$80 per person per day. Tours don't usually have a fixed timetable; the agents normally wait until they have enough people unless you don't want to wait and are prepared to pay more. Contact the operators in advance. Legally you should have a Brazilian or Peruvian visa to stay in the reserves, so check this issue with the agencies (unless nationals of your home country don't need a visa).

Palmari is the only operator that, apart from tours, has a budget offer for independent travelers who want to stay in the reserve but don't want to pay for an all-inclusive tour. The **lodge** (hammocks/r per person US\$7/10) simply charges for accommodations and food (breakfast/lunch/dinner US\$3/4/5) and you can plan your stay and excursions as you wish, using the reserve's canoes and guides if they are not too busy with tours or other tasks.

Apart from the Palmari's backpacker offer, other budget ways of getting a taste of the jungle include guided excursions in the Parque Nacional Amacayacu (p625) and trips with the locals from Puerto Nariño (p625). Bring enough mosquito repellent from Bogotá because you can't get good-quality repellent in Leticia. Take high-speed film – the jungle is always dark.

Sleeping

LETICIA

Residencias Marina (☎ 8-592-6014; Carrera 9 No 9-29; s/d/tr US\$7/10/15) Acceptable central hotel providing rooms with fan and fridge.

Residencias El Divino Niño (☎ 8-592-5598; Av Internacional No 7-23; s/d US\$8/11; 🚽) There is nothing

special about this basic place, except that it's very cheap. Located near the border with Brazil.

Hospedaje Los Delfines (☎ 8-592-7388; losdelfinesleticia@hotmail.com; Carrera 11 No 12-81; s/d/tr US\$14/18/22) Small family-run place offering nine neat rooms with fan and fridge, arranged around a leafy patio.

Hotel Yurupary (☎ 8-592-7983; www.hotelyurupary.com.nu in Spanish; Calle 8 No 7-26; s/d/tr US\$18/27/35, all incl breakfast; 🍴) One of the best affordable bets in town. It has ample rooms with fridge and cable TV.

TABATINGA

Hotel Cristina (☎ 92-412-2558; Rua Marechal Mallet 248; s/d with fan US\$6/8, with air-con US\$8/12) Convenient basic shelter if you plan on taking the early-morning boat to Iquitos.

Hotel Bela Vista (☎ 92-412-3846; Rua Marechal Rondon 1806; d US\$16; 🍴) It may not be fancy, but this place packs a great combination – cheap, clean, air-conditioned and only steps from the morning boat to Iquitos. And it's friendly to boot.

Posada do Sol (☎ 92-412-3987; Rua General Sampaio; s/d/tr US\$20/24/36, all incl breakfast; 🍴 🍷) One of the most pleasant places around. This large family-run mansion has seven rooms with TV and fridge.

Eating

LETICIA

Food in Leticia is generally good and not too expensive. The local specialty is fish, including the delicious *gamitana* and pirarucu.

Restaurante El Sabor (Calle 8 No 9-25; set meals US\$2-4; 🍷 24hr Tue-Sun) Leticia's best budget eatery, with excellent-value set meals, vegetarian burgers, banana pancakes and fruit salad, plus unlimited free juices with your meal.

A Me K Tiar (Carrera 9 No 8-15; mains US\$3-5; 🍷 noon-11:30pm Mon-Sat, 5-11:30pm Sun) Some of the best

parrillas and barbecued meat in town, at very reasonable prices.

Restaurante Acuario (Carrera 7 No 8-12; mains US\$3-5; 🍷 7am-9pm) This pleasant outdoor restaurant serves excellent meat and chicken dishes, as well as local fish such as pirarucu.

TABATINGA

Tabatinga's culinary picture has improved over recent years.

Restaurante Fazenda (Av da Amizade 196; mains US\$3-7) Good-value Brazilian food served in a pleasant interior.

Restaurante Tres Fronteiras do Amazonas (Rua Rui Barbosa; mains US\$4-7; 🍷 9am-11pm) Attractive palm-thatched open-air restaurant with a wide choice of fish and meat dishes.

Drinking

Discoteca Tacones (Carrera 11 No 6-14) Probably the trendiest disco in Leticia.

Taberna Americana (Carrera 10 No 11-108) A cheap, rustic bar playing salsa music till late.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The only passenger airline that services Leticia is **AeroRepública** (☎ 8-592-7666; Calle 7 No 10-36). It flies between Leticia and Bogotá several days a week (US\$110 to US\$140). It may be difficult to get on flights out of Leticia in the holiday season – book as early as you can.

Two airlines (Trip and Rico) fly from Tabatinga to Manaus; between them they fly every day except Wednesday. Tickets can be bought from Tabatinga's travel agency, **Turamazon** (☎ 92-412-2026; Av da Amizade 2271), or **CNM Câmbio e Turismo** (☎ 92-412-3281; Av da Amizade 2017), both near the border. The airport is 2km south of Tabatinga; *colectivos* marked 'Comara' from Leticia will drop you off nearby.

GETTING TO BRAZIL & PERU

Leticia may be in the middle of nowhere, but it is something of a jumping off point to destinations in neighboring countries. The quickest way out is by air to Manaus, although a more interesting option is to take a hydroplane to Iquitos in Peru. Although slower, the more enjoyable route out of Leticia is by river boat to either Manaus or Iquitos. Note that Iquitos is as isolated as Leticia, if not more so.

Leticia is on good terms with its neighbors and as such there is no formal border between Colombia and Brazil. Before leaving the country you'll need to get stamped out at the DAS office in Leticia and stamped in at the Polícia Federal in Tabatinga. For more information on these border crossings see p394 and p936.

A small Peruvian airline, TANS, flies its 15-seat hydroplane from Santa Rosa to Iquitos, on Wednesday and Saturday (US\$65). Information and tickets are available from **Cambios La Sultana** (☎ 8-592-7071; Calle 8 No 11-57) in Leticia. You need to go by boat from Leticia or Tabatinga to Santa Rosa to catch the plane.

BOAT

Leticia is a jumping-off point for travelers looking for backwater Amazonian adventures, downstream to Manaus (Brazil) or upriver to Iquitos (Peru).

Boats down the Amazon to Manaus leave from Porto Fluvial de Tabatinga, beyond the hospital, and call at Benjamin Constant. There are three boats per week, departing from Tabatinga on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday around 2pm, with a stop in Benjamin Constant. More boats may go on other days, so check.

The trip to Manaus takes three days and four nights and costs US\$65 in your own hammock, or US\$240 for a double cabin. (Upstream from Manaus to Tabatinga, the trip usually takes six days, and costs about US\$110 in your hammock or US\$330 for a double cabin.) Food is included but is poor and monotonous. Bring snacks and bottled water. Boats come to Tabatinga one or two days before their scheduled departure back down the river. You can string up your hammock or occupy the cabin as soon as you've paid the fare, saving on hotels. Food, however, is only served after departure. Beware of theft on board.

Three small boat companies, Transtur, Mayco and **Mi Reyna** (☎ 92-412-2945; Rua Marechal Mallet 248), in Tabatinga, run high-powered passenger boats (*rápidos*) between Tabatinga and Iquitos. Each company has a few departures a week, so there is at least one boat almost every day. The boats depart Tabatinga's Porto da Feira at 5am and arrive in Iquitos about 10 to 12 hours later. The boats call at Santa Rosa's immigration post. The journey costs US\$60 in either direction, including breakfast and lunch. Don't forget to get an exit stamp in your passport from DAS at Leticia's airport the day before.

There are also irregular cargo boats from Santa Rosa to Iquitos, once or twice a week. The journey takes about three days and costs US\$25 to US\$30, including food. Downstream from Iquitos to Santa Rosa, it generally doesn't take any longer than two days.

Note that there are no roads out of Iquitos into Peru. You have to fly or continue by river to Pucallpa (five to seven days), from where you can go overland to Lima and elsewhere.

PARQUE NACIONAL AMACAYACU

Amacayacu national park takes in 2935 sq km of jungle on the northern side of the Amazon, about 55km upstream from Leticia. A spacious **visitor center** (hammocks/dm US\$8/12), with food (three meals about US\$8) and accommodations facilities, has been built on the bank of the Amazon. The park entry fee is US\$9. In Leticia, the **Aviatur office** (Calle 7 near Carrera 11) handles bookings.

From the visitor center, you can explore the park either by marked paths or by water. Local guides accompany visitors on all excursions and charge roughly US\$10 to US\$20 per group, depending on the route. In the high-water period (May to June) much of the land turns into swamps and lagoons, significantly reducing walking options; trips in canoes are organized at this time. Bring plenty of mosquito repellent, a flashlight, long-sleeve shirt and waterproof gear.

Boats from Leticia to Puerto Nariño (see following) will drop you off at the park's visitor center (US\$10, 1½ hours).

PUERTO NARIÑO

☎ 8 / pop 2000

Puerto Nariño's main attraction is its isolation. Sitting around 60km up the Amazon from Leticia (15km upstream from the Amacayacu park), this tiny town is located on the bank of the great river in the middle of absolutely nowhere. This isolation has never dampened the pride of the local people, and today it's one of the cleanest places in the country – each morning citizen brigades march across town to pick up lingering garbage. About 10km west of Puerto Nariño is the Lago Tarapoto, a beautiful lake accessible only by river, where you can see the pink dolphins. A half-day trip to the lake in a small motorized boat can be organized from Puerto Nariño (around US\$25 per boat for up to four people). Locals can take you on boat or walking excursions to many other places, including the Parque Nacional Amacayacu, or you can just rent a canoe (US\$8 per day) and do your own tour.

Puerto Nariño has quite a few accommodations choices.

Brisas del Amazonas (☎ 311-281-2473; dm US\$6) has simple rooms in a stylish, if dilapidated, mansion.

Eware Tourist Refuge (☎ 311-474-3466; zoraidaveloza@yahoo.com; dm US\$10) is one of several rustic inns about a 10-minute boat ride from town. There is free use of the canoe and a small tower with a view of the surrounding jungle.

The charming **El Alto del Águila** (dm/d US\$5/10) is a 20-minute walk from town, with sightings of monkeys, macaws and great river views. Budget jungle trips can be organized.

Casa Selva (☎ 310-221-4379, 311-217-7758; s/d/tr US\$28/38/42) has impeccably clean rooms with private bathrooms and a six-hammock dorm. Meals are available.

For cheap meals, try one of the two basic town restaurants near the waterfront: Doña Francisca or Las Margaritas.

Three small boat companies, Expreso Tres Fronteras, Transporte Amazónico and Expreso Líneas Amazonas (all with offices near the waterfront in Leticia), operate scheduled fast passenger boats to Puerto Nariño at 2pm from Monday to Friday and at 1pm on weekends (US\$14, two hours). Buy your ticket in the morning or a day before departure.

COLOMBIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

There is a constellation of places to stay in Colombia, in the largest cities and smallest villages. The vast majority are straight Colombian hotels where you are unlikely to meet foreigners, but some budget traveler haunts have appeared over the past decade. You'll find them in most large cities (Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Cartagena) and popular tourist destinations.

Accommodations appear under a variety of names including *hotel*, *residencias*, *hospedaje*, *hostería* and *posada*. *Residencias* and *hospedaje* are the most common names for budget places. A hotel generally suggests a place of a higher standard, or at least a higher price, though the distinction is often academic. In this guide, hotels will almost always have private bathroom while *hosterías*, *residencias* and guesthouses have mainly shared facilities.

On the whole, *residencias* and *hospedajes* are unremarkable places without much style or atmosphere, but there are some pleasant

exceptions. Many cheapies have a private bathroom, which includes a toilet and shower. Note that cheap hotel plumbing can't cope with toilet paper, so throw it in the box or basket that is usually provided.

In hot places (ie the lowland areas), a ceiling fan or table fan is often provided. Always check the fan before you take the room. On the other hand, above 2500m where the nights can be chilly, count how many blankets you have, and check the hot water if they claim to have it.

By and large, *residencias* (even the cheapest) provide a sheet and some sort of cover (another sheet or blankets, depending on the temperature). Most will also give you a towel, a small piece of soap and a roll of toilet paper. The cheapies cost US\$3 to US\$8 for a single room, US\$5 to US\$15 a double.

Many *hospedajes* have *matrimonios* (rooms with a double bed intended for couples). A *matrimonio* is usually cheaper than a double and slightly more expensive than a single (or even the same price). Note that traveling as a couple considerably reduces the cost of accommodations.

Many cheap *residencias* double as love hotels, renting rooms by the hour. Intentionally or not, you are likely to find yourself in such a place from time to time. This is actually not a major problem, as love hotels are normally as clean and safe as other hotels, and the sex section is usually separated from the genuine hotel.

Camping is not popular and there are only a handful of campsites in the country. Camping wild is possible outside the urban centers but you should be extremely careful. Don't leave your tent or gear unattended.

ACTIVITIES

With its amazing geographical diversity Colombia offers many opportunities for hiking, though some regions are infiltrated by guerrillas and should be avoided.

Colombia's coral reefs provide good conditions for snorkeling and scuba diving. The main centers are San Andrés (p592), Providencia (p594), Santa Marta (p579), Taganga (p580) and Cartagena (p585), each of which has several diving schools offering courses and other diving services. Colombia is considered one of the world's cheapest countries for diving.

Colombia has also developed greatly as a center of paragliding. The main hub is Medel-

lín (p597), but there are also gliding schools in Bogotá, Cali and elsewhere. Paragliding in Colombia is cheap.

White-water rafting is pretty new in Colombia but is developing fast, with its major base in San Gil (p572). There are fledgling operations in San Agustín (p612) and Suesca (p565). Like most other outdoor activities, rafting is also cheap in Colombia.

Cycling is one of Colombia's favorite spectator sports, yet bicycle-rental agencies have only begun to appear in recent years.

Other possible activities include mountaineering, horse-riding, rock-climbing, windsurfing, fishing, caving and even bathing in a mud volcano (Volcán de Lodo El Totumo, p588).

BOOKS

For more detailed travel information, pick up a copy of Lonely Planet's *Colombia*.

The Fruit Palace (1998) by Charles Nicholl is a very funny diary of his wanderings through the country in the 1980s. It's dated, but the personal stories are as relevant today as when they were written.

For an account on Colombia's drug war, read *More Terrible than Death: Violence, Drugs and America's War in Colombia* (2003) by Robin Kirk, who spent a dozen years in Colombia working for Human Rights Watch and recounts some of the most brutal incidents of terror she witnessed during her fieldwork.

A more academic account of the same conflict is *America's Other War: Terrorizing Colombia* (2005) by Doug Stokes. The author, critical of US policy in Colombia, gets his message across by using declassified documents.

Although Colombians appear to be less than interested in reading about FARC, Pablo Escobar is still a very popular topic and *Killing Pablo: The Hunt for the World's Greatest Outlaw* (2002) by Mark Bowden is a hot seller.

BUSINESS HOURS

The office working day is, theoretically at least, eight hours long, usually from 8am to noon and 2pm to 6pm Monday to Friday. Many offices in Bogotá have adopted the so-called *jornada continua*, a working day without a lunch break, which finishes two hours earlier. Banks (except for those in Bogotá – see p557) are open 8am to 11:30am and 2pm to 4pm Monday to Thursday, and 8am to 11:30am and 2pm to 4:30pm on Friday.

As a rough guide only, the usual shopping hours are from 9am to 6pm or 7pm Monday to Saturday. Some shops close for lunch while others stay open. Large stores and supermarkets usually stay open until 8pm or 9pm or even longer. Most of the better restaurants in the larger cities, particularly in Bogotá, tend to stay open until 10pm or longer, whereas restaurants in smaller towns often close by 9pm or earlier.

The opening hours of museums and other tourist sights vary greatly. Most museums are closed on Monday but are open on Sunday.

CLIMATE

Colombia's proximity to the equator means its temperature varies little throughout the year. Colombia, however, does have dry and wet seasons, the pattern of which varies in different parts of the country. As a rough guideline only, in the Andean region and the Caribbean coast (where you are likely to spend most of the time) there are two dry and two rainy seasons per year.

The main dry season falls between January and March, with a shorter, less-dry period between June and August. The most pleasant time to visit Colombia is in the dry season. This is particularly true if you plan on hiking or some other outdoor activities. The dry season also gives visitors a better chance to savor local cultural events, as many festivals and fiestas take place during these periods.

For more information and climate charts, see the South America Directory (p1062).

CUSTOMS

Customs procedures are usually a formality, both on entering and on leaving the country. However, thorough luggage checks occasionally occur, more often at the airports than at the overland borders, and they can be very exhaustive, with a body search included. They aren't looking for your extra iPod, but for drugs. Trying to smuggle dope through the border is the best way to see what the inside of a Colombian jail looks like, for quite a few years.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

While security has been improving for several years, Colombia still has plenty of dangers to be aware of. Look beyond the media headlines because kidnapping is the least of your worries (this almost never happens to foreigners). However, robbery and scams do occur.

SAFE TRAVEL

When traveling in Colombia use common sense and don't get paranoid. Travelers do come to Colombia and few have any problems. Here are some basic rules of safe travel in Colombia.

For your own personal safety:

- Unless the rural area you plan to visit is regarded as safe, make cities the focus of your travel rather than the countryside.
- Don't accept any food, drink or cigarettes from strangers.
- Don't venture into poor suburbs, desolate streets or suspicious-looking surroundings, especially after dark.
- Before arriving in a new place, make sure you have a map or at least a rough idea of orientation.
- Behave confidently on the street; don't look lost or stand with a blank expression in the middle of the street.
- Use taxis if this seems the appropriate way to avoid walking through risky areas.

When traveling between cities:

- Consider air travel if the overland route is notorious for a lack of safety.
- Seek local advice about the safety of the region you are traveling in and the one you're heading for.
- If traveling by bus, do so during the daytime.
- Don't use a rented car (but if you insist on traveling this way we provide some guidelines under Car & Motorcycle, p647).
- Should you feel compelled to go off the beaten track, leave details about your planned whereabouts prior to departure.

To avoid the risk of theft:

- Leave money and valuables in a safe place at your hotel. If you must bring valuables on the street, keep it in a moneybelt next to your skin.
- When traveling, distribute your valuables about your person and luggage to avoid the risk of losing everything in one fell swoop.
- Wear casual and inexpensive clothes, preferably in plain, sober tones rather than in bright colors.
- Keep your camera out of sight as much as possible and only take it out to snap a photo.
- Look around to see whether you're being observed or followed, especially while leaving a bank, *casa de cambio* or an ATM.
- Arrange comprehensive travel insurance just in case something goes wrong.

Theft & Robbery

Theft is the most common traveler danger. Generally speaking, the problem is more serious in the largest cities. The more rural the area, the quieter and safer it is. The most common methods of theft are snatching your daypack, camera or watch, pickpocketing, or taking advantage of a moment's inattention to pick up your gear and run away.

In practice, it's good to carry a decoy bundle of small notes, the equivalent of US\$5 to

US\$10, ready to hand over in case of an assault; if you really don't have a peso, robbers can become frustrated and, as a consequence, unpredictable.

Armed holdups in the cities can occur even in some more upmarket suburbs. If you are accosted by robbers, it is best to give them what they are after, but try to play it cool and don't rush to hand them all your valuables at once – they may well be satisfied with just your decoy wad. Don't try to escape or strug-

gle – your chances are slim. Don't count on any help from passers-by.

Be careful when drawing the cash from an ATM – some cases of robbery have been reported. Criminals just watch who is drawing money, and then assault people either at the ATM or at a convenient place a few blocks down the street.

Drugs

Cocaine is essentially an export product but it is also available locally. More widespread is marijuana, which is more easily available. However, be careful with drugs – never carry them. The police and army can be very thorough in searching travelers, often looking for a nice fat bribe.

Sometimes you may be offered dope to buy on the street, in a bar or a disco, but never accept these offers. The vendors may well be setting you up for the police, or their accomplices will follow and stop you later, show you false police documents and threaten you with jail unless you pay them off. There have been reports of drugs being planted on travelers, so keep your eyes open.

The *burundanga* is more bad news. It is a drug obtained from a species of tree that is widespread in Colombia and is used by thieves to render a victim unconscious. It can be put into sweets, cigarettes, chewing gum, spirits, beer – virtually any kind of food or drink – and it doesn't have any particular taste or odor. The main effects are loss of will and memory, and sleepiness lasting from a few hours to several days. An overdose can

be fatal. Think twice before accepting a cigarette from a stranger or a drink from a new 'friend.'

Guerrillas

You could travel for months around Colombia's main cities and tourist spots and not have any clue that some regions are in the midst of a low-level war. In recent years guerrilla and paramilitary activity has been pushed deeper and deeper into remote jungle and mountain areas that you are unlikely to visit. The principal areas of conflict are Chocó, Putumayo and the vast, low-lying Amazon Basin that covers the southeast part of the country. Various methods of negotiation have been carried out between the rebel FARC and the Uribe government and there has been some success in disarming some rebel factions and paramilitaries. While the advantage is back with the government, the four-decade war is far from over and levels of violence could flare up anytime.

As a general rule, avoid any off-the-beaten-track travel. It's best to stick to the main routes and travel during daytime only. Yet even main routes may sometimes be risky – there have been assaults on buses and cars on the Popayán–Pasto and Medellín–Cartagena roads. In most cases these assaults are purely political – all passengers and their luggage are kindly let off before the bus is put to the torch.

Since Uribe came to office in 2002, cases of kidnapping for ransom have decreased significantly. When they do occur the targets are

RISE AND FALL OF THE COCA PLANT

The coca plant thrives in Colombia's mineral-rich soils and four of the five varieties of coca grow here. Indigenous peoples of South America have been chewing coca leaves for centuries to cure everything from altitude sickness to toothache. It is also used in religious ceremonies, as an offering to the sun or to produce smoke during sacrificial ceremonies. Coca leaves are read as a form of divination in the same way that other cultures read tea leaves. Chewing coca is still an important form of cultural identity for indigenous communities.

Coca was first introduced to Europe in the 16th century; its early users included William Shakespeare and Queen Victoria of England. Then in 1855 German chemist Friedrich Gaedcke achieved the isolation of the cocaine alkaloid. Western doctors and scientists, including Sigmund Freud, started experimenting with the drug. The drug took off as an energy booster and an anesthetic, but its addictive properties were also becoming evident. Its use was made illegal in the US in 1915, although the flow of drugs from South America to the US, Europe and beyond has never waned.

Today in the US, a kilo of cocaine goes for around US\$36,275. Each day, 5000 people worldwide will try cocaine for the first time – 75% of whom will become addicted.

LANDMINES

Colombia ranks third in the world (after Cambodia and Afghanistan) for victims of landmine blasts. An estimated 100,000 mines are scattered around the country, mainly in remote, FARC-held areas. There were 1070 land-mine victims in 2005. None of the areas mentioned in this chapter are affected by landmines, but be doubly careful if you end up in any rebel-held regions such as Chocó, Los Llanos, Putumayo or the Amazon.

almost exclusively wealthy Colombian businessmen or their family members, and foreign businessmen. The danger of being kidnapped, however, cannot be completely ruled out – the last case of tourists being abducted occurred on a trek to Ciudad Perdida in 2003.

Ambushing of car and bus travelers for their valuables has occurred. These surprise attacks mostly happen at night at roadblocks set up by common criminals and also by guerrillas, although these attacks are also on the decrease.

Monitor current guerrilla movements. It's not that easy because things change rapidly and unexpectedly, but make the most of various resources. Regional press and TV news can be useful. Possibly better and more specific is advice from guesthouse owners. Ask other travelers along the way and check online resources.

DRIVER'S LICENSE

It is possible to drive a car or motorbike in Colombia and some travelers have been managing this without too much trouble. A driver's license from your home country is accepted, although it's probably best to bring along an International Driver's License.

ELECTRICITY

Colombia uses two-pronged US-type plugs that run at 110V, 60 Hz.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES
Embassies & Consulates in Colombia

Foreign diplomatic representatives in Bogotá include the following (embassy and consulate are at the same address unless specified otherwise). For locations of these and other consulates, see individual city maps.

Australia Bogotá honorary consulate (☎ 1-636-5247; Carrera 18 No 90-38)

Brazil Bogotá (☎ 1-218-0800; Calle 93 No 14-20, Piso 8); Leticia (Map p622; ☎ 8-592-7530; Carrera 9 No 13-84); Medellín (Map p596; ☎ 4-265-7565; Calle 29D No 55-91)

Canada (☎ 1-657-9800; Carrera 7 No 115-33, Piso 14, Bogotá)

Costa Rica (Map p591; ☎ 8-512-4938;

Av Colombia, in Novedades Regina shop, San Andrés)

Ecuador Bogotá (☎ 1-212-6512; Calle 72 No 6-30); Ipiales consulate (Map p619; ☎ 2-773-2292; Carrera 7 No 14-10); Medellín (Map p596; ☎ 4-512-1303; Calle 50 No 52-22, Oficina 603)

France (☎ 1-638-1400; Carrera 11 No 93-12, Bogotá)

Germany (☎ 1-249-4911; Carrera 4 No 72-35, Bogotá)

Honduras San Andrés (Map p591; ☎ 8-512-3235;

Av Colombia, in Hotel Tiuna)

Israel (☎ 1-327-7500; Calle 35 No 7-25, Piso 14, Bogotá)

Panama Bogotá (☎ 1-257-4452; Calle 92 No 7-70);

Cartagena (Map p583; ☎ 5-664-1433; Plaza de San Pedro Claver No 30-14, El Centro); Medellín (Map p596; ☎ 4-268-1358; Carrera 43A No 7-50, Oficina 1607)

Peru Bogotá embassy (☎ 1-257-0505; Calle 80A

No 6-50), Bogotá consulate (☎ 1-257-6846; Calle 90 No 14-26); Leticia (Map p622; ☎ 8-592 7204; Calle 13 No 10-70)

UK (☎ 1-326-8301; www.britain.gov.co; Carrera 9 No 76-49, Piso 9, Bogotá)

USA (☎ 1-315-0811; Calle 22D Bis No 47-51, Bogotá)

Venezuela Bogotá embassy (☎ 1-640-1213; Carrera 11 No 87-51, Piso 5), Bogotá consulate (☎ 1-636-4011; Av 13 No 103-16); Cartagena (Map p583; ☎ 5-665-0382; Carrera 3 No 8-129, Bocagrande); Cúcuta (Map p576; ☎ 7-579-1956; Av Camilo Daza); Medellín (Map p596; ☎ 4-351-1614; Calle 32B No 69-59)

Colombian Embassies & Consulates Abroad

Colombia has embassies and consulates in all neighboring countries, as well as in the following:

Australia (☎ 02-9955-0311; 100 Walker St, North Sydney, NSW 2060)

Brazil (☎ 92-412-2104; Rua General Sanpaio 623, Tabatinga)

Canada (☎ 514-849-4852; 1010 Sherbrooke St West, Suite 420, Montreal, Quebec H3A 2R7; ☎ 416-977-0475; 1 Dundas St West, Suite 2108, Toronto, Ontario M5G 1Z3)

France (☎ 01-4265-4608; 12 rue de L'Elysee, Paris 75008)

Germany (☎ 030-263-9610; Kurfürsternstrasse 84, 10787 Berlin)

UK (☎ 020-7589-9177; www.colombianembassy.co.uk; 3 Hans Crescent, London SW 1X 0LN)

USA (☎ 202-387-8338; 2118 Leroy Place NW, Washing-

ton, DC 20008; ☎ 305-441-1235; 280 Aragon Ave, Coral Gables, Miami, FL 33134; ☎ 212-949-9898; 10 East 46th St, New York, NY 10017)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Colombians love fiestas. There are more than 200 festivals and events ranging from small, local affairs to international festivals lasting several days. Most of the celebrations are regional, and the most interesting ones are listed in individual destination sections.

FOOD & DRINK

Colombian Cuisine

Colombian cuisine is varied and regional. Among the most typical regional dishes:

ajiaco (a-khee-a-ko) – soup with chicken and three varieties of potato, served with corn and capers; a Bogotá specialty

bandeja paisa (ban-de-kha pai-sa) – typical Antioquian dish made of ground beef, sausage, red beans, rice, fried green banana, fried egg, fried salt pork and avocado

chocolate santafereño (cho-ko-la-te san-ta-fe-re-nyo) – cup of hot chocolate accompanied by a piece of cheese and bread (traditionally you put the cheese into the chocolate); another Bogotá specialty

cuy (kooy) – grilled guinea pig, typical of Nariño

hormiga culona (or-mee-ga koo-lo-na) – large fried ants; probably the most exotic Colombian specialty, unique to Santander

lechona (le-cho-na) – pig carcass stuffed with its own meat, rice and dried peas and then baked in an oven; a specialty of Tolima

tamal (ta-mal) – chopped pork with rice and vegetables folded in a maize dough, wrapped in banana leaves and steamed; there are many regional varieties

Variety does not, unfortunately, apply to the basic set meal (*comida corriente*), which is the principal diet of most Colombians eating out. It is a two-course meal consisting of *sopa* (soup)

and *bandeja* or *seco* (main course). At lunchtime (from noon to 2pm) it is called *almuerzo*; at dinnertime (after 6pm) it becomes *comida*, but it is identical to lunch. The *almuerzos* and *comidas* are the staple, sometimes the only, offering in countless budget restaurants. They are the cheapest way to fill yourself up, costing between US\$1.50 and US\$2.50 – roughly half the price of an à la carte dish. A proper *desayuno* (breakfast) can be hard to come by and is rarely anything to write home about. You might find some scrambled eggs and coffee, otherwise save your appetite for lunch.

Colombia has an amazing variety of fruits, some of which are endemic to the country. You should try *guanábana*, *lulo*, *curuba*, *zapote*, *mamoncillo*, *uchuva*, *feijoa*, *granadilla*, *maracuyá*, *tomate de árbol*, *borojó*, *mamey* and *tamarindo*, to name just a few.

Drinks

Coffee is the number one drink – *tinto* (a small cup of black coffee) is served everywhere. Other coffee drinks are *perico* or *pin-tado*, a small milk coffee, and *café con leche*, which is larger and uses more milk.

Tea is of poor quality and not very popular. On the other hand, the *aromáticas* – herb teas made with various plants like *cidrón* (citrus leaves), *yerbabuena* (mint) and *manzanilla* (chamomile) – are cheap and good. *Agua de panela* (unrefined sugar melted in hot water) is tasty with lemon.

Beer is popular, cheap and generally not bad. This can't be said about Colombian wine, which is best avoided.

Aguardiente is the local alcoholic spirit, flavored with anise and produced by several companies throughout the country; Cristal from Caldas and Nectar from Cundinamarca

THE REAL THING

Coca Sek may really hit the spot if you need to quench your thirst, but don't bother looking for it on the supermarket shelves when you return home. Produced by Nasa Indians in southern Colombia, the soft drink is made from coca-leaf extract. There's not enough coca in it to get you high, but the bottlers describe it as an 'energizing drink,' lightly stimulating like coffee.

The drink is available domestically, but Coca-Cola and Pepsi corporations can sleep easy at night with the knowledge that Coca Sek will probably never make it to the US, UK or most other countries. Laws prohibiting the importation of raw coca would stop the pop at customs.

Coca Sek (which means Coca of the Sun) looks like apple cider and tastes vaguely like ginger ale. While complete testing has not been performed, it's known that the coca makes up less than 0.5% in the drink itself. Coca Sek is produced and bottled by a staff of around 15 Nasa Indians. A portion of the profits made by the company goes to coca farmers.

are the most popular. *Ron* (rum) is another popular distilled spirit, particularly on the Caribbean coast.

In some regions, mostly in rural areas, you will find *chicha* and *guarapo* (fermented maize or fruit drinks), which are homemade and low (or not so low) in alcohol.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

In a deeply Catholic country such as Colombia the gay and lesbian movement is still very much underground, yet there has been an increasing number of gay hangouts appearing over recent years, principally in the major cities. Bogotá has the largest gay and lesbian community and the most open gay life, and therefore is the best place to make contacts and get to know what's going on. Visit www.gaycolombia.com, which lists bars, discos, events, activities, publications and other related matters.

HEALTH

Colombia has an extensive network of pharmacies, and those in the large cities are usually well stocked. The country also has a developed array of clinics and hospitals, including some world-class private facilities in Bogotá. Tap water in the large cities is said to be safe to drink, but it's best avoided anyway. See the general Health chapter (p1090) for more information.

HOLIDAYS

The following holidays and special events are observed as public holidays in Colombia. When the dates marked with an asterisk do not fall on a Monday, the holiday is moved to the following Monday to make a three-day-long weekend, referred to as a *puente*.

Año Nuevo (New Year's Day) January 1

Los Reyes Magos (Epiphany) January 6*

San José (St Joseph) March 19

Jueves Santo (Maundy Thursday) March/April – dates vary

Viernes Santo (Good Friday) March/April – dates vary

Día del Trabajador (Labor Day) May 1

La Ascensión del Señor (Ascension) May – dates vary

Corpus Cristi (Corpus Christi) May/June* – dates vary

Sagrado Corazón de Jesús (Sacred Heart) June*

San Pedro y San Pablo (St Peter & St Paul) June 29*

Día de la Independencia (Independence Day) July 20

Batalla de Boyacá (Battle of Boyacá) August 7

La Asunción de Nuestra Señora (Assumption)

August 15*

Día de la Raza (Discovery of America) October 12*

Todos los Santos (All Saints' Day) November 1*

Independencia de Cartagena (Independence of Cartagena) November 11*

Inmaculada Concepción (Immaculate Conception) December 8

Navidad (Christmas Day) December 25

Apart from the weather, you may also consider Colombian holiday periods. There are basically three high seasons when Colombians rush to travel: late December to mid-January, during the *Semana Santa*, and mid-June to mid-July. During these three periods transport gets more crowded, airfares rise and hotels tend to fill up faster. If you travel at this time you will have to plan your trip a little ahead, but you'll also enjoy more contact with traveling Colombians, who will be in a relaxed, holiday spirit.

INTERNET ACCESS

Virtually all large cities and many smaller urban centers have cybercafés. Bogotá alone has probably more than 100 of them. Most cafés provide a range of related services such as printing, scanning and faxing, and some offer cheap international calls. Internet connections are fastest in the major urban centers, while they can be pretty slow in some remote places such as Providencia or Ipiales. Access normally costs US\$80¢ to US\$2 per hour.

Wireless fidelity (wi-fi) is limited to a few places in the major cities, such as shopping malls and some hotels. However, using wi-fi means carrying your laptop around the city, something you should avoid doing for security reasons. Some upscale hotels in the biggest cities will have wall jacks to hook up to the internet, if they don't already have wi-fi.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Useful online resources of general and tourist information about Colombia include:

Colombia in Cyberspace (www.javier.net/colombia)

A website filled with pictures and background information, plus a music page with audio files.

Colombia Journal (www.colombiajournal.org) Excellent site providing information on current politics, the economy, human rights issues etc.

El Tiempo (www.eltiempo.com) Spanish-language readers will want to browse the website of Colombia's leading newspaper.

Locombia (www.locombia.com) News, comments and opinion on all things Colombian.

Online Newspapers (www.onlinenewspapers.com/colombia.htm) Links to 19 Colombian online newspapers.
Poor but Happy (www.poorbuthappy.com/colombia) Lots of tourist and practical information.

LEGAL MATTERS

If arrested you have the right to an attorney. If you don't have one, an attorney will be appointed to you (and paid for by the government). There is a presumption of innocence.

As for drugs, you are legally allowed 20g of marijuana and 5g of cocaine. But it is illegal to buy or sell either. In any case it's safest not to carry these. When approached by police, play it cool. If money is demanded, ask to go to the station and get a receipt for any fines due. Try not to pay bribes, but use your best judgment. Watch out for police impostors.

MAPS

The widest selection of maps of Colombia is produced and sold by the **Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi** (IGAC; www.igac.gov.co; Carrera 30 No 48-51, Bogotá), the government mapping body. Folded national road maps are produced by several publishers and distributed through bookstores.

MEDIA

Newspapers & Magazines

All major cities have daily newspapers. Bogotá's leading newspaper, *El Tiempo*, has reasonable coverage of national and international news, culture, sports and economics. It has the widest distribution nationwide. The leading newspapers in other large cities include *El Mundo* and *El Colombiano* in Medellín, and *El País* and *El Occidente* in Cali.

Semana is the biggest national weekly magazine. It features local and international affairs and has an extensive cultural section. *Cambio* is another popular weekly magazine.

Radio & TV

Hundreds of AM and FM radio stations operate in Colombia and mainly broadcast music programs. In Bogotá, try the Universidad Nacional station (106.9 FM). There are three nationwide and four regional TV channels. Satellite and cable TV has boomed in Bogotá and in other major cities.

MONEY

Colombia's official currency is the peso. There are 50-, 100-, 200-, 500- and 1000-peso coins,

and paper notes of 1000, 2000, 5000, 10,000, 20,000 and 50,000 pesos. Forged peso notes do exist, so watch exactly what you get. In contrast to perfect dollar fakes, peso forgeries are usually of poor quality and easy to recognize.

Given the country's hazards, it's better to carry traveler's checks (American Express are by far the most easy to change) rather than cash, though some US dollar bills may be useful (euros are far less popular). With the proliferation of ATMs, however, the best way to carry money in Colombia is on a credit card.

Note that large amounts of counterfeit US dollars 'made in Cali' circulate on the market. According to rough estimates, about a quarter of all fake US dollars circulating worldwide are printed in Colombia. They are virtually indistinguishable from the genuine article.

ATMs

There are plenty of *cajeros automáticos* (ATMs) in the cities and major towns. Most major banks have their own ATMs, usually in the bank's wall, but also at other key locations (at the main plaza, in a shopping center, airport etc). Many ATMs are linked to Cirrus and Plus and accept MasterCard and Visa. Advances are in Colombian pesos.

Bargaining

Bargaining is limited to informal trade and services such as markets, street stalls, taxis and sometimes long-distance buses.

Credit Cards

Credit cards are increasingly popular as a method of payment for goods and services. They are also useful for getting peso advances at the bank, either from the cashier or from the ATM. These transactions are calculated on the basis of the official exchange rate, so you effectively get more money than when changing traveler's checks or cash.

Visa is by far the best card for Colombia, as most banks will give advance payments on it. MasterCard is the next best. Make sure you know the number to call if you lose your credit card, and be quick to cancel it if it's lost or stolen.

Exchanging Money

Some major banks change cash (mostly US dollars, less often euros) and traveler's checks (principally Amex). The most useful banks

include Banco Unión Colombiano, Bancolombia, and Banco Santander.

Banks change traveler's checks at rates 2% to 5% lower than the official rate, and usually pay about a further 1% to 3% less for cash. Exchange rates vary from bank to bank, so shop around. Some banks charge a commission for changing checks. Banks usually offer currency exchange services within limited hours, which may mean only a few hours daily, usually in the morning. Banks are often crowded and there's much paperwork involved in changing money, but the process shouldn't take more than five or 10 minutes. Your passport is required for any banking transaction.

You can also change cash (and often traveler's checks) at *casas de cambio* (authorized money-exchange offices), found in virtually all major cities and border towns. They are open until 5pm or 6pm on weekdays, and usually until noon on Saturday. They deal mainly with US dollars, less often with euros, offering rates comparable to, or slightly lower than, banks.

You can change cash dollars on the street, but it's not recommended. The only street money markets worth considering are those at the borders, where there may be simply no alternative. There are moneychangers at every land border crossing.

Never change money that is not yours, particularly on behalf of Colombians you meet in the street. Travelers have been arrested and jailed for this favor after the bank discovered that the dollars were fake.

Exchange rates at press time included the following:

Country	Unit		Col\$ (peso)
Australia	A\$1	=	1768
Canada	C\$1	=	2079
euro zone	€1	=	2961
Japan	¥100	=	1973
New Zealand	NZ\$1	=	1553
UK	UK£1	=	4383
United States	US\$1	=	2355

POST

The Colombian postal service is operated by three companies: Avianca, Adpostal and Depris. All cover domestic and international post, but only Adpostal will ship overseas using surface mail (the cheapest form of postage). All three are efficient and reliable, but

Avianca and Depris are much more expensive: a 10g letter sent with Avianca to Europe costs US\$3 (and only US\$1 with Adpostal). Depris prices can border on the outrageous (US\$4 for a postcard to the US or Europe). The poste restante system is operated by Avianca. The most reliable office is in Bogotá (p557).

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Tourism in Colombia is still relatively small and has so far not had any lasting detrimental effect on indigenous cultures or the environment. You can keep it that way by adhering to common-sense practices: asking people first before photographing them (especially indigenous peoples), dressing appropriately when entering a church, and practicing safe environmental rules when hiking or scuba diving.

Talking politics in Colombia can be a dangerous thing. Because paramilitaries wear civilian clothing, you never really know who you are talking to, or who is listening to your conversation, and it can be quite easy to offend someone if you start ranting about the government or the opposition.

Encourage ecotourism projects that aim to preserve or restore local environments. Support native communities by buying their crafts but avoid those made from corals, turtles or fossils.

STUDYING

Colombia can be a good place to study Spanish. The Spanish spoken in Colombia is clear and easy to understand and there are language schools in the big cities. You can also find a teacher and arrange individual classes. Inquire in popular travelers' hostels (in Bogotá, Cartagena, Medellín, Cali), which usually have contacts with Spanish tutors. They are often students and their rates are reasonable. Another place to try is **Nueva Lengua** (www.nuevalengua.com/spanish), which has branches in Bogotá, Medellín and Cartagena.

TELEPHONE

The telephone system is largely automated for both domestic and international calls. Telecom is the most prominent company, with Orbitel and ETB not far behind.

Public telephones exist in cities and large towns but, except for the centers of the largest cities, they are few and far between, and many are out of order. As a rule, Telecom offices

have some operable phones. Public telephones use coins, although newly installed telephones accept phonecards (*tarjeta telefónica*) that can be used for international, intercity and local calls. Local calls are charged by timed rate (not flat rate), costing around US10¢ for a three-minute call.

You can call direct to just about anywhere in Colombia. All phone numbers are seven digits long countrywide. Area codes are single digits (they are included before all the local numbers listed in this chapter), but before them you need to dial the index of the provider you want to use: ☎ 05 for Orbitel, ☎ 07 for ETB and ☎ 09 for Telecom. As yet, Orbitel and ETB only provide connections between some major cities, so in most cases you'll be using Telecom.

All three companies provide international service and may temporarily offer significant discounts – watch out for their ads in the press and on TV. To call abroad from Colombia, dial ☎ 005, ☎ 007 or ☎ 009 respectively, then dial the country code, followed by the area code and number.

Colombia's country code is ☎ 57. If you are dialing a Colombian number from abroad, drop the prefix (05, 07 or 09) and dial only the area code and the local number.

The two major cell/mobile-phone companies are Movistar and Celcom. Branches for both are widespread in most towns and cities. It costs US\$5 to US\$10 to get a SIM card and then you just buy units as needed. Chances are you'll end up with Celcom, which sells SIM cards on the spot. To subscribe to Movistar you'll need to show Colombian residency.

TOILETS

There are virtually no self-contained public toilets in Colombia. If you are unexpectedly caught in need, use a toilet in a restaurant. Museums and large shopping centers are other rescue options, as are bus and airport terminals. Carry some toilet paper with you at all times.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Municipal tourist-information offices in departmental capitals and other tourist destinations administer tourist information. Some are better than others, but on the whole they lack city maps and brochures. Staff members may be friendly but often don't speak English. The practical information they provide can be

lacking, and the quality of information largely depends on the person who attends you.

In some cities, tourist offices are supported by the Policía de Turismo, the police officers specially trained to attend tourists. They are mainly to be found on the street and at the major tourist attractions.

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Colombia offers very little to people with disabilities. Wheelchair ramps are available only at a few upmarket hotels and restaurants, and public transport will be a challenge for any person with mobility problems. Hardly any office, museum or bank provides special facilities for disabled travelers, and wheelchair-accessible toilets are virtually nonexistent.

VISAS

Nationals of some countries, including most of Western Europe, the Americas, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, don't need a visa to enter Colombia. It's a good idea for you to check this before your planned trip, because visa regulations change frequently.

All visitors get an entry stamp or print in their passport from DAS (the security police who are also responsible for immigration) upon arrival at any international airport or land border crossing. Make sure they've stamped your passport, otherwise you are illegally in Colombia. The stamp indicates how many days you can stay in the country. The maximum allowed is 90 days, but DAS officials often stamp 60 or just 30 days. An onward ticket is legally required and you may be asked to show one.

Upon departure, immigration officials put an exit stamp in your passport. Again, be sure to check if they've done it; without the stamp you may have problems entering Colombia next time around.

You are entitled to a 30-day visa extension (US\$25), which can be obtained from DAS in any departmental capital. The new 30 days begins from the end of the visa already stamped in your passport (so there's no need to wait to the last minute). Most travelers apply for an extension in Bogotá (see below).

Visa Extensions

A 30-day extension can be obtained at the **DAS office** (☎ 1-408-8000; Calle 100 No 11b-27, Bogotá; 📞 7:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) in Bogotá. Your

passport, two photocopies of your passport (picture page and arrival stamp) and two passport-size photos are required. You may also need to show an air ticket out of the country. You have to pay the US\$26 fee at the bank (which does not open until 8:30am, so there's little need to arrive too early). You get the extension on the spot.

VOLUNTEERING

There are few options for volunteers in Colombia, mostly because local organizations are afraid to take responsibility for visitors, given the precarious safety condition of life, work and travel in the country. That said, your best chance is to work as a ranger in one of Colombia's national parks. A minimum commitment of one month and decent Spanish-speaking skills are required. You may also be required to take a five-day course in Bogotá. For information (in Spanish) check www.parquesnacionales.gov.co/parques/gpv.html.htm. If you want to work for an NGO you have to be in the country on a tourist visa. For other possible voluntary work (in social areas), contact federations of NGOs:

Confederación Colombiana de ONGs (Map pp554-5; ☎ 1-215-6519; www.ccong.org.co; Carrera 13A No 107-02, Bogotá)

Federación de ONGs de Bogotá y Cundinamarca (Map pp554-5; ☎ 1-677-1088; Calle 175 No 40-56, Bogotá)

Peace Brigades International Colombia Project (☎ +32(0)2-536-1169; www.peacebrigades.org/colombia; Rue de la Liniere, 11 1060 Bruxelles, Belgium)

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Like most of Latin America, Colombia is very much a man's country. Machismo and sexism are palpable throughout society. Women travelers will attract more curiosity, attention and advances from local men than they would from men in the West. Many Colombian men will stare at women, use endearing terms, make comments on their physical appearance and, in some cases, try to make physical contact. It is just the Latin-American way of life, and local males would not understand if someone told them their behavior was sexual harassment. On the contrary, they would argue that they are just paying the woman a flattering compliment.

The best way to deal with unwanted attention is simply to ignore it. Maintain your self-confidence and assertiveness and don't let macho behavior disrupt your holiday. Dressing modestly may lessen the chances of you being the object of macho interest, or at least make you less conspicuous to the local peacocks. Wearing a wedding band and carrying a photo of a make-believe spouse may minimize harassment.

There isn't much in the way of women's support services in Colombia, let alone resources specifically for women travelers.

WORKING

Legally you need a work visa to get a job in Colombia. Without one you can try to teach English, but it may be difficult to get a job without bona fide teaching credentials.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'